

By Andrew Gilbert,
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Faye Carol, back at the Back Room with the Fellas



The Dynamic Miss Faye Carol checks into the Back Room every Sunday in June with her trusty pianist Joe Warner and a stellar roster of special guests. Photo: Eric Vogler.

The relationship between performers and venues is often fraught with tension and conflicting agendas, as the pressures of commerce can restrict avenues for creative expression. Berkeley jazz and blues matriarch Faye Carol has spent decades gracefully walking this tightrope, tailoring her performances to suit different rooms and audiences.

From the West Oakland R&B clubs where she made a name for herself in the mid-1960s to the San Francisco cabarets where she reinvented herself as an emotionally expansive interpreter of the American Songbook in the 1970s, Carol has delivered the goods, captivating audiences with her soulful authority.

In recent years the longtime Berkeley resident has found an ideal East Bay home in The Back Room, the cozy, living-room-like venue founded and run by blues/jazz pianist Sam Rudin on Bonita just north of University Avenue. She's settled into the space for several long Sunday residencies, and Carol returns in

June for the series “Faye and the Fellas.” Joined by her trusty accompanist Joe Warner, a pianist with a deep feel for the blues and compelling sense of swing, she’s showcasing some marvelous musicians, including blues guitarist and vocalist Alvon Johnson (June 3), supremely suave crooner Nicolas Bearde (June 10), searing saxophonist Charles McNeal (June 17), and R&B great Freddie Hughes (June 24).

“Joe and I have been doing lots of different kinds of things, and I’ve been enjoying that,” says Carol, who’s also a regular at San Jose’s Café Stritch. “I was thinking, what else would I like to do? I like all these guys a lot. They’re all different in their own way and I thought it would be fun to go back to the Back Room and invite some of my partners to do a couple of tunes.”

A regular gig is a rare and coveted situation, and Carol has turned the late afternoon Sunday hang into one of the most reliably entertaining shows in town. Longtime fans rub shoulders with students from her School of the Getdown and folks who’ve discovered her more recently through projects like UnderCover Presents a Tribute to *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, when she stole the show with her closing rendition of “Can’t Take My Eyes Off You.” Carol’s residencies have helped establish the venue as an East Bay cultural mainstay, says Rudin.

A veteran musician who spent decades touring and recording with his jazz-steeped blues combo Hurricane Sam & the Hotshots, Rudin often sits in with Back Room acts when the vibe is right. He shares Carol’s affinity for the blues-jazz continuum, but “she has such a remarkable partnership with Joe, I’ve never really considered getting on stage,” Rudin says.

“We have a lot of great people here of all sorts, but I’ve got to put Faye up at the top as the most accomplished in what they bring to the moment. She has a couple of homes in the Bay Area, and I’m very happy that she’s chosen the

Back Room as her home in the East Bay.”

When it comes to versatility and crowd-pleasing verve, Alvon Johnson is an ideal foil for Carol. One of the Bay Area’s most dynamic blues artists, he’s as likely to cite his love of Tom Jones and Doris Day as Guitar Shorty and Lowell Folsom, the blues greats he cut his teeth with on the 1980s Los Angeles scene.

“Blues is one vehicle we use to express ourselves,” Johnson says. “But I think it’s wonderful to turn on a dime and play whatever style you feel, if you can do it authentically.”

He and Carol performed together back in 2002 in the Alice Arts Center production of *Oaktown Blue*, a play written and directed by poet, DJ, percussionist and bandleader Avotcja Jiltonilro. “Alvon is so crazy and fun and good,” Carol says. “After Avotcja’s play we always wanted to work together again, but life takes you the way it does. I ran into him a while back and said, ‘Oh my goodness, let’s do something else!’”

An old-school entertainer who embraces the show biz imperative that the audience is always right, the Vallejo resident has earned a vaunted reputation over the past two decades, gigging widely at home and touring internationally. He’s a regular at top clubs like the Blue Note Napa, Biscuits & Blues, and Yoshi’s, but Sunday’s show provides a rare opportunity to see him in close confines, taking the measure of the room.

“I’m somewhat of a chameleon,” he says. “I gear my material to the room. At a juke joint, I do juke joint material, and at a jazz club I’m playing songs that make sense there.”

Her other guests bring their own brand of excitement. She and Bearde have bonded over the years as faculty at Jazz Camp West. “With his smooth deliver

and charm singing with Nic is so much fun,” Carol says. “And Charles McNeal and I just clicked from day one, before everyone else found out about his magic. He’s just a joy to work with. He can go anywhere musically I want to go.”

She shares the most history with soul singer Freddie Hughes, a Bay Area treasure who’s never quite gotten his due. She was still a teenager when she first heard him in the popular gospel group The Five Disciples. “I was singing a lot of gospel then too, and when I heard that harmony I thought I’d lose my mind it was so good,” she says. “Singing with him is going to be a pleasure. It’s a voice I have reveled in.”

They were on bills together in the 1960s when he was performing in the Casanova Two with Wylie Trass, and she watched him get a taste of the limelight with “Send My Baby Back,” his 1968 hit for Wand Records. “There are all kinds of hidden gems all around. Each one tells us something. This is one more way to help the scene stay vibrant. The other glorious thing is they’re all my friends, and for Joe to have a chance to be with these guys. The repertoire is varied and wide. That’s what I love.”

Carol doesn’t take a welcoming venue for granted. Last December an ugly incident at a Jack London Square restaurant ended a gig abruptly when the management was unhappy with the sound. When Warner came by at the appointed time to pick up the check, he says he was threatened with violence. After an uproar on social media, the restaurant apologized and paid up, but the encounter provided an unwelcome reminder that not every business

presented music treats artists with respect. All the more reason that Carol is grateful to going back to the Back Room.

“I love Sam,” Carol says. “He lets my ideas come to life. All of these guys are loved by the community. They’re all stellar at what they do, and I love being a part of the musical community with them.”

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