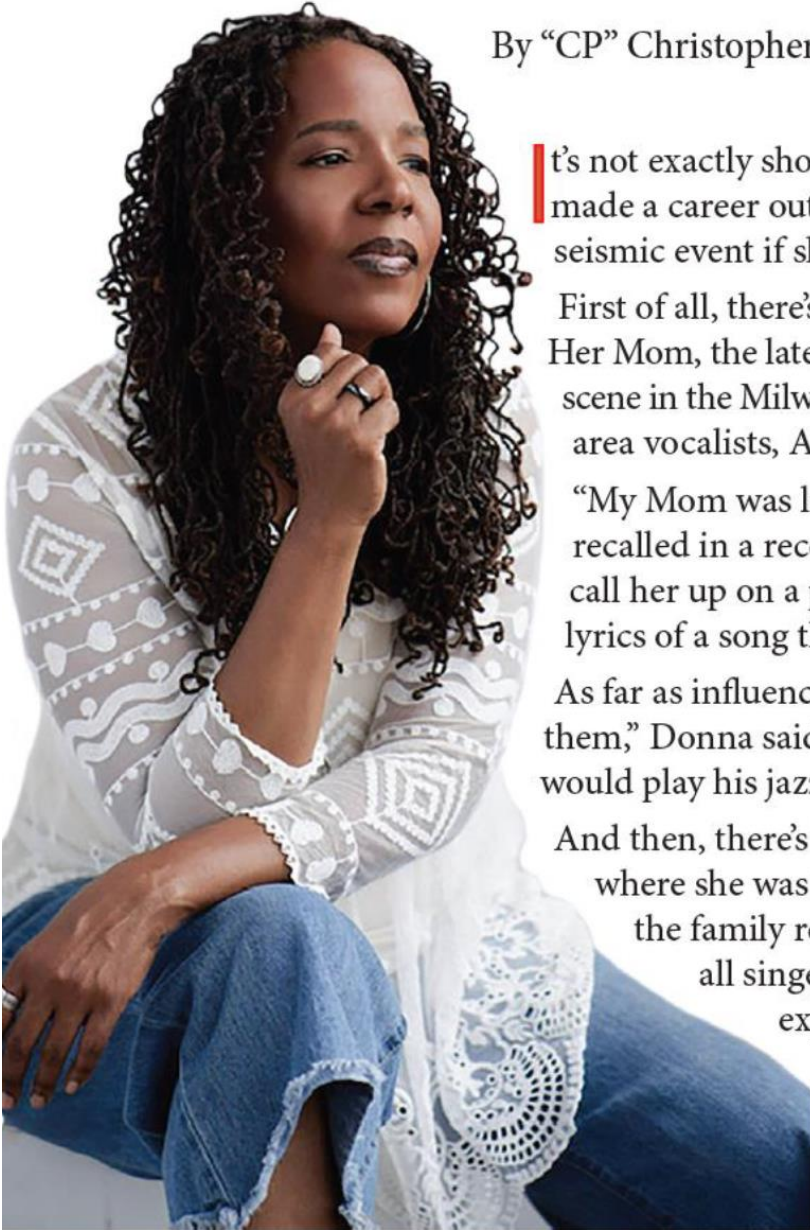


We're sure you 'Woodall' like to hear Donna sing!

By "CP" Christopher Peppas



It's not exactly shocking to think that Donna Woodall made a career out of music. It would've been a much more seismic event if she hadn't.

First of all, there's that whole apple/tree thing going on. Her Mom, the late Jeanne Woodall, was a fixture on the jazz scene in the Milwaukee area for years and taught many area vocalists, Anne Lucius Davis among many others.

"My Mom was like an encyclopedia of jazz," Donna recalled in a recent interview. "Before the internet, I'd call her up on a pay phone from a gig and she'd tell me lyrics of a song that I wanted to do."

As far as influences, then, "I'd say she was definitely one of them," Donna said. "And my Grandfather as well. He would play his jazz albums whenever I'd come and visit."

And then, there's Donna's extended family in St. Louis where she was born and lived until age thirteen when the family relocated to The Cream City. "They were all singers, musicians and educators," Donna explained. "I feel like this (Milwaukee) is my home now."

It would seem that, rooted so deeply in the core of her essence, that the die



was cast for her twin career as a teacher as well. Donna recently retired after working as an English teacher for thirty years.

Now she is laser-beamed focused on making music and we are the beneficiaries of her efforts. You can see the Donna Woodall Group at Blu at the top of The Pfister, The St. Kate Arts Hotel, The Story Hill Firehouse and many other venues.

“It’s a lot of hustling, a lot of work,” Woodall said when speaking of getting gigs. “I do my own booking for the most part. We’ve been doing this since 1996, so people know who we are and all we do.”

While the majority of it is jazz, Donna also loves “exploring different genres. I have a hard time limiting myself,” she said. “I want to explore and bounce between pop, jazz and blues. Even when I do “Message in a Bottle” by Sting I do it with a jazzy feel.”

She has dubbed the music that she writes (since she was a teenager) Acoustic Jazz Pop like on her most recent CD “The Subject Love.”

To further drive home the point on her musical diversity, Donna did a show recently that was limited to

songs written by Carole King, Norah Jones and Tracy Chapman. Donna Woodall liked her bass player so much, she married him. When Ethan Bender isn’t laying down a sweet line under his wife’s vocals, he’s playing with a panoply of other great players like Warren Wiegratz and Bob Monagle, just to name a couple. “After twenty years, we read each other,” Donna said of their musical relationship. “Most of the time, we work together. We’ve done it. We prefer it.”

As far as the greats are concerned, Donna has several who have influenced the vocalist she is today. “I specifically loved Sarah (Vaughn),” Donna said. “For her deep, rich voice. I’m a lower alto myself...she taught me (the) holding of long notes. “Then, there’s Nancy Wilson and Ella Fitzgerald. I loved listening to her (Ella’s) selections from the Great American Songbook.”

You can add Betty Carter, Abby Lincoln, Dianne Reeves, Diane Schuur and (the more recent) Esperanza Spalding to the long list.

“I liked the male crooners like Nat King Cole, too,” Donna said. “I grew up with such a wide palate...The Isley Brothers, War and more.”

Even though it may seem that you never know what to expect when you go to a Donna Woodall show, be it a duo, trio, quartet or larger group, you know that you will be thoroughly entertained.

And now that she is devoting the entirety of her energies to making music, there will be no stopping her.

You don’t have to get out of the way, you simply have to get to one of her shows.

