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The Resurrection of Lady Day

Faye Carol genuflects to Billie Holiday in a new live album.

By *Rachel Swan* @*rachelswan*

As a child, Faye Carol would have characterized herself as "a tomboy with lady overtones." The overtones came from growing up in Meridian, Mississippi with a grandmother who made her read etiquette books and learn which color palette goes with what. The tomboy part was in her natural constitution. "I'm a Taurus, so I'm stubborn," said Carol, admitting that it took a while for her to warm up to the older styles of jazz music that she would eventually master. In many ways, she's still an amalgam of the grande dame that her grandmother envisioned, and the salty adventurer who wouldn't take anything from nobody, but always stayed curious about the world. Carol's long curly fingernails are her most memorable feature, and her sartorial choices (plum lipstick, large rings, high heels that she wears "to look cute," but removes during shows because they hurt) are of a piece with her ebullient personality. When we sat down for lunch a couple weeks ago, the first thing she did was stick a fork across the table to sample my Greek salad. "I only hang out with people I can do *this* to," she said.

Personal quirks helped Carol endear herself to the Bay Area audience that has supported her for more than three decades, as she went from fronting funk bands to singing in cabaret clubs, and eventually cemented her place as one of most respected vocalists on the West Coast. In this sense, she's virtually peerless: Goapele and Ledisi are more commercially successful but neither has Carol's versatility. In fact, Carol's antecedents are singers like Nancy Wilson, Betty Carter, and Carmen McRae, who could shift from straight-ahead jazz to guttural blues, but were also conversant in the avant-garde. It's no surprise that Howard Wiley and Marcus Shelby both had Carol in mind when crafting their most recent albums: On Wiley's *Angola Project* she adds a layer of grit to Mahalia Jackson's gospel song, "Trouble of the World"; on Shelby's *Harriet Tubman* she sings the main theme "I Will Not Stand Still," which is actually an aria.

Until she was ten years old, Carol lived with her Methodist grandmother in Meridian. Her grandmother was a schoolteacher, so Faye sang and acted in school plays starting at age five. Her first exposure to music — besides hymns at church — was the barbershop quartets she'd see at train stations, and the bands at her neighborhood juke joint (the door policy was pretty lax, and Carol remembers going in there when she was still small enough to sit on top of the bar). But Carol's musical career

really got set in motion after she moved to Pittsburg, California to be with her mother and sister. In Meridian she'd grown accustomed to the staid, decorous attitude of Methodist churchgoers; in Pittsburg she was inducted into a Baptist community where religion revolved around music — in everything from gospel choirs to the cadence of preachers' sermons. "When I came out here and I went to my mom's church, now that's when it was like, 'Eureka!'" Carol remembered. "They had a young people's choir and young people's activities, besides that it was hand-clapping and spirit filled and all these fabulous voices I was hearing. ...When I would go get my hair done at the hair shop I would sing under the dryers."

Carol sang R&B in high school and got hip to jazz by hanging out with her neighbor Martha Young, who was the niece of famed saxophonist Lester Young. Young was a killer pianist with an aggressive, no-nonsense persona that appealed to Carol, even though it drove other people away. They met right around the time that Carol was starting to learn a few standards by rote, from listening to Nancy Wilson's 1962 record with Cannonball Adderley. Young introduced Carol to other jazz singers, too, including raspy-voiced Billie Holiday, whom Carol didn't much like, at first. "It was totally different from anybody I had ever heard, because I was used to belting," she said. "Like Mahalia Jackson, like Aretha Franklin, like Patti LaBelle — you know, people who belted out there." But Carol kept listening, and gradually grew to appreciate the strange texture and fragility of the older jazz vocalists. She started tagging along with Young to jam sessions and gradually developed her own inimitable style: brittle but arresting, with inflected notes and phrases that have a unique contour.

Turning a labor of love into a viable career was tricky, and there was a point when Carol didn't even consider singing as a way of putting food on the table. She graduated from high school at age sixteen and went on to Oakland's now-defunct Automation Institute. "Then I tried to get what people call 'a real job,'" she said. "I used to have to get up at four o'clock in the morning to catch the bus in Pittsburg to come here looking for jobs and stuff. And people were so racist. I would come in looking all prim and proper with pumps and my business suit on and the King's English well-spoken, and they would just toss my ass right on out." It was Carol's husband Jim Gamble — a guitarist she met on the bandstand at an after-hours spot — who convinced her that singing was an honorable profession. And once she got started, she never looked back. Even on her honeymoon Carol said she got restless after a couple days. "I said, 'Okay, we did enough of this, let me go find a gig.'"

Over four decades Carol built her career, first as a soul belter and frontwoman for Johnny Talbot & De Thangs, then as a gun-for-hire in San Francisco's cabaret scene, then as an educator at Jazz Camp West and in East Bay public schools. She still teaches "Music in the Community," an afterschool program that traces the genealogy of African-American music, several times a week at Berkeley's Black Repertory Theatre. (It's inspired, in part, by the black history of music class that Gamble taught at Cal during the '70s.) Despite having a paucity of recordings (the result of not rubbing elbows with "those who-you-know people," she said), Carol is worshipped for her inexhaustible imagination, and because so many things about her hark back to a different time and place. Fans call her "the dynamic Miss Faye Carol."

Carol's latest project is a Billie Holiday tribute, *Faye Sings Lady Day Live at Yoshi's*, with a band featuring her daughter Kito Gamble on piano, Darryl Green on drums, Shelby on bass, and Wiley on saxophone. It was recorded last year during two one-hour sets, in which Carol easily captured the spirit of her jazz forebear: the longing and melancholy that infused "Strange Fruit" and "Willow Weep for Me"; the stories of falling in love and being jilted that informed "Billie's Blues" and "All of Me"; the hopefulness in "God Bless the Child." The two singers' lives weren't all that similar, but their stylistic parallels are evident. Carol says there's a reason for that: "The thing that made her want to sing is the same reason that makes me want to sing," she said. "She musta had an awful good time sometimes."

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