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Marshall Artists Series celebrates Black History Month with multi-media show by Lady D

By Derek Halsey For The Herald-Dispatch
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Lady D, an accomplished soul, pop, reggae and blues singer and music historian from Beckley, West Virginia, will screen and perform a full concert as part of the Marshall Artists Series documentary series called "Those Who Came Before" and perform a full concert as part of the Marshall Artists Series on Thursday, Feb. 16, at the Keith-Albee Performing Arts Center in Huntington.

Submitted

HUNTINGTON — The Marshall Artists Series is celebrating Black History Month with a concert and documentary showing by West Virginia's First Lady of Soul Lady D.

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Lady D is not only an accomplished soul, pop, reggae and blues singer who hails from Beckley, West Virginia, but she is also a music historian who brings to life the stories of Black entertainers in a multitude of ways.

Lady D also just returned from Memphis, Tennessee, where she represented the Huntington Blues Society in the International Blues Challenge hosted by The Blues Foundation.

On Thursday, Feb. 16, Lady D will take the stage of the historic Keith-Albee Performing Arts Center where she will showcase the many sides of her talent.

The performance begins at 6:30 p.m. Tickets range from \$32 to \$49 and can be purchased by calling 304-696-6656 or in person at The Marshall Artists Series Box Office located in the Joan C. Edwards Playhouse on 5th Avenue on the campus of Marshall University. Box Office hours are Monday through Friday from noon until 4 p.m.

The evening will begin with a showing of Lady D's documentary series called "Those Who Came Before," where she brings to life the stories of Black West Virginia musicians who have established themselves in wonderful ways back in the day, from West Virginia's current Ambassador of Jazz Bob Thompson to artists such as Crystal Good, Aristotle Jones, Rodney Boyden and W.I. "Bill" Hairston.

After the short first episode of "Those Who Came Before" is shown on the big screen, Lady D will then take the stage with her band to perform a full show of great music.

Lady D is the right artist for this presentation for many reasons, one of them being her two decades of telling the life story of the legendary blues singer Bessie Smith, who died in Mississippi after a car crash in 1937 at 43 years of age. The late rock and blues singer Janis Joplin famously worked to get Smith a proper tombstone before her own untimely death in 1970.

As it turns out, a couple of members of the West Virginia Music Hall of Fame performed on some of Bessie Smith's 160 recordings back in the day, including saxophone player Leon "Chu" Berry, who died in 1941, and saxophone player Don Redman, who lived from 1900 to 1964.

As for Lady D, her resume also features tours with musicians Johnny Rawls and Bruce Katz, a performance at the Obama For Change Inaugural Ball in Washington, D.C., in 2008, and a special appearance at the outdoor New River Blues Festival held every Labor Day on the banks of the New River in Ashe County, North Carolina.

“I was really surprised to be approached to do this show at the Keith-Albee, and I’m thrilled about it,” said Lady D. “I’ve always heard about the Keith-Albee Theatre and I walked in there once, years ago. I’ve also heard about the Marshall Artists Series as well, yet never really thought about being a part of it. I had never reached out to them or anything, and then I got a call from them one day and they asked me to do a Marshall Artists Series show and I said, ‘Yes!’”

While Lady D’s musical repertoire extends beyond blues music, she will be in character as the late and great Bessie Smith during a portion of her highly anticipated show.

“I have been portraying Bessie Smith for about 20 years now,” said Lady D. “I was working at Theatre West Virginia in Beckley and it was my last summer there and I wanted to put together a one-woman show. I was thinking about who I could portray and I had all of these encyclopedias out all over my living room and one just fell to the floor and opened up to the page with Bessie Smith on it. That is how I literally found Bessie Smith, and we’ve been together since then.

“I learn more and more about her every year, and I’m always amazed at her presence at that time because she was not only a blues star in the 1930s, she was fronting her own band, was her own management and called the shots on everything,” continues Lady D. “That really impressed me, probably more than anything else, to be a Black woman during that period who had such a good business sense and was able to survive as an entertainer even through the Great Depression era. She performed after the Stock Market Crash by going back down south and doing tent shows for nickels, dimes and quarters, which was a lot less compared to what she used to get for a show. That is how she got through those hard times, though, and her perseverance was what really attracted me to her in the first place.”

Performing for the Marshall Artists Series at the legendary Keith-Albee Performing Arts Center, which opened in downtown Huntington 95 years ago in 1928, is a dream come true for Lady D.

“I went to the Keith-Albee once many years ago to see a play,” said Lady D. “I always saw the Marshall Artists Series shows advertised, but I had never been able to afford to go to the shows when I was younger. So, to perform as a part of this series is very cool. And, I’m bringing my full band, which includes Demetrius ‘Meech’ Cross on drums, Dan Bailey on guitar, Robert Gray on keyboards, and Phillip Copney on bass.”

Lady D’s latest album is called “Disturbing The Peace.” More information can be found at musicbyladyd.com and www.marshall.edu/muartistseries/#/.

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