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Black women blues greats performing Sunday at Civic Center Park

The Black Women's Blues Festival, produced by Berkeley singer Faye Carol, will include performances by Lady Bianca, Theresa Harris, Kito Kamili, Avotjca and more.

By Andrew Gilbert, Aug. 19, 2021, 7 a.m.



A whole lot of soul and blues comes to Civic Center Park on Sunday afternoon with the Black Women's Blues Festival featuring (left to right) Lady Bianca, Kito Kamili, Faye Carol, Theresa Harris, and Avotjca. Credit: Leah Marie Studio

Thinking that he'd killed a guest on the eve of his wedding, Joel McCrea flees the celebration and makes his way to New Orleans, where he's eventually tracked down and reunited with his bride, played by Barbara Stanwyck. Despite the star power, the 1936 film *Banjo On My Knee* is utterly forgettable, except for one scene, when veteran actress and singer Theresa Harris belts out a call-and-response version of "[St. Louis Blues](#)" with a chorus of stevedores.

Like so many of her appearances in Hollywood films, Harris's performance is uncredited, an utterly unexceptional example of the way that contributions by Black women were so often erased. Produced by the great Berkeley singer Faye Carol, the [Black Women's Blues Festival](#) serves as a timely corrective to the historical amnesia that distorts our understanding of American culture. The fact that one of the featured artists happens to share the name Theresa Harris is yet another reminder that the past, in Faulkner's famous formulation, "is never dead. It's not even past."

Originally programmed for Freight & Salvage, the event will now take place at 2 p.m. Sunday, Aug. 22, at Civic Center Park as Freight has postponed its pandemic reopening to Sept. 9. All tickets purchased will be honored and tickets are still available. Some seats will be provided and listeners are welcome to bring their own chairs and blankets.

A student of history and a tribune of Black music for more than five decades, Carol is known for her generosity when it comes to sharing bandstand wisdom. As a performer, bandleader and educator — each role is deeply enmeshed, and many of her accompanists credit her with playing an essential role in their creative evolution — Carol continues to nurture any musician with the requisite talent and work ethic, embracing players of every creed, color, age, gender and religion.

She said that the time seemed ripe to shine a spotlight on the legacy of Black women artists, who turned an African American folk idiom into a galvanizing force in popular music in the 1920s, sparking a sea change in American culture that rippled outward. While Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith's names continue to carry currency, "We've known of so many Black women blues greats who don't get credit, Sippie Wallace, Big Mama Thornton, and on and on," said Carol, a longtime Berkeley resident. "They invented the shit. Just like everything else, we're often not first in line for recognition, money, power and respect."

Carol performs with pianist Joe Warner, who like a succession of her previous accompanists is rapidly gaining recognition

beyond the Bay Area (he's producing a series of concerts and workshops at the California Jazz Conservatory next month, "[Give the Drummer Some](#)," featuring drum legends Dennis Chambers, Bernard "Pretty" Purdie and Lenny White).

Carol designed the festival to give each artist a healthy turn in the spotlight, and the program includes pianist/vocalist Lady Bianca, vocalist Theresa Harris (who also performs with Joe Warner), pianist/vocalist Kito Kamili, and poet Avotjca. Carol is also using the festival to celebrate the legacy of San Francisco-reared R&B great Sugar Pie DeSanto, though she won't be attending.

"I love her to the core and really think she's one of the greatest pioneers in our area," Carol said. "We should all hold her up. I want to give a little synopsis of her life and talk about some other woman, like Martha Young and Beverly Stovall, who've contributed so much."

No Bay Area artist exemplifies the way that brilliant Black women get overlooked better than Lady Bianca, a soul powerhouse who spent the first half of her career as a foil for Frank Zappa and Van Morrison (while also putting in a stint with Sly and the Family Stone as backup vocalist and keyboardist). She turned heads in the jazz world when vocalese pioneer Jon Hendricks cast her as Billie Holiday in his 1972 production of *Evolution of the Blues*, an experience that loosened up her phrasing. "Esther Phillips was an influence too, the bite and pepper of her music," she said.

Lady B has been a headliner in her own right since her aptly named 1995 debut album *Best Kept Secret* (Telarc), a project produced by blues great Joe Louis Walker. Over the past two decades she's released a series of albums on her own label, Magic-O Records, and is widely revered by her fellow performers. "She is just incredible as an entertainer, writer and pianist," Carol said. "And she's been stumping out here for so long."

Carol's daughter, blues pianist, vocalist, composer, producer, and educator Kito Kamili (who formerly performed and recorded as Kito Gamble), makes an all too rare appearance. A major league talent versed in jazz, blues, gospel and hip hop, she grew up on the Bay Area music scene and has been a standout talent since her days at Berkeley High.

Avotjca is a polymathic artist whose work as a poet and playwright has been published in English and Spanish. A dynamic performance poet, skilled percussionist and talent-savvy bandleader, she's also a DJ who champions the music via her

weekly shows on KPOO and KPFA, “Bebop, Cubop and the Musical Truth.”

“She’s a warrior and a great poet who knocks your socks off,” Carol said.

While she’s no youngster, Theresa Harris is billed as the festival’s emerging artist. A San Francisco native, she graduated from Carol’s vocal workshop, School of The Getdown, an experience that got her back on stage after years away from music. Growing up in Haight Ashbury in the 1960s, Harris learned the blues from a neighbor, Aunt Ferina, who hailed from Texas. After school instead of going out to play, she and her siblings “would go over to her house to sing the blues,” she recalled. She performed around the region as a young woman, performing at the original Yoshi’s in Berkeley and various community events and festivals with the band House Calls and East Bay blues singer Earnestine Barze.

Looking to reconnect with music from the scene she decided to study vocal music at Los Medanos College, which led her to Carol’s School of The Getdown. Thrilled to mentor an artist with a deep connection to the tradition, Carol has kept her in the mix ever since, regularly inviting her back to classes even as Harris has returned to local stages.

“After years of not singing, I was sort of shy and she gave me that inspiration,” Harris said. “I am so honored to be part of the festival. It means representing my aunty teaching me the blues from years ago. A lot of people think it’s going out of style, but it’s not. I sing the blues from my soul. I’ve gotta feel it.”

The Black Women’s Blues Festival was made possible in part by a Civic Arts Grant for Festivals from the City of Berkeley in partnership with the Berkeley non-profit organization Black Female Project, and by a grant from the Alliance for California Traditional Arts (in partnership with the Walter & Elise Hass Fund, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Grants for the Arts, and The California Endowment).

Carol was on the cusp of a concert series that involved her collaboration with jazz bass great Buster Williams when the pandemic shut down all musical performances last year. She was determined not to let the delta variant put the kibosh on this event. In many ways Civic Center Park provides an ideal setting for one of her central missions, introducing young Black audiences to their heritage.

“I want our young people to know there are deeper parts of our culture,” she said. “Twerking is cool. I’m not trying to get it to

Black Women's Blues Festival
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