

# ...And All That Jazz

Meet Denise Donatelli

By Elyse Glickman | Photos by Craig X Sotres Photography



“I’ve lived here in Studio City for most of my West Coast life,” affirms singer Denise Donatelli, who now calls the area home with husband Robbie Davis. “There is everything one needs here. We’re close to the freeways, shopping, and great restaurants, and it’s only a short trip over the canyons to West Hollywood and Beverly Hills.”

Denise grew up in Allentown, PA after her parents moved there from Brooklyn, NY with her two sisters, Diane (who now lives in Clearwater, FL) and Sandy (who now resides in Portland, OR with her husband.) She graduated from Parkland High School and went on to Garland Jr. College in Boston. She left college to marry her first husband, the late Joe Tomcho, with whom she had two sons together, Rick and Jason. She is a proud grandmother as her son Rick lives in Atlanta, GA with his wife Kathi and their children, Morgan and Preston.

Even with a full life and career back east, Denise, like many current Studio City residents, says that love and the pursuit of an entertainment industry career brought her to Los Angeles and Studio City. “I moved here in 2000 after a long-distance relationship with Robbie Davis,” she recalls, noting they married in 2014 at Shutters at the Beach in Santa Monica.

“I met Robbie while I was a Marketing Manager for Turner Broadcasting in Atlanta,” she details. “I was working with his company, DG Entertainment, on an upcoming promo campaign for the TBS Network. I happened to be in Los Angeles, and his Director of Marketing invited me and several other Turner execs out to dinner. Robbie unexpectedly showed up at the restaurant and it was love at first sight. Since I was living in Atlanta and he was here in Studio City, we kept a long-distance relationship until I decided to leave my job at TBS to be with Robbie and pursue my music career in LA.”

When she first arrived, the couple lived in a condominium by the Los Angeles River along Valleyheart Drive. She recalls enjoying early morning walks on Longridge Avenue, where she and Robbie admired the beautiful homes and the area’s tranquility even with its proximity to the action on Ventura Boulevard. Then one Sunday about 13 years ago, Robbie saw a listing for an open house in the Longridge area.

“We took a drive to see it,” Denise says. “We immediately fell in love with the home, the neighborhood, and the canyon views. Soon after, we were the proud owners. We have lived in Longridge Estates ever since, and have made some excellent friends here. I cannot imagine living anywhere else.”

Having roots in Studio City also proved to be comforting for Denise in challenging times, when she could count on a support system and meaningful causes to be right outside her door. “Jason, my younger son, passed away in 2008 due to complications from an enlarged heart. His death was devastating. One never truly recovers from losing a child, and there is not a day that goes by that I don’t think of him. Since then, I have performed for the American Heart Association and participated in their annual Walk. I continue to donate and raise money for their cause in his honor.”

Although Denise recorded a bit in Atlanta during her years at Turner Broadcasting, she hit her stride in Studio City and has since dedicated herself to music full-time.







"My first full recording, *In the Company of Friends*, was released on the Jazzed Media label, she details. "I then signed on with the New York record label Savant Records with my recording of *What Lies Within* and my recording career took off. To date, I have recorded six albums, and three of my recordings (When Lights are Low, Soul Shadows, and Find a Heart) have garnered GRAMMY® nominations for Best Jazz Vocal Album." In addition to the nominations, she has also been a member of the Los Angeles Jazz Society for many years, and in 2012, was honored to receive its Vocalist of the Year award.

"One of my career highlights happened two years ago when I recorded my latest album, *Whistling in the Dark* ... the music of Burt Bacharach with famed record producer, Larry Klein. I've grown up listening to Burt's music so it was an extraordinary experience to work with Larry and record Bacharach's music. I'm currently writing and researching music for my next recording," she affirms.

Denise also insists that music has always played an important part in her life as her mother had been a singer in New York and her father, a clothing manufacturer by trade, could play the piano by ear. While her upbringing in the countryside of Allentown, PA was idyllic, she found it quite lonely as there were few other children nearby. Her two older sisters were well into their teen years so for all intents and purposes, she grew up as an only child. However, music sustained her through the years. One thing that she always looked forward to during her youth was her parents' subscriptions to the Capitol and Columbia Music Clubs. She anxiously awaited every monthly shipment of vinyl record albums in the mail. Those records, in turn, deepened her interest in Jazz.

"Listening to all those amazing jazz artists connected me to the music," she says. "I memorized jazz solos and would sit on the floor next to the stereo and sing along to Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughn, and so many more great jazz artists. There was a lot of music in our home," Denise continues. "I started playing the piano at the age of three and took lessons until I was 16 years old. Although I won several Superior Awards during the National Federation of Music's piano competitions, my interests had shifted away from classical music. I much preferred jazz and pop music."

"While living in Atlanta, GA, I met a jazz pianist who encouraged me to sing. I was offered my first steady gig performing with a jazz trio three nights a week at the Ritz Carlton Hotel lounge and that was the start of my professional vocal career. The Ritz Carlton lounge was also a hot spot for celebrities and since the late Freddie Cole lived in Atlanta, he would frequently stop in and hang with us. We became very good friends."

In her free time, you'll find Denise at LACMA, shopping in Studio City and Beverly Hills, and spending Sunday mornings at the Studio City Farmer's Market. She also enjoys playing golf and is grateful the cooler months have arrived. "The holidays will find me cooking, baking, and spending time with family and friends," she says about December being a happy time of year for her, filled with gratitude for everything else that brings joy during the rest of the year.

"During my singing career, I have been blessed to perform throughout the U.S and internationally," Denise affirms. "One of my fondest memories includes a performance with the Czech National Symphony Orchestra in Prague with some of the greatest international musicians. Most recently, I performed at LACMA for their Summer Jazz Series. There are a few venues here in Los Angeles that I truly enjoy performing at including Catalina's Jazz Club in Hollywood, Vibrato Jazz Club, and Vitello's Jazz Club in Studio City. Now that Covid is subsiding, I look forward to the opportunity to travel and perform more."



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