



photos: Jeff Dunas

a string of foster homes and psychiatric-care facilities after numerous suicide attempts. By age 16, Magness called her dad to make peace — she no longer blamed him for her mother’s death. Two months later, he killed himself. Then she learned she was pregnant. Eventually, with guidance from a drug and alcohol counselor, Magness sobered up, became an emancipated minor, rented an apartment, got on welfare, and cleaned houses to make money. But she eventually gave her baby daughter up for adoption.

“My history is pretty dramatic. At least that part of it. And it totally informs my craft. How could it not?” said Magness, now 51, during a break in recording her latest album, which is being released on Alligator Records. “My parents’ suicides were a pretty strong message to leave your kid. I think the mistake they made was to give up too soon. But it makes perfect sense to me that I’m drawn to this music. I really believe no one comes to this music without some reason. The music brought a purpose to my life. For me, blues and rhythm-and-blues will always be, and has always been, about getting through the hard times and the bad times, and the good times, too. And so it’s about coming out the other side, without bailing.”

Somehow, Magness did, indeed, come out the other side, although the impetus was there even during her struggles. Throughout her teenage years, she was drawn to the blues and R&B artists that passed through the Minneapolis/St. Paul region where she later lived. She saw big names, such as B.B. King, and not-so-big names. But she would attend clubs whenever she could, soaking up the emotion flowing off the stage as if the musicians and their songs were speaking to her directly. And the music left such an impression that Magness carried it with her everywhere for years to come.

“Sometimes, I think this music chose me. There were so many times that I felt something that I didn’t feel, perhaps, at all in my life — a real human connection — from the lyrics and the sound. I just remember Otis Rush, and how he played every note and sang every word with such complete and total desperation. He was fully committed to the story he was singing, whether it was pain or joy or whatever. And through this music, I realized I wasn’t alone, because up to that point, I thought I was. What I’m grateful for today is being able to understand that path the music showed me.”

That path has since taken her on a journey that has generated acclaim — she was winner of the 2006 and 2007 Blues Music awards for best contemporary female artist of the year; her last album, *Do I Move You?*, was nominated as album of the year in 2007 and was the No. 1 album on *Living Blues* magazine’s radio chart; and more recently, she was nominated by the Blues Foundation for the “B.B. King Entertainer of the Year” award. In short, Magness has landed on the cultural radar screen in a big way, thanks to years of hard work, a reputation for gritty performances, and a keen ear for choosing the right songs to

For generations, musicians have been singing the blues. And many had good reason — cheating spouses, debts that couldn’t be paid, dreams that were crushed, or hard times that simply would never end. Such sentiments helped define the blues genre almost as much as its primordial sound. More recently, though, singing the blues has become something of a cliché, sometimes to the point of parody — an agonizing declaration expressed simply to match the image of the music. Think of it as bitter moaning used as a career move. No doubt the blues can be a state of mind that can be hard to measure. But when Janina Magness steps up to the microphone to belt out a mournful plea or lament her luck, those blues are authentic.

Consider her story: A Detroit native, she was just 13 when her mother committed suicide. Although she came from an ostensibly typical, middle-class family, both parents were alcoholics and, after the tragedy, Magness ran away with her boyfriend, who was a drug dealer, and lived on the streets in Berkeley, California. She returned not long afterward, but her father was unable to care for her, and she wound up in

showcase her talents. Her website, meanwhile, proudly boasts this line from a review in *The Los Angeles Times*: “She blurs the lines between blues and soul, singing with elegance and authority.”

Of course, none of this happened overnight. Magness always liked to sing, but never acted on the impulse. She had various jobs as a waitress and bookkeeper before she got up the courage to audition for singing gigs. “I was 19 or so, and I was really uncertain, but I needed to try. I didn’t have any mentors. And I got gigs, but I didn’t really want them. I was shy. But I did it for the practice. And it was a learning process — like homework.” Her first notable job was a 6-month stint as one of three female backup singers in a 17-piece big band.

Such gigs, however, never really led anywhere. And so after a few years of not making much money from singing, Magness gave it up and enrolled in a school to learn electronics. Although she still wanted to be around music, she didn’t think singing would work out. Instead, she became a recording studio engineer intern at Sullivan Sound in St. Paul which, ironically, is where she reluctantly found herself behind a microphone again. “It was about 3 a.m., and I was being bugged to sing background vocals because they needed it done. I didn’t want to do it, but they told me to sing or I’d be fired. Afterwards, I was asked to do still more, and I wound up doing session work. So I got back into singing through a back door of sorts.”

From there, Magness left for Los Angeles. The year was 1981, but as she describes it, her five-year stay was uneventful. So she picked up and moved to Phoenix where, again, serendipity struck. While working as a bookkeeper for a construction company, she eased back into singing thanks to a girlfriend who had a gig with a local blues band. The singing bug bit, and Magness soon began gigging with numerous bar bands, which is where Bob Corritore, the well-regarded blues harmonica player, met up with her. He noticed her in an eight-piece revue called the Blues Connection, where Magness was a featured singer, but not the star.

“Initially, the band was a place where she was part of the show, but you could see she was bigger than that. Janiva needed her own show. She was very well-versed in everything; she seemed to have a vision of what she wanted to do. She had a certain gleam in her eye, a passion, that you knew she was headed somewhere. She had star power and that was apparent to me from the moment I met her,” said Corritore. “But she worked really hard. Nothing was handed to her, and she was starting from humble beginnings as she went from gig to gig.”

And so they formed a new band called Janiva Magness and the Mojomatics, which did, indeed, provide a showcase and, equally important, allowed her to develop her chops and confidence. In fact, her repeated bookings on the regional circuit provided enough confidence for Magness to return to Los Angeles a few years later and begin doing session work and club dates. Slowly, her hard work mushroomed into a budding solo career that produced several albums, starting in 1991, although most have been released over the last several years.

Her last effort, in particular, *Do I Move You?* has catapulted her to the point where she occupies an ironic perch — a veteran respected and admired by her peers who is developing a reputation with the public as something of an up-and-comer. The collection includes a nicely balanced mix, including the shuffling “I Can’t Stop Cryin’” and the smoking “Bad Blood” (written by her husband, guitarist and bassist Jeff Turmes); forgotten gems, such as the funky blues of “I’m Just a Prisoner (Of Your Good Lovin’),” which was first recorded by Clarence Carter; Willie Dixon’s jumping “Working On Me, Baby”; the

Motown-like magic of Lee Powers’ forgotten Detroit classic, “I Want You to Have Everything”; the scorcher title track first made popular by Nina Simone; the soul blues of Denise LaSalle’s “A Man Size Job”; and the swamp blues of Ray Batts’ “Stealin’ Sugar.”

Perhaps one of her finest moments, however, occurs on her rendition of the soulful Delbert McClinton ballad, “You Were Never Mine.” Although the original still resonates, Magness makes it still better, as if it were written for her and her alone. In fact, this is how McClinton would most likely sound if he were to leave us tomorrow and return as a woman. Magness captures powerful heartbreak perfectly and, in doing so, creates a seamless mood to the point where you don’t care whether any one song is new or old. Magness manages to make a statement that the music is hers, and ours, as she weaves the sentiments and sounds together into one big, beautiful package.

“I’m very inspired by her deep and soulful singing,” said Bob Margolin, the free-spirited journeyman who came to fame as a Muddy Waters sideman and has played with Magness at various blues festivals over the past few years. “Backing her on guitar, it’s a labor of love to support her singing and presentation and to try to inspire her, too. She’s enormously talented, and her vocal chops and choice of material combine with an attractive gift for showing her heart in her music. It’s inevitable that her career is really taking off. Her

power is not some subtle thing that I picked up on. It’s as obvious as the headlight speeding toward you and the growing thunder beneath your feet if you stand on the train tracks.”

The next stop on the train will be the new album on Alligator, which Magness discusses excitedly. For one, she’s genuinely thrilled that the venerable label has shown interest in her music, and she seems to view the upcoming release as something of a long-sought big break. And so she’s using the opportunity to move further into what she calls a “Memphis soul vibe that’s part Stax and part Hi, but it’s still me.” As

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Besides singing the blues, Janiva Magness sings the praises of Casey Family Homes as a spokeswoman. The Seattle-based organization works nationally to prevent the need for foster care. “Since foster homes are also a big part of my history, it’s an amazing opportunity for me to be able to try to help these kids that are still in the system and still caught in struggle and hard times. I think the phrase is ‘pay it forward.’ It’s strange, but good, how I never thought I would find any logic or reason or a way to make some of the worst parts of my life make sense. But in doing the work with Casey, I have found that possible. It’s beautiful really. Carrying a message of hope to kids to keep moving forward, and don’t give up, that same message to parents and social workers that these youth — particularly, vulnerable youth in this country — are worth fighting for. It sort of makes things come full circle in my heart, bringing even more healing, and I am grateful for it.” [www.casey.org]

of this writing, she hadn't yet chosen a title. And she doesn't want to give much away about the contents, but Magness did reveal that there will be covers of Candi Staton and Little Milton, along with several original songs.

"I've always just put my head down and worked," said Magness, who, after 16 years, reconnected with her daughter and now is a strong presence around her five-year-old grandson. "But I never thought recognition would come. I've always been the long-shot kid. Being signed to Alligator is a really big deal. And those Blues Foundation awards, well, I never thought that would be me getting anything like that. And it's happened at a time when a lot of venues and festivals have gone away. These are hard times for the arts and live musicians. But I'm going to tour to support the new album. I'll even be playing for the soldiers in Iraq. I just keep moving and don't stop. I don't know any other way."

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