

Carla Cook Reflects on Jazz, Friendship and a Landmark Performance

By Iris Wiener

It was just another course filled with "Hola's" and Spanish verb agreement, and Carla Cook was tired of it. What she could never have guessed is that this was where she was destined to meet Regina Carter, an instant friend and fellow musician. The two first met as freshman in the foreign language classroom, bonding over their disinterest in the material at hand. "Neither of us was really interested in learning Spanish, so we just giggled and laughed and wanted to play music for a living," Cook remembers. Many years later, the nationally renowned Jazz artists team up once again for their premiere performance as a pair at Town Hall on April 30.

A Detroit, Michigan native, Cook has studied a variety of music ranging from piano and string bass to voice. She knew early on that musical notes were in her blood. "I was in late elementary school. There's no exact second when I knew I wanted to sing. I started singing in the choir when I was five. Just my love of music, singing in the glee club, I just knew early on, listening to the radio that my oldest brother listened to. Jazz was really cool to me. It was just something that I knew I wanted to do, no other way to say it, just that nothing else occurred to me in that same sense."

Cook continued to perfect her talents with every given opportunity. Ranging from performances at the local Church to a position

in Michigan's most esteemed choir, she always found a way to sing. But when it came to working with Regina, now an acclaimed violinist, it was a special kind of collaboration. "We hung out to check out music and then there was the atmosphere, not just the two of us, but several of the music students would play informally in situations between classes probably when we should've been in class in the practice room. We even sang once or twice in the elevators!" Cook firmly believes that anyone who really wants to sing can, and will do so, even if it means belting the tunes in an elevator. "If you 'kind of' like to sing and you think it'll be just fun and you like to wear nice clothes and travel and all that then do something else. If you really have to sing, that's something else all together. But if your soul screams out 'this is what I have to do!' then you're in the right business but hold on because it's not easy, there's a lot of sacrifice involved and you will be self employed, no health insurance, it's going to be very difficult. But if your soul says you have to sing, don't let anyone change your mind and get out and sing at every opportunity. Family reunions, or church or community center, at nightclubs, because there's no substitute for experience. Also try to get musical training. Listen to other instruments."

Despite the fact that this is the first performance featuring both women, they have worked together in the past. "We both went to Boston and our colleges were next door to each other. We didn't meet back in New York until the early nineties, and even though this is the first performance with our bands, we did work with other bands when we first got here. And when we recorded, I recorded some on her CD and she recorded some on mine."

In an excited whisper, the Grammy nominee and past opening act for Aretha Franklin looks ahead to her performance

on April 30. "We're both performing but we've both decided that we will leave some of it spontaneous because that's part of the nature of this music, not to plan out every note. We'll be surprising, hopefully for the audience and ourselves. I'm sure we'll do a couple of things together, not sure what, we'd like to keep that a surprise." The years have only made their relationship and anticipated stage presence even stronger. "Because we grew up listening to the same kinds of music and similar philosophies about music, and because we're friends, there's a lot of mutual respect," says Cook with great confidence.

Cook claims that the biggest honor in her career is pleasing fans that have paid to see her. Hopefully they will continue to enjoy the art that she, and many other Jazz greats have so

masterfully shared with the world. "Keep jazz alive! It's wonderful to have a lot of jazz fans. There are a lot of people that hear a little and say they love jazz, but they haven't bought any CD's or supported any jazz concerts. But that would be the way to keep jazz alive in this country the way it is alive in other countries." Cook and Carter never fail to give fans a revitalized taste of the craft. As a pair, they're sure to breathe a rejuvenated sound into jazz everywhere. ■

