

# The Queen of Gospel lives in *The Mahalia Jackson Musical*

by EMILY RAINE

"About four years ago, I put pen to paper with Raneé Lee in mind," says *The Mahalia Jackson Musical's* author and director, local 60-year theatre veteran Roger Peace.

Mahalia Jackson is a tremendous role for local actress and singer Raneé Lee to step into. Dubbed the Queen of Gospel, Jackson was a powerful contralto with commanding charisma and a rare emotional intensity. She was also a central figure in the American civil rights movement who rose from utter penury to become one of the best-selling and most beloved artists of her time.

For those invested in soul, R&B and all of the other genres that claim lineage to the woman who brought the jazz of the clubs into the bounce and vocal virtuosity of the Southern church, this may be the closest you'll come to seeing the Queen of Gospel live.

Watching Canadian jazz singer Raneé Lee perform Jackson's rendition of "Summertime," the *Porgy & Bess* cover tune staple and one of the few secular songs Jackson recorded, it's clear that she's up to the part. Lee has a kind-hearted vivacity that sells Jackson's spirituality, wholesome image and proud political legacy. More importantly, she has the pipes and the presence to back it up.

"She had a very physical persona, very present," Lee says. "She took a type of music which was very spiritual and very pious, and she gave a roundhouse sort of rhythm to it, and even if you weren't listening to the message, you sort of felt what was happening."

No slouch herself, Lee has a substantial résumé as a jazz singer, teacher, dancer, actress and children's book writer, and she gave a roundhouse sort of rhythm to it, and even if you weren't listening to the message, you sort of felt what was happening.

"I've gone from a drug addict to a spiritualist," she notes wryly.

## CLEAN DIVA

The musical follows Jackson's life, with a heavy dose of Lee's virtuosic performances of songs from the singer's discography.

"It's the story of how she came from absolute poverty—no clothes, no shoes—and that she finished up 80 years later being friends with President Kennedy and the Shah of Iran," says Peace. Her music was a gift that "she was fortunate enough to be able to develop, which made a difference in thousands and thousands of people's lives."

Jackson was born in 1911 in a three-room shotgun shack in New Orleans, where she lived with her preacher father and 12 other family members. She dropped out of school early to help the family by working, but still sang six days a week in church. In New Orleans, she frequented the seamy music scene enough to absorb jazz's rhythm and swing, and the emotional grit of blues singers like Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey. But she swore off secular music entirely after moving to Chicago at 16.

"I sing God's music because it makes me feel free," she once said of the decision. "It gives me hope. With the blues, when you finish, you still have the blues."

Peace has written about Edith Piaf as well as Jackson and Holiday. "The interesting thing when I was doing the research," he says, "was, as opposed to Piaf and Billie Holiday, who had a lot of stuff—drugs and sex and all sorts of things—Mahalia was squeaky clean." There was nothing really that you could find. But then I realized it was about the music."



Jackson's devotion, and her long and relatively drama-free life, stand in the face of a sad history of troubled jazz, blues and soul stars riddled with tragedy.

"Her expression of her beliefs—social or family or spiritual—it all seemed to be wrapped up in her music," says Lee. "I think that's what maybe saved her."

The production channels Jackson's music and her legacy, with a sparse set featuring a churchy stained-glass window background, all designed to let Lee and her voice stay centre stage. Her deep and spiritual timbre uncannily recalls the gospel star's, breathing life into Jackson's songbook for a new generation of disciples.

## KING'S FORTUNE

Jackson was also remarkable for her early and vociferous involvement in the civil rights movement. A friend of Martin

Luther King Jr.'s, she sang to raise funds for Montgomery, Alabama's famous bus boycott and school desegregation rallies, performed just before his famous speech at the 1963 march on Washington, then sang again at his funeral in 1968.

"Mahalia was, historically, a very important person in the civil rights movement. That's where we finish up, with the 'I Have a Dream' speech," Peace reveals. "I'm not going to give it away, but if it had not been for her, Martin Luther King would not have said that speech."

"I think that was the highest point of her life. And the songs all move to that and uplift the audience, and I hope they're going to go out feeling good."

*The Mahalia Jackson Musical* runs at the Segal Centre for the Performing Arts (5170 Côte-Ste-Catherine) from March 3-24. \$29

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