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'The Dynamic Miss Faye Carol is the East Bay's Hardest- Working Live Musician

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Faye Carol has been an active live performer since the 1960s, and her career has survived several turbulent historical eras.

(Nastia Voynovskaya)

Active since the 1960s, the **Dynamic Miss Faye Carol** is arguably the hardest-working live musician in the East Bay.

On a recent afternoon, we meet at **Geoffrey's Inner Circle** in Oakland, where she's hosting weekly concerts throughout March that draw links between her jazz repertoire and blues, Latin jazz and even hip-hop, with collaborators such as percussionist Pete Escovedo, veteran bluesman Bobby Rush and rapper Mistah F.A.B. Dubbed **Faye Carol & the Folks**, the program is just part of Carol's 24/7, 365-day-a-year grind of rehearsing, promoting, performing and teaching—a grind she's maintained for the last six decades.

"I do my own everything," Carol tells me in her honeyed, resounding voice, and that includes her manicures. When we meet for our interview, she takes a seat on a regal, velvet chair in Geoffrey's emerald-green hall, and pulls out a bottle of light pink nail polish to touch up an impressively lengthy fingernail on her ornately bejeweled hand.

In connecting jazz with the blues and hip-hop, Carol seeks to show the common black roots of American popular music. Her husband, the late scholar Jim Gamble, who was also her manager and musical director, taught a class at UC Berkeley called the Black History of Music. Early on in her career, Carol audited the course on a weekly basis, and it opened her eyes to the ways the African diaspora's creative

innovations have shaped virtually all popular genres.

"I think of it as black music coming from that source, and then there are many flavors—just like if you cookin'," she says. "Do you want to put some oregano in something, or do you wanna put some cayenne? It's different flavors, different expressions coming from different parts of the country, different creative beings. They create differently, they hear differently. We are not a monolith."

The Aftermath of the Harlem of the West

If there's one word to describe Faye Carol, it's resilient. As a young girl, she moved to the East Bay town of Pittsburg from the segregated South. As a young adult in the 1960s, she was making a name for herself as a soul singer in West Oakland's clubs, and even toured with Marvin Gaye.

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"The music in the hood was so rich," she says of West Oakland's musical legacy.

After World War II, the neighborhood, along with San Francisco's historically black Fillmore district, was referred to as the Harlem of the West. That era came to a close after hundreds of black-owned homes and businesses were destroyed to make room for the post office, BART and the interstate freeway system. By the mid 1960s, the bustle of 7th Street's nightlife district dwindled.

This turbulent history deeply impacted Carol. So her choice to present Faye Carol & the Folks at Geoffrey's, one of the last standing black-owned clubs in Oakland, was an intentional one. As she explains it, world-class jazz musicians "come to Yoshi's or they come to SFJAZZ—which is fine, nothing wrong with that, I want them to continue to go to those places. But let's add this place also. We don't want to leave it out because it's a viable, beautiful, wonderful, should-be-treasured place."

**'Evolutionary
Blues' Resurrects
West Oakland's
Musical Legacy**

"Over time, you see [the music has] been dissipated out of the hood," she laments, "to the point where we don't have our own music in our own neighborhoods anymore."

Reinvention in the Age of the AIDS Crisis

In the 1970s, after the majority of West Oakland's black clubs shut down, Carol's love for the music continued to buoy her. She persisted and found a new niche: singing cabaret for the burgeoning gay community in the Castro, who, like her, were big fans of musical theater and show tunes. In the Castro, she gossiped on her breaks with trailblazing disco star Sylvester (of "**You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)**" fame), and established herself in a new scene.

"I loved that so much, these was my babies," she says. "They lived hard, they played hard, they worked hard and they enjoyed the finer things in life."

**How the World
Caught Up to
Sylvester**

But Carol's new audience was hit by tragedy yet again—this time by the AIDS epidemic. "That's still devastating to me," she says. "It wiped—I'm telling you, girlfriend—it wiped *everybody* out. All the people who owned the clubs, all the bartenders, all the waitresses, the people who came to the clubs. Everybody was just falling, falling, falling."

Yet, once again, Carol continued to persevere and adapt. In the '80s, she performed with avant-garde saxophonist

Pharoah Sanders and soul legend Ray Charles. In 1990, the City of Oakland chose her to sing for Nelson Mandela during a visit following his release from a 27-year sentence as a political prisoner. That decade, Carol deepened her collaboration with her daughter, pianist Kito Gamble (who joins the Faye Carol & the Folks bill on March 29), and the mother and daughter released an album together in 1996.

**While the US
Government Sat
Idle, AIDS
Activism
Mobilized in San
Francisco**



The Dynamic Miss Faye Carol and pianist Joe Warner. (*Nastia Voynovskaya*)

Passing Musical Traditions to the Next Generation

These days, Carol performs regularly around the East Bay at concert halls and private parties alike with a variety of ensembles. She also teaches singing in private lessons and at her **School of the Getdown**. In all of her projects, a constant is her pianist of nearly a decade, Joe

Warner. Warner, a 27-year-old originally from the East Bay town of Martinez, first saw Carol perform when he was only 13 years old after his music teacher, saxophonist Howard Wiley (another Faye Carol protégé), brought him to Yoshi's.

For Carol, the collaboration with Warner was unexpected given their ages and cultural differences. "I thought, how the hell am I gonna be with some white guy from Martinez?" she jokes, giving Warner a sly look. "But you know, with some people you just gel, and that's the way we do."

"She's the holder of a lot of traditions that are no longer here or not as prevalent as they used to be," says Warner with reverence. "It's really unique and remarkable for an artist to be able to do all the different things she can—she can really sing gospel, she can really sing the blues, she's really a jazz singer, she can scat. She knows about R&B and hip-hop and can adapt herself to that. And to put it all into really unique sound—you don't really see anybody do that."

Indeed, it's that adaptability and embrace of younger generations that's given Carol's career its longevity—a longevity that sometimes even surprises the singer herself.

Her secret?

"Well, I'm pretty stubborn. I think it's my right to do this—when you're born you have certain inalienable rights," she says. "When you're not doing anything to harm anybody or to harm yourself, then you should have the right to do it. And I just fight to do it. That's about what it is in a nutshell."



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Faye Carol & the Folks takes place at Geoffrey's Inner Circle on Sundays through March 29. The March 15 concert features Pete Escovedo, John Santos, Carolyn Brandy, and Jesus Diaz. On March 22, she performs with Mistah F.A.B., and on March 29, she performs with Bobby Rush and Kito Kamili. [Details here.](#)