

Soul survivor

Singer Sharon Jones wraps up the year in 'Great' style

BY MICHAEL GILTZ

MY DN
12/30/07

Soul singer Sharon Jones makes her movie debut in the Denzel Washington drama "The Great Debaters," which opened Christmas Day. But she had to tick off Lou Reed to do it.

She was touring with Reed when he was performing his classic 1973 album "Berlin," with Jones in a backup choir that included Antony of Antony and the Johnsons, among others.

"It was a beautiful thing," says the 51-year-old singer, who was born in Augusta, Ga., and grew up in Brooklyn. "Then when we got to Australia, Lou gave me two verses on "Sweet Jane" and the people went crazy, and he almost cried, said I took him to the mountaintop.

"I was getting ready to go away with him again in June and July for a European tour, and then this movie came through three days before I was leaving, and I let Lou down. And oh my God was he angry."

"The Great Debaters," which co-stars Forest Whitaker and is produced by Oprah Winfrey, is the second film directed by Washington. He stars as the debating coach at all-black Wiley College in Texas, which famously competed against Harvard in 1935. Jones plays a juke-joint singer and performs six songs on the soundtrack, including a number of gospel tunes like "Up Above My Head" and gritty soul numbers like "That's What My Baby Likes."

But tell that to Reed.

"I saw him in July at Prospect Park for this Doc Pomus tribute. When I got there, I saw Lou on the other side of the stage, and he started walking away. And I

ran him down and said, 'Lou, it's me, Sharon.' He said, 'I know,' and turned around and walked away from me. But me and him had bonded. I didn't do anything to hurt him. I'm a nobody. Why would he treat me like that? I grabbed him and said, 'Lou, give me a hug. Please don't walk away, Lou. I am so sorry, Lou.'

"I said, 'Lou, come on, you're talking Denzel, Forest Whitaker and Oprah. Come on, Lou. You don't turn down Oprah.' He finally did write me a letter. And he understood."

So Jones survived Reed's anger and made up, like she always has. A one-time corrections officer at Rikers Island, Jones knows one thing: Never show fear. And she has been fearless in recording gritty, old-school soul music for tiny Daptone Records with the fierce band the Dap Kings for more than a decade. The work finally began to pay off with their second album, "Naturally," which won terrific reviews.

Then Amy Winehouse came calling. The English pop star used the band on her breakout album, "Back to Black," and the hit single "Rehab," giving them a higher profile than ever. And they've capitalized with a new album, "100 Days, 100 Nights," that's even funkier. Jones herself is getting better reviews than ever, despite a lifetime of being told she wouldn't make it. When success hits, she'll know how to handle it.

"These young people just don't know," says Jones. "I'm 51. I've been out here too long. Ain't no fallin' down here. If I had money, I would definitely know what to do with it, because I haven't had money my whole life. I definitely would not waste it." ▲



Sharon Jones, 51, who grew up in Brooklyn, appears in "The Great Debaters" as her music gets raves.