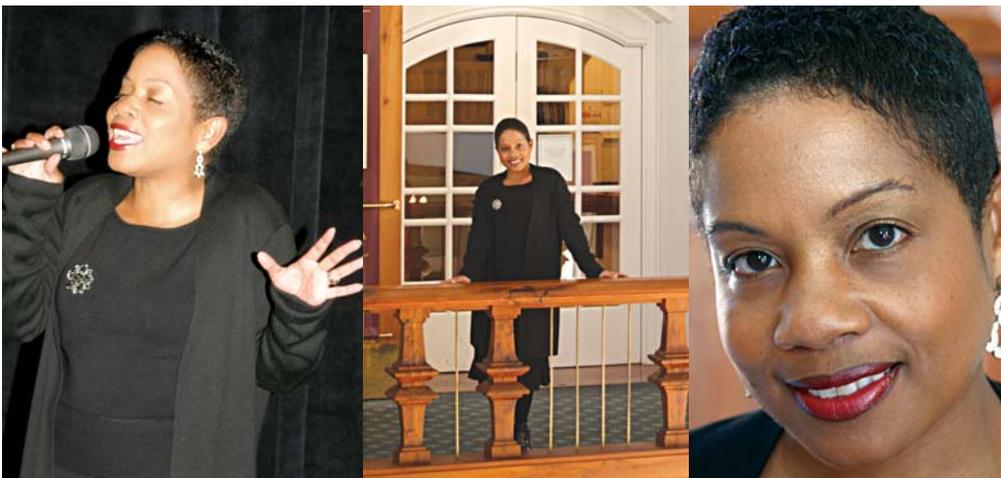


There is no question about it — Gita Blakeney's voice is honeyed magic, and to be in her audience is an uplifting experience. As well as enjoying a successful musical career, she is the Development Director at the Bermuda National Gallery. Our Frankly Speaking team was determined to find out more about this gracious and talented singer.



do something else for a living?

gb I'm so glad that you asked that question. I work at the Bermuda National Gallery as the Development Director. This is my job but I don't consider it a job, it has become a passion for me just like my music. I think that the heart and soul of the community is its art and culture. The National Gallery is of course in the realm of business development and philanthropy. It makes me very much in touch with my community not just as a singer, but also as a representative of a very fine institution. It was a really comfortable fit for me once I got over the fear of the visual arts, all the artists who I knew and didn't know. I realised that the visual arts speak to our children, enlightens and educates and gives them a level of enrichment that you can never describe.

the jazz singer

rg I heard you sing on Saturday evening at the Fairmont Hamilton Princess for the first time and was totally blown away by your voice. I suppose the obvious question is have you been professionally trained?

gb Yes, I have, I have been classically trained which started about 5 years into my career. It was perfect timing as I had done some damage to my throat and as a result of that it gave me the opportunity to gain some technical skills which gave me the insight into the voice and how it works.

rg Did you do this in Bermuda?

gb Actually I did it all here at the Bermuda School of Music with various wonderful teachers who would change from year to year. The one who had the most effect on me was Susan Lavasseur who was from out of New York. She was the first one who really made me connect with my voice and enable me to take the stress out of my vocal cords. It's just wonderful when you suddenly understand and you 'get it' it's like a light going on and from then on you're just soaring.

rg What first got you interested in classical music?

gb It was my father really. He always had music playing especially opera and I used to love listening to all the various arias. The one opera that he used to love to play over again was La Bohème, which was my favourite. There was always music playing in the house and when it wasn't classical it would be gospel, jazz with Miles Davis or records from the current musicals. So at a very tender age I got to appreciate the art of music and the huge spectrum that was involved.

rg Was it at this young age that you started to sing?

gb No, not at all, I used to do a bit at high school in the choir, but it really wasn't until I got well into my adult life that I realised that this was what I wanted to do. I loved the theatre and used to act quite a lot, but it wasn't until I auditioned with Greg Thompson and got a part that required me to have to sing that I realised that I had the potential. I never thought that this would be my vocation. This was when I was in my early twenties and it was then that this thought started to crystallise with me and I realised that I had a gift.

rg Is music your only profession or do you

rg Given the choice, what do you enjoy singing the best?

gb I would have to say that my favourite medium of sound would have to be Jazz. Jazz because of its interpretive value and sound. The fact that it allows me to create what I want with it. I just love its textures and colours.

rg Do you have a family that keeps you busy?

gb I am newly married; I consider myself to be newly married anyway although it's a year and half after the event. I got married relatively late in life. I just love my new life with my husband; he has added a whole new dimension to me and a deeper value to what I do! When I sing now I have just a little, different energy, which has been added to this woman who has found love.

rg Give me the names of some singers who have given you inspiration.

gb Oh there are so many, both contemporary and jazz, but the ones who have influenced me the most are Sarah Vaughn, Nancy Wilson, Shirley Horn, Gladys Knight, Bette Midler, Sade and Barbra Streisand.

franklyspeaking

rg You come across as a real little, pocket rocket, tiny, vibrant and exuding huge self-confidence. Is this easy for you to attain or underneath are you like a lot of actors who get extremely nervous and shy before a performance.

gb I think I am really more of an extrovert than an introvert. In so saying there is a very private side to me. I find, however, that it is the experience and the time that I have spent performing that give me the confidence that I have. It is a part of the woman that I am today. I get a feeling when I have a good audience, an audience that love me and then I love them back even more. I get off on what's given back to me.

rg Have you ever sung internationally?

gb Oh yes, I've sung my way across the United States; places such as Chicago, Atlanta, Las Vegas and New Orleans.

rg Who is the most important or famous person that you have ever performed for?

gb Oh that definitely has to be Isaac Hayes. This was in August 1999 at the Copacabana In New York City for the 3rd Annual Salute to Soul Birthday Celebration for Isaac Hayes. I had the pleasure of performing and working with Mr Hayes during an event sponsored by KISS FM. It was after this event in Bermuda that he invited me to share the stage with a star-studded group of entertainers including Freda Payne, Dionne Warwick, Stephanie Mills, Sam Moore and Mark Curry. It was also an honour to be invited as a participant in the Smithsonian Folklore Festival 2001, which highlighted the unique culture of the island of Bermuda.

rg What are your aims and goals for the future?

gb I think that I will continue to build on my body of work. I already have one CD out which is devoted to jazz. I am very happy with the way the sales of this have gone. So far I've easily sold over 5,000 copies and people are still buying it. I am working towards bringing out another jazz CD this year also.

rg I know that you have received many nominations and awards including the 'Best of Bermuda' twice; are there any nominations in the pipeline at the moment?

gb Well, as a matter of fact, I have been

nominated for the VIP (Visitor Industry Partnership) award so am waiting to see what happens there.

rg If you had one big wish that could come true what would it be?

gb You know we are living in a very interesting time where the world is really changing. There is all this terrible devastation going on around us but I believe that the human spirit lives on. I think that intrinsically we are all good people and have a lot to give each other. What I really wish is that collectively we could all work together and appreciate our differences and celebrate these differences. I would like to see the world become the dynamic place that it is with all of us together becoming as one. You know I think on more of an ethereal level because I know that all of us have such great gifts. Ultimately I want to see each of us doing well for the betterment of mankind.

rg Apart from your music and your huge input into the Bermuda National Gallery do you have time for any leisure activities?

gb Well, those two, as I said are really the

two passions in my life so there isn't really much time for anything else. I do want to be a part of the community and anything that allows me to do this, I want to be a part of. I like to get involved in any philanthropic entities and am currently working very closely with Michael Spurling on the Raleigh International Bermuda Initiative. I am on the board of that and adore working with Michael. I am also working on another project, which is with children who do not have the privilege of seeing other parts of the world. We are offering them the opportunity with Raleigh on a work initiative to be able to go to places such as Gambia, other parts of Africa and also Malaysia to benefit these countries. This is what I love doing, to be able to enhance the community.

rg I am getting married in June and would love it if you could perform at our wedding. My fiancé has a rather 'different' sense of humour and was wondering if your repertoire could include the old Rolling Stones song 'You Can't Always Get What You Want'.

gb Of course, Sharleen, for you I'll do anything. You ask and you shall receive! 

island glass