

NBCBLK

## Clairdee sings the music of Lena Horne in a love letter to jazz, activism, and family

"Clairdee's spirit reminds me so much of Lena Horne, the way she carries herself. Her spirit is strong and beautiful and loving."



— Musician Clairdee. Dimitry Loiseau

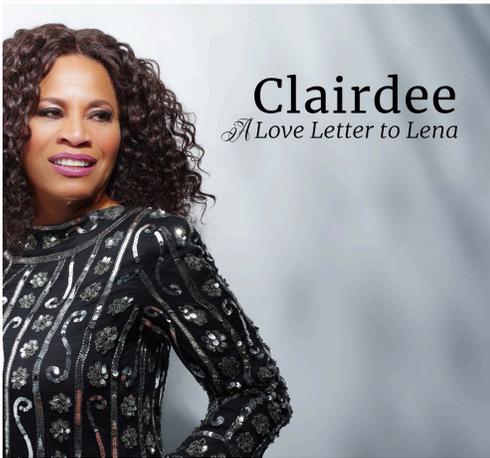
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**By Patrice Gaines**

During this summer of protests jazz songstress Clairdee offers us “A Love Letter to Lena,” a CD that pays tribute to Lena Horne not only because of her talent, but also because the singer fought racism at every turn.

Clairdee remembers that her family gathered whenever Horne was performing on television.

“My parents admired her intellect and talent. They talked about how she carried herself. But more than that, they admired her civil rights efforts,” the San Francisco-based singer said in an interview.



Dimitry Loiseau

Horne got a major Hollywood contract, yet she was given short singing roles that could be cut when movies played in the South. She sang for a living rather than accept demeaning acting roles. The USO forbade her from touring Army camps after she spoke out against the mistreatment of Black soldiers. Later, she participated in numerous civil rights marches and protests.

When Horne died in 2010, President Barack Obama said she had “worked tirelessly to further the cause of justice and equality.”

In her bio, Clairdee, a 2018 winner of the Bay Area Jazz and Blues Artist Lifetime Achievement Award, lists herself as a singer, educator and activist. “My social activism is through the music and the way I work with people,” she said.

She wanted a music project that honored her parents but wasn’t certain what it might be. She began researching Horne extensively — and then Donald Trump became president.

“I knew exactly what I had to do,” she said. “This project had to mean something. I didn’t want it to be a greatest hits album.”



Included in the tunes on the CD is what Clairdee calls “an anthem.” The smooth upbeat “Stand Up” has the sound of an R&B protest song from another era, except interspersed among its lyrics is the poetic cadence of excerpts from a Cory Booker speech with declarations such as: “No action in the cause of justice — helping a child, mentoring a brother, speaking out, standing up — no matter how small, no cause of justice is wasted.”

“I want people to really, really do something,” Clairdee said, referring to the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd. “We can’t just talk.”

Originally, Clairdee considered 60 of Horne’s songs, whittling the number to 13.

“I wanted the songs to reflect who she was. I wanted it to speak to her dedication to the civil rights movement — and then I threw in a few other things.

She chose “I Got A Name” because it reminded her of something her father used to say.

“My father always wanted us to be proud of who we are. He would say, ‘You have my name; make us proud.’”

Her father would no doubt be proud of what she has done with her voice. Clairdee doesn’t imitate Horne or anyone else but instead proves that she is a unique instrument, effortlessly breathing her own life into melodies, often accompanied by her husband, pianist Ken French.

Jon Herbst, pianist, arranger and producer, said of Clairdee: “She sings with such honesty and abandon. You hear her early days in the church — and the emotions she brings to this project not only include the high regard she held for Lena as an artist and groundbreaker but also her love for her parents and her wanting to be someone who moves things forward.

Herbst said 14 musicians, including Clairdee, were able to perform the music of “A Love Letter for Lena” just once in March in Berkeley, California, before the pandemic shut down theaters and nightclubs.

“It was a great show with people jumping out of their seats and applauding,” he said.



— Rod and Carol walking in national park in Northern California.  
Courtesy Rod Jolliffe

Carol and Rod Jolliffe, longtime fans and friends of Clairdee, were in attendance that night.

“I met my husband at a Clairdee concert,” Carol Jolliffe said, laughing and adding, “I like her interpretation of music.”

Said Rod Jolliffe: “Clairdee establishes a great rapport with every audience. She interacts with the audience, tells stories.”

Sometimes Clairdee even tells the story of how the Jolliffes, married 30 years now, met because of her music.

Regina Carter, the internationally renowned violinist and MacArthur “genius grant” winner, is also a longtime friend of Clairdee’s and performs with her on the CD.

“I love the track ‘Stand Up!’ but I looove ‘Motherless Child.’ A gazillion people have recorded it, but something about the way she delivers it, wow,” Carter said. “She should put a warning on it saying, ‘Get a tissue.’ When I need to cry, I put on that song.”

“Clairdee’s spirit reminds me so much of Lena Horne, the way she carries herself. Her spirit is strong and beautiful and loving,” Carter said. “This record chose to come out when we’ve been snatched back in time. Lena was fighting, and here we are now fighting for the same thing. Lena has said to Clairdee: ‘Some things need to be said again.’” 🌸

# JazzWax

Marc Myers writes daily on jazz legends and legendary jazz recordings

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August 15, 2020

## Gordon, Laurie and Clairdee



### About

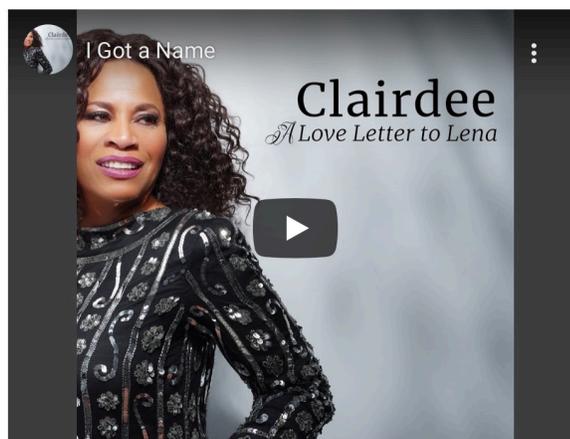
Marc Myers writes regularly for *The Wall Street Journal* and is author of "Anatomy of a Song" (Grove) and "Why Jazz Happened." Founded in 2007, JazzWax is a three-time winner of the Jazz Journalists Association's best blog award.



**A CD you should know.** *Clairdee: A Love Letter to Lena* (Declare Music). Clairdee is a warm, soulful singer who makes every song she sings her own. I love her new tribute album to Lena Horne. For Clairdee, Horne's struggles in Hollywood are relatable. In the 1940s and '50s, the charismatic Horne straddled between who she was—a Black actress and singer with enormous talent—and what white Hollywood wanted to present and how often. Despite her abilities, Horne could only go so far, and no matter how hard she worked, a depressing barrier for anyone. On her new album, Clairdee's heart is in every song, and her backing band and arrangements are terrific, especially the songs with a Singers Unlimited-like vocal backdrop.

[Go here.](#)

[Here's](#) Clairdee singing the 1973 Charles Fox and Norman Gimbel song made famous by Jim Croce, *I Got a Name*...



“Immaculately performed tribute to a multi-talented civil rights icon.” —Fred Dellar



## Clairdee



### A Love Letter to Lena

DECLARE MUSIC. CD/DL

By **Fred Dellar**

May 12, 2020

#### **Rewarding tribute to a multi-talented civil rights icon.**

Lena Horne had it all. Star of some of Hollywood’s best musicals; the biggest-selling album by a female artist in the history of RCA; a civil rights activist linked to Paul Robeson and Medgar Evers. This immaculately performed tribute by Bay Area jazz vocalist Clairdee discards such obvious contenders as Stormy Weather in favor of material by Horne’s muse, Billy Strayhorn, including *Maybe*, which the composer wrote for her, plus the lovely *Something to Live For*, featuring Regina Carter’s violin. There’s also *Believe In Yourself*, which Horne sang in the film *The Wiz*, a soulful rendering of *Sometimes I Feel Like A Motherless Child*, and *Old Devil Moon* set in a Shearing-esque piano-vibes arrangement. The tracks are interspersed with quotes from Horne, voiced by actress Margo Hall, a device which probably works better as part of Clairdee’s stage presentation.



“An exquisite collection of songs paying homage to the late Lena Horne, adorned with sincerity, musical artistry, and heartfelt emotion in every soulful note. ‘A Love Letter To Lena’ is reflective, emotional, uplifting and inspiring as much as it is inspired. Clairdee’s vision and patience in creating this record is evident and nothing short of exceptional. Where unity, solidarity and strength is needed across the peoples of today, this album offers a snapshot of the resilience that came before us and the convictions that can help us move forward together.”

## Clairdee inspires with A Love Letter To Lena

By **Pop Magazine (Berlin)**

June 10, 2020



To be truly inspired is an experience many crave for. To be moved to the point of inspired expression is a feat worthy of admiration and acclaim. For jazz singer Clairdee it was her youthful captivation by a woman who demonstrated remarkable prowess as a vocalist, actress, and civil rights activist that transformed her life and started her on a journey to music. “A Love Letter To Lena,” the latest record by San Francisco based Clairdee, is an exquisite collection of songs paying homage to the late Lena Horne, adorned with sincerity, musical artistry, and heartfelt emotion in every soulful note.

Clairdee’s veneration for Horne has been blossoming ever since she was four years old. Her introduction to the multipotentialite came through her parents who themselves admired not just Lena the talented singer, but Lena the intelligent, passionate woman. For Clairdee, this album is therefore a tribute not only to Horne but especially to her parents and the like-minded souls instrumental in and impacted by the civil rights movement in the early 1960s, in which Horne herself participated. Though considerations for this project began back in 2009, Clairdee’s efforts to further immortalize the wonderful work of a woman who fought for equal rights in America couldn’t be more aptly timed. This of course in light of the current resurgence of national racially charged discussion, protests and riots sparked by the senseless murder of George Floyd, an African-American man, by police in Minneapolis two weeks ago.

Even as a passionate advocate herself, particularly for music education, Clairdee has cemented herself as one of the staples on the contemporary jazz scene. After 25 years of performing and several years of working as a professor of music, the seasoned singer has still managed to expand her identity as a musical visionary and creative conceptualist with her new project. “A Love Letter to Lena” sidesteps a new-century interpretation of Horne’s biggest hits to treat listeners to a carefully crafted setlist which paints an intimate portrait of the life and conviction of the late artist. Clairdee’s thrilling vocals and spirited tones offer much to be explored and enjoyed with each song.

With the help of a cast of over twenty musicians including pianist and arranger John Herbst, songs like “Old Devil Moon” and “I Got A Name” offer attractive rhythmic textures that invite and soothe. The reflective tune “I Want To Be Happy” is gleefully revitalized with effervescent lead vocals and backing harmony. Featured too are tracks originally played by Billy Strayhorn,

Horne's close friend, including the poignant "Something To Live For" which showcases Clairdee's dynamic range and is given new pulse with a sublime violin accompaniment by Regina Carter.

As if the arrangements weren't powerful enough, the album is also punctuated by brilliantly voiced narrations of Lena Horne quotes. Such inclusions succeed in masterfully dovetailing selections such as the emotionally weighty "Sometimes I Feel Like A Motherless Child" which follows an interlude of Horne's description of her encounters with racism in Hollywood. Matching the dramatic nature of such a track is the album-closing "Stand Up", a spoken-sung rally cry to engage in meaningful activism in today's sociocultural and sociopolitical climate. The use of impassioned excerpts of speeches met by a host of captivating voices drive the message of action and hope home.

"A Love Letter to Lena" is reflective, emotional, uplifting and inspiring as much as it is inspired. Clairdee's vision and patience in creating this record is evident and nothing short of exceptional. Where unity, solidarity and strength is needed across the peoples of today, this album offers a snapshot of the resilience that came before us and the convictions that can help us move forward together. *Clairdee - A Love Letter To Lena* is a wonderful tribute to Lena Horne that takes on a life of its own. This music is a celebration of life and the career of one of the greatest entertainers to grace this planet. Don't miss out on this one.

# # #

# All About Jazz

"Equally comfortable working the smart curves of Billy Strayhorn's "Something to Live For" in a string-enhanced setting and giving off upbeat calls to activism on Marcus McLaurine's "Stand Up," Clairdee finds a fair amount to share about life in Horne's time and in our own. *A Love Letter to Lena* isn't merely a tribute to an artist from our past. It's a statement about giving voice to what's desperately need in the present." —Dan Bilawsky

## Clairdee: A Love Letter to Lena

By **Dan Bilawsky**

April 22, 2020



A fixture on the Bay Area jazz scene, [Clairdee](#) has established herself as a self-assured singer and an artist who's never content in repeating an idea. Her first three albums move from the studio to the holidays to the stage, demonstrating a high level of comfort in disparate settings and seasons. This fourth project—a tribute to [Lena Horne](#), realized after a decade of thought on the matter—will likely extend that reputation while marking her as a strong conceptualist.

Working closely with pianist/arranger [Jon Herbst](#), who helped shape the music and produce the album, Clairdee delivers a set that remains fresh by foregoing some of Horne's biggest hits, embracing the honoree's words and history, and wearing an attractive gloss in varied shades. Never garish yet always glowing, the production puts a positive spin on smooth ideals while also proving sophisticated in nature. Clairdee and a cast of twenty musicians charm with their direct yet contemporary approach, renowned actress and director Margo Hall delivers interspersed spoken word passages highlighting Horne quotes and truths, and the finished work speaks equally well of the featured, the fêted, and those who follow in the footsteps of the righteous by standing up for themselves and civil rights.

Whether giving "Old Devil Moon" an attractively-textured sheen, exploring the underexposed "I Got A Name," dipping into jazz-inflected spiritual territory with "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child," or lightening the mood with a grooving "I Want To Be Happy," Clairdee reflects positively on both her own craft and the path(s) paved by Lena Horne. Equally comfortable working the smart curves of [Billy Strayhorn](#)'s "Something to Live for" in a string-enhanced setting and giving off upbeat calls to activism on [Marcus McLaurine](#)'s "Stand Up," Clairdee finds a fair amount to share about life in Horne's time and in our own. *A Love Letter to Lena* isn't merely a tribute to an artist from our past. It's a statement about giving voice to what's desperately needed in the present.

**Track Listing:** Old Devil Moon; Home (spoken interlude); I Got A Name; Maybe; Hollywood (spoken interlude); Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child; Seminar with Drinks (spoken interlude); I Want to Be Happy; Soul Mates (spoken interlude); Something To Live For; I'm Free (spoken interlude); Believe in Yourself; The Movement (spoken interlude); Stand Up.

**Personnel:** [Clairdee](#): vocalist; [Jon Herbst](#): piano; [Ron Belcher](#): bass; [Doug Miller](#): bass; [Deszon Claiborne](#): drums; [Lance Dresser](#): drums; [Johnny Hoy](#): guitar; [Dave Bell](#): guitar; [Mario Guarneri](#): trumpet; [Charles McNeal](#): saxophone, tenor; [Emily Onderdonk](#): viola; [Ashling Cole](#): vocalist; [Bryan Dyer](#): vocalist; [Tony Lindsay](#): vocalist. Margo Hall: narrator; Paul Hale: cello; Philip Santos: violin; Kenny Washington: vocals; Janice Maxie-Reid: vocals; Zoe Ellis: vocals; Regina Carter: violinist.



“This is not simply a paint by the numbers cover album... Clairdee endows her version with smooth sway that possesses a dash of jazz, and a hint of funk to go along with a nice helping of R&B.” —Howard Dukes

## First Listen: Clairdee sings of that "Old Devil Moon"



Photo courtesy of Clairdee, Photo Credit: Dimitry Loiseau

(April 23, 2020) Jazz singer **Clairdee** said that her parents raised her and her siblings with a knowledge and respect of history. They also made sure that their children heard plenty of good music, and Clairdee became a fan of the music of Lena Horne. But she was not simply a fan of fan of Lena Horne's music; Clairdee's parents also made sure that all their children knew about Horne's life and her social justice activism.

A veteran jazz singer who has been entertaining music fans in the San Francisco area for more than 25 years, Clairdee latest project, **A Love Letter to Lena**, honors Horne's music and life. The album includes songs performed by Horne, but it is not simply a paint by the numbers cover album.

*"The 2016 election helped me decide how I wanted to approach the Lena project. It had to be more than merely a tribute album of her greatest hits. It was clear to me that the album should reflect my parents' hopes for their children through the lens of Lena's efforts for civil rights and equality."*

The arrangements also reflect Clairdee's fusion of jazz with a R&B sensibility, and that is definitely the case with her cover of "Old Devil Moon" that is featured in this First Listen. The Horne's version was a brassy, swinging example of 1950s era swankiness that you might have heard her belt out at the Copa or in Vegas. Clairdee endows her version with smooth sway that possesses a dash of jazz, and a hint of funk to go along with a nice helping of R&B.

Check out Clairdee's cover of "Old Devil Moon" here.

**By Howard Dukes**

### Clairdee - "Old Devil Moon"



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