

Nineteen eighty-six was supposed to be the year of Melba Moore. Her own television series—a situation comedy titled *Melba*—was set to debut on the evening of January 28. At 11:30 that morning, the space shuttle Challenger exploded in midair, and that night when audiences sat down in front of their televisions they largely ignored the new sitcom, in favor of the few bits of information they could get from news broadcasts.

The next time *Melba* was scheduled to air, it was preempted by the State of the Union address. And the next time it was bumped for the Grammy Awards. Melba Moore is a believer in signs from God. These were not what anyone would call good signs.

MELBA MOORE

A LITTLE BIT MORE
THIS MULTIMEDIA STAR REFUSES TO BE PEGGED. SHE SINGS, SHE DANCES, SHE ACTS: ON TELEVISION, STAGE, AND IN FILMS.

BY AIMEE LEE BALL

When the show finally got on the air, as a summer replacement, it was hampered by unfunny scripts and an improbable premise: a black woman and a white woman, raised as sisters, dealing with life's little grown-up crises—men, work, families. There was another problem, says Moore. "People kept saying, 'Isn't she going to sing?' I think it's just too much to ask people to totally erase anything they ever knew about me musically." The show, which was pulled from the CBS schedule, is set to reappear eventually—revised and revamped to give people a taste of the Melba they remember, the Melba who won a Tony Award for her Broadway performance in *Purlie*, belting out "I Got Love" in a voice of astonishing power and range. "It is not," she acknowledges with a smile, "an ordinary-sounding voice."

So now 1987 may be the year of Melba Moore, and she is ready for it. She has fought, over a career of already remarkable longevity, to please changing audiences, and that's been tricky. Show business may seem to require originality, yet everybody loves a clone—another Bill Cosby, another Meryl Streep, another *Miami Vice* or Madonna. "There's always someone saying, 'Why don't you sing like Dionne Warwick?' or 'Why don't you sing like Chaka Khan?' or why don't you do what everybody's already done?" says Moore. "It's

fashion. If someone has created a trend, the most obvious thing is to mimic it. I can't say I've not been intimidated by that, but I've never been a good mimic. There's something inside me that says, if I'm just like the other person, you really won't hear me, you won't see me, I'll kind of disappear. I've tried so hard to do what everybody said was the right thing—I've done everything that even the janitor suggested—and always some little thing was missing. And it was an important little thing: me."

Moore made a decision some time ago not to shoot for what the music business calls crossover hits. She records what she cheerfully refers to as black music, and if the song crosses over from the rhythm-and-blues charts to the pop listings, so be it. "I feel I've accomplished something simply in my ability to succeed in black music. I get a great deal of joy in relating to my own people."

"But my great opportunity to be on the map and have everybody know who I was came from the Broadway theater," she says. "Then I had to prove myself with records."

She seems to know what she's doing. Her latest single—a duet with Freddie Jackson called "A Little Bit More"—was a number one R & B song, and it was only shaken from its first-place position by none other than Freddie Jackson, this time singing on his own. Moore didn't object too much: She discovered Jackson when he was working as a word processor by day, singing in supper clubs by night. Her husband, Charles Huggins, now manages both their careers and, in the process, is getting a taste of the itinerant life his wife has lived for years. "He comes home and says, 'My God, Melba, I'm so tired. You got some vitamins? I have a sore throat. The bus is so drafty.' I say, 'Welcome to the club, honey.'"

This may be a show-business family, but the distinctions between home and work are clear. "When I go out to do my job, I love being on and dressing up in my fancy clothes and watching the people's reactions. When I'm at home, it's sort of like I'm another person. I welcome that time to wind down and enjoy the simplicity. I love being married. I wanted to be married, I wanted to be a mother, I waited for my daughter [nine-year-old Charli]. ▷

Moore has been pleasing an ever-changing audience—and pulling it off. Hair and makeup, Reggie Wells.



DEBORAH FEINGOLD

MOORE

Every second from the moment of conception has been such a treat.”

Having a family is part of the impetus for Moore's involvement in the anti-drug movement—she was shocked to learn that the targets for drug pushers are often fourth-graders like her daughter. “I'm a New York kid,” Moore says. “I grew up in the ghetto to a degree and have seen the alcoholics and the heroin addicts, and I'm a part of that community still. I live in a very posh neighborhood, but I can look out my window and see people selling drugs. We have several plagues now—plagues is what they are—and they're just wiping out our population. If you're a thinking person at all, you take the opportunity to do something about it. I feel personally responsible as an entertainer to try to change the trend of making the dissipation of life fashionable. I can't just enjoy a wonderful career and feel I'm separate from these other things. There's a growing awareness that you have to pitch in and help your neighbors because it's not their problem—it's our problem. Or even when it starts out as their problem, it's going to be your problem in a minute.”

Moore has helped to organize such musical confreres as Mick Jagger and David Bowie in anti-drug concerts, and she's taken the more direct route: Last year she was part of a group that sprayed red paint on the doors of crack houses in Brooklyn. Anyone who might be tempted to supply her dressing rooms with drink or drugs might as well save his money. “I just tell them I like tuna packed in water and green apples.”

Standing up for herself hasn't always been easy—people have tended to treat her in a dismissive manner. “In so many ways it's still a man's world,” she says. “As a black woman, I live in a white man's world. You continually have to find ways of communicating. But the easiest time to communicate is when you're all right with yourself.” She's quite all right now, with a second chance at TV, a passionate new single called “Falling,” and a possible return to Broadway—although being a multimedia star does have its drawbacks. “My problem has been that I'm versatile, so people say, ‘Well, if that's you, then what's *that*?’ One of these days I'm going to do a project that reaches masses of people, and they'll all see me do the same thing at the same time, and they'll say, ‘Aha, *that's* what a Melba Moore is.’ ” □