

## LIVING

## DAWANA GUDGER:

## A Hometown Girl Sings For The Pope

By VELMA S. PRESLEY  
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"Mama knows best — she's been right so far," Dawana Gudger acknowledged in a Monday afternoon interview.

"Mama" is Treva Posey of Britton Avenue; and what she's been right about is sending her daughter to the Atlantic City, N.J., area to "seek fame and fortune," said Dawana, giggling a bit as she recalled the incident.

From the time Dawana moved to Pleasantville, N.J., in December 1989, she's been moving steadily toward what has been the highlight of her professional singing career so far: singing for the pope at the Vatican on Dec. 20.

Now, admittedly, Dawana was on stage with other people, and she did not actually get to see Pope John Paul II; but "he was viewing — he saw us," she said.

She did see Prince Albert of Monaco and his party, seated in a box "right down here," she said, stretching out her hand as though he were close enough to touch, as he had been on Dec. 20.

#### The Tour

This is Dawana's second European trek with "Queen

Esther Marrow and The Harlem Gospel Singers On Tour" (Queen Esther's parents named her that; it's not a stage name), but this was the first year Dawana was listed in the program as a "featured singer."

The show, called "Spirits," began with four weeks in Paris at the "Mogador," followed by performances in well-known theaters of Milan, Rome, Munich, Vienna and Berlin.

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Dawana Gudger

The same program, which is printed in both German and English because BB Promotion and producer Michael Brenner of Mannheim, Germany, manage Queen Esther Marrow's tour, lists 15 performers, including the headliner.

As a featured singer, Dawana sings "He Steps Right In" with three featured performers and solos on "Oh, Freedom."

Although the group is put

together by audition, Dawana did not have to audition. She jokingly said that they were "stuck" with her for the tour last year when one member of the group was not able to make the trip, and another member recommended her as a replacement. Dawana showed up, ticket in hand, for the European tour.

While exciting, that trip, which included "several galas, and a performance for the Ambassador of Vienna," could not compare with this year's tour because of the stop by the Vatican.

#### The Vatican

Dawana and the other members were caught in a "mess at the airport" and so missed the scheduled audience with Pope John Paul II.

Even without the papal audience, however, "just walking in the Vatican . . ." Dawana's voice trails off as she attempts to express in words the power of the feelings the situation evoked.

"There's a presence there," she recalls. "You're almost hushed . . . you're afraid to move."

That feeling invaded even her group's performance, for they were not certain their scheduled performance of "O' Happy Day" was reverent enough for the Vatican.

As the evening progressed, however, they became more comfortable.

"Queen Esther Marrow featuring The Harlem Gospel Singers" was on the program with 14 other groups — including Los del Rio (of "Macarena" fame) and Dionne Warwick.

The Harlem Gospel Singers cut one song, but still performed "Sweet Little Jesus Boy," "Joy To The World" and yes, a rousing rendition of "O' Happy Day" which Dawana



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where she was in the choir under the direction of James Winfree.

She also took private voice lessons from Ruth Thomas, who "let me dabble in a lot of different things," she says, meaning that she studied classical pieces as well as rock 'n' roll, blues and gospel.

Once Dawana got to Middle Tennessee State University in Murfreesboro, however, all her teachers tried to steer her toward the classics, but that wasn't where her heart was.

She completed a degree in music industry in December 1988 and remained in school to take the play, "A . . . My Name Is Alice," back to the theatre for the Irene Ryan Competition, held somewhere in Alabama (Dawana's memory doesn't recall the name of the city).

#### Her Career

When Dawana was finally ready to leave college, and her mother was sending her to Atlantic City to seek the elusive F&F Ms. Posey was pic-

Oh Lord  
Freedom

