

The Music Scene

Simply Toya

Nothing warms up a pitch black, sharp-as-needles cold winter's night like a rich, creamy cup of hot cocoa. Maybe with a touch of cinnamon to add bright notes to the soothing, steamy mug. Or how about the vocal version of this addictive treat. Rich, smooth, steamy and spicy. Mix in soulful, poignant, soaring and sultry and you have the perfect musical recipe for beating the winter blues, Simply Toya.

Or if the glowing garnet of a ripe red zinfandel is more your style to chase the chills, Simply Toya satisfies. Because Simply Toya is really not so simple; and neither is Toya Alexander whose singing style is a complex and vibrant mix of funky Rhythm & Blues, and Soulful Pop with an undercurrent of Inspirational and – even – Classical influences. According to Alexander each selection, whether an emotion laden original composition or swinging cover of a favorite standard, “reflects a moment in my life. I always feel it my way. It's the Toya twist.”

And the “Toya twist” made itself apparent early on in Alexander's life. At the age of nine, when Alexander was caught composing classical pieces shortly after starting piano lessons, her teacher abruptly closed the keyboard cover. She was sternly advised, “Don't write until you learn theory.” Consul, gratefully, Alexander chose to ignore. Her piano classes ended, but her musical life took off.

With a father who was a jazz pianist, and a mother who sang in the church choir, Alexander was born into a world filled with rhythm and song. Following her short stint as a piano student, her creativity flourished, her pieces composed by ear. “I would hear the songs in my head. Or sometimes just the words, and then the melody.” She feels her talent was a gift given, a blessing, to help keep her focused through what proved to be a challenging childhood.

Looking back on her relationship with her parents, Alexander feels particularly strong emotions, both happy and sad, linking her to her father. Despite his outgoing musical career, her father was a quiet man who didn't interact much with family members. Even as Alexander developed her style and wrote her ballads, her father “had no clue” about her music aspirations. Fortunately, as an adult, Alexander was able to share her work with her father and began programming music with him, collaborating and creating in a deeply meaningful partnership. Sadly, their teamwork was cut short by her father's death following a diagnosis of cancer.

Her father's death was just one of several emotional setbacks that plagued Alexander during her early adult years. Facing the serious illness of her young daughter, shortly after the birth of her son, was extraordinarily draining as she focused her energy on serious family concerns for a long period of time. She experienced a downward spiral triggered by emotional distress, and yet through all the difficulties, and heartbreak, her music was her coping tool. “I would cry through my songs, and laugh. Music has always been a healing tool for me, a gift of hope and renewal.”

She also feels her music is a spiritual gift from her mother whose murder, when Alexander was a young woman, was another loss striking deep into her heart. Even in the midst of drowning in an ocean of anger and hurt, Alexander felt her mother's presence as she continued to compose her music. "I felt her and heard her voice, 'I'm watching over you.'" She feels her music is a living legacy from her mother.

Alexander acknowledges that although her music seems born from tragedy and a need to create a strong identity that "my songs are written out of compassion, not ego. They are a message for people who have suffered and survived." And Alexander's compassion, and her voice, are not only treasures for those who hear her musical performances. She is a much beloved yoga teacher with the Alameda Recreation and Parks Department. Her vocal qualities work magic in the yoga classroom where her soothing tones and spiritual empathy create an atmosphere that is safe, comfortable and healing "without fear or judgment."

She wants her yoga students to realize a "contentment with self." And after her own trials, Alexander finds herself at mid-life, finding her own pleasure and satisfaction as her musical career soars. Warm and spicy. Mellow and smooth. Layer upon layer of feeling and beat, melody and meaning. Her musical performances reflect life filled joy and hard won wisdom. Bringing an emotional depth and pulsating rhythm to her songs – not merely surviving – but absolutely thriving, Simply Toya is anything but.

CD, Performances, Play

One of my favorite covers – Toya's version of "When I Fall in Love" – is not featured on her new CD, **Simply Toya**; you'll have to see her perform that selection in person. Instead her CD showcases 15 heartfelt original compositions written, arranged and performed by Toya Alexander. The CD will be released in mid-February under her label "**Love Light Records.**"

You can see Toya Alexander in a performance which celebrates local talent at the Malonga Casquelourd Center for The Arts. The event is called the "Fib and Quibble Showcase." And will be presented Friday and Saturday, February 3rd and 4th at 8:00pm. And Sunday February 5th at 3:00pm. For more information contact Michael Lange at 510-520-1340.

Alexander is currently busy working on a musical play (the title is currently under wraps), which will explore a woman's truly unique perspective on the relationships with the men in her life. It is a funny, poignant and all-too-true production scheduled for a Fall debut.

Past performances by Alexander have included featured soloist for the City of Oakland's Black History Celebration and Annual Black History Month Program by the National Council of Negro Women, Inc.

Alexander has also composed selections specifically for weddings, graduation ceremonies, and fund raising events. One incredibly stunning example is her composition for the Laney College 2004 Commencement Ceremony, "*What Will You Do With The Rest Of Your Life.*" Several of her songs have been recognized with awards from the American Song Festival, Billboard Song Contest, and the Music City Song Festival.

For more information on upcoming performances and CD release, please contact Toya Alexander at **simplytoya@hotmail.com**.