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# Faye Carol's Black Women's Roots Fest brings a bit of everything to Berkeley



Courtesy of Faye Carol

Singer Faye Carol brings a talent-packed team of singers to Freight & Salvage in Berkeley Nov. 27

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By **ANDREW GILBERT** | Correspondent

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If Black American music is a mighty river, Faye Carol is determined to account for every stream and tributary feeding the ever-evolving torrent.

Exceptional less for her versatility than the effectiveness with which she transmits fundamental truths, she's sung gospel, blues, R&B and jazz in a career spanning some six decades. The dynamic Berkeley vocalist, bandleader and educator represents the inextricably enmeshed nature of African American musical traditions and her latest showcase, the Black Women's Roots Festival, drills down into the aquifers that have long provided popular styles around the world with indispensable rhythms and cadences.

Joining Carol on her Sunday afternoon Freight & Salvage production are gospel great Lady Tramaine Hawkins, R&B powerhouse Lady Bianca, blues star Terrie Odabi, and Oakland Poet Laureate Ayodele Nzinga. Le Perez, a midlife church-reared vocalist who graduated from Carol's School of The Getdown vocal workshop and went on to win Living Jazz's 2017 Jazz Search West talent competition, rounds out the program as a rising talent.

The Roots Festival embodies two strategies that have guided Carol in recent years as she's produced an array of multi-act programs and concert series at venues around the East Bay, sharing the spotlight while assembling novel and enticing rosters.

"As long as I've been singing and having my central place in the Bay Area, you still have to have something else for the people to see," she said. "We've got such a wealth of talent here, and Black music has so many different ways you can go. I don't separate music. It's all spiritual."

Carol seems to have moved into overdrive in recent years. She and her dedicated accompanist, Martinez-raised pianist Joe Warner, have presented ambitious programs that rival any of the leading jazz festivals. After launching his series Give the Drummer Some at the California Jazz Conservatory last year, Warner brings the trap set showcase to the SFJAZZ Center in May with Billy Hart, Lenny White, Jeff "Tain" Watts, and Dennis Chambers.

"We get the master drummers," Carol said with evident pride. "We plan on continuing doing that. These have been tough times for live music. It's nice to bring together different kinds of situations people are not thinking about."

In bringing together leading practitioners of sacred and secular music the Black Women Roots Festival offers a rare communion indeed. Nominated for numerous Blues Music Awards, Odabi is the most formidable blues singer to come out of the Bay Area in recent decades.

Lady Bianca is true R&B royalty. A pianist, vocalist and songwriter whose boundless soul is rooted in her formative years singing in church, she spent the first half of her career as a backup vocalist and keyboardist featured by stars such as Frank Zappa, Van Morrison and Sly Stone.

But it's Lady Tramaïne Hawkins' presence that turns the concert into a singular can't-miss event. Part of a world-shaking gospel music clan, she's been at the center of gospel music innovation since the age of 16, when she recorded "Oh Happy Day" with the Edwin Hawkins Singers in her grandfather's Berkeley congregation Ephesian Church of God in Christ. Dorothy Combs Morrison sang lead on the single, which became an international hit in 1969 that transformed the gospel scene.

"Those voices rang out in that sanctuary and it went all over the world," she said from her home in Sacramento. "You can go to Europe now and it's played in jazz forms and R&B forms. I'm going to do it at the Freight. It never gets old. It still has that kind of electricity to it, that encouraging vibe to it. You want to sing along still. It's amazing."

Hawkins was only 17 when the high school gospel vocal ensemble she performed with, The Heavenly Tones, was recruited to tour with Sly and the Family Stone and rechristened Little Sister. The only one of the four young women who declined the offer, she went on to expand the audience for gospel music by bringing the church's uplift to the dance floor with hits such as "Fall Down (Spirit of Love)," "Child of the King" and "In the Morning Time."

Just as "Oh Happy Day" was criticized by people who wanted the music to remain static and unsullied by worldly settings, Hawkins was often buked and scorned for her innovations. But she saw her mission as expanding "our audience and reach, not just being at church," she said. "We sang at clubs, but we were still singing gospel music and living Christian lives."

Mostly performing in Europe these days, Hawkins was thrilled to get the call from Carol, “an awesome person and talent,” she said. “I love the fact we’re all women. It’s a show of strength and power. A show of unity, and I’m glad to be mentioned in that power and love.”

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## BLACK WOMEN’S ROOTS FESTIVAL

**When:** 4 p.m. Nov. 27

**Where:** Freight & Salvage, 2020 Addison St., Berkeley

**Tickets:** \$40-\$44; 510-644-2020, [www.thefreight.org](http://www.thefreight.org)

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