

Cleveland POPS New Year's Eve: meet vocalist Melinda Doolittle

by Mike Telin



"Some of my favorite shows are singing with pops orchestras," vocalist and *American Idol* winner Melinda Doolittle said during a recent telephone conversation. "It's such an exhilarating feeling. There's nothing like having a massive orchestra behind you playing the songs you love. And this is my very first New Year's Eve symphony show, so I'm even more excited."

On Saturday, December 31st at Severance Hall, Carl Topilow and the Cleveland POPS Orchestra will ring in 2017 with their 21st Annual [New Year's Eve Celebration](#). The festivities begin at 9:00 pm with a two-hour concert featuring Melinda Doolittle and the Orchestra performing Broadway songs, contemporary pops and jazz hits, and a tribute to some of the great American soul singers — Aretha Franklin, Gladys Knight, Tina Turner, Gloria Gaynor, and Marvin Gaye.

Following the concert, audiences can dance their way into the new year to live music. Topilow and an ensemble of Cleveland POPS members will play in the Grand Foyer, while the No-Name Band will play rock music in the Smith Lobby.

"I absolutely adore Maestro Carl," Doolittle said. "I first performed with him and the Orchestra when I was part of the Michael W. Smith Christmas tour. The Cleveland POPS is so amazing — that's going to make this concert a fun night for me and everyone."

[Melinda Doolittle](#) came to prominence during season six of *American Idol* in 2007. Although she finished third, Doolittle was the personal favorite of Simon Cowell. Since then she has performed at venues ranging from the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame to The White House, from the Copa Room to Carnegie Hall. She has performed as soloist with the Boston Pops, Charlotte Symphony, United States Air Force Orchestra, and the Cincinnati Pops — a stellar career considering that Doolittle was, by her own admission, a terrible singer as a child.

“Music has always been part of what moves me,” she said. “I love the stories that you can tell through song, but I was actually an awful singer growing up. I was tone deaf. When they played a note on the piano I wouldn’t be anywhere close to it, but I loved singing so much that I auditioned for the choir. They told me that I had a lot of charisma, so they put me in the middle and told me to smile really big and move my mouth — but don’t let sound come out.”

Doolittle recalled her mother’s advice when she said she wanted to be a singer. “My mom said, ‘Oh baby, you’re going to have to pray hard.’ So I prayed and I practiced, and the summer before seventh grade, something clicked. My voice changed, my ear changed, I was able to hear harmonies, and I have not stopped singing since.”

After graduating from high school, Doolittle decided to study music at Belmont University in Nashville, where she got her first job as a backup singer for a recording session. “I could not believe that people paid me to do that. I was just overjoyed,” she said. “Nashville is a word-of-mouth city and thankfully that first session went really well, so I started getting more and more calls to sing background while I was still in school.”

After college, Doolittle established herself as a go-to background singer, performing with artists like the Anointed, Michael McDonald, Aretha Franklin, BeBe and CeCe Winans, Aaron Neville, and Jonny Lang. “It was an amazing job that I loved. It never dawned on me to be a lead artist.”

At the urging of a friend, Doolittle decided to enter the *American Idol* auditions in Memphis, and much to her surprise, was invited back. “At first I didn’t want to return, but my mom said that she raised me to be a woman of my word. So I went back — and talk about life changing! Everything happens so instantly with a show like *American Idol*. I had to figure out who I was as an artist because I was so used to blending. It was quite the experience and I’m so glad that I did it. I love my new job, and when I get to travel with my own background singers it’s always a cool, full-circle moment.”

As a singer who performs a variety of genres, Doolittle said that she enjoys the process of figuring out how to make a song her own. “I love love songs. Most of the time I’ll start by reading the lyrics and figure out how I would say them to somebody — and that’s how I’ll sing them. When I take a soul, jazz, or Broadway song and figure out how to make it work for me, all of those genres blend together.”

Doolittle said that staying vocally healthy is important to her. “I have a coach, Janet Kenyon, because I believe there’s always room to get better at your craft, and she is just phenomenal. It’s good to take care of your instrument just like an orchestral musician does, but it is quite different when your body *is* your instrument. I tell my band that I’m the boring person on tour, because when the show is over I have to go to bed so I can do it again tomorrow. But to feel like you’re flying on a bed of string sounds when you’re onstage is more than worth it.”

When not working, Melinda Doolittle relaxes by watching old movies, especially *Anne of Green Gables*. “If I’m feeling really adventurous, I like to beat people at air hockey. I also do Tae Bo. There’s a gym down the street so I can punch and kick, then get my rest. I’m always on the go so I normally shut it down when I get home.”

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