Pop Talk: Sharon Jones isn't shy about sharing what God gave her

by George_Varga

When Sharon Jones & The Dap-Kings made their San Diego debut two years ago, this vintage R&B-celebrating band from Brooklyn was so low-profile it barely qualified as a sub-underground sensation.

SHARON JONES - 'Don't let anybody tell you that you can't succeed in music because of how you look or what you're wearing,' says vocal sensation Sharon Jones, 51. CNS Photo courtesy of Dulce Pinzon. Now, thanks to such famous fans-cum-collaborators as Amy Winehouse, Denzel Washington, Lou Reed, Rufus Wainwright and They Might Be Giants, this independent-minded group is at last becoming a sensation in its own right.

"I'm just glad it's all sort of happening now," said Jones. "It's been 12 years and we've been working hard. You can say it's about time."

Jones, 51, is the vocal and visual focal point of the Dap-Kings, whose eight male members are nearly all at least 20 to 25 years younger than her. While hipsters have been buzzing about the band for several years, its recent rise to prominence can be attributed less to the group's lean, mean, proudly old-school style of soul and funk than to two notable admirers in London, Winehouse, 24, and her producer, Mark Ronson, 32.

Winehouse became a fan after hearing the 2002 album, "Dap Dippin' With Sharon Jones & the Dap-Kings," and its more polished 2005 sequel, "Naturally," both released on the band's own Daptone Records label. The group, minus Jones, was hired by Ronson to perform with Winehouse on six of the 11 songs on her 2007 breakthrough album, "Back to Black," including the international hit "Rehab."

The Dap-Kings subsequently backed the gifted but troubled young English singer on her North American tour and was featured on all but one of the 14 songs on Ronson's solo album, "Version." The group, again minus Jones, has since worked with artists as diverse as Al Green and Robbie Williams.

But the Dap-Kings' charismatic lead singer hasn't been twiddling her thumbs during her downtime from the group.

Jones toured with ex-Velvet Underground leader Reed on his recent "Berlin" world tour and did recording dates with Wainwright and They Might be Giants. She is also featured in the upcoming Denzel Washington film, "The Great Debaters," which Washington both stars in and directs.

Accompanied by Alvin Youngblood Hart and The Carolina Chocolate Drops, Jones performs in the film as a bluesy 1930s juke-joint singer and has a few spoken lines as well. She will be featured on at least a half-dozen songs on the soundtrack album, including the proto-R&B classic "Tight Like That" and the gospel chestnut "Two Wings Above My Head."

"When I first got on the set, Denzel knew I was nervous," Jones recalled. "So he came out, grabbed me, hugged me, and said: 'Sharon Jones!' Every time he called my name I would just shiver, but I had to be professional."

She giggled with a combination of girlish delight and professional pride.

"They asked Denzel in an interview how he liked me. And he said: 'She's real, she's honest, and I love her.'"

Washington's assessment of Jones also helps explain why she and her band are striking a big chord with young and seasoned listeners here and across Europe.

The taut, rhythmically infectious songs the Dap-Kings write and perform with Jones are steeped in the classic

styles of Aretha Franklin and James Brown, circa their respective artistic primes in the 1960s and early '70s. The influence of such great Stax Volt Records artists as Otis Redding, Carla Thomas, Mable John and the Bar-Kays is also evident on "100 Days, 100 Nights," the third and finest album yet by the Dap-Kings.

"I have a sound that James and Aretha had when they were in their 20s that I'm singing now in my 50s," Jones said.

"When I get off that stage, I'm sweating! I don't think about makeup and trying to be all cute, or about my feet being dirty or my pantyhose being ripped. I'm coming to give you a show and to give you the nitty-gritty. I don't need 15 background singers and dancers on stage to keep the entertainment up. I don't need some young girls behind me with with their chests sticking out. I'm enough on stage, me and the Dap-Kings.

"I'm not thinking about notes; I just open my mouth and it comes out. When the music is good, you just get out of the way and let it flow. We bring these songs to life and tell a story."

Jones' own story might be worthy of a feature film in its own right.

Born, like Soul Brother No. 1 Brown, in Augusta, Ga., Sheron Lafaye Jones grew up mostly in Brooklyn, N.Y., although she regularly returned to visit family members in the South. She began singing gospel music in church as a child, then branched out into funk and soul as a teenager.

Yet, while she had the vocal chops and onstage poise to make it as a professional, fame and fortune eluded her. The reasons had little to do with skill and everything to do with a society that places a premium on image over ability.

Or, as Jones put in an interview in late 2005: "When I started out in music back in the early 1970s, people told me I didn't have the 'look,' and that I was too dark-skinned. Then, once I got past 30, they told me I was too old and too fat. Well, I'm still dark. And I don't think I'm fat; I'm pleasantly plump."

She never stopped singing, be it in wedding bands or as an anonymous studio vocalist. To make ends meet, Jones held a variety of day jobs, including stints as an armored car guard, a sanitation worker and as a guard at Rikers Island, New York City's largest jail.

"I had a great time with the inmates, but I didn't belong there," she recalled of her tenure at Rikers Island.

"God gave me a gift. I always said to myself: 'People are not accepting me, but one day they'll accept me for my voice, not my color, or my height or my weight.' You have to keep the faith when God gives you something. That's my voice - and this is me."

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