



Entertainment*

Soul singer Sharon Jones reflects on life, race, and her decision not to go to business school

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Sharon Jones is the gem of Portsmouth. A native, she's proof positive world class performers can live next door. When the Seacoast chanteuse takes the stage, your musical preference becomes whatever she's doing: jazz, standards, R&B.

"I love the connection between the audience and myself. It's almost as if when my performance starts I'm driven to bring them to their feet," she says. "It's a wonderful feeling of acceptance, as if you set out to make something special happen."

And special is what happens when Jones sings. Her ability to arrest the audience goes deeper than her perfected vocals. It's the performer's commitment. When Jones takes the stage, she takes charge of the room. Molecules and heartbeats do her bidding, move to her rhythm.

"I believe singers are actors to some degree. It's important to me that I can stir up enough emotion during my performance to have my audience respond to the lyrics and the story I'm telling through the music."

Another sentiment the singer gives life to.

At the recent Spotlight Awards at The Music Hall, Jones soothed with throaty, drawn-out notes, then brought people to their feet with a voice on fire.

Constantly in motion, her body punctuated the performance, played to the art and audience simultaneously. She filled the stage with presence and commanded the room.

There are similarities in the off-stage Jones. She's a ball of energy, a self-assured, outspoken spitfire sans edge, thanks to the street equivalent of those soothing notes: a generous, open personality.

Today she sings jazz as Sharon Jones and performs lead vocals with State Street Rhythm and Blues. Her former group was Brown Sugar. Her music of choice is Motown, Memphis Soul, jazz, swing and contemporary R&B material, "everything my voice will let me sing." She has one CD to her credit, "The Many Styles of Sharon Jones."

In her earlier career years, she was a member of a "girls group," the Ranselliers, made up of herself, sister Karen and nieces, Yvonne Tilley and Sheila Reed. The quartet had a popular run on the Cape for half a decade. The group, under the name the Sharonettes (a one-time moniker tacked on to its only recording), had a song that hit the top of the United Kingdom music charts.

"Of course we agreed (to record) not knowing that we should have signed documents that would have protected us, but as the commercial goes, ?who knew!? We were very young and having fun singing to large audiences, wearing great clothes and making decent money."

Eventually Jones went solo. The others were less interested in going pro.

She performed the Jazz Circuit in the ?70s with the likes of Jonning Hammond Smith, jazz organist and the renowned saxophonist Houston Person. She's played elite resorts and clubs on both coasts.

Today she regularly performs locally at the Press Room and at the Dolphin Striker and C.R. Sparks in Bedford, The Mast Cove Art Gallery in

Kennebunkport and throughout New England.

“I love choral music, too. I’m a member of Saint John’s Episcopal Church Choir where I find myself on Sunday morning sharing in a whole different musical experience, and sometimes I’m moved to tears by some of the pieces that we sing.”

Hard to believe it’s the life of a once shy child, 12th in a family of 14 siblings. She was the first to be born in Portsmouth, after the family moved from Seneca Falls, N.Y.

The early years were spent in what is known today as the Cutts Mansion, a large home on Maplewood Avenue.

Sitting at Café Espresso, a usual hangout, Jones proudly shares books filled with photos of her large, extended family. Some of the pictures from earlier generations are marked only with the branch the person hails from, their names lost to time.

She flips the pages stopping on photos from two generations back. One depicts a stern-faced German-American maternal grandmother, with her equally stringent siblings. Another depicts five generations of her mom’s family, now German/Afro-Americans. A number of photos show her dad’s Afro/Native-American side. She laughs at the obvious differences in these photos, not that of color, but disposition. The controlled Europeans and dad’s family, while holding still for photos still radiating life.

“My mothers ancestor’s were Germans and Dutch. — They were very stern people, even mom at 5 years old,” she says pointing at the photo. “The Afro-Americans - not stern at all. They loved life.”

Life wasn’t always smooth for the Jones family in Portsmouth. Early on, some of the siblings, (now 13, one having died), especially older ones, dealt with overt

prejudice.

There were shopkeepers who made them feel unwelcome, barbers who wouldn't cut their hair. One sister was devastated when denied a cut for her young daughter in a painful, rude manner. Jones thinks repeated, similar incidents left scars on older siblings.

By the time she was aware, things had started to change. There were laws.

"I'm a firm believer you can't change the way people feel about you, but you can change that they can't do it in public, things like entering buildings or buying a house," she says. "You can't change some things, when it goes down to the core. — But you can change what they can do."

Issues remained. For example, Jones was keenly aware of folks who wouldn't use a water fountain after her. And there was a standout incident while attending Portsmouth High School (graduated 1961).

Jones was already recognized for her talent. Two music teachers had singled her out and fostered her skill. For the annual minstrel show she was the featured, closing act. The problem was she sung it before a row of white students done up in "Al Jolson black face." She did it a few times, before it dawned on her how insulting it was.

"It was shameful and degrading. — What it meant to me was they were still mocking, making fun of us," she says. "I went and opposed it that year. I said ? you have a choice, close or not, I'm not going to walk out in front of people with those masks on. Make a choice.? They stood up to the bat for me."

"I'm sure kids have problems fitting in today, but back then the racial thing was pretty heavy. The NAACP was really finding its wings and stayed very busy with

restaurants, barber shops, housing, etc., all of which made it clear that they would rather not make us feel welcomed.”

Things have continued to improve. She has a place here, lots of friends - colorless. But there's still work to be done, she says. Still today there are times she walks into a restaurant with her husband and eyes follow.

“We should walk colorless through the world. The only time we should attract attention is when we're creating an unpleasant situation,” she says.

That, and perhaps owing to talent, which is something the Joneses have been doing since coming to town.

Music is intertwined through the generations. Her mom played classical piano, made her take lessons as a child. Her brother Tommy played bass and sang. Harry introduced her to classical music when she was a teen.

“My sister Jean, she's a duplicate of Billie Holiday. She'd make you cry. — — Lucy (eight years older than me) had a great voice. — she had a spot on WHEB, sang her own program. I'd stand there and try to copy her.”

There was Ida who played piano. She turned down a scholarship at the Boston Conservatory.

Cutts Mansion was often filled with folk from in and outside the family, gathered to make music. It's where Jones started her career, standing on a small box “singing for my grandfather.”

Many of the siblings? children and grandchildren are performers.

Jones pulls out a piece of paper with a list of first- and second-generation nieces and nephews. There are seven marked off as practicing musicians, “but more have the skill,” she says proudly.

This said by a woman whose yearbook lists her future goal as “Business School.” When asked if she ever followed that dream, Jones laughed.

“No, I never went to business school. I put down business school because it seemed appropriate at the time. I was searching so hard for where I should go, and what I should be, and to please a lot of people. — I always intended to be an entertainer, and possibly an actress,” she says.

“If you look under (my picture), there’s a little philosophy, about being true to yourself. And that’s where the hint was hidden. Right there. I was never going to business school. I knew I was going to be an entertainer.”

Jones, once a bailiff in Manchester courts, only recently started teaching her craft, as an Artist in Residence for the New Hampshire Council for the Arts and as a private instructor. Sharing the music and the magic of the stage has become an unexpected passion.

“I show singers how to move around the lyrics, how to make a song their own. How to live the song, basically. I tell them how important stage presence is and their attire.”

It’s a lesson taught by a master.

Who: Sharon Jones

What: Performances