

Miss Sharon Jones! Barbara Kopple's documentary

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Sharon Jones is the subject of veteran director Barbara Kopple's new film, *Miss Sharon Jones!* Born in Augusta, South Carolina in 1956, Jones came from a modest background singing gospel songs in church and listening to the music of her idol, James Brown. Her real talents went largely unnoticed and unfulfilled until she was hired to be a backup singer for a record label. The music producers were impressed by her vocal range and soon she became part of "Sharon Jones and the Dap Kings" in 2002. Before that she worked a gamut of odd jobs, including as a corrections officer at New York City's Rikers Island.

Sharon Jones and the Dap Kings toured extensively and released several critically acclaimed albums throughout the 2000s, appearing on the music show *Austin City Limits*, as well as the *Conan O'Brien Show* and *The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon*. Jones achieved public recognition somewhat late in life, releasing her first record at age 40. In 2014, she was nominated for her first Grammy for her album appropriately titled, "Give the People What They Want."

In 2013, Jones announced that she had been diagnosed with bile duct cancer and had to delay the release of her 2014 album. Jones underwent surgery and chemotherapy in response to her new diagnosis, stage II pancreatic cancer. The extensive chemotherapy caused her to lose her hair but she performed bald anyway, refusing to wear a wig.

To call Miss Jones lively is a serious understatement. One has to stand back when she starts to sing. She has been called "the female James Brown" and not without some justification. This reviewer's favorite scenes in the film, curiously enough, occurred when Jones is accompanied to church and begins to sing gospel songs in front of her congregation. She appears to be almost

in a trance and gives it everything she's got.

Jones brings to the contemporary music scene something that is rare: authenticity and humanity. At age 60, Jones has life experience and a certain historical memory that imparts her music with such seriousness and joy. She recalls in the film the bitter racism that she and her generation had to deal with in the Deep South; having to receive food from the back door of the local restaurant and being handed rotten pieces of candy by the owner when she was little. At another point in the film she recalls how she was told point blank that she was "too old, too short, and too black" to sing.

At the risk of sounding jaded, I am not a particular fan of the "retro" revival of soul music, or any genre for that matter. A lot of water has flowed under the bridge since the popular music of the 1960s and '70s and there is no going back. Having said that, upon listening to Jones she happily does bring something contemporary and new to soul music. Even when death appears to be knocking at her door, her music and life seem to tell us, "It's not over until *you* say it's over."

One can only wonder how many more Joneses have been snuffed out by the class-segregated American health care system before they are ever allowed to live, breathe and sing.

Veteran documentarian Barbara Kopple (*Harlan County, USA; American Dream; Shut up and Sing*) brings the audience into Jones's world as she struggles with her music career and her fight with cancer. It is at once intimate and objective. Rather than focus solely on the questions of her newly found fame and ill health, Kopple plants this story on more solid foundations that any audience can relate to.

We learn how Jones and her new music friends made their first record studio essentially from scratch. How every band member struggled personally and

financially from Jones's illness, including one member having to refinance a home. The warmth and compassion Jones shows to nearly everyone, even when she has a short temper.

On the surface they sound like mundane details, but the struggle to live is what lies at the heart of great drama. Kopple knows this and has a sympathy for the common man and woman. Her *Harlan County, USA* (1976) tells the story of striking coal miners in Western Virginia having to struggle against both the coal bosses and the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) in their struggle to secure decent working conditions.

Kopple's first effort was the antiwar film *Winter Solider* (1972), which documented war crimes in Vietnam through the testimony of American veterans. She also made *American Dream* (1991) about the bitter 1986 strike by Hormel meatpacking workers, which was betrayed by the trade unions and defeated.

In more recent years she made *Shut up and Sing!* (2006) about the country group Dixie Chicks and the right-wing backlash they received for making antiwar statements.

While *Miss Sharon Jones!* does not draw as many wider conclusions as one would like, it is an immensely enjoyable and commendable film. The perfect antidote to Hollywood's summer madness. *A recent performance of Sharon Jones and the Dap Kings can be viewed here.*



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