

Faye Carol, artist and mentor, to be honored as Jazz Hero

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By Andrew Gilbert

April 10, 2014

Benny Green was a standout player in the Berkeley High jazz band in the late 1970s, but his formative education took place on the bandstand with [Faye Carol](#), a veteran vocalist whose command of blues and jazz prepared the pianist for his career-making stints with jazz legends Betty Carter, Art Blakey and Ray Brown.

A Berkeley resident since the early 1970s, the Pittsburg-raised Carol has provided firm but loving guidance to hundreds of aspiring musicians over the years, which is why the [Jazz Journalists Association](#) is presenting her with a Jazz Hero award at Yoshi's on Saturday afternoon (full disclosure: I'm a JJA member involved with planning the event).

Green was 16 when he started playing with Carol, and she made a point of featuring him at the beginning of every set.

"I'd open the show playing a trio number or two, and that was my first time getting my feet wet leading a band," says Green, 51, who's the first artist-in-residence at Berkeley's [California Jazz Conservatory](#) (formerly known as the Jazzschool).

"I can't begin to fathom how much I got from Faye in terms of a foundation as a jazz performer," Green says. "We played standards and talked about the blues from an insider's perspective...Being around a black American musician who lived the music all her life was an experience that money can't buy."

Carol has worked tirelessly to see that a lack of funds doesn't prevent her from sharing her hard-won musical knowledge. She first started teaching in the late 1980s at JazzCamp West and went on to launch her own Music In the Community program at the Black Rep Theatre. While the California Arts Council initially funded the program, she kept it going for years through her own grit and determination.

"I kept it going by sweat and rubber bands," Carol says. "But I suspended it this year because it was wearing me out. I want to serve the at-risk kids. Somehow there's a platform for kids with extraordinary talent, but I've taught kids who didn't even know they can sing. My only criteria are to love music and be committed to coming every time."

She continues to teach evening classes in her School of the Get Down, and she's featuring an array of current and former students at Yoshi's on Saturday. She'll also be joined by a dazzling array of vocal talent, including Frankye Kelly, Denise Perrier and Kenny Washington (who performed alongside Carol at the SFJAZZ Center last month on a program presented by John Santos). In the coming months she'll be offering a series of workshops at the Eastside Cultural Center with tenor saxophonist/drummer Howard Wiley, another proud Carol protégé.

"I've got to be working with some kids," Carol says. "I hope to restart the MITC program when I secure some funds so I can get to the hard to reach kids. But as much as I love teaching, I love to sing myself, and I need time to practice, look for gigs, and do the gigs."



Faye Carol: Photo: courtesy Faye Carol

Though she's criminally under documented as a recording artist, Carol is best known as a singer whose spunk and effortless charisma led to her indelibly stamped billing as the Dynamic Miss Faye Carol. Like a bottomless well of soul, she's played an essential role on a series of historically minded musical journeys, like Howard Wiley and the Angola Project's *12 Gates to the City*, an album inspired by the hymns and work songs of Louisiana's notorious Angola State Penitentiary.

Bassist/composer Marcus Shelby drew on her voice for inspiration while writing the music for his epic 2007 double album *Harriet Tubman* (Noir Records), and 2010's *Soul of the Movement* (Porto Franco). They've continued to perform together widely and she's featured as a special guest at the Marcus Shelby Jazz Orchestra's Cal Performances engagement at Zellerbach Hall on May 2, [The Legacy of Duke Ellington: 50 Years of Swing!](#)



Faye Carol: Photo: courtesy Faye Carol

"She's probably one of the most underrated and under-appreciated talents," Shelby told me in an interview several years ago. "I've never seen anybody work as hard as her. Her rehearsals are more intense than most gigs I play on. It's changed my whole approach to this process. She's got this wonderful understanding of the history of the music, and she's always looking to share it."

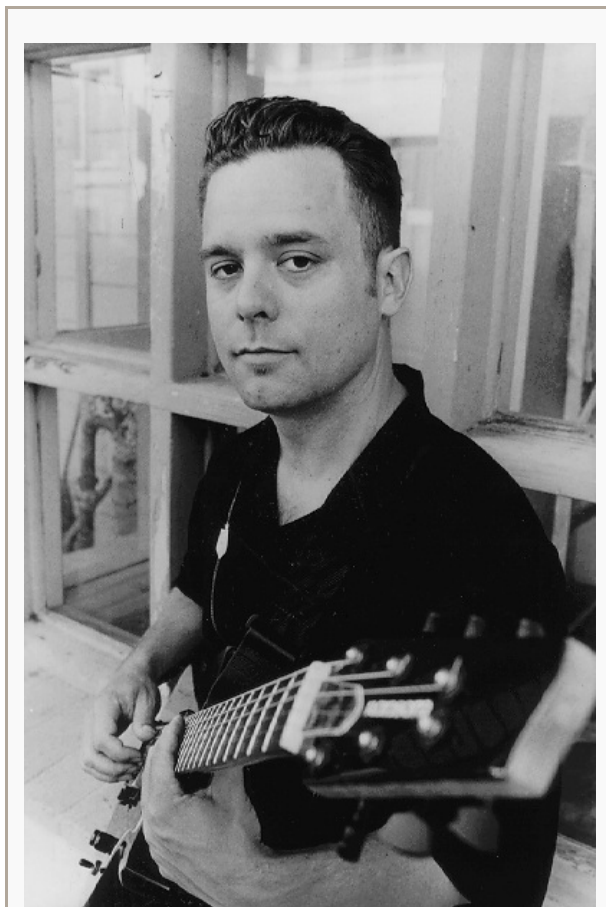
Recommended gig:

Berkeley native [Will Bernard](#) returns to the East Bay this week for a series of gigs with the cooperative trio Pleasure Drones, playing the [Boom Boom Room](#) on Friday, [Jupiter](#) on Saturday and [Duende](#) on Monday. A groove-centric improvisational ensemble steeped in the R&B of the 1960s and '70s, the group features Bernard on guitar, keyboard and electronics, Jeff Hanley on bass, keys and electronics, and drummer Eric Kalb, whose credits include John Scofield, George Porter Jr., Melvin Sparks, Sharon Jones and the Dapp Kings, the Greyboy Allstars, and another great Berkeley-raised guitarist, Charlie Hunter.

They first started playing together as a trio at a Manhattan restaurant in Union Square when Bernard needed to assemble a stylistically flexible band that could play a wide variety of music with vocalists. "Jeff Hanley was recommended to me and I really dug his playing," Bernard writes in an email from Europe. "He has an incredible ear and has a wide repertoire of songs and is quick to pick up on any kind of music."

They were having so much fun they started convening on their own for jam sessions in a small studio Kalb had outfitted in his apartment. Before long the band took on its own identity, though the name was subject to second thoughts.

"At the time the working title of the band was Gluesniffer," Bernard writes. "We thought maybe that would limit our options and perhaps paint ourselves into a stylistic hole so we changed the name. We like the more or less punk rock side



Will Bernard. Photo: Antilles Records

of the project though. It's really an expressive outlet for us where at least at this point in time we aren't trying too hard to fit in a category. I think our basic parameters can be seen as groove oriented music with sonic textures on top

The mild-mannered Berkeley High alum first made his mark with Peter Apfelbaum's stylistically sprawling Hieroglyphics Ensemble. He gained national attention in the mid-1990s with the Grammy-nominated guitar triumvirate T.J. Kirk, around the same time that his band Medicine Hat was also signed to a major label. Bernard has been a Jupiter regular for two decades, since he started filling in for Counting Crows' David Immergluck in the popular band Papa's Culture, and he's continued to perform there regularly even after trading Berkeley for Brooklyn in 2007.

"I always feel it's a nice constant," Bernard writes. "Eric Kalb mentions the huge redwood tree that's right in back of where the band plays. For a New Yorker that is a pretty unusual sight. Sometimes we take for granted these things in California."

Andrew Gilbert writes for Berkeleyside, the San Jose Mercury News, the San Francisco Chronicle, and KQED's California Report. He lives in West Berkeley.

To find out what is going on in Berkeley and nearby, be sure to check out Berkeleyside's recently launched [Events Calendar](#). We encourage you also to submit your own events.