

Secrets of the Soul Queens

BY ELIO IANNACCI

Toronto is in for a triple dose of soul searching, when three of the finest R&B singers on the planet—Sharon Jones, Bettye Lavette and Mavis Staples—bring in their brand of soul to share their stories of love and loss. *Prime Time* chatted with the trio of musical monarchs on their historical—and sometimes hysterical—lives on and off stage.

Who Sharon Jones



Sound style This 54-year-old's brand of R&B bridges the gap between '60s funk and '70s soul—a retro sound that was famously co-opted by Amy Winehouse (who'd even toured with Jones's band, the Dap-Kings).

For the record After quitting her job as a corrections officer, the NYC resident became a star at the age of 45 when her first disc, *Dap-Dippin' with Sharon Jones and the Dap-Kings*, was released in 2002.

Musical mentor James Brown. "So many people told me I was too black, too short and too fat to be in music, but that did not take a toll on my confidence, thanks to Mr. Brown. As soon as I heard his song 'Say It Loud (I'm Black and I'm Proud),' I quit my job and ran off with the band."

Career high Starring in a cameo role in Denzel Washington's film *The Great Debaters*. Jones had to turn down playing with Lou Reed to be in the movie. "You can't say no to Denzel, Baby!"

Up next Touring her latest disc, *I Learned the Hard Way*. This includes performing at the Sound Academy in Toronto on May 25.

Favourite track "I love singing 'She Ain't a Child'—it's a true story and a testimony...about a girl who stood up to her abusive parents. I can relate—I've had some hard times."

Secret behind the soul David Byrne auditioned Jones for a back-up spot when she was an unknown singer 25 years ago and told her she was too old to sing with him (she was 30). Forgetting the incident, he asked her to sing on his latest album last year. "He forgot about it! But I told him what he did...after I sang his track for him and got paid. We had a good laugh over it, but it just goes to show you're never too old for soul."

Who Bettye Lavette



Sound style The specialty of this 64-year-old is transforming pop and rock standards into country, blues, gospel and soul hits.

For the record Michigan-born, Detroit-raised Lavette recorded her first record at 16 but finally tasted fame at the age of 59, when her critically acclaimed album *I've Got My Own Hell to Raise* was released in 2005.

Musical mentor Sam Cooke. "I am the only one standing on earth who had been able to sing with him. I am blessed."

Career high Singing Cooke's "A Change Is Going to Come" for a Lavette fan, U.S. President Barack Obama, at his inauguration festivities. "It felt like 800 million people looking at me for the very first time in my life."

Up next Lavette is currently promoting her latest CD, *Interpretations: The British Rock Songbook*—featuring her soulful take on Pink Floyd's "Wish You Were Here" and The Beatles' "The Word"—which has been added to the Toronto Jazz Festival's lineup. Her live show takes place at the Phoenix Concert Theatre on June 25.

Favourite track "I love 'My Man—He's a Loving Man' because it was the first time I heard my own song on the radio. I was getting my hair done and it came on and I jumped up and ran all the way home to tell my family...without finishing the 'do!'"

Secret behind the soul "Getting older means growing into yourself and knowing what you want. I sound better than ever, and now I know that I require certain things in life. I need M&M's [Chandon] Champagne, I need to have something pretty to wear on stage, and I need to know that the band plays the music absolutely like I say it."

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Who Mavis Staples



Getty

Sound style The 70-year-old singer is known for belting out powerful gospel, southern fried R&B and a clutch of historical Civil Rights anthems. With her rich tenor, Staples says her identity was often mistaken [for a man's]. "When I started playing on the road, I would call down for breakfast and the concierge would say, 'What else can I do for you, Mr. Staples?' I would get angry and say, 'I'm a lady!'"

Musical mentor Gospel legend Mahalia Jackson and her sisters (aka "the legendary Staple Sisters") and their father, 'Pops' Staples. "Mahalia taught me how to take care of my voice, and my family taught me their own musical language. I sing from ear and don't read music, but when we played together we didn't need to communicate with sheets or notes on a page."

Career high "Writing 'Freedom Highway' after meeting Dr. Luther King. That song is about everyone being treated respectfully. I knew Dr. King well, and let me tell you, he would be displeased to see that gays and lesbians still do not have equal rights. Obama is only half of Dr. King's dream come true."

Up next She's putting the finishing touches on a new album—"You're Not Alone"—and will be coming to the Toronto Jazz Festival on June 30.

Favourite track "I love 'The Chokin' Kind.' That song was a good thing for me and any woman. It was when I started doing secular music, so it was a big risk for me to sing about my life so openly. I was a young lady—I had been in love, got a divorce and had heartache and I wanted to sing about it."

Secret behind the soul Bob Dylan proposed to Staples and she declined. "He was courting me for a while, but I was foolishly still thinking black and white. I wasn't smart enough to know what was good for me. Honey, youth is beautiful, but it can be stupid."