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“This is not only a passionate tribute to Lena Horne. The spoken interludes remind us of the struggles of the civil rights era. As lovely as the music is, the words may make you angry too. Listen to those words, both spoken and in the lyrics. Stand up to ensure

such an era doesn't repeat itself and their progress was not in vain.” —Jim Hynes

Clairdee A Love Letter to Lena



By **Jim Hynes**

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Last year this writer covered a touching, excellent tribute to Lena Horne from D.C.- based vocalist Coniece Washington, albeit for another outlet. San Francisco jazz vocalist mainstay Clairdee now bursts forth with an even more expansive project honoring Lena, with a supporting cast of no fewer than 20 musicians or singers, including some stirring narration from actress/director/playwright Margo Hall. Clairdee spent three years

shaping the project, originally envisioned back in 2009, calling on pianist/arranger Jon Herbst to arrange and produce.

Clairdee, a fixture in the Bay Area jazz scene for over 25 years, is a global performer who received the *Bay Area Jazz and Blues Artist Lifetime Achievement Award* in 2018 for her ongoing commitment to the community in terms of music education. Clairdee is a part-time professor of Jazz Voice at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music and a member of the Artist Advisory Committee and active mentor in the Bay Area-based non-profit Jazz in the Neighborhood. She is also a long-time teaching artist with the San Francisco Symphony's education department.

Clairdee has admired Horne since she was four years old, not just for her vocal expertise but for her activist stance in Civil Rights. Much of that imbues the album. As Clairdee explains, “The 2016 election helped me decide how I wanted to approach the Lena project. I didn't want it to be merely a tribute album of her greatest hits. My mother passed in 2007, and I wanted the album to reflect my parents' hopes for their children through the lens of Lena's efforts for civil rights and equality. I also wanted to include a few songs people may not be so familiar with.”

The large ensemble includes special guests Regina Carter on violin and vocalists Tony Lindsay, Janice Maxie-Reid and Kenny Washington. While Horne's vocals were often in the smoky romantic range, Clairdee can invoke that mood but soar too as she does on the opening “Old Devil Moon,” arranged in the configuration of the classic George Shearing quintet with piano, guitar, vibes, bass and drums. She is backed by three member of the vocal group SoVoSo, choosing not to layer the backgrounds herself by instead invoke a community feel, in keeping with the project.

“I Got a Name” will sound familiar in tribute to singer Jim Croce who passed 1973, the Jim Croce but Lena did her own version in 1975. Clairdee found the lyrics personally meaningful, especially “...and I carry it with me like my daddy did,” which invoked the memory of her dad who passed at age 48 when she was just 12 years old.

Billy Strayhorn and Horne were great friends and the composer wrote “Maybe” just for her. Clairdee stays faithful to the original arrangement initially before kicking it up a few notches.

“Hollywood,” the spoken interlude from Hall is especially poignant as she speaks about racism in the ‘50s. “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child” was first performed by Horne in 1941 in front of a full orchestra but Clairdee plumbs the depth of the song by choosing to accompany herself only with Herbst’s piano. “I Want To Be Happy” goes in the opposite direction, using what she calls ‘vocalized horns’ and beat boxing in the arrangement.

“Something to Live For” is another Strayhorn piece that he composed the year after he graduated from high school. The unmistakably emotive sound of Regina Carter’s violin graces the tune. “Believe in Yourself” may be familiar from the motion picture version of “the Wiz” which Horne sang while playing Glinda the Good Witch. Clairdee renders it over NOLA second line march rhythm. The set closed with “Stand Up,” written by Clairdee’s long-time friend Marcus McLaurine with lyrics by Keva Singletary Youngblood. This is her cry for activism, as vocalists Tony Lindsay, Janice Maxie-Reid and Kenny Washington join her. It also included fiery speeches from New Jersey Senator Cory Booker.

Clairdee envisions an expanded evening length concert designed for performing arts centers that is richly layered with history, and multi-media, including vintage footage, photographs and new film especially commissioned for the show. “This album is not only my way of saying thank you to Lena for how she touched the lives of me and my family, it is a way for me to honor my parents’ legacy and those of the millions of women and men that fought for civil rights. The lessons of their lives are resoundingly relevant now. It is up to us to keep up the work. This is my 21st century call to acknowledgement and action.”

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