

An Evening with Deborah Chessler, Songwriter and former manager of the Orioles at The Rock And Roll Hall of Fame

By Pamela Horner

Shirley “Deborah Chessler” Reingold was interviewed on February 9, 2009 at The Rock And Roll Hall of Fame and Museum in Cleveland. Deborah Chessler was the songwriter and manager of the pioneer vocal group, the Orioles. Dr. Charles Horner conducted the interview before a live audience.

We met Deborah and her husband Paul, Mark del Costello, and Val Shively in the Green Room at the Hall of Fame. Hall of Fame President Terry Stewart and the staff of the HOF were very welcoming. A long table was set out with food and beverages for the participants.

On the way up to the Theatre, we saw a photo of Deborah on an electronic marquee. We stopped to take a photo. Charlie and Deborah took their seats on stage. The 90-minute interview was very informative. Deborah, who appears much younger than her chronological age of 86 years, answered Charlie’s questions with accurate recall.

Deborah was born and raised in Baltimore, a then segregated city south of the Mason-Dixon Line. As a young songwriter, she went backstage at local theaters (both black and white) to try to sell her songs to performers. “My songs were more in the black vein,” Deborah recalled.

Though a songwriter, Deborah could neither read nor write music. “I would write my lyrics in my mind and I would pay a piano player to write the lead sheet.” If Deborah thought of a song in the middle of the night, she would have to stay up all night repeating the melody in her mind until she could find a piano player in the morning. While staying in a New York hotel, Deborah had an idea for a song and wrote the lyrics to “It’s



Pam, Charlie & Deborah Chessler at the Rock Hall.



Deborah Chessler, ca. 1949

Too Soon To Know” on toilet paper when there was no other paper in the room.

Deborah first heard a vocal group called the Vibranaires (later the Orioles) sing over the telephone. She thought the group was great and agreed to help them. She became their manager. Deborah started getting the group jobs and then got them booked on the “Arthur Godfrey Talent Scouts” radio program. This show could be compared to today’s “American Idol.” The Vibranaires were one of three acts competing. They lost to blind pianist George Shearing and a Swedish soprano. The Vibranaires returned to Baltimore feeling discouraged, but unknown to them Arthur Godfrey received thousands of protest phone calls and letters. Godfrey sent a telegram to Deborah asking her to bring the group back to New York to appear on his daytime radio show. That telegram is now in the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame Museum.

The Vibranaires changed their name to the Orioles. Their first record, the Deborah Chessler penned “It’s Too Soon To Know” became one of the most influential records of all time. It’s considered by many to be the first Rhythm & Blues vocal group song. Many groups began to imitate the sound of the Orioles.

When Sonny Til & the Orioles first played the Apollo Theater they set all time attendance records. They were brought back a second week performing five shows a day instead of the normal three.

Deborah’s fascinating stories kept the audience spellbound throughout the program. Behind Deborah and Charlie, photos from The Orioles and Shirley’s past were projected on a large screen. When Charlie requested a song, it was immediately played.

After the program there was a question and answer session. Deborah came out the theatre. Photos were taken and Deborah autographed items for her fans.

More than 60 years ago, Shirley “Deborah Chessler” Reingold set in motion the beginnings of Rhythm & Blues vocal harmony, a musical revolution that is still going on today.