

Entertainment

Master vocalist Faye Carol sings the blues at Café Stritch



In her Oct. 22 gig at San Jose's Café Stritch, Faye Carol will present "The Many Grooves of the Blues." (Faye Carol)

By **ANDREW GILBERT**

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Every Faye Carol performance is a master class — a deep dive into the soul-steeped marrow of jazz and blues.

A Bay Area institution, she has devoted herself to teaching young musicians the finer points of overlapping African-American musical traditions. Her devotion to sharing her knowledge is one reason why she's not better known. But the Berkeley vocalist needs only one set to leave an indelible impression on her listeners, who know just what to expect if they pay attention to her billing as the Dynamic Miss Faye Carol.

She returns to Café Stritch on Saturday as part of a monthly residency that started this summer with concerts devoted to the songbooks of Billie Holiday and Dinah Washington. Her Oct. 22 show casts a wider stylistic net with a repertoire she calls "The Many Grooves of the Blues."

"I'll do some songs that people don't think of as blues, some straight shuffles, then go deep in the vaults to funkify something like Ma Rainey's 'See See Rider,' " Carol says. "I love Koko Taylor's 'Wang Dang Doodle,' and you know there'll be some Jimmy Reed and BB King in there, too."

Always eager to break in new spaces, she will make her SFJAZZ debut at the Joe Henderson Lab Dec. 16-17, with the program "Carolizing Christmas," based on her 2009 album of the same title. (Tickets go on sale Nov. 15.) Determined to expand the holiday repertoire, she includes jazz standards like Cedar Walton's surging "Holy Land" and an arrangement of "My Favorite Things" that's an homage to John Coltrane.

Born in Meridian, Mississippi, Carol grew up in Pittsburg and discovered her love of singing in the youth choir of Solomon Temple Missionary Baptist Church. By the end of high school she was a familiar presence in Pittsburg's Black Diamond district, an East Bay hotbed for jazz and blues fueled by soldiers on leave from Camp Stoneman.

She credits her neighbor, pianist Martha Young, with providing an early education in jazz fundamentals (not to mention introducing her to her future husband, bluesman Jim Gamble). A niece of tenor sax titan Lester Young, Young acquainted Carol with the music of Billie Holiday, which took some patience, since Carol's ear was attuned to soul and gospel powerhouses like Aretha Franklin and Mahalia Jackson, rather than Lady Day's quiet and insinuating behind-the-beat phrasing.

Carol has played a similar role for dozens of Bay Area musicians over the years, providing an invaluable bandstand education. Berkeley saxophonist Howard Wiley, also a Café Stritch regular, cites her on his Facebook page as "studied Blues, Swing and Soul at Faye Carol University."

Piano great Benny Green started working with Carol when he was at Berkeley High in the late 1970s. A few years ago, he told me that she gave him an essential foundation as a jazz performer. "We played standards and talked about the blues from an insider's perspective," Green said. "Being around a black American musician who lived the music all her life was an experience that money can't buy."

The band she brings to Café Stritch features a mix of veterans and rising stars. Bassist Mark Williams spent his formative years in the 1970s performing with innovators like vibraphonist Bobby Hutcherson and trombonist Julien Priester. On the other side of the career continuum is 14-year-old Oakland drummer Genius Wesley, who's been blowing minds around the area for the past year playing with Carol and vocalist Kalil Wilson.

Her music director is pianist Joe Warner, a Martinez native who's the first to admit it's a demanding gig. "There's a lot that's required of you," he says. "You need a breadth of knowledge about a lot of different styles. An arrangement might go from McCoy Tyner to Otis Spann in a couple of bars. You have to know a lot of songs and be able to transpose keys at a moment's notice. Her sets move like a James Brown or Otis Redding show, and, as musical director, you have to be into the next song, keeping the show moving."

Information flows both ways. When it comes to influences, Carol names John Coltrane and Kendrick Lamar, Aretha Franklin, Ray Charles and her daughter — pianist, songwriter and vocalist Kito Gamble. More than anything, she sees musicians as part of a family charged with the mission of spreading love and bringing people together.

"When my husband Jim Gamble was alive, he imparted to me that you should love your musicians," Carol says. "It's a very important component of my music and what I do. We want to make the world more unified."

The Dynamic Miss Faye Carol

When: 8:30 p.m. Oct. 22

Where: Café Stritch, 374 S. First St., San Jose

Admission: No cover, 408-280-6161;

www.cafestritch.com

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