

Iris DeMent - Bio

Iris Luella DeMent was born on January 5th 1961 in Paragould, Arkansas. She was the fourteenth and final child of Patric Shaw and Flora Mae DeMent. At the time her father was a farmer, but in 1963 economic difficulties left him with little option but to sell his land and take a factory job at Emerson Electric in nearby Paragould. Twelve months later, after a group of workers, including Patric, failed to unionise the factory, the DeMent family headed west to California. They settled in Long Beach initially, then moved to Buena Park where Patric took a job as a gardener and janitor at the nearby Movieland Wax Museum. A deeply religious family, her father had played fiddle as a young man, but put the instrument aside when he "*got religion.*" In later life Patric led the choir at church services. Iris' mother also sang in the choir, and at home [she and the family] regularly sang gospel songs. The older female DeMent siblings formed a gospel group, The DeMent Sisters. As a youngster Iris learned to play piano, and, naturally, went on to play the instrument in church. Growing up she was influenced by the music of the Carter Family, Jimmie Rodgers, Loretta Lynn, Johnny Cash, Dylan and Joni Mitchell. Iris graduated from high school in 1977, and the following year left home and moved to Topeka, Kansas where she enrolled in a college creative writing class. Around that time, Iris stopped attending church services on a regular basis – she was conflicted by her church's teaching and the reality of everyday living. DeMent had toyed with, but failed to write a whole song from an early age. The writing course sparked her creativity, although Iris claims that her first *real song* didn't arrive till she was twenty-five years old. Moving on to Kansas City, Iris taught herself to play [her brother's] guitar, and despite her strict religious upbringing began playing songs at open mics. She also married a Kansas City fireman named Elmer McCall, and they occasionally collaborated on songs.

Deciding to pursue a career in music, Iris moved to Nashville in 1988, where she soon came to the notice of established performers such as John Prine. She sang on Emmylou Harris' 1990 album "**Brand New Dance.**" Producer Jim Rooney was another person attracted to DeMent's unique musical sound, and he produced the album "**Infamous Angel**" which was initially released by Rounder/Philo in 1992. Her father passed away soon after the album was released. Such was the instantaneous popularity of DeMent's debut recording that within a year of its release, Warner Brothers traded some early Guy Clark and Rosie Flores recordings for Iris' debut disc and signed her to the label. In due course Rounder/Philo reissued the Clark and Flores recordings, respectively as the 2CD "**Craftsman**" [1995] and "**A Honky Tonk Reprise**" [1996], while Warner's re-promoted "**Infamous Angel.**" In 1993 Iris was the opening act on Nanci Griffith's American tour for "**Other Voices, Other Rooms,**" and she also sang on the recording. Rooney produced Iris' sophomore collection, "**My Town.**" Iris' third, and final, Warner's recording was the stunning "**The Way I Should.**" Produced by Randy Scruggs, I'd personally rate this "*gloves off*" set of DeMent song lyrics as *cut from the same cloth as Dylan's finest socio-political creations.* In 1994 Iris contributed "Big City" to the Merle Haggard tribute "**Tulare Dust,**" and later undertook a tour with Haggard, playing piano in his band. When Haggard cut her song "No Time To Cry" for his album "**1996,**" Iris played piano on the recording. Although Iris spent a few years in Nashville, she eventually returned to Kansas City to live.

Sadly, post 1996, an eight-year silence ensued before an album bearing DeMent's name surfaced in the public domain. During this period DeMent continued to ply her trade in the music business, and toured, albeit on an irregular basis. DeMent was frustrated by *writer's block* for most of the eight years, and although songs came she felt they were inferior. Further complicating the situation, Iris and Elmer were divorced. The Jimmie Rodgers tribute album "**Songs Of Jimmie Rodgers : A Tribute**" [1997] featured DeMent performing a haunting version of "Hobo Bill's Last Ride." The following year she turned up on the Larman compilation "**The Folkscene Collection, Vol. 1**" singing "Our Town." On John Prine's 1999 album "**In Spite of Ourselves,**" DeMent sang duets with the former Chicago mailman on four songs. DeMent went on to tour with Prine in support of the recording, and appears in the Prine DVD "**Live From Sessions At West 54th.**" The CD album was later nominated for a Best Contemporary Folk Grammy in 2000. The Steve Earle/Del McCoury bluegrass collaboration "**The Mountain**" [1999] included the track "I'm Still In Love With You," on which Iris sang a duet with the Texan. Iris took a small role in the movie "**Songcatcher**" [2000], that of a backwoods Appalachian mountain singer who sang "Pretty Saro," and her rendition of the tune also appeared on the movie soundtrack recording. In 2002 she performed "The Train Carrying Jimmie Rodgers Home" on the "**Going Driftless**" Greg Brown tribute album released by Red House. On the morning of Thursday 21st November 2002, Iris married the Iowa bred folk musician Greg Brown. They share homes in rural Southern Iowa and Kansas City.

Released on her own Flariella label, in late 2004, Iris DeMent's "**Lifeline**," featured a set of gospel songs that she had regularly sung as a child. The collection did contain one DeMent original "He Reached Down" a retelling of the story of the Good Samaritan.

Discography : "**Infamous Angel**" [1992] ; "**My Life**" [1994] ; "**The Way I Should**" [1996] ; "**Lifeline**" [2004] :

Arthur Wood.

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