

## Clairdee – A Love Letter to Lena

When one thinks of Lena Horne, most – particularly men – swoon in recalling the beauty of her voluptuous physical appearance - calling out, like Fred Sanford to Elizabeth or anyone looking down from Heaven that'll listen – that they've just laid eyes on the most alluring woman whose feet ever touched the earth. "The Horne" was among the greatest multi-hyphenate stars of classic Black Hollywood, gracing stages from Carnegie Hall to the Cocoanut Grove, movies, television and the bright lights over Gay Paree. Yet for those that truly understand her life's purpose, she was so much more. Singer/Educator Clairdee 'overstands' Lena's legacy like no other. And she has turned her admiration for the essence of who Ms. Horne is into this inspired audio homage, *A Love Letter to Lena*.

The first clue to how deep this salute to Lena goes is noticing what's not here: obvious standards such as "Stormy Weather," "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man" or "The Man I Love." Clairdee is saving those for the concert stage. The laser-focused program at hand finds the Sepiascope camera dollying in for a heart-stilling closeup of what truly made this thinking woman's diva tick: the love of a fine, upstanding man, knowledge of self and roots, and the uplift of her people.

"From the time I was 4 years-old, I heard so much about Lena Horne," Clairdee recalls. "My mother and father (Georgia & Rufus Wright) had such great respect for her. They referenced her as a source of pride and dignity – qualities of excellence they wanted to see all eight of their children possess. It wasn't about how beautiful she was. They talked about how *smart* she was and how she carried herself. Just like they would tell us about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. or Medgar Evers – whoever was fighting the good fight and pointing the direction for where we need to go as a people - that's who they would instill upon us to pay attention to. Lena was spoken of in the highest terms among them."

Clairdee became more familiar with Lena the artist in her '20s when she was just beginning her road to becoming a transfixing stage presence in her own right. "When Lena had her television special, I was enamored with her confidence," Clairdee marvels. "Nothing fazed her! When she shot the camera that cool 'don't touch me' look, she reminded me so much of my mother...her fair skin and what we used to call 'good hair' but - just as much - how strong, outspoken and wise she was. I could see that in Lena based on seeing all of that in my mom."

Thoughts of Lena remained deeply imbedded in Clairdee's mind until 2009 when she started thinking seriously about putting together a very special project to honor Lena. "It was two years after my mother passed and a year before Lena passed. Then as a result of the 2016 election, a truly purposed approach to my Lena project became apparent. It wasn't about her greatest hits. I wanted to reflect on my parents' hopes for their children, and the hunger for equality in reference to Lena and her civil rights efforts. I also knew I wanted the songs to be ones that people were not so familiar with." After releasing three superb albums of her own and performing all over the country, the time was right.

Once Clairdee honed her repertoire, she called on pianist/arranger Jon Herbst who had co-produced her delightful *This Christmas* CD. And in true guerilla indie artist style,

Clairdee spent three years getting it realized the way she envisioned it. Setting the songs up in revelatory style are a series of interludes of narration or direct quotes from Ms. Horne marvelously voiced by actress/director/playwright Margo Hall whose stage work includes roles in productions of August Wilson's "Fences" and "Gem of the Ocean." "I'd already sent her the script with notes on each section describing the mood I wanted conveyed," Clairdee explains. "When Margo got to the studio, I had her listen to a few songs to get a feel for the project then she did her thing!"

The album opens with the mid-tempo groove "**Old Devil Moon**" arranged to mirror the sound of the classic George Shearing Quintet of piano, guitar, vibes, bass and drums. "Lena recorded it as a cha-cha," Clairdee instructs. "Jon and I came up with a Latin groove of our own. The background singers are three members from the Bay Area group SoVoSò, a spinoff from Bobby McFerrin's Voicestra. Jon and I considered me doing all of the backgrounds myself then I decided I wanted other vocal textures – male and female. Many of these songs are about community and I wanted that reflected in the vocal palate as well."

"**I Got A Name**" originally came to prominence as the first song released in 1973 in memory of singer Jim Croce after he perished in a plane crash that September. Like most people, Clairdee first heard his version as an especially poignant Top 40 radio hit. Then when wading through songs for her project, she remembered that Horne had sung it, too. "Where the lyric says, 'and I carry it with me like my daddy did,' I feel exactly as the song says," Clairdee says softly. "My father died from lung cancer when I was 12. He was 48... He always told us to be proud of who we are. Education was huge for him. I can only imagine all of the hardships he endured trying, as a Black man, to be an entrepreneur after leaving the military. The slap in the face of not being able to get a business loan because he was Black. Then I think about my life... I'm living the dream he couldn't...having double degrees. He would have been so proud." The song resonated as deeply with Lena in her walk of life, too, but Clairdee's stirring rendition brings the meaning to vivid life, aided by Herbst's piano and John Hoy's guitar that sound like a match made in Heaven of the late greats Floyd Cramer and Eric Gale.

"**Maybe**" is a sexy, sassy circumstantial blues that the great Billy Strayhorn, a dear friend of Lena's, wrote especially for her. "I fell in love with it the first time I heard it in the video 'An Evening with Lena Horne,' Clairdee says. "I honor her arrangement in the intro...then we give it a lil' kick!" Strayhorn - a gay man – was the one that got away for Lena. They remained best friends until he died in 1967.

Clairdee's penchant for conveying deep emotions without waxing overwrought is on sparkling display in her rendition of the Negro spiritual "**Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child**," sung to the sole accompaniment of Herbst's piano. "I loved the way Lena sang this on a 1941 recording," Clairdee shares. "Knowing the difficulties that she had in Hollywood when everyone thought she had it so easy. There she was trying to help our people but many hated her thinking she was trying to keep them from getting work. This song was ideal to reflect her conflicting emotions."

The peppy **“I Want to Be Happy”** gets contemporized with soulful syncopation and harmony. “Several of the songs on this project are very weighty - this is the one where we get the thang smokin’,” Clairdee signifies! “I came up with the idea for the vocalized ‘horns’ and beatboxing then, together, Jon and I buffed it into a party on wax. Lena was so happy working at Café Society among great people from pianist Teddy Wilson and Billie Holiday to Paul Robeson and NAACP head Walter White. It was her happy place – surrounded by entertainers and intellectuals.”

**“Something to Live For”** returns to the book of Strayhorn, this time in a much more profound way. Via her aching rendering of the ballad, Clairdee masterfully conveys the longing and melancholy of the lyric that Strayhorn composed the year after he graduated from high school. Shading in the pain is jazz violin chanteuse Regina Carter, a friend Clairdee is finally working with for the very first time since meeting her backstage at Nancy Wilson’s 70<sup>th</sup> Birthday Concert at the Hollywood Bowl.

This leads into the gloriously inspiring **“Believe in Yourself,”** made famous by Horne starring as Glinda The Good Witch in the motion picture version of “The Wiz.” Clairdee sings this over a gentle New Orleans second line march rhythm that subliminally speaks to walking tall and to the beat of your own drummer.

The album closes with a new original, **“Stand Up,”** Clairdee’s manifesto of involvement and activism in the footsteps of the ancestors who came before her. Wanting to send an uplifting message that gently pushed people to replace their horror and complaining with a reminder that there are things we all can do toward positive change, Clairdee invited singers Tony Lindsay, Janice Maxie-Reid and Kenny Washington to spread the word in quadruplicate. Excerpts from speeches by fiery New Jersey State Senator Cory Booker hammer home the word.

Following the release of *A Love Letter to Lena*, 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 commissioned especially for the show. This dream show will be a magnificent memento for Horne but will simultaneously serve purposes both closer to Clairdee’s heart and broader in context.

“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 right now. It is up to us to keep up the work. This is my 21<sup>st</sup> century call to acknowledgement and action.”

— A. Scott Galloway

*(Mr. Galloway is a prolific music journalist whose work includes over 300 essays and liner notes, including “The Essence of Nancy Wilson”; “The Minnie Riperton Collection”; “The George Benson Anthology”; and “The Best of Dianne Reeves.”)*