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Survivor's song

Janiva Magness finds healing in laughter and the blues

HEALING TUNES: Detroit–raised blues singer Janiva Magness performs at the Ritz–Carlton Saturday.

"Tea and sympathy" takes on new resonance when conversing with Detroit–raised blues singer Janiva Magness. Serious exchanges about survival and music are salted with ribald wisecracks, plus generous suggestions of healing teas and homeopathic remedies for a flu–addled interviewer rasping out questions between hacking coughs.

You think you've got it bad? Magness has been there, done that and moved on – but not before learning tough lessons that give meaningful grit to her music.

The conversation's jumpstarted by the current issue of Blues Revue magazine. It contains an engrossing profile in which author Kenneth Bays details some of the trials Magness has endured: the suicides of both her parents, 12 foster homes, putting a child up for adoption, an "alcohol problem" and a few visits to psychiatric hospitals – all while still in her teens. Since then she's survived two decades in the heart of LA's music industry.

"That was just some of the highlights," she acknowledges. "I do feel like this is the good part of my life, I'll tell ya that," she laughs. "And I'm happy about that. I'm real happy about that. ... When a person is given those kinds of challenges, you're forced to learn. If you don't, then it'll bury you."

She learned well. Her 2004 CD "Bury Him at the Crossroads" earned her a W.C. Handy Award nomination for Best Contemporary Blues Female Artist, and on March 7 NorthernBlues is set to release her seventh album, "Do I Move You," titled after a Nina Simone ballad that

ignites from the heat of Magness' slow–burn delivery. It's a crackling–good platter of blues that elevates Magness to a new artistic plateau. Her reading of Delbert McClinton and Gary Nicholson's lament "You Were Never Mine" is a model of poignantly restrained passion, but elsewhere she clearly relishes tearing into the melodic meat and juicy humor of Denise LaSalle's "Man Size Job," Candi Staton's "I'm Just a Prisoner" and hubby Jeff Turmes' "Bad Blood."

She deliberately refuses to push past tragedies into a closet. "The idea of 'we're not talkin' about it' isn't really an option under my roof," she says. "Honestly. Because 'we're not talkin' about it' got me exactly what my parents did. ... I don't know what it is in me that has made me such a formidable fighter, but I am. And I don't know why I've been given the grace that I've been given to come out appearing to be a fairly normal, functioning person. [Laughs] Y'know what? You've gotta be able to laugh about stuff.

"I cried for years. That's the truth. I still do, but I think there's great healing to be had with laughter, and there's great healing to be had with music. And that's the meat of it for me, is the healing part."

On Saturday at 9 p.m.–ish, Janiva Magness returns to the Ritz–Carlton Huntington Hotel lounge, 1401 S. Oak Knoll Ave., Pasadena. No cover. Call (626) 568–3900. www.janivamagness.com