

NBCBLK

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

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— 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. (Clairdee is her professional name; her real name is Barbara French.)

"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.

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



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

"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."

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"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.'" 