

Culture

MUSIC

The Politics of Blues | A

Berkeley icon, vocalist Faye Carol, imparts her love of music to the youths she mentors. | *By Lee Hildebrand*

Faye Carol had this to say to a decidedly multiracial crowd in Oakland on a Saturday afternoon, "We can't have no music in America without the blues. It's political." She was performing atop a flatbed truck at an October block party on 23rd Avenue between International Boulevard and East 12th Street. The free event—a celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Black Arts and Chicano Arts movements—was sponsored by the nearby Eastside Arts Alliance, where the veteran Bay Area vocalist mentors young musicians as part of a program called Unity Grooves.

The political nature of the block party was made obvious prior to Carol's hourlong set by a series of speakers who angrily decried the murders and mass incarceration of African-American men in America. Ron Davis had traveled all the way from Jacksonville, Fla., to speak about the 2012 murder of his 17-year-old son Jordan during an argument with an angry white man over loud hip-hop music. An activist from St. Louis spoke about the recent killing by a policeman of 18-year-old Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo., and Cephus Johnson recalled the 2009 shooting death of his 22-year-old nephew Oscar Grant III at the Fruitvale BART station located just a few blocks away.

As if to drive home their and her earlier points, Carol closed her show with a radical reinterpretation of the old standard "The Birth of the Blues." The song had debuted as part of a musical revue called George White's Scandals of 1926 at the then-all-white Apollo Theater in Harlem and was popularized on record that year by Paul Whiteman, a rotund white orchestra leader who was widely known as "The King of Jazz." Some have detected subtle racism in Buddy DeSylva and Lew Brown's lyrics, especially the line "from a jail came the wail of a down-hearted frail."

As the sun peeked through a cloudy sky and BART trains periodically passed on the elevated tracks behind them, Carol, her three-man rhythm section, and two teenage horn players from



Bringing the Faye-ness: Berkeley's Carol teaches kids about the music she loves. Photo courtesy Kito Kamili.

Celebrating MLK

Faye Carol will appear, along with Linda Tillery, Melanie DeMore, the Oakland Interfaith Gospel Choir, and others, in Living Jazz, Inc.'s 13th annual Musical Tribute to Martin Luther King Jr. at 7 p.m. on Sunday, Jan. 18, at the Scottish Rite Center, 1547 Lakeside Drive, Oakland. Tickets are \$23 in advance, \$25 at the door, and \$8 for children 10 and under; 510-287-8880, MLKTribute.com.

Unity Grooves kicked off "The Birth of the Blues" with an African-accented funk groove. Before delivering the original lyrics, accenting them dramatically with broad strokes of her hands and 3-inch fingernails and frequently interjecting John Coltrane-inspired yodels, she ad libbed her own lines about the middle passage, auction blocks, and cotton fields.

Hip-hop artist Don Juan then stepped to the mike, rapping, "In Oakland they know about the blues. In Ferguson they know about the blues. In Florida they know about the blues."

"All power to the blues," Carol called out before rhythmically chanting the names of some of her musical heroes and sheroes, including Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, Lester Young, Albert King, T-Bone Walker, John Coltrane, Robert Johnson, Big Bill Broonzy, Jimmy Reed, Charlie Parker, and B.B. King. And she added the famous Black Panther Party slogan "all power to the people" to the list.

Carol, a longtime Berkeley resident, is currently in the third stage of her five-decade career. From the mid-'60s through the mid-'70s, she sang R&B hits of the period, especially those by Aretha Franklin, on a then-thriving network of nightclubs in African-American communities on both sides of the Bay. Then, when many black club owners found it cheaper to hire disco DJs than live bands, she turned to singing popular standards and an occasional blues at gay clubs in San Francisco, winning three prestigious Cabaret Gold awards in the process. By the early '80s, however, AIDS had wiped out much of her audience, and she began appearing mainly at jazz clubs, doing standards, jazz tunes, and quite a bit of blues. In November, she did one of her frequent gigs at Yoshi's, this time to promote the release of her latest CD, Faye Sings Lady Day, a set of 10 songs associated with Billie Holiday that was recorded several years ago at the Oakland club.

Although she sings both, Carol doesn't like being labeled a "jazz singer" or "a blues singer."

"Music is in the ear of the beholder. I'll let somebody else call it something," she says over a sandwich and salad at a South Berkeley restaurant. She's casually attired in several shades of purple, which is also the color of her nails.

"Those are nice words for boxes for selling," she adds. "If somebody's gonna come and buy something, they gotta compartmentalize you. I just don't believe in boxing myself in. I've been blessed to be able to sing what I like. My biggest hero for that was Ray Charles. You could not pigeonhole that man. He brought his Rayness to whatever he did. And he could kill you on the blues, just lay your ass out."

Faye Carol was born in Meridian, Miss., and spent her first 10 years there with her schoolteacher grandmother, except for summers when she traveled to Port Chicago, Calif., to be with her parents

who'd moved there for work. She considers living in Mississippi to have been "absolutely wonderful," yet she was well aware of the "white only" signs and other forms of racism that surrounded her.

"The great thing about segregation was that you were just with your own people," she says. "The other thing about segregation that wasn't so great but still had side benefits was that you had to be pretty self-sufficient, 'cause wasn't nobody gonna come and do too much of nothin' for you. We had everything 'cause you had to have everything. We had our own newspaper, our own restaurants, our own hairdressers, and those juke joints on the outskirts of town."

"We never did try to go into [white] restaurants," she adds. "Our food was better, anyway."

She began singing in church as a teenager in Pittsburg, where her family had relocated from Port Chicago, and joined a gospel group called the Angelaires that performed at churches throughout the Bay Area and did a brief tour that included stops in Chicago, Detroit, and New York City. After winning a talent contest at the Oakland Auditorium during the mid-'60s, she landed a gig with R&B guitarist Johnny Talbot and De Thangs at the Zanzibar Room in Oakland's California Hotel.

Carol's husband, the late Jim Gamble, a jazz guitar player and bassist who taught a class in black music history at U.C. Berkeley, helped broaden her musical horizons beyond the R&B hits of the day. She in turn began schooling their daughter Kito, then a budding young piano player, in the music of blues pianist Otis Spann and such jazzmen as McCoy Tyner and Cecil Taylor. Kito went on to work as her mother's piano accompanist for more than a decade before launching her own career as a Christian rapper known as Sista Kee.

Besides performing in clubs and at festivals, Carol has been imparting her broad knowledge of African-American music to children, teenagers, and adults through workshops and private lessons over the past 20 years. She currently teaches a four-week workshop she calls "the School of the Get Down" at Chamber Arts House in Berkeley.

For vocalists, Carol says, she teaches "according to what they need. Sometimes they just need confidence. Sometimes they need to know about time. You can't sing if you don't have good time. You can't sing if you didn't have good intonation and good enunciation."

For all students, she stresses the importance of blues in the history of African-American music.

"If I say 'Otis Spann,' " she explains, "I make them do me a report so they can come back and tell me who is Willie Dixon. How come you guys are, you know, musically speaking? Why did James Brown get to be James Brown? I tell them that blues is actually the thread through everything we've ever done. Kids are like, 'Really?' Like with 'Kiss' [by Prince], you're listening to another form of the blues

when you break it all down.

"The kids aren't hardly exposed to any of that stuff. There's so much to know, so much to feel."

Lee Hildebrand, a longtime Oakland resident now living in Tracy, has been writing about music, particularly blues, soul, and gospel music in the East Bay, since 1968.

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