

Healing blues

Janiva Magness triumphs over adversity

By Daniel Gewertz | Monday, July 7, 2008 | <http://bostonherald.com/> | **Music News**

At first glance, you might wonder if a glamorous Caucasian woman such as Janiva Magness knows enough about life's hard knocks to sing the blues.

Stop wondering.

By the time the Detroit native was 16, both her parents had committed suicide. She spent the next two years in a dozen foster homes. An unwed mother by 18, she gave her 4-month-old baby up for adoption. She also lived on the streets for a time.

It was hearing live blues as a teenager - specifically a molten hot performance by Otis Rush in Minneapolis - that made Magness want to live a life of purpose.

"Something inside me changed," said Magness, who plays the Regattabar in Cambridge on Wednesday. "I only understood it fully years later. Seeing that Otis Rush show was like a giant hand that grabbed my heart and yanked it out of my chest. He was fully committed to the music: totally honest, totally desperate, totally filled with joy and rage. Seeing that show made me want to be in life, because up to that point, I wasn't sure I wanted to be here."



The blues, according to many musicians, isn't about wallowing in sorrow. It's about singing the truth, surviving sorrow and triumphing over adversity. By those counts, Magness has surely lived the triumph of the blues.

At an undeniably sexy 51, Magness has been nominated for entertainer of the year by the Blues Foundation. She has just released her first album on Chicago's Alligator label, "What Love Will Do," a soulful, sassy work that easily combines the earthy with the sophisticated. She has been married for 13 years to musician Jeff Turmes, who has written two songs for the new CD. One achievement stands out for Magness.

"I am privileged to be spokesperson for National Foster Care Month," Magness said. "There's all kinds of publicity for the bad news about foster care, the Jerry Springer stories, but so little publicity for the success stories like me."

Really? Does she call living in 12 foster homes in the space of two tumultuous years a success story?

"I was incorrigible," Magness said speaking by phone from her home in Los Angeles, "a really damaged child and a really difficult case. And there were some bad placements. But my last foster placement was the right one: a single mom with five children - a loving, caring adult, with boundaries. She was a woman who was able to love me when I was at my most unlovable. I was 16 and pregnant.

"I can say I was chosen as a spokesperson because I'm a successful entrepreneur and, frankly, I'm a successful human being. I have peace in my heart on most days."

After decades of anger, she has forgiven her late parents for leaving her in such a disastrous manner. Magness once named an early album "Bad Luck Soul."

"I can now say I'm a lucky, lucky woman," she said.

Janiva Magness Band, at the Regattabar, Cambridge, Wednesday at 7:30 p.m. Tickets: \$18; 617-395-7757.

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