

Clairdee, a 21st Century Jazz Vocalist, Educator, Activist

Soulful, swinging, and stylish, the music of San Francisco-based jazz singer Clairdee epitomizes jazz's empowering imperative. More than a masterly interpreter of lyrics with a lustrous, velvety tone, she embodies the tradition's twinned legacy of standing for social justice with glamor and guts. Deeply informed by the music's departed masters, Clairdee puts a personal stamp on whatever she sings, a gift aptly described by the inimitable Nancy Wilson. "In the tradition of all great vocalists," Wilson said of Clairdee, "she infuses each song with her own unique style while always remaining true to the song itself."

An internationally touring artist who has performed in leading concert halls, festivals and nightclubs around the world, Clairdee has collaborated with some of America's most celebrated jazz masters, including Dick Hyman, Bucky Pizzarelli, Houston Person, Cyrus Chestnut, Ken Peplowski, and the late Nancy Wilson herself. Equally at home singing various African-American musical idioms in an array of settings, she's performed with pops symphony orchestras, big bands, small jazz combos, and intimate duos.

Clairdee covers a lot of stylistic ground on her latest project, which celebrates the iconic star Lena Horne, one of the 20th century's most consequent performers. Released in the winter of 2020, her critically hailed album *A Love Letter to Lena* is a deeply personal tribute to the barrier-shattering African-American actress, singer, nightclub entertainer, World War II pin-up, and civil rights activist who died in 2010 at the age of 92.

During the Golden Age of Hollywood, when Black women were visible on movie screens only in stereotypical roles as maids and servants, the vivacious Horne radiated glamour as she seized the spotlight in a series of MGM musicals. But many of her scenes were designed to be easily edited out for screenings in the South, where the studio assumed white audiences would rebel at the sight of a Black actor presented as a social equal. For viewers like Clairdee's parents it was impossible not to revel in the abundant evidence that Horne was more than equal to anyone else in the film.

"She meant so much to me in so many different ways," Clairdee says. "The example she set, the role model that she was for many African Americans was very powerful. I learned a lot about what I do and how I present myself on stage just by watching her. She was always dressed impeccably, and completely professional despite all the discrimination and mistreatment. As my mother used to say, the best revenge is to never let them see you sweat."

While Horne is indelibly associated with several classic songs, such as "Stormy Weather," "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man," and "The Man I Love," Clairdee wasn't interested in rounding up the usual repertoire. She includes a few standards in her Horne tribute, but the far-flung range of material and the arrangements drawing on an

array of styles highlight her view of Horne's legacy as a living, breathing force. "The album isn't about trying to portray Lena," Clairdee says. "We're celebrating her life in all its many facets."

The album includes numerous surprises, like the New Orleans second line groove running through the anthem "Believe In Yourself," a song Horne sang as Glinda the Good Witch in *The Wiz*. Another show stopper is Clairdee's version of the Billy Strayhorn masterpiece "Something To Live For" (which features an exquisite solo by violin star Regina Carter). Horne's life and thoughts are manifested by six spoken-word interludes read by veteran actress Margo Hall taken from interviews of Horne discussing the role of the integrated Café Society in her career and her deep love of the openly gay Strayhorn, whom she described as her soulmate.

A 2018 recipient of the Bay Area Jazz and Blues Artist Lifetime Achievement Award, Clairdee has a long track record as a passionate advocate for music education. She is a collegiate professor of Jazz Voice at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, and has taught at the University of California Berkeley Jazz Department, and Diablo Valley College. She was a long-time teaching artist with the San Francisco Symphony's education department.

Born in Tucson and raised in Denver, Clairdee grew up harmonizing and dancing with her sisters in a show-biz minded family. She took to improvising naturally and formed a four-part vocal group in high school. Music became a priority after college. She was already listening closely to pioneering jazz vocalists such as Carmen McRae, Sarah Vaughan and Betty Carter when veteran Hammond B-3 organist William "Big Daddy" Sailes took her under his wing and taught her a repertoire of standards and how to develop arrangements to suit her voice.

Since moving to the Bay Area in 1986, Clairdee has performed almost every style of music, from R&B and cabaret to country and soul. But in the mid-90s she decided to focus on jazz, honing a singular sound while working with jazz luminaries such as trumpeter Eddie Henderson, saxophonist John Handy and pianists Roland Hanna and Allen Farnham. She gained national attention when legendary bassist, manager and NEA Jazz Master John Levy, who toured and recorded with Ben Webster, Erroll Garner, and Billie Holiday, built a show around her and guitarist/vocalist Henry Johnson. Whether she's celebrating Lena Horne or delivering a carefully honed program of standards, her aim is the same. "My mission," Clairdee says, "is to engage, uplift and build community through music —creating narrative that inspires beyond the stage."

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