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SAN JOSE JAZZ SINGER IS BACK BY POPULAR DEMAND 'RETIREE' JOYCE RANDOLPH CAN'T STOP THE MUSIC

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You better believe that Joyce Randolph can belt a "Stormy Monday" blues or melt your heart singing "Sophisticated Lady." Yet it's been four years since this retired public school teacher last stepped onto a stage to do that for the paying public, and she might never have done it again had it not been for Benjamin Estrella. He is one of the devoted piano students who visit Randolph, 63, at her home in San Jose's Cambrian neighborhood, has done so for a decade. But he is sick with cancer, and came up with a question several months ago that got his teacher thinking: "Joyce, are you going to sing again?" he asked. "Give me something to live for."

She did, and Estrella bought 10 tickets to see Randolph's show this afternoon at San Jose's Sainte Claire hotel. It will mark the re-emergence of this sorely underrated jazz and gospel singer -- and it will be her last major engagement, she swears. Yes, Randolph, who spent a decade teaching college-prep English at San Jose's Santa Teresa High School -- always the nurturer, this woman -- says she finally will be done with this business of being a professional singer.

"I don't need it," she says, though you don't quite believe her. "I do it once, and I'm re-energized for a decade. Don't have to do it again."

She's been saying this for years: that she'd rather live the quiet life at home with her husband, teaching piano, noodling in the garden, occasionally going out to sing in churches or at community events. But then, mulling the flip side of this afternoon's big engagement, she says: "This is not a regular concert. For me, it's a celebration of full living and life. It's like I'm having a fireside chat with the audience, and it's me talking through songs about things I've seen and done. When I sing, there's a lot to sing about."

She will sing jazz and blues and at least one "song of faith. Because songs of faith are close to my heart; they can do me in," she says. (Sample her work at www.joycerandolph.com.)

"Audiences love her," says bassist Jeff Chambers, anchor of Randolph's all-star quartet, which also will include the legendary tenor saxophonist Houston Person. "It's the church connection, her gospel approach -- a free-spirit approach. Not a lot of vocal gymnastics; it's just singing from the heart."

"She's a gem," says Bill Bell, her pianist. "I was on the road years ago with Carmen McRae. I've worked with Joe Williams, Anita O'Day, all the best ones. And Joyce -- she's right up there. She holds her own. And she sings with a message. She doesn't just sing the lyrics; she sings with the message behind the lyrics."

One practically sees the message in Randolph's face, so expressive, no matter what she's discussing. It softly beams as she talks about her 62 piano students, who sit with her every week, one by one, at her grand piano, which nestles into the bay window of her living room. When they've left, she sits there contentedly, and "I watch life go by; I have to pinch myself. For an old lady, it's sweet livin'," she says. "How much more do you want than what's enough?"

Born and raised in Stockton, Randolph grew up in a household of singers and poetry reciters, with her mother Mable, a nurse, and her father Daniel, a mason. Her uncles were always in the living room with their acoustic guitars, harmonizing on "Muleskinner Blues," "Here Comes Elmer" and other comic tunes.

She sang in the youth choir of First Christian Church, one of the congregation's handful of African-American children: "I did not grow up with the black gospel feeling," she says, laughing. "That came later."

From age 6 she studied piano, from age 7 violin. Private lessons were paid for by a "mysterious benefactor," whom she met only before going off to college: Skipper Yee, a local businessman, who had observed potential in Randolph. She became concertmistress of the Edison High School Orchestra and a star student: "Daddy would say, 'If you want to have an average life, get C's. C's are for average people.'?"

Always, she venerated teachers. And all these years later, while sitting in her cozy San Jose living room, serving coffee and homemade scones, she ticks off their names:

"Miss Carter," who taught her algebra, had "eyes that danced."

Donovan Cummings, who taught oratory, revealed "command of language."

Doris Byron, who ran the high school orchestra, ruled with "wit and constancy."

Lolita Jordan, her piano teacher, embodied courage: She kept teaching black and Hispanic kids, despite neighbors' complaints.

Inspired by all of them, Randolph went off to Stanford University in 1966.

She didn't anticipate one thing -- becoming pregnant during her first few weeks as a freshman. "Scandal!" she says. She was unmarried.

She dropped out for a year, had her baby son (Tadd is now a high school English teacher in San Francisco), married her Stanford boyfriend (an abusive drinker, she says) and went back to school. There were classes in the morning. Afternoons, there was a typing job in the math department. At night, homework and diapers. She lived off campus in East Palo Alto, majored in music, minored in English and fell in love with Shakespeare. And with jazz: "My first husband prided himself on his vast record collection, everything from Coltrane to Nina Simone. And I fell in love with Billie Holiday, Etta Jones, Miles Davis -- music that has stayed with me my whole life."

At school, she studied piano, gave a recital every semester. But she didn't sing at home. In fact, she says, her husband discouraged her: "You can't sing," he told her.

Graduating from Stanford with a B.A. in music (1971) and a master's degree in education (1972), she went on to teach vocal studies in the Menlo Park public schools for two years. She married a second time and had a daughter (Taryn, now a regional manager with the Stanford Alumni Association), eventually moving over to

her English position at Santa Teresa High School -- where she sang occasionally, for students on their birthdays, and now and then at graduation ceremonies.

Two events made all the difference for her singing: In 1987, Randolph married her third husband: Barney Randolph, a research biologist. "He's the one that stuck." He dragged her back to church -- Antioch Baptist Church, San Jose's oldest black congregation -- where they joined the choir and still sing today. Finally, Joyce Randolph got "steeped" in the gospel feeling.

The second event: In 1995, Randolph's sister Linda, a businesswoman, was launching a line of dolls. "Career dolls, all ethnicities," Randolph remembers. "She called me and said, 'I need a song that talks about all the potentialities of life, and I need it in 48 hours.'?"

She penned a song titled "My New Day," and now she sings a couple of lines, her voice honey-smooth:

I believe in my new day that's dawning,
And the promises that lie there for me ...

It was the first of many songs she has written. Linda connected her to John Turk, who ran the music program at Glide Memorial Church in San Francisco. He was intrigued: "You can sing a little bit," he told her, jokingly. "Ever thought about making a demo?"

Turk wound up producing "I Send Him Roses," Randolph's first CD, drawing on his musician friends from Tower of Power and Con Funk Shun. One tune on the recording, "Teach Me Tonight," caught the ear of jazz disc jockey Doug Edwards, of Berkeley radio station KPFA, who gave it airplay -- and hooked up Randolph with local heavies like guitarist Calvin Keys, as well as bassist Chambers and pianist Bell.

Suddenly, Randolph was -- hey, a singer. She performed at the San Jose Jazz Festival in 2001. She recorded three more albums, including one titled "Just Enough for Me," recorded live at the Sainte Claire hotel in 2007 - the last time she gave a retirement concert. Go to her website, and listen to the audience cheer her on, as she puts her rare soul into "Skylark" and "Lord, Don't Move My Mountain."

Then get over to the Sainte Claire this afternoon. It's your last chance.

Maybe.

JOYCE RANDOLPH QUARTET

Featuring Houston Person

When: 3-5 p.m. today

Where: Sainte Claire hotel, Grand Ballroom, 302 S. Market St., San Jose

Tickets: \$40; 1-866-468-3399, www.ticketweb.com through noon today; or at door

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