



“Blues, Baroque, & Bars” Dives Into Black Musical Evolution and Resilience

[Jeff Kaliss](#) on September 13, 2022.



Faye Carol performs with rapper RyanNicole in “Blues, Baroque, & Bars” | Credit: Jeremy Allen

Six decades of singing and high-energy entertainment have never slowed [Faye Carol](#), whose past year has included gigs at Black Cat in San Francisco and Yoshi’s in Oakland, a month of Sundays in February at Geoffrey’s Inner Circle, a showcase of her [School of the Getdown](#) at the Oakland Black Generations Festival in April, and a return to Geoffrey’s for the Black Music Month Festival in June.

Throughout the year, Carol had been planning a revue dubbed “Blues, Baroque, & Bars,” which she [discussed](#) with SFCV’s Lou Fancher in December 2021, after receiving a grant as part of the Hewlett 50 Arts Commissions, in partnership with Oakland’s Art + Soul festival. “I’m liberated by it,” Carol said about the grant.

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“It will allow me the freedom to do a really nice commissioned work ... and I’ll be able to go around to four underserved communities and to present this work for free. ... I’ll be free to enrich people with music.”

That’s what Carol has been doing this month, starting at the East Bay Center for the Performing Arts in Richmond and moving on to the Love Center Ministries in Oakland, Pittsburg’s Creative Arts Building, and the historic Bayview Opera House in San Francisco, where this reviewer caught up with her on Sunday, Sept. 11. If grins and laughs were evidence, the one-of-a-kind event was worth the wait for the performers as much as for new and longtime fans.



RyanNicole, Faye Carol, bassist Tarus Mateen, and drummer Dennis Chambers in “Blues, Baroque, & Bars” | Credit: Jeremy Allen

The program opened with an instrumental number, Eddie Harris’s “1974 Blues,” titled for its tricky 7/4 time signature. Carol’s musical director and co-creator, Joe Warner, on the baby grand piano, was joined by Dennis Chambers, who’s drummed with Parliament-Funkadelic and John Scofield, and bassist Tarus Mateen, whose credits include working with Betty Carter, Terence Blanchard, Jacky Terrasson, and Jason Moran.

The Dynamic Miss Faye Carol then took the stage in an eye-catching pantsuit broadly striped in black and white. Quickly establishing her crowd-pleasing and often humorous persona, she made way for a sonorous prerecorded narration, announcing a theme of African American socioeconomic and musical evolution and “resilience.” What was billed as “Miss Faye’s Bangin’ Black String Quartet” took their chairs to offer up a lyrical, blues-based overture, evoking the ambience of Wynton Marsalis’s 1997 jazz oratorio *Blood on the Fields*.

The evening’s program, spanning some 17 sections, drew from a century of African American music but without strict chronological succession or adherence to style within any single section. This served to showcase the breadth and depth of all the musicians, as well as the exciting innovation mutually attributed to Carol and Warner, who’ve partnered for the past 10 years. The hardscrabble “C.C. Rider,” recorded by Ma Rainey almost a century ago, was tastefully arranged, with hushed backing from the Quartet.

Carol’s ingenious verbal intros and canny delivery of lyrics were for a while obfuscated by echoey and attenuated amplification. This also hampered the fast-paced, well-worded delivery of Oakland performance artist and activist RyanNicole (aka Ryan Nicole Austin), whose opening rap sparkled over Warner’s Harlem stride on Fats Waller’s “The Joint Is Jumpin’.”

Although all performers contributed to the show’s consistent ensemble quality, each got his or her own shining moments. The rhythm trio in particular explored the outer limits of their instruments. Chambers opened Neal Hefti’s “Splanky” with stunning pyrotechnics, and the



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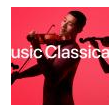
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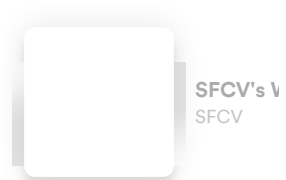
Quartet, both collectively and singly, subbed marvelously for what would have been the Count Basie horn section (in the most famous recording of this tune). In a different mode, the drummer closed out the gorgeous gospel number “Precious Lord,” a favorite of Martin Luther King Jr.’s, with righteous thunder.

Mateen, in addition to taking time out to enhance the show’s acoustics by providing detailed guidance to the sound booth, intoned an enchanting, sweet, and deep bass solo on Horace Silver’s “Cookin’ at the Continental” and took the changes of John Coltrane’s “Giant Steps” effortlessly all over his fingerboard. Warner, whose library of styles is voluminous, displayed astounding technique and imaginative improvisation while soloing on the Coltrane classic and on Nina Simone’s “Backlash Blues.” And Austin, vibrant and confident, worked a rollicking rap about romance into “Think,” by former Bay Area resident and club booker Jimmy McCracklin. The nearly full house cheered and applauded all these efforts and listened attentively to a second narration, countering the “giant steps forward” of civil rights with the setbacks of gentrification and the passing of the presidency from Obama to Trump.

Carol’s capacity to successfully embrace and enliven a multitude of genres was more irrefutably evidenced here than in the programming of most of her gigs. She both scatted and yodeled impressively on the Silver tune, the latter technique uncommon among jazz vocalists (with the late Leon Thomas a rare exception). Her infectious sass on Willie Dixon’s “I Just Wanna Make Love to You” included a change-up on the lyrics, with “Why don’t you *make* me make love to you?” She swung effortlessly through the skippy percolation of Allen Toussaint’s “Yes We Can Can,” a hit for Oakland’s Pointer Sisters, and after challenging the audience with, “Don’t you know you can?” she elicited an energetic collective response: “Yes I can. Yes we can!”



Faye Carol in “Blues, Baroque, & Bars” | Credit: Jeremy Allen



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Miss Faye’s Bangin’ Black String Quartet and pianist Joe Warner in “Blues, Baroque, & Bars” | Credit: Jeremy Allen

Early acoustic problems aside, the show wove seamlessly from start to finish, with changes of tempo and rhythm appearing as pleasant surprises, rather than as artifice. The unusual singer-rapper pairing presented as a partnership of mutual admiration, and the experimental integration of a string quartet — violinists Christina Walton and Yeri Caesar, violist Tristan Williams, and cellist Byron Hogan — was arguably more successfully

natural and edifying than similar legendary hybrid efforts involving jazz saxophonists Charlie Parker and Stan Getz. The success of “Blues, Baroque, & Bars,” of course, depended on the artful arrangements by and evident onstage communication between Carol and Warner and on Warner’s coordination of the other performers.

Carol shone again as an icon of genuine generosity to everyone who makes and comes to hear her music. “There should be a red carpet for you, everywhere you go,” Austin told her, near the evening’s end. Carol will anchor a Black Women’s Roots Festival, featuring a handful of vocalists, at the Freight & Salvage on Nov. 27. Her latest double album, *Faye Sings Lady Day*, recorded at Yoshi’s, is available [on her website](#).

***Jeff Kaliss** has featured and reviewed classical, jazz, rock, and world musics and other entertainment for the San Francisco Chronicle and a host of other regional, national, international, and web-based publications. He holds an MFA in Creative Writing from San Francisco State University, is a published poet, and is the author of I Want to Take You Higher: The Life and Times of Sly & the Family Stone (Backbeat Books) and numerous textbook and encyclopedia entries, album liner notes, and festival program notes.*

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