

# Evolution of a Voice

## Brenda's Story –

By Carol Hunter



Whether it's light and lyrical, crisp and snappy or a free form scat, Brenda Bayne is a vocalist in control of the music. Control is the hallmark as Brenda explores the twists and turns of an old melody with a special something she alone can bring to it -- her voice. But her sound hasn't always been sweet. Her transformation into the effortless singer of today started many years in the past while picking on an out-of-tune '54 Gibson guitar in a neighborhood near The Ringling School of Art. She lacked an ear sharp enough to keep her own axe pitch perfect so she tried letting the boys play which often resulted with Brenda singing the right song in the wrong key. But it was the days of Dylan, so if you were vocally inept, you could always try to do it like Bob. But her friends finally spoke the truth, "You're tone deaf, and you just can't sing." Coming up short with a natural gift, she compensated to overcome her musical obstacles with hard work. She found teachers and tenaciously clung to the idea that her struggle would be fruitful. Eventually a new voice began to evolve and change was inevitable.

She left Sarasota and the songs of the 1970s behind and headed to Hoggetowne where she began to define herself in the jazz idiom. Again, she became musically discouraged. "Something was missing," she recalls, and she stopped the music. But fate soon provided contact with a kindred spirit who would fit in well with her recovery. One night in the 1980s, at a local club, she trailed critically acclaimed jazz singer Sheila Jordan into the john.

As she lamented her own lost voice, Jordan turned to her and said, "Oh honey, you can never put out that fire." And that was the beginning of a harmonious sisterhood. Nurtured and inspired by this renowned artist, Brenda eventually began to recover her hidden voice. "Sheila comes from an inner space that has to do with spirit and emotion and authenticity", Brenda said. "I see her with other vocalists and she is very respectful and accepts everybody where they are without judgment."



Under the tutelage of Jordan, she received scholarships to the prestigious "Jazz in July" workshops. Ms. Jordan, who at age 76 is still the creative master of improvisation, released her last CD "Jazz Child" in 1999. With yet another dose of hard work and inspiration from her mentor, Brenda became a leading figure on the local jazz scene. She sang in bars, restaurants and the Thomas Center, as well as the Hospice Center for those in the final stage of life. Along the way, the student became the teacher by conducting a voice class at SFCC entitled "**You Too' Can Sing.**" Soon she began to produce shows for her fellow artists. And eventually she got "burned out" on the production aspect of the business. As the Nineties drew to a close, Brenda's voice was about to evolve once more from that of an entertainer into a political activist.

Brenda throws her bicycle helmet down on a big wooden table in the back booth of a downtown eatery on a winter day and talks about the current decade. Clearly, she is a whirlwind of activity. Along with a private voice lesson scheduled that morning, she had one sick kid to attend to at home and that evening she would be doing her weekly gig at Satchel's. But she had time for a quick salad before dashing back to the house to be part of a 3 o'clock conference call with Howard Dean. At 52 Brenda is strong and articulate. She speaks emotionally about her involvement with "Democracy for America." She states that the aim of this campaign is working on the local level to make change. This agenda got its roots from "Dean for America." When Dean was no longer the nominee it became the "Democracy for America" movement. It has a strong following across the nation and in Florida. She first became involved in the presidential campaign at the end of 2002. "He was the only voice out there that was strong enough and appealed to me," she said. "And while there were other voices, he appealed to me because he was honest, had integrity and had an exceptional record of accomplishment in Vermont. And he spoke passionately against the war. Dean wanted to get the Democratic Party back to its base. He had strong appeal because in his campaign he gave the power back to the people."

And while she has no political aspirations of her own, she is definitely in her element working behind the scenes. "I'm an efficient person. My strength is organizing. The reason I became such a strong organizer is because I produced all those concerts for all those years," she says with a laugh. "I knew how to network and how to get the press out. I not only produced my own concerts, but I was used to producing and organizing so it just translated into politics."

At the moment politics is her all consuming passion, which limits her performance time. However, she will be doing a fundraiser for Public Access Television at The Thomas Center on March 15. And you can usually find her at Satchel's on Thursday night interpreting the tunes of illustrious composers such as Gershwin and Ellington. Or maybe she'll send a little chill down your spine doing a Brazilian bossa nova. Backed by philosophy professor by day, piano man by night, Robert D'Amico and David Glennon on bass, she uses her vocal instrument with ease, not revealing a trace of that girl who once couldn't find the right key. And of course, in addition to the tasty pizza, there is always plenty of political dialogue mixed in with the music.

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