

**My mother was musical.** She'd take me to church as a child and sit me beside her on the organ bench. When she rocked back and forth as she played, I'd rock back and forth, too. I didn't know what I was doing, but that's how I grew up loving music.

**I started taking piano lessons at the age of nine.** Every Saturday, I'd travel from Arlington, Virginia, where I was raised, to Washington DC for my lesson. It was exciting – I felt so grown up. My teacher would make me play Rachmaninoff. I didn't even know how to pronounce it; I was just a little girl.

**I was an overachiever at school.** Whenever the music teacher left the room, she'd say, "Roberta, take over." I skipped grades and received a scholarship to college when I was 15. I went as a piano major.

**I studied classical music, but when you grow up in a black family, you hear black music.** There's no way you could've grown up in my neighbourhood without hearing gospel singers such as Mahalia Jackson or Shirley Caesar. From that, you transitioned to Aretha Franklin and then to the doo-wop singers.

**I recorded 'The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face' in 1969.** I was performing in small clubs in Washington DC and had



## **“JOHN LENNON LIVED NEXT DOOR”** **ROBERTA FLACK**

developed the song as a performance piece in a gay bar. It was wonderful there; people would bring me songs to record and introduce me to foreign languages. On my first album, *First Take*, there was a song called 'Angelitos Negros'. I never spoke a word of Spanish in my life, but I learnt to sing in it.

**I was at home with a toothache when 'The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face' won the Grammy Award [in 1973].** The people at my record company had told me not to bother going because no one thought I'd win. It was nominated against Harry Nilsson's 'Without You' and Don McLean's 'American Pie' – they were big songs!

**When they said my name, I passed out.** I was watching it on TV with my mom and had taken medication for my tooth.

I couldn't believe I'd won.

**I look back on those years – when 'Killing Me Softly With His Song' and 'Where is the Love?' were hits – with fondness.**

What was my life like then? It was pretty darn good. When today's artists sample or cover my songs, I feel very proud.

**In the '70s, I lived across the hall from John Lennon and Yoko Ono.** We all lived in The Dakota building in New York [before that, Flack lived with husband Stephen Novosel, until they divorced in 1972]. When he wrote 'Imagine', I could hear him playing bits and pieces of it through the walls. I didn't know him in the sense I could call up and say, "Hey, John. Can I come over?" but when he was recording *Double Fantasy* – his last album – he invited me to the studio to hear

what he was doing. He didn't ask me to play or sing anything, but I would have. I recorded an album of Beatles covers because I'm a fan. Pure and simple.

**I look at today's artists and really admire Lady Gaga.** When I was at the Grammys a couple of years ago, I walked past her as she was doing interviews, her arms full of awards. She stopped and said, "Roberta Flack! I love you! Let's do something together." I hope we do. She's so talented; she's made us realise it's not just about being a great songwriter, musician or singer; it's about image, the stage and the show. Today, you have to consider everything, from top to bottom. It's not like the old days. **TIFFANY BAKKER**  
**Let It Be Roberta: Roberta Flack Sings The Beatles (Universal) is out now.**