

Backstage Pass

Janiva Magness

**BB's Jazz Blues and Soups, St. Louis,
July 9, 2005**

No matter where music goes, the blues will never die, and yet there are a select few both brave enough and talented enough to carry the torch into the new millennium. The Janiva Magness Band is carrying this torch. Riding the headwinds of her 2004 release *Bury Him at the Crossroads*, two-time W.C. Handy Award nominee Janiva Magness (pronounced JAN-ihv-uh) brought a little old-school fire to stoke a balmy St. Louis Saturday evening.

Janiva possesses an unmistakable comprehension of the R&B aesthetic, which she undoubtedly picked up from her childhood in Detroit. With a style compared to the likes of Etta James, Billy Holiday, and Koko Taylor, Magness carries herself with a rock star's grit and intensity, while also encapsulating the essences of delta blues and classic jazz singing. Her voice pours out with melodic assertiveness, a simultaneously raspy and edgy timbre that articulates a woman filled with the blues and the tenacity to shout it from the rooftops. Yet with the feisty attitude and soulful vocals, the Magness band offers more than good ol' blues for the good ol' boys.

Frank but graceful, Magness carried herself with a no-nonsense attitude, both on and off the stage. Her command of the audience and of the band was notable for this self-described "greasy granny." At no point did the crowd stop moving to the rhythm, from soulful, traditional songs like "Better off With the Blues" to playful tunes like "Eat the Lunch You Brought" (off the *Crossroads* disc). And though the spotlight was all hers, she gave her band plenty of chances to shine, even staying off stage for the first few songs of each set to make sure you knew it wasn't just her feeling the blues. Particular attention was paid to keyboardist Benny Yee, with the look of Pat Morita and the chops of Jimmy Smith.

A brief conversation with Magness between sets revealed a woman who knew how to handle her business, even if life occasionally dealt her a bad hand. Mention of St. Louis draws memories of her relatives, a few of which are buried here. Magness is an old soul in a still-sexy-in-her-40s body, and she flaunts it in a black cocktail dress and leopard print heels. No diva ensemble would be complete without a handheld fan, which she used to swat air at herself in rhythm with the band. While she sometimes shot serious, businesslike glances at her band members, she was always ready with a wry smile and a well-placed heel stomp to get you back in the groove.

For an authentic, almost vintage taste of the blues, the Janiva Magness band is where it's at. | **Jon Rayfield**

Comments?

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