Feature

Sheila Jordan

Interview By Nora McCarthy

Jazz singer, improviser, lyricist, educator, creative pioneer and 2012 NEA Jazz Masters Award recipient, Sheila Jordan came up during a most significant time in both the history of jazz music and of this country—the Civil Rights Movement—which put her right in the center of the mix with the greatest jazz musicians of all time while fostering her rebellious spirit. Out of these two iconoclastic forces she developed as an artist. Born with a natural talent for singing and an angel on her shoulder, Sheila experienced many highs and lows in her personal life and over 60 year long career. However, driven by her unwavering love of the music, and strong belief in change, she persevered, and is an inspiration to many aspiring and accomplished jazz singers today.

JI: Ms. Jordan, Jazz Inside Magazine would like to congratulate you on your recent award, The NEA Jazz Masters Fellowship, what does it feel like to be the recipient of this most coveted award?

SJ: I'll tell you a funny story about it. I had returned home from doing a week in Toronto with workshops and a couple of concerts. I came in the door and my phone was ringing. I answered and this guy said, "I'd like to speak to Sheila Jordan—Sheila Jordan please." And I said, "Yes." He said, "Is this Sheila Jordan?" very business-like. And, I said, "Yes, what do you want?" He said, "Well this is Wayne Brown from the National Endowment of the Arts and I just wanted to inform you that you are to be a recipient of the Jazz Masters Award." I said, "Oh my God Wayne, I thought you were a telemarketing guy, I'm so sorry." So, both of us cracked up laughing. I was in such shock when he told me this, I'm still in shock. I said, "Are you sure?" I'm thinking they're going to call me up and say, "Oh we made a mistake."

JI: It's the highest award in the country given to jazz musicians, that's awesome.

SJ: I know and there are so many great musicians out there that haven't gotten it. I've never had a Grammy nomination or anything like that. But I think part of the reason I was selected has to do with the fact that I am known as a teacher. I am so blessed to have something like this happen to me at 83 years of age. It's such a gift and I do not take gifts like this for granted. It's overwhelming and it's just fantastic.

JI: I understand that this may be the last year that they will be giving these awards, is that true?

SJ: Well, they're not sure. I heard it might be but I don't know too much about it.

JI: Sheila, please describe your journey. Reflecting back on your life's blessings from your recording debut at the age of 34 with your original rendition of the classic, "You Are My Sunshine," on George Russell's 1962 album *The Outer View* to your first full-length album, *A Portrait Of Sheila*, on Blue Note Records that same year to now receiving the highest honor that our nation bestows on jazz artists for their exceptional contributions to the advancement of jazz?

SJ: I always sang as a child. It was a way of eliminating the pain of poverty, alcoholism and the taunting of the kids in the schools that I went to as a little kid. The music has always saved me; it was my savior. The music is part of me. And, I knew that as a little tiny kid. A kid that walked all the way to the store for her grandmother in the dead of winter to get a little bit of food singing all the way up and all the way back, constantly singing. And, I was in pain because it was cold. It didn't matter. Any time I had any deep feeling whatsoever, I was singing. So I made a decision at a very young age in life, especially after I heard Charlie Parker, that music would be my journey.

JI: Where did you first hear Charlie Parker?

SJ: I put a nickel in the jukebox and heard him; it was across the street from the high school I went to in Detroit. This was after I moved there from Pennsylvania; I was with my grandparents

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before that until I was 14 years old.

JI: Why were you with them?

SJ: Because my mother couldn't take care of me, she was too young and my father could have cared less; he had nothing to do with me. He had remarried and had another family. I was kind of a loner.

JI: Do you have siblings?

SJ: Well I have half sisters and a brother but he passed on. There were four sisters I believe that I only recently have gotten in touch with and we've become very close. It wasn't their fault, it was my father's—he couldn't be bothered at the time. He had all these kids with another woman. It was hard; it was very difficult. My grandfather was like my father but he was an alcoholic. My grandmother was like my mother. As I said my mother was too young; she couldn't raise me. When I was 14 I moved to Detroit. In Pennsylvania my mother had gotten into a fight with my grandfather, they were all drinking, he said "Take your kid, I've had her all these years now you take her." That kind of hurt me but it was supposed to happen. I don't know where I'd be today—I probably wouldn't be alive. I'm sure I certainly wouldn't have been singing. Even though I sang as a little kid, I don't think I would have had the jazz journey because there was no jazz in Pennsylvania in that little coal mining town, that's for sure. So, the journey was up and down. But you know, it's like anything in life, if you love something strong enough you will go to any lengths to keep it alive within your soul. And, that's what I've done because the music is so important to me. I don't mean necessarily that I have to sing it or be known. I'm not even talking about awards or anything like that; I'm talking about music saving my soul. Whether I teach it, whether I go and support it, or whether I sing it, it's just part of my life. I eat, breathe and sleep, jazz music. That's what I am.

JI: Speaking of awards, what other awards have you received?

SJ: I received the Mary Lou Williams award a couple of years ago and that was a shock. Then I got the MAC award and *that* was a shock. I'm always shocked, I always keep thinking, "Who is this person that they are giving these awards to, you know?"

JI: That little girl that was singing on her way to the store in the cold for her grandmother.

SJ: The little girl trying to get rid of her misery through song. That's what I did; I would try to get rid of my misery through song, that's how I lived. And, it's all paid off. Even going through the time in my life with the alcohol and cocaine use, somehow I was saved. I had a spiritual awakening and boom, the spiritual awakening came in the form of a subliminal message that said in effect, "I gave you a gift and if you don't take care of it, I'm going to take it away and give it to somebody else." I jumped up—I was coming out of a hangover—and boy I got my butt to AA real fast and I've been there ever since. It works if you work it.

JI: Having supported yourself and your daughter working as a legal secretary and then in an advertising agency till you were 58 years old, having conquered addiction and other personal demons, your story is an inspiration to *all* singers today some of whom are just coming out of school with a degree in music that are grappling with a diminished jazz market and fewer opportunities, an over abundance of "door gigs," and a bad economy who are finding it hard to make ends meet and still hang on to their dream. What advice can you give to those singers who are disheartened and having a difficult time staying positive, optimistic and focused?

> *"Learn the original melody. The original melodies are the stepping stones to improvisation."*

SJ: Do not give up!! Don't give up. When I decided to dedicate my life to music, it meant regardless of what went on, I would always find a place to sing even if it was in the streets…I would find a place to sing. Don't give up. Do this beautiful gift that you have, don't let it go. Because if you let it go too long, you might not get it back and that's a definite. The two most important things in my life were keeping jazz music alive as I said regardless of how I went about it whether it was singing, teaching, or going out to support it. The other thing was my daughter. Like my father, her father had nothing to do with her. He didn't support her or anything, but he had an illness. He was a drug addict and that is a disease which I know. So for me I always kept the music alive regardless of whether I was working in an office to support myself and my daughter; I always found a place to do music, always. I had a job in a club in the Village called the Page Three making six dollars a night. By the time I paid the babysitter and the cab fare home, I had maybe a dollar left. But I did it for the music; I just knew I had to sing to let out my feelings. I wasn't doing it for any other reason than to satisfy my soul. It had nothing to do with hoping to get discovered or becoming a star. That never occurred to me. So everything that happened to me from that time forward up until today has been mind blowing. When I got laid off from my job, I was 58 years old. Because the agency where I worked was merging with another advertising agency, they gave me two options, either take a year's severance pay or float around the agency as a typist doing little odd jobs here and there. I didn't want to do that. I had been praying for a long time to be able to do the music more. And as they say, be careful for what you pray for, you just might get it. And I never looked back. From the time I left the advertising agency of Doyle Dane Bernbach at age 58, I have worked, and I have been able to survive spiritually and financially. It's amazing what has happened to me. I believe that if you dedicate your life to something you love, it will come around. It will come back. As I said before, everything I do, whether it's singing, teaching or supporting the music it doesn't matter. It does come around. I never gave up on it. I never turned my back on it. I never let it go. I couldn't. The music is part of me. I knew that as a little tiny kid. A kid that walked all the way to the store for her grandmother in the dead of winter to get a little bit of food singing all the way there and all the way back; I was constantly singing. I was in pain because it was cold but it didn't matter. Any time I had any deep feeling whatsoever, I was singing.

JI: Please talk a little about your teaching.

SJ: I've been teaching since 1978. I started a workshop at City College when John Lewis was still alive. He and Eddie Summerland, who was the head of the Jazz Department, wanted me to come there and do a concert so I went. Afterward they asked me to teach there. Janet Steele, a classical professor, said I should start a vocal workshop but I told her that I didn't know how to teach. In saying that, I learned how to teach through teaching. One of the things I found out very early is that you do not break people's spirits. It doesn't matter how old the student is. I've had workshops where women in their fifties, sixties and seventies wanted to sing. They had let it go and wanted to come back to it. That is always a thrill for me.

I was a pioneer in starting the vocal workshop thanks to Janet Steele, John Lewis and Eddie Summerland—it was an accident but I believed in the workshops; I've been teaching ever since. I don't teach on a weekly basis anymore the way I used to but I still do my summer workshops and I get wonderful kids. I've had some terrific students; students that are out there doing it now, making it.

JI: That must be very fulfilling for you.

SJ: Yes, absolutely regardless of whether they stayed in jazz or went on. One of my students, Lilieth White, has since become a really big Broadway star. She has a fantastic voice and is a very sweet woman. I've done workshops where well known singers such as Tierney Sutton and Roberta Gamberini participated. Roberta came to a workshop I conducted in Italy. A lot of the young people today that are starting to make it at some point crossed my path. So it's just absolutely beautiful because I could have chosen to not encourage them—I could have broken their spirits—but that's not the way I teach. Theo Bleckman was also a student of mine; I brought him over from Graz, Germany. He's doing great now. I believed in him. He used to say that I teach with my heart. I think it's very important for teachers to not be on a power trip when they

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teach but a lot of them are. It's unfortunate. I never yell at my kids; I never did and I never will. I don't let them get away with anything; I give them what they need. But, I do it with love.

JI: Coming up, you crossed color lines, following and working with Black musicians during a highly incendiary racial time in our country's history, meeting with disapproval from White America—at times physical—how did these experiences impact your career and what do you think of our current political climate now that we have a Black President in office? Do you think we are in a better place?

SJ: First of all, I would say that I almost got killed over my belief in racial equality. In other words, I never saw color. I saw souls and people who I could identify with. It happened to be that the music that I finally decided to do, thanks to the great Charlie Parker who was like my brother, showed me the way. I found what I wanted to do but I had to struggle for it because the music that I loved and wanted to be around was being made by Afro-American musicians in those days. There was such hatred and ugliness and prejudice in Detroit, Michigan that I almost got killed many times. I thought when I got to New York that it would be different. Well it was in New York that I almost got killed. After having dinner in a Chinese restaurant with two of my Afro-American artist friends we were headed back to my loft where there was a full session going on when we were jumped by four guys. They held my two friends and one of them threw me down on the street, knocked my front tooth out. He started kicking and punching me while I was lying there and suddenly I looked up and saw some man walking across the street all dressed up in a suit and a coat with a gun that was pointed in my direction. I said to myself, "I'm going to die over this. I know that I'm right; I know things are going to change one day. But if I have to be a pioneer in this and die then that's what's going to happen and I don't care." I wasn't afraid and that was way before my daughter was born.

JI: What year was this?

SJ: Probably, 1953. The man happened to be a plainclothesman and he was White. It was also a White plainclothesman in Detroit that caused me to leave Detroit because I was always in the police station answering questions like "Why are you hanging around with ___." (I won't use the word.)
My first boyfriend was Frank Foster. The cops took me, Frank, my girlfriend, and the guy she was with to the police station. We were going to Belle Isle in Detroit for a picnic. They stopped our car, made us come down and gave me the third degree. The cop asked, "Do you see this in my holster?" I said, "Yes, it's a gun." He said, "Let me tell you something. I have a nine year old daughter at home and if I found her the way I found you tonight, I'd take this gun and blow her brains out." I said, "Oh my God, I've got to get out of here; how am I going to get out of here." He said, "I'm going to call your mother." I said, "Call my mother??? I've been living on my own since I was seventeen years old; I've been supporting myself and getting through school." I wasn't being a smart ass, because I knew he would get me if I was a smart ass but I said, "Officer, I'm moving to New York." Because Frank was going into the army and I wanted to be near Charlie Parker's music. My decision was when Frank went into the army, I'd move to New York, which I did. The cop said, "Oh, so you're going to where it's more cosmopolitan." That's why it was so weird that when I came to New York thinking it was less prejudiced.

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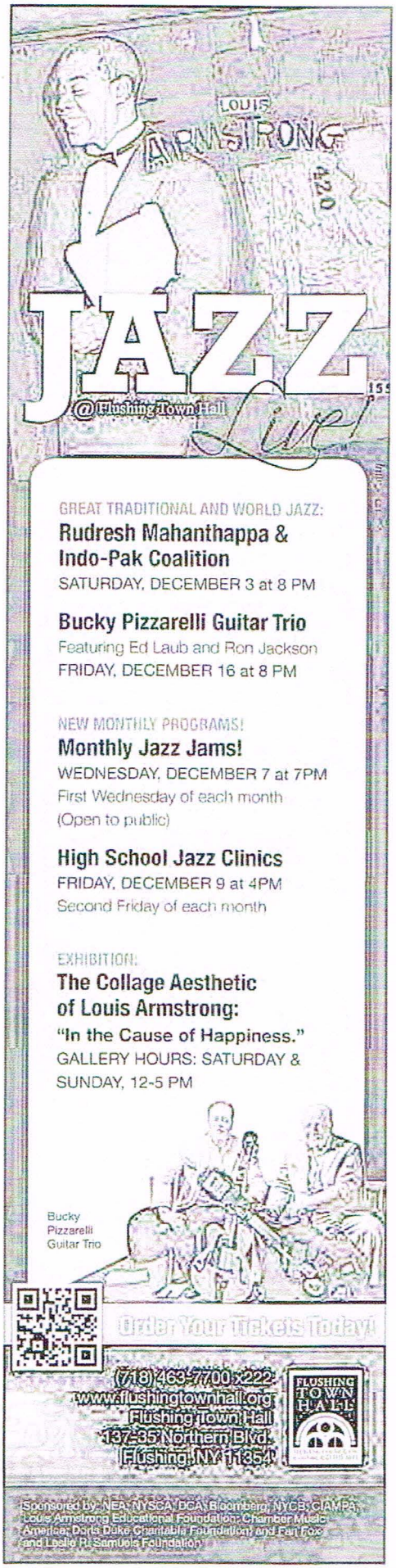

because of the Bebop scene that I almost got killed and it was a plainclothes detective that saved my life. Now why was he there? Isn't it strange that a plainclothesman would be right there at that exact point in time? I'm telling you I would have gotten killed, that guy would have killed me. It's always been that way with me, there's always been somebody taking care of me, I believe that.

JI: What do you say now when you look around at the world?

SJ: I see interracial couples all the time, with their children, their bi-racial kids like I had. I had a bi-racial daughter with Duke Jordan. I say, "Look, look, look I was right, it's happening!" It makes me thrilled. I'm thrilled when I see it.

JI: We still have serious racial issues though in this country.

SJ: We have a long way to go but it's not as bad as it was.

JI: You're absolutely right but when I see a return of the same old prejudices rearing their ugly heads since Obama got elected, especially during the election and how Congress has blocked his every effort since he has been in office basically, you've got to acknowledge how far we still have to go.

SJ: They do that to him because they don't want a Black president. They don't want anybody that might do us some good who is Black. They don't want him in there. If he pulls us out of this mess, he'll be up on top and rightly so. I think they're not giving the poor guy a chance.

JI: I agree, they don't want to give it up to a Black man.

SJ: That's what it is and again that's where the (#@!%) messed up prejudice comes in. It's still a mess but people are getting together and people are living their lives the way they want to. If they want to marry an African-American or vice versa an African-American wants to marry a White person, it's happening. Look at a lot of these movie stars like Sandra Bullock adopting a Black child, it's beautiful. That would have been unheard of years ago.

JI: I know…and Madonna too, and Angelina Jolie.

SJ: It's just incredible. It's going to take some time but you know what? There's a light at the end of the tunnel I see it. This is proof of it. One day we will all be one race.

JI: Absolutely—the human race, the way it was intended, what we're supposed to be now. If we could get to that one thing first, we'd have most of our troubles solved.

SJ: Exactly!! [Laughter] I feel there's hope. I feel there are enough beautiful people out there in the world to see that we will get through this—this too shall pass.

JI: What songs have you composed and did you write "Reel Time?" I love how you sing it and I've noticed that you use it also as an introduction to other songs?

> "I learned phrasing by listening to Bird. I don't recommend singers learn tunes from other singers because they are not going to learn the tune right.

SJ: No, that was written by Chris Lee who is a vibraphone player and a drummer from Portland, Oregon. The first part of the song is improvised when I do it sometimes but that's from the Native American thing I do. I'm not a composer, but if something really hits me, then I can write about it like the lyrics to Don Cherry's "Art Deco." I wrote something for Bird called "The Bird" then I put lyrics to his Quasimodo which talk about how it was growing up as a kid the first time I heard Bird. But I wrote a little intro for that before I did "The Bird." Then I wrote a little introduction for Miles Davis about how beautiful it is when Miles Davis plays a ballad. "The Crossing", I wrote for my recovery, it's also the name of the album I did with Kenny Barron, Harvie S, Ben Riley and Tom Harrell. Then there's "Sheila's Blues." I wrote that because everybody asks me a million questions after I come off the stage such as, "Where do you come from, where did you grow up, etc…?" But I want to hear about them, I don't' want to talk about me when I come off the stage. So I wrote "Sheila's Blues" and it tells my whole story. I change it up from time-to-time according to what is happening now. I'll put in an extra chorus and then it tells everybody where I came from, how I heard Bird for the first time, what's going on in my world and stuff like that; that way everybody knows. So when I come off the stage I want to hear about them; what brought them to hear us.

JI: When did you start putting the chanting into your improvisation?

SJ: Oh, I've been doing that since I was a little kid but I never put it into jazz. I mean, I grew up with Tommy Flanagan, Kenny Burrell and Barry Harris; I don't think I was going to be doing that stuff around them because they would have said, "Is she out of her mind?" But it was always there. It was one of things I did as a kid that would get me through. I would make up these

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sounds and hear them when I had to walk past the graveyard or when I had to go to the store when it was freezing out. I'd be doing these chanting things, singing and making up words, and making up sounds; that's what I did. I can't remember exactly when but I finally decided that it was part of me so somehow one night it just broke out. I might have started doing it when I started doing some of Kuhn's original tunes like "Deep Tango," and I improvised. Plus a lot of it happened when I started doing the bass and voice.

JI: You are one of the first singers to work in that format, I don't know of any singers before you who sang with only the bass—were there any before you?

SJ: I am the originator of the bass and voice duo format. Peggy Lee did a tune once with bass and voice but I had already been doing bass and voice with Peter Ind at Lennie Tristano's sessions; I was studying with Lennie at the time. That was years ago in the early 50's before my daughter was born.

JI: You studied with Lennie Tristano but it has also been written that you said you studied with Charles Mingus as well which you've denied. Once and for all let's dispel the misinformation floating around out there here and now, did you ever study with Charles Mingus?

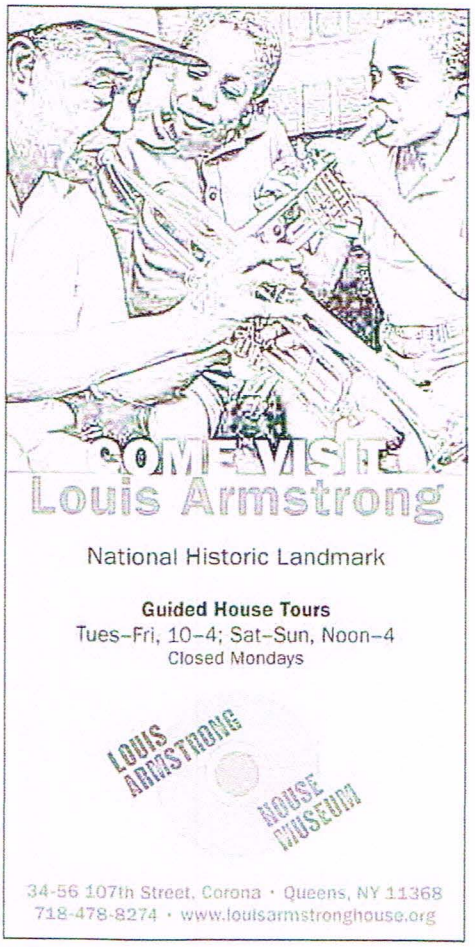
SJ: No. I never said I studied with Mingus, it isn't true. Is there a way to take that information off the internet because I'd like to? It was Max Roach and Charlie Mingus who turned me on to Lennie Tristano. Mingus used to come up to Lennie's and play. One of the very first times that I ever did a bass and voice duo was in Toledo. I went to visit my half sisters and we went to this jazz club and Mingus was there with I believe Lee Konitz and a drummer. So Mingus asked me to come up and sing a tune. I said, "But there's no piano or guitar." Mingus replied, "Well that doesn't seem to bother you at Lennie's." So, I said, "Yes, I know, but I'm not going to do it out in front of people." And he said, "Why not?" So I did Jerome Kern's, "Yesterdays", I'll never forget the first time I ever performed in bass and voice duo with Mingus I was only sitting in. I want to make that clear. I never studied with Charlie Mingus; I just had gigs with him every once in a while. He'd have a gig somewhere or somebody would have a gig and he'd be the bass player. They would present me a little bit at the time doing a couple of tunes just sitting in. But I never studied with Mingus.

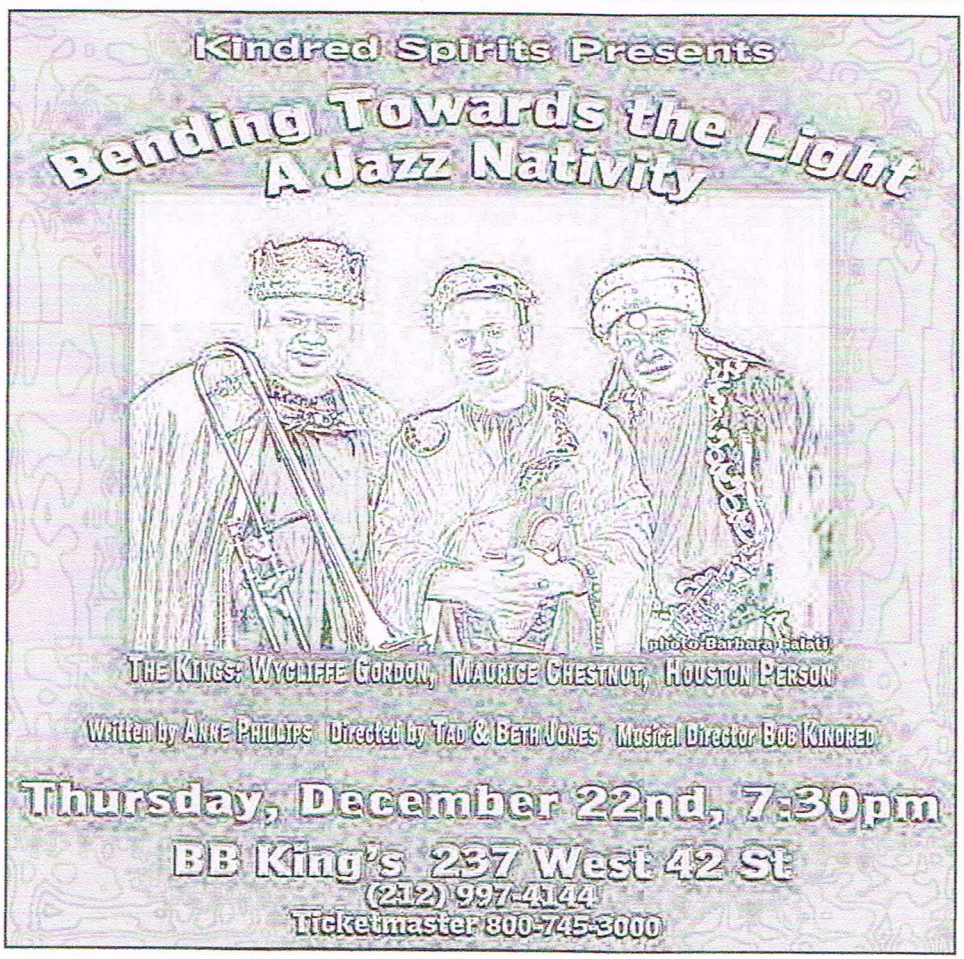
JI: What did you study with Tristano? Do you read music?

SJ: I'm not a great reader. I have to be very honest, I hear quicker than I can read. I would have loved to have been a piano player and I would have loved to be able to compose. I had a great aunt when I was a little kid living with my grandfather, she was his sister, who I took piano lessons from. They were free but we were so poor we wouldn't have been able to afford them anyway. She was brutal. That's why I talk about teaching and not breaking spirits. She would take a ruler to my very small hands—tiny hands at that time. I couldn't reach the keys and she took a ruler and cracked my little hands. I remember my grandmother asking me why my hands were all black and blue and I told her that Aunt Alma hit me when my hands couldn't fit the keys. I told her I couldn't go there anymore and she wouldn't let me go there anymore. Consequently, I became afraid of the piano.

JI: Did you ever study bebop or did you just listen and absorb it?

SJ: Are you kidding? We didn't have any jazz schools back then. I grew up with the best, Tommy, Barry and Kenny. We always had sessions and I sang with these two wonderful Afro-American cats, Leroy Mitchell and "Skeeter" Speight—they taught me how to scat sing. I found a way to make a little extra money by cleaning this woman's floors and I would go down on John R, a street in Detroit, to the record store and I would buy all of the records that I could possibly buy and play them till I wore them out white! This was after I heard Charlie Parker on the jukebox and I had gotten turned on to Bebop. And that's how I learned the music—through the records and by meeting these two young guys at the time. I asked them if I could sing with them and told them I'd love to be able to do that. They told me, "Yes," but I'd have to stop drinking. I was in high school and all the kids in high school drank. And of course, not





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knowing that it (alcoholism) is hereditary, I had no clue. So I stopped drinking at the time and they took me on and we were known as Skeeter, Mitch & Jean. I went by my middle name; I didn't even use Sheila. Anytime Bird would come to town, he'd let us sit in. Dizzy would let us sit in too. We didn't work. We would just sit in and do a tune or two.

JI: How long did you do that? Was it for several years prior to your coming to New York?

SJ: Yes, absolutely, for at least five years.

JI: You've worked with some seriously great bass players. In fact, when I discovered you back in Cleveland, Ohio in the early '80's, it was through the album you did with Arild Anderson, *Sheila*. I loved every song on that album

SJ: When George Russell came to the Page Three in the Village, that's the little club I used to work in, remember I told you about dedication and you will always find a place to sing, this club in the Village was called the Page Three and I would work there a couple of times a week. Monday night was session night and that's when they'd hire a full rhythm section and that's where I met Steve Swallow who played acoustic bass at the time. George Russell came down to hear Jack Reilly one of his students and Steve Swallow, and he heard me. So after I finished singing he came up to me and said, "I want to introduce myself, where do you come from to sing like that." I looked up at him and smiled and said, "I come from Hell." We laughed and that was the beginning of "Sunshine." He said he wanted to go back to where I come from so I took him to Pennsylvania to meet my grandmother. I was drinking at the time and she was drinking of course, and she introduced us to a miner who was sitting at the bar and of course I knew him from when I was a little kid but George didn't and so she introduced us as these great big stars and I said, "No Mom, I'm not a star, George is but not me." So, the old miner said, "Oh really? Do you still sing, 'You Are My Sunshine,' Jeanie?" I said, "No, I don't do that one anymore." "Why not?" he asked, and George said, "Why Not?" So there was an old upright piano and George started playing it and I started singing it and my grandmother got very upset. She took him and literally pushed him off the bench and said, "That is not the way it goes!" Then she played it. And I sang it with her. A few weeks after George and I got back to New York he called and asked me to come down because he wanted me to hear something. So I went and he played this incredible introduction and when he stopped he said, "OK, sing!" And I said, Sing what?" And he said, "Sing 'You Are My Sunshine." I told him I couldn't sing it without any accompaniment and he asked me, "Why not? You did it when you were a kid, go ahead sing it." And that's how it was recorded on his album, *The Outer View*. Then through that he got me my record date on Blue Note Records. There were only two singers on Blue Note at that time, Alfred Lion and Francis Wolf; Blue Note didn't record singers. I was the first jazz singer they ever recorded. I wanted to do a bass and voice record with Steve Swallow because we would do at least one or two tunes a set at the Page Three with just bass and voice. So I asked George if we could do an album but George didn't think it was time for that yet."

JI: What do you like about singing with the bass?

SJ: It gives me freedom. I love the sound of the bass. Maybe at some point in another life I was a bass player, I don't know. I just love the sound of the bass; I feel very in tune with it. But there is a lot about bass and voice you have to be careful with because the pitch can go very easily by hearing the noise of a fan or tinkling glasses, your intonation can go like that. So you have to be very careful but I just love the freedom it gives me, I love it.

JI: When did you start working with Harvie S?

SJ: I approached Harvie when we had the group with Kuhn that recorded for ECM—the Steve Kuhn/Sheila Jordan Band and Harvie was in that band. We would get together and do bass and voice when we were out on tour, when there was time. I asked him if he would like to do bass and voice because I really wanted to do the bass and voice. And he agreed but insisted on rehearsals. So, we'd get together and rehearse all the time and that's how I approach it because it was something I started years ago and I wanted to keep it going. I don't work with Harvie anymore in duo because Harvie wanted to concentrate on his own music. I understood that. There is an old recording coming out of my last concert with Harvie S. A wonderful student of mine and wonderful singer, Brenda Baines, invited me to come down to Gainesville, Florida where she lives and do a concert with the bass and voice. It was recorded and all these years later they're going to put it out. I never tried to put it out myself but Harvie has been very instrumental in trying to get that recording out because he liked it so much. After having started the voice and bass thing I didn't want it to die and since Harvie wasn't available any longer to do it I had to find somebody and that somebody was Cameron Brown. Cameron Brown is a great bass player and a great human being. With Cameron I feel very safe. He's very respectful of me and he is willing to rehearse. Now, what I'm trying to do is encourage singers and bass players to do this.

JI: A lot of singers can't do it because they don't have the freedom or the ears, it's not easy.

SJ: A lot of the things that happen with the young singers today that I really get on them about is learning the original melodies of the tunes, that is very helpful. If you don't know the original melody you're taking a big chance out there because you can take off but you have to be able to land again. In order to land you have to know what that original note was, you know what I mean?

JI: Exactly. What are some of the most important things that you teach your students?

SJ: Learn the original melody. The original melodies are the stepping stones to improvisation—very important. Also, don't sing in keys that are not good for you, if they're uncomfortable, change them until you find what works for your voice. In other words don't try and compensate your vocal quality for the rhythm section, piano and bass player because they don't like to play in singer's keys sometimes. The wonderful thing about Lennie Tristano was if you were an instrumentalist, say piano or bass, and you studied with Lennie, he made you learn the tune in every key. OK? So, of course, there are some keys, like A or B that may be a little more awkward for some instruments, so you come up half a step or down half a step, you can make adjustments but generally speaking, I don't have any trouble with the musicians I work with, they understand that. Another thing is for the singer to have good lead sheets. I'm not talking about arrangements. I'm talking about lead sheets so that the melody, the chord changes, and the lyrics are all on that sheet. That's very important. Also, always put your name on it and the composer's, in case it gets played on the radio they are going to want to know who wrote it. And always keep the original at home—I learned that one the hard way once when I accidentally left all my music in a cab when I was in hurry coming home from a gig. It took me forever to replace it. That's why I keep the originals in two places now. Singers don't realize how important this is. I get called to perform all over the world with musicians I don't know so I better have my music together. You don't know who you're going to get so the only thing I request is that they have to be able to read and they have to be able to swing, that's all! But I never have problems because everything is there on my lead sheets—they're maps. I take my maps with me. It's like going somewhere in the car without a map and not knowing how to get there, for crying out loud. Singers need to know this so they get respect from the musicians. A lot of the time we're not respected because we don't know what we want. We don't know how to count time, we don't know how to talk down tunes, and we don't know how to ask for what we want. So, they think, "Another chick singer, Oh God!"

JI: Yes, that old stereotype.

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SJ: I'm trying to bust that because I don't like it. And one of the ways to bust it is to have our shit together.

JI: That's right. It's pathetic to see a singer get up to sing and not know how to count off a tune. I've seen singers with Master's Degrees not be able to count off a tune because they have no sense of time—that's troublesome. If you don't know how to conduct the band you're in for a bumpy ride. It's also so unprofessional.

SJ: That's right, and getting lost is another problem. Singers have to listen to the musicians' solos to know where they are.

JI: Can you imagine having a Master's Degree in Music and asking the pianist what your first note is? I see it all the time.

SJ: I hate that. I don't like that punch one note. Just play me a beautiful chord or an arpeggio. That's what I teach. If you're still having problems after playing the chord, tell them to put your note on top. It's better than going up and having them hit a key.....Oh God, that's the worst.

JI: Can you imagine though Sheila, a Master's Degree and still these issues. What are the schools turning out?

SJ: It doesn't surprise me. I have my theory, my pros and cons about teaching jazz what's going on in the schools. [Long pause]

JI: Tell me about some of the more avant-garde musicians you've worked with such as Don Cherry and Roswell Rudd.

SJ: I love Don Cherry, I wrote some beautiful lyrics to his "Art Deco." We did a jazz opera together for George Bruins in Hamburg and he would play this straight ahead tune during intermission and he asked me to write some lyrics for it and I asked him who he had in mind. He said, Billie or Bess Smith. But I never did, because I couldn't think of any lyrics that would suit Bess Smith. After Don died, I was walking down the road by my house and these lyrics came to me and they're all about Don Cherry. I call it "Art of Don." It's "Art Deco" but with lyrics you sometimes have to change the title of course.
With Roswell Rudd I did voice and trombone, now that was out. He's great to work with, I love him. He's wonderful. I did free things with him - we would be in and out. Roswell's group was called "In and Out." I don't really think of myself as an avant-garde singer. I do things that maybe listeners aren't familiar with and they may ask, "What the hell is she doing?" I take a lot of liberties but I don't really consider myself an avant-garde free singer. I'm free in the sense that my spirit is free. I guess, "You Are My Sunshine" was considered kind of out but I can be free if I need to be—if my soul calls for it, then I'll be free.

JI: Let's talk about singing "out" versus singing "in."

SJ: Singing is singing to me. If it goes out, it goes out, if it goes in, it goes in. It doesn't matter to me. The only thing that matters to me is that I sing something I believe in. For example, I don't do a tune because it will be very popular and I'll be on the so-called Hit Parade. It's not where I'm coming from. If I feel the time is free or sometime there is no time, I go with it. A couple of times I've done things with Cameron where he just stopped playing and looked at me like, "What the hell is she doing?" And I look back like, "Don't worry, I know what I'm doing."

JI: That's because you trust in the musical landscape. When you're singing, you are totally immersed in the music so you're safe.

SJ: That's right, music is my lover.

JI: You sing as if there are no wrong notes and only a master understands that there are no wrong notes.

SJ: That's right. Wrong is right and right is wrong. It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter if it's in time or out of time. What matters most is, do you really believe in what you're singing? If you do then it doesn't matter.

JI: I saw in your extensive discography where you worked in larger ensembles with other singers and one I noticed with Jeanne Lee.

SJ: That one was for an Italian bass player, Marcello Melis, the record was called *Free To Dance*. I loved singing with Jeanne. I heard and felt what the composition was about and I just did what I did. I don't even remember that much of what I did. The reason being is that I never listen back to myself nor do I watch myself on video or listen back. When it's done, it's over. I don't want to hear it, I don't want to see it. If I go somewhere and they're playing something of mine I'll say, "I'll come in but you have to take that off first." I don't know if that's good or bad, I don't know what it is. I don't question why I did something or I could have gone here, or I could have gone there. When I listen back I start creating a whole other thing. So when I'm doing a recording, I listen to the final thing in order to prepare it. I put the song order together that's the whole trip and then that's it. Prime example—the recording with Harvie S that will be out around the time the NEA Jazz Masters Awards presentation will be taking place. We're calling it *Yesterdays* because it's from the past. I listened to it in the car driving yesterday and that's it, I will never listen to it again.

JI: That's interesting. Well one of the most self indulgent things you can do is to listen to yourself. But that having been said, do you like the record?

SJ: No!....Yes! (Laughter) Everybody asks me out of all my recording which is my favorite. My answer is, I haven't made it yet. I haven't recorded it yet and I mean that in all honesty. I know the wonderful feeling I get from the music. I especially love to do the bass and voice and I love singing with other singers. I *LOVE* singing with Jay Clayton. We have a group that we call bebop to freebop. Of course she's the freebop and I'm the bebop but somehow we get together. When Kurt Elling had the group Four Brothers together, he decided at the opening of Millennium Park concert in Chicago, to call it Three Brothers and a Mother. I was the mother. I had such a wonderful time on that concert.

JI: I listened to your first recording *Looking Out* with bassist Peter Ind and pianist Ronnie Ball in 1960. You sang "Yesterdays." Your voice sounded wonderful; its texture and contours have pretty much remained the same over the years. What do you do to maintain your vocal health and do you sing every day, do you have a specific practice regimen?

SJ: Since I've gotten acid reflux that is affecting my singing, I've gone to one of the top ENT doctors to check my vocal chords and also to a speech therapist who has given me exercises to do so I do them twice a day.

JI: During improvisation, in terms of register and pitch, and specifically notes, your voice dares to go where one would think it's not going to be able to go yet it goes there so effortlessly. How do you explain this?

SJ: A lot of that happens because I know what was originally there. That's getting back to what I said about learning the original melody of the tune.

JI: A singer's phrasing is extremely important and takes years to develop. You have an innate sense of rhythm, where did you learn to phrase?

SJ: I learned phrasing by listening to Bird. I don't recommend singers learn tunes from other singers because they are not going to learn the tune right. They're going to learn it the way the jazz singer sings it and will never know what was originally there. That's why you should always get the original music. Then I always talk about the scat virus. You don't have to scat to be a jazz singer. For God's sake Billie Holiday was a great example of that. And Abbey Lincoln, she didn't scat sing. There's a virus going around called scat singing. Everyone feels as if they have to scat sing but they don't.

JI: A lot of singers scat for the sake of scatting but haven't developed the art form itself and have nothing to say.

SJ: That's because they don't know what the antibiotic is for the scat singing virus. The antibiotic is bebop; learn bebop. In other words, check out Charlie Parker. Sing with him, or should I say, try to sing with him. That's what it is my dear.

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(Sheila Jordan — Continued from Page 14)

JI: Speaking of Charlie Parker, do you ever do the annual festival that takes place in his honor at Tompkins Square Park?

SJ: Glad you asked. I did the very first two. The first one they named a street after him, Charlie Parker Place. They gave me a replica of the street sign that I've hung on my barn; I'm looking at it now.

JI: Tell me about Charlie Parker; what was your relationship?

SJ: I was very close to Bird; he used to spend a lot of time at my loft. He was like my big brother. People used to say that he came on to all the chicks. Charlie Parker never ever came on to me, ever. He just told me I had million dollar ears and to sing what I believed in and not to let anyone discourage me—period! That was the wisest and the greatest lesson I ever got in my life. But what really upsets me the most in this world is that a lot of the big time jazz people who are winning Grammys and awards, they never ever mention Charlie Parker. They mention John Coltrane and they mention Miles Davis—where do they think all of this started from? And a lot of them are famous players. Not everyone now, I don't want to misquote and say everyone but they never mention Bird but as long as I'm alive, I'm keeping Bird's name alive. Do you know one of the people who are keeping it alive? Barry Harris. We're Bird freaks and always will be. But Bird was the one. Unfortunately, he left us at a very early age.

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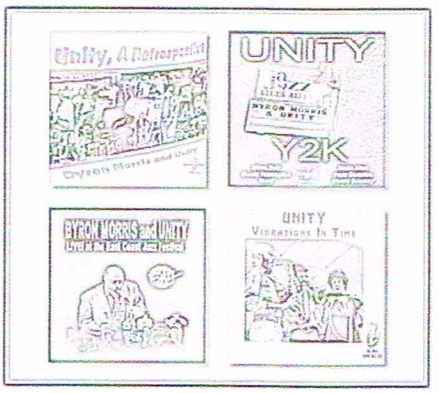

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JI: How much do you work a year?

SJ: I'm working a lot now. Every year it gets better and better. I'm booked all the way up through August, 2012. I have some time off in May but all the other months are taken care of.

JI: I think your next gig should be at the Whitehouse, what do you think?

SJ: I would like to sing for Obama because I like him. I wouldn't have sung for "you know who" his predecessor, no way. (laughter)

JI: Did you ever consider doing a solo album?

SJ: No. I leave that one to Jay Clayton. She knows how to do that; she has the machines and all that. I do solo tunes but I'm not going to do a whole album solo. People would be bored to death. Besides I don't feel it.

JI: So you're not going to do it just to do it.

SJ: No, not to just do it. I don't do anything just to be doing it.

JI: What do you thing about auto tuning and compression to help a singer sound better and have better pitch?

SJ: First of all, I don't let them get away with that. The singers that are doing that, they are letting that be done to them.

JI: What do you think of reviewers and reviews.

SJ: (Much laughter, clears throat) I don't think!

JI: I love it, that's it. You don't have to say another word that is absolutely it.

JI: What is a day in the life of Sheila Jordan like?

SJ: I try to face each day grateful that I got up. I thank my higher power, and I thank God that I have another day of life at this age. And every day I just try and do the best that I can do to live life as full as I can live it for that day and I try not to worry about what is going to happen in the future. Good or bad, I just face each day, one day at a time. That's how I live. I've learned that since I've gotten sober. I can't think about tomorrow because I may not even be here tomorrow. I want to live my life as full as I can today and be the best human being I can be. I found lately that when I'm in New York City walking down the street and I see something that is lovely, I take the time to comment on it. I say, "Hey, that's a great hat you're wearing," or "Hello" to people passing by. I learned that years ago in Pennsylvania because we knew everybody. When I got to Detroit, I was on the street car saying hello to everyone and they looked at me as if to say, "What the hell is the matter with this kid? She's saying hello to everybody." I stopped doing that for a long time, but now I see people on the street and they look friendly or they look like they may be sad and I'll say, "Oh hello, you look beautiful today," and I keep walking. When I order food I don't eat it all. Maybe this is a message from my higher power saying, "Share." What I do now is, I eat half of whatever I've ordered and the other half I take with me and when I pass a homeless person, I give them the food. I always make sure the waiter includes a plastic knife and fork in the bag. The people are very grateful. That's the least I can do. So if I can do just a little something every day to make people feel good then I'm doing something and it makes me feel good too. I don't want to go around at 83 years old looking 83 years old. That's why people always say I don't look 83.

JI: You don't look 83 years old and you don't sound like it either. You sound like a kid.

SJ: The reason I don't is because I'm not going to have my head down to the ground because I think, "Life is a bitch and then you die." I don't want that. I see older people who are probably not even my age but they look older because they are very unhappy.

JI: There are younger people that look older like that too.

SJ: You wake up and you have a day of life and it's beautiful regardless if it's raining or whatever. We have a terrible disaster up where I live. Some of our little towns are gone. One whole town is gone and another one a little further away is also gone. But if you go into these little villages that are about 7-10 miles from where I live and have to go shopping, there's nothing there. The homes are all gone. Or, if they're not, they're for sale. These people have no place to go. They have no money, a lot of them are on social security like myself. Luckily, I'm doing something I love to do, but if I had to live on just social security I'd never make it, I wouldn't be able to live. Getting back to what you said, I'm grateful. I wake up and acknowledge my good life. I have this wonderful new award, all of the other awards, I've got these beautiful kids that I teach, I have these beautiful fans that I sing for, I have these beautiful people that I meet on the street—why would I go around thinking life is a bitch and then you die? I don't want to be like that. I've been treated very, very well in my life. I came up the hard way big time, but I have been treated extremely well. And that makes me believe that there's something bigger than me going on, there's something bigger than me taking care of me. Do you know what I mean?

JI: I do know what you mean. Your guardian angel has been running defense for you all your life. It's always been there to pull you out of bad situations—life threatening at times. It has saved you from your self-destructive behavior and put you where you needed to be via divine intervention. Music is your guardian angel, your raison d'etre.

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I attended Sheila Jordan's 83rd birthday celebration at the Blue Note and felt the love in the room; it was palpable. Her voice was like a healing balm to all those in attendance. So that she is being rewarded with the nation's highest honor for jazz is only right and good. Her belief proved true that if you dedicate your life to something you love, it will come around and it has. Continued blessings Ms. Jordan.

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