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PROFILES
MUSIC



JOAN DAVIS

SARAH SCARLETT WILLIAMS
TALKS TO THE WARM, WILD
AND WONDERFUL BATH
SONGSTRESS
PORTRAITS JESSE WILD

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It's the first day of Glastonbury and rain drizzles disappointingly down from a grey sky. Inside the Raincheck restaurant however, the atmosphere couldn't be more different. Gentle jazz floats on air spiced with fresh coffee as the late morning malingersers evaporate and owner Mark Heather greets his early lunchtime guests. Regular customer, Carlo, whose stunning photographs adorn the walls waves goodbye on his way to a fashion shoot as another regular, Joan Davis, breezes through the door for our lunchtime appointment.

Joan Davis was born in Washington, DC of American Indian, Afro American and European heritage. Her childhood was nurtured by such jazz greats as Duke Ellington and Dizzy Gillespie and her youth inspired by the capital's jazz and soul clubs. Performing with the likes of Gil Scott Heron, George Melly and Bobby McFerrin, Joan's dazzling career has included performing for the then President Lyndon B. Johnson. She's also studied for three university degrees and has three children, whom she maintains have taught her more about life than all her academic achievements.

After falling in love with the UK, she became smitten with Bath when looking for somewhere to settle because of its similarities with Washington, DC. "Bath has the same sort of 18th-century limestone architecture, lots of parks, rivers and canals. It's very laid back with a thriving café scene and great music scene, it's just perfect. And it's just Bohemian enough to put up with a wild woman like me!"

Joan is wild but warm and wonderful with it. She's one of life's 'real' people, open, approachable, fun and obviously

well loved at the Raincheck. A bottle of champagne arrives, compliments of Judy who's scooting off to choreograph the aforementioned fashion show. Could she talk to Joan later about the show's music? "Of course" laughs Joan, "come back after rehearsals, we'll still be here sipping cocktails!"

Discussing the local music scene Joan was surprised at how hugely eclectic it is. "There's everything from old hippy Celtic music right up to Classic Jazz and lots of mixtures with Soul and R&B in between." Her favourite gig was at the Bath Fringe Festival three of four years ago, "it was a hot sunny day and there were about 12,000 people in the middle of the street and when I sang I knew it could be heard all over the east side of Bath, it was an absolutely spiritual experience"

But she's frustrated by the lack of good, live music venues in Bath and the South West in general. "Even well-established places like Moles and the Fringe Festival have been threatened with closure because of noise complaints to Health and Safety. And getting an entertainment license, especially for late night gigs, is very, very difficult."

Joan's diverse style fits well into the city's scene. She started off in the US singing the blues, classic standards like Gershwin and Porter but underage trips to the Washington's jazz and soul clubs taught her to like all kinds of music and broadened her vocal range into a style she calls "Soulful Jazz".

She's passionate about mixing styles, crossing genres and hearing music evolve. "It's like a language, it has to change and develop otherwise it'll die. Purists should be hauled into gaol for

their stagnant attitudes."

Joan's regular collaborations with Coast to Coast artists Tony Kofi, Cameron Pierre, Andy Tween and Anders Oliners produce an original mix of sounds that include Black British, Afro, US/UK and European styles. She likes to work with "good, open-hearted musicians, who listen and create, taking my basic melody arrangement and transcending way beyond that."

Joan feels that we need more artists and less techies in music, especially more people playing instruments. "Traditionally ethnic communities aren't taught instruments but they're a great beginning to understanding your own or other cultures. The history of music is all about mixing and migration. Duke Ellington gave us a wealth of published material, a document of black culture in the U.S., and if kids were taught music that way, they would find it more exciting than the rigid stuff they're learning today."

Joan's ardour for music extends to her voice workshops where she believes that learning to sing is a life-affirming experience and brings belief in yourself. "Voice is an expression of soul where things cannot be hidden as in the ego; it's a way of declaring yourself and facing the world. My workshops have helped students through difficult times and given them strength and in a lot of cases worked faster than psychotherapy!"

Flying Kangaroo cocktails land on the table as Joan ponders the last question. "If I could play with any musician from any time it would have to be Billie Holiday. To have sung a duet with her on "Strange Fruit" would've been sublime". ●