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LOCAL NEWS

GG Amos: Playing the blues to be the Guitar Goddess

GG Amos has been making music and performing all her life



GG Amos, seen in 2016 at the San Jose Jazz Festival, is to headline the Club Fox Blues Jam on Aug. 9, 2017. (David Hoover photo)



By **PAUL FREEMAN** | Bay Area News Group

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GG Amos has been playing guitar for almost 50 years. Yet she calls herself “a late bloomer.” The singer-guitarist, based in San Francisco, was in her mid-30s when she discovered the joys of the blues. In the blues world, aging is something to embrace. “The older you get, with the experiences you have, the time put in on this planet, you’re able to put more feeling into your music,” Amos says. “And with the blues, it’s all about feeling and emotion, strength and vulnerability — all those aspects of life. If you’re able to channel that into your playing, that’s something people really respond to.”

Amos, a vibrant 59, began taking guitar lessons at age 10. She had been singing ever since she learned to talk. So her parents thought it would help to have an instrument to accompany herself. Soon she was performing in school talent shows and choirs.

“I don’t ever remember a time in my life when I wasn’t performing in some capacity. It’s the most natural thing in the world for me. It’s the only thing I’ve ever done,” Amos says, laughing.

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In the 1980s, Amos was exposed to the lively blues scene in Sacramento, where she grew up. "I heard it and I was like, 'That's what I want to specialize in! That's the music that I can express myself in.' Once you hear it, it just gets under your skin. There's nothing else like it. It's powerful. It's expressive. It's so earthy and real."

Bluesman Johnny Heartsman, who had moved to the Sacramento area, was a big influence. So was lap-slide guitarist and harmonica player Nate "Snakeboy" Shiner..

Shiner showed Amos some riffs. Always a strong rhythm guitarist, she learned to play hot lead parts. She picked up lots more by listening to vintage blues records, from the 1920s onward.

From noted drummer/vocalist Alvin Sykes, who become another mentor, Amos acquired the knowledge she needed to become a capable band leader. "He was a consummate entertainer. So I learned a lot from him about how to really put on a show."

Another mentor was Guitar Shorty. Eventually, Amos began focusing on West Coast Blues.

"That music has a very California sound. It's very different from Chicago or Texas or Delta blues. It started with T-Bone Walker, Jimmy McCracklin, Lowell Fulson, Pee Wee Crayton, Johnny 'Guitar' Watson — all those guys came out to California after World War II.

"They developed a newer sound than all the other styles of blues that were out there. It was a very laid-back, jazzy type of blues. That's what sets it apart. It also has a lot of funk influence, especially after the '70s."

Amos says it wasn't easy to get established on the blues scene, especially for a woman.

"I really had to fight to be taken seriously, just because people had preconceived notions all the time. That's been a challenge. "People are more open than they used to be, because there are more female guitarists out there. It's become less of a novelty. But that bias is still there. To me, it's perfectly natural for women to play lead guitar or to solo on any instrument. But we really have to work twice as hard and be twice as good to get half the recognition."

Amos returns to the Club Fox Blues Jam on Wednesday. She'll perform songs she has written, as well as favorite covers. She'll have four other musicians in her band — keyboardist Parris Bertolucci, bassist Edgar San Gabriel, drummer (and her partner) Randy Lee Odell and saxophonist Salvador Aguilera; plus guest vocalist Sue McCracklin, daughter of Jimmy McCracklin, one of the fathers of the West Coast blues movement.

McCracklin is about to record a solo album that's a tribute to her dad. Amos will play on several of those tracks. "I'm really happy and honored to be part of that project, because Jimmy McCracklin was such a big part of the foundation of West Coast blues," Amos says.

In 2010, Amos released the song "West Coast," which she co-wrote with Taki Komori. It's an homage to Johnny Heartsman. Shiner collaborated with Amos on her album, "Gotts Ta Go." More recently, Amos recorded a West Coast blues rendition of the standard "Side By Side," dedicated to veterans.

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Amos is planning a new album, which will showcase her original material. She will utilize crowdfunding to finance the project.

Amos teaches guitar, at her rehearsal space in San Francisco, and at South San Francisco's Bronstein Music.

Performing live is her passion. She's a powerhouse, vocally and instrumentally. The double-G — her nickname — stands for Guitar Goddess.

"I still put out a lot of energy, every time I play. I always try to give it my all. It's a challenge to maintain that level of intensity at an older age. But I figure, hey, it could be my last gig, right? You never know. I could get hit by a truck the next day," she says, laughing.

Meanwhile, like a fine wine or a classic blues tune, Amos only gets better with age. "After all the years you spend working on your craft, learning what works and what doesn't work, what it really boils down to is being yourself. And it takes years, sometimes decades, to become who you really are. When we're younger, we spend a lot of time projecting an image of who we are and not so much being ourselves.

"So now, at my age, I've finally learned how to just be who I am on stage and let it all flow and hang out," she says with a laugh. "Being natural, that connects with the audience. I'm making eye contact. You have to let them in. They can feel that I'm happy being there with them and they respond to that."

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Music

Who: GG Amos, Club Fox Blues Jam

Where: Club Fox, 2209 Broadway St., Redwood City

When: 7 p.m. Wednesday Aug. 9, 2017

Tickets: \$7; www.clubfoxrwc.com

Artist website: www.twogees.com

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