artist spotlight

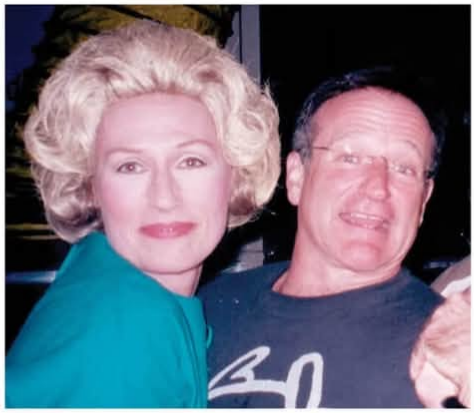


Darlene Koldenhoven

GRAMMY® Award Winning Musician

Interview by Cassie Leigh

Photos provided by Darlene Koldenhoven



From left to right: 1970 at the Chicago Symphony Orchestra Hall, 2000 Academy Awards with Robin Williams, 1986 Grammy Awards with Mary Hylan, Daryl Phennisse, & John Laird of Clare Fischer's 2+2, 1985 NARAS MVPs at The Roxy.

You've enjoyed an incredible career spanning decades. Looking back, was there one defining moment when you thought, *"I've really made it"*?
When I was 19, I sang an opera aria with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in Orchestra Hall. That was quite young to be doing that. When the door opened for me to walk through the orchestra to take my place onstage near the conductor, this strange calm came over me as if I had done this before, yet I had not.

I walked through the string section and thought, *This is it. I've really made it.* I used to joke and say, "I peaked at 19!" That was just the beginning.

You've worked with so many legendary artists over the years. Which collaboration stands out as one of your favorites, and what made it so memorable?
That's a tough one to answer. There are two.

First was Mr. Clare Fischer, when I sang lead soprano for his vocal group 2+2 with his Latin Jazz band Salsa Picante. Working with him was the source of my GRAMMY® Award and three GRAMMY® nominations in Best Jazz Vocal Performance by Duo or Group.

The second was with Pink Floyd. Producer Bob Ezrin called me to contract two additional singers, and we sang on the three tracks with vocals on their *A Momentary Lapse of Reason* album. I was a huge fan of their *Dark Side of the Moon* album, wishfully thinking I wanted to sing with them someday.

Voila! My wish came true.

You've crossed paths with countless celebrities throughout your career. Is there one interaction that completely surprised or inspired you? What made it so unforgettable?
That would be working with Robin Williams on the *Academy Awards 2000*. He chose me to portray his wife in the skit for the song "Blame Canada."

He was a true professional in every sense of the word. As hilarious as he was on camera, the way we were used to seeing him, he was equally kind and caring about everyone there during those few days. It didn't matter if you were above the line or below the line. He treated everyone equally, spoke with a sincere voice, and made sure we all looked good.

We normally don't get to see his behind-the-scenes persona. It surprised me and inspired me. I will never forget those days.

Your voice has been featured in numerous films and productions. Can you share a few of your favorite projects and tell us about your role?
There was the time I sang improvised solos for a film starring Richard Gere, *Internal Affairs*. Brian Banks and Anthony Marinelli were the music supervisors and were composer friends of mine.

It was an unusual film score, as all those who played on it improvised their parts. Normally, things are meticulously written out for us. I had a monitor in the vocal booth that I watched while singing. My instructions were: sing what you feel and sing something super high in this section or super low in that section and come in at precisely a tenth of a second here and end on a tenth of a second there.

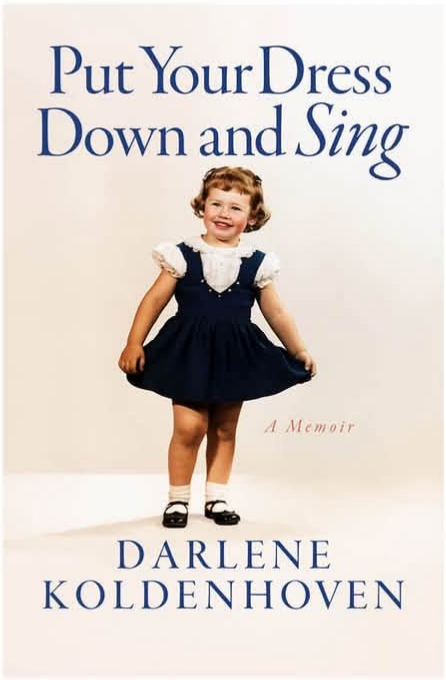


My vocals added to the surreal, chilly emotional fabric of the film. It was the first of several times I worked with director Mike Figgis.

My first film date was for *Poltergeist*, with Jerry Goldsmith composing and conducting. I sang soprano in a 40-voice choir with a 100-piece orchestra over at MGM Studios in Culver City, which is now Sony.

The score was the most difficult I have ever encountered. Different meters in every measure, with the bottom number changing as well as the top number, and atonal, meaning no home center as in Do-Re-Mi. It was like picking a note out of nowhere, singing it at precisely the correct beat, then counting like crazy through 64 measures of silence and hoping to heavens you came in correctly.

I passed the test.



You've witnessed the music industry evolve from the analog era to today's digital world. What's the biggest change you've experienced, and do you think it's ultimately been a positive one?

I miss the warmth of the analog sound, and I enjoy the speed of the digital. It was a positive change until AI crept in.

There's nothing like human performance and connection. AI leaves me cold, very cold.

What's something people are always surprised to know about you?

I sew all my own clothes, including my gowns on stage and nightgowns I sleep in.

If you could relive one day from your career, which day would you choose, and why?

That day I auditioned for television's *Star Search*. It was the worst ever and most hilarious ever.

You'll have to get my book, *Put Your Dress Down and Sing*, to find out the details.

Was there ever an opportunity you almost turned down that ended up changing the course of your career?

Yes, that would probably go to *Sister Act* with Whoopi Goldberg. Another great story in my memoir.

I was a first-call, busy studio singer, standing in director Emile Ardolino's office at Disney, when he said, "We understand you are a top call session singer and may not want to give up your place in line by working on a film for six weeks or more.



I would like to hire you to be in this film."

I said I'd think about it and left. The next morning, I called him up and said that I would be happy to be in the film, and the rest is history.

What advice would you give a talented young singer moving to Hollywood today with big dreams but very few industry connections?
Come prepared and then prepare more. Polish your skills, have a goal, and have a plan. Find a flexible day job. Persist, persevere, and prevail. Keep your nose clean and make as many social connections as you can.

After everything you've accomplished—from recording studios and concert stages to earning Grammy recognition—what still excites you most about making music?
The feeling I get from singing as the whole body vibrates, listening to something I created, especially when a certain few measures here and there make my hair stand up on my arms, and feeling the piano keys under my fingers making beautiful sounds.

Then, watching other people have an emotional reaction to my work.

I also love teaching voice and seeing the joy in my students' faces.

Do you think it's easier or harder to become famous these days with everyone having access to social media and recording apps?
Let's just say it's crazier.

And what is fame anyway? It means different things to different people.

How do you feel about AI in music?
Sad, very sad, very, very sad.

Did I mention SAD?

How long have you been working on your memoir? What inspired you to finally tell your story, and what do you hope readers will take away after turning the last page?
Back in the '90s, people would tell me I should write a book because of all the great stories I had. I said I was too young then, but I'm old enough now!

Also, I found out I have one of the two genes for Alzheimer's and thought it would be good to write my life's story as proof of the life I've lived. If anything does go south, I'll at least be able to read about it even if I can't remember it.

I began in January 2024, when I first researched all my programs and day journals I kept and wrote 195,509 words in only four months. Then I spent the next nine months editing it down to where it is today, at about 95,000 words.

Next was finding a publisher. Then, making the deal. Then wearing my project manager's hat and keeping everyone and everything on track. Then, narrating and recording the audiobook. Now I'm in the promotion stage and booking appearances.

When the book, e-book, audiobook, and companion solo piano album, *A Grand Memoir*, all come out after August 7, 2026, I will start touring across the country presenting my book and, in some places, combining it with a mini-concert of music from my new album.

I love the people.











Darlene with the Touring Nuns in Sister Act

My main purpose of writing it was not to have a purge of my life but to inspire people to never give up on their dreams. The title of my book means that to change your feelings, you must take action. It is in the taking of the action that your feelings change, and hope and courage can prevail to carry you on to fulfilling your goals and dreams.

I hope my readers are inspired and motivated to find their gifts, develop them, and share them with the world to make it a better place.

Without giving too much away, can you share one story from your memoir that you think will genuinely surprise readers? We've heard there may even be a paranormal twist!

I was singing an opera aria, "Casta Diva" from *Norma*, at Sheryl Lee Ralph's annual AIDS fundraiser, Divas Simply Singing.

In the opera, Norma is a priestess summoning the goddess of the moon. It was all very "spiritual" when suddenly I started seeing hundreds of these vibrating circular things in the air with a vibrating gold nucleus. I thought I was having a stroke or something.

In the second half of the song, they all flew into me, and my energy changed dramatically.

You'll just have to read the book to find out what they were and what happened before and after. I don't want to spoil it.

It was a real "trip," as the saying goes.

In your opinion, what does "making it" in Hollywood really mean? Is it money, fame, or something else?

Making it in Hollywood can mean many different things to different people. I get to do what I love to do and make a living doing it. For me, it wasn't all about the money or fame.

Although, I was able to buy my own home in Studio City where I've lived for the past 31 years. My recording studio is in this beautiful guest house, twenty paces from my bedroom door. That was my dream come true.

Music gave me a life I could never have dreamed. It was a huge difference from my strict Dutch Calvinist upbringing on the South Side of Chicago.

For aspiring musicians dreaming of becoming successful artists—or even Grammy winners—what advice would you give them based on your own journey?

Keep up the good work. Share your knowledge and experience to help others. Stay healthy. Don't think about age, and whatever you do, do not retire.







From top to bottom: 2011 Darlene's Studio, 2005 on Malcolm in the Middle, Darlene singing with a choir

You built your career during a very different era in the entertainment industry. What was it like being a woman navigating Hollywood, and how have you seen opportunities change over the years?
Growing up, I never saw women in orchestras. Now I do.

I was probably one of the first few women to own synthesizers and engineer my own recordings. Now it is more common.

I stood up to some really big Hollywood moguls. I didn't take their guff or do all the work while they got the credit and pay. I've made a few producers' veins on their foreheads bulge out because I stood up for myself.

I stayed off the casting couch.

Yup, there are some juicy stories about that in the book too.

You're much more than a singer—you've also been a composer, arranger, producer, recording studio owner, educator, and entrepreneur. How have you managed to balance so many creative roles throughout your career?
I stay organized with my time. I have an addiction to music and making music, along with a deep, sustaining curiosity about trying new things.

I've been blessed, and I work very hard at it.

All those things I do, and hats I wear, are all about being creative. I do something creative every day, even if it is brushing my teeth with my non-dominant hand just to jolt my brain to unlock more creativity.

Beyond the release of your memoir and its accompanying album, what's next for you? Are there any exciting projects, performances, or surprises your fans can look forward to over the coming year?
Next is going on tour. I love getting out amongst my friends and fans.

If anyone would like to see me perform in their town, just contact me through my website, DarleneKoldenhoven.com.

Other than that, we'll see what the universe offers me. I keep my antennas up and my heart open. It hasn't let me down yet.

Anything else you would like to add?
Yes: when the going gets tough, just put your dress down and sing!

Connect
See more of Darlene's work on DarleneKoldenhoven.com