

Irene Reid, Singer, Bandleader and Actress, Dies at 77

by Peter Keepnews
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Irene Reid, a singer who toured and recorded with Count Basie's band and appeared on Broadway in "The Wiz," died last Saturday in the Bronx. She was 77.

The cause was cardiac arrest, said Wendy Oxenhorn, director of the Jazz Foundation of America, which had been helping to provide Ms. Reid with health care for more than a decade.

A jazz vocalist whose style was heavily laced with elements of gospel and the blues, Ms. Reid never achieved as much success as contemporaries like Dinah Washington and Esther Phillips who took a similar approach. But she worked steadily, and she finished her life on a high note with a surprising career resurgence.

Born in Savannah, Ga., on Sept. 23, 1930, Ms. Reid began singing in a church choir there and moved to New York in 1947 to pursue a singing career. After winning the Apollo Theater's amateur contest several times, she spent two years with the Dick Vance band at the Savoy Ballroom in Harlem before going out on her own.

She joined the Basie band in 1961 and stayed for a year, then formed her own small group, Irene Reid and Company, and recorded two big-band albums for Verve, one of the leading jazz labels of the period. But probably her most prominent job in the post-Basie years was on Broadway, where she briefly joined the cast of "The Wiz" as the wicked witch Evillene, the role originated by Mabel King.

In 1997, after two decades spent largely under the show-business radar, Ms. Reid began recording for the small Savant label with the organist Charles Earland. Her album "Million Dollar Secret" was the first of six she released as a leader in her last years -- more than she had in her entire career up to that time. She also worked frequently at Smoke, the Lenox Lounge and other New York nightclubs until a few years ago, when health problems forced her to stop performing.

She is survived by a daughter, Gwendolyn Reid; four sons, Michael Leon Redfield, Bernard Redfield, James Raymond Reid and Gregory Reid; 13 grandchildren, and 9 great-grandchildren.