

Jazz singer inspires others to fulfill dreams



Submitted

Nnenna Freelon

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Nnenna Freelon's busy, accomplished life sings of dreams fulfilled and inspiring others to make theirs come true.

The jazz singer, composer and educator has performed at The White House, Hollywood Bowl, the Grammy Awards (while being nominated for six), and has toured with Ray Charles as well as other great jazz artists including Ellis Marsalis, Al Jarreau and George Benson.

Ms. Freelon is capping her two-week residency with the Quad City Arts Visiting Artist series, offering a free concert Saturday night at Bettendorf High School.

"There's nothing like this residency. It's a unique format, in that it's so varied," she said of visiting schools, churches, community centers and civic groups. "It reaches wide and deep in the community."

Ms. Freelon has varied her presentation based on the group she speaks to, usually singing unaccompanied, but with a consistent message -- follow your dreams and never give up.

"I leave them with, 'If I can do it, you can do it.' I want them to feel confident," she said. "I try to make it as interactive as I can. The larger the group, the less talking I do, and it has to be more performance based."

"I think kids have enough of very passive experience through all their devices, television and movies. My job is to kind of shake them up," Ms. Freelon said. "Actually think what you're listening to, compare and contrast with their own experience."

She inspires students and others to have something to work toward, whatever it is. "It's your own special way of being who you are."

"Creativity is a muscle, you have to exercise it," Ms. Freelon said. "If you're always in a position of consuming, even great art, it doesn't necessarily allow you the chance to express yourself. There has to be a give and take."

At one school recently, as she was getting ready to leave, a girl came up to her and said, "I want to be a cosmetologist or a singer."

"She hugged me and ran away, it was so awesome," Ms. Freelon recalled. "You get little moments like that. It kind of doesn't matter, you can feel that some things are moving around in their head and heart."

Born and raised in Cambridge, Mass., Ms. Freelon sang in a Baptist church, and received her undergraduate degree from Simmons College in Boston. Her parents and church exposed her to the arts – especially to jazz. Her father played Count Basie records and her mother's active involvement in their church led Ms. Freelon to appreciate all music.

Ms. Freelon's large repertoire includes the standards of Cole Porter, Duke Ellington and Harold Arlen -- music "that's in my heart," she said. It's something I can't not do. This is what makes my heart sing, what I'm interested in. There's way more money in pop music, but it doesn't hold my interest."

She went to school for health care administration, and worked in that field for more than 10 years, "but it really wasn't what I wanted," said the mother of three with her architect husband. "Talk about really following your passion." In her 30s, Ms. Freelon decided to pursue music full-time, and she's never looked back.

"I really think what you love will lead you to what you want to do," Ms. Freelon said. "That doesn't mean everyone's going to be a musician or be on stage. Music can accompany anything you want to do in life, if you're a lawyer or other professions."

"It's been a lifelong passion, but not a passion I've been doing full-time all my life," she said, noting her kids have traveled on the road with her, through Europe and Asia. "I impress upon them we got here with my art. On the wings of my music, I have been able to visit places I wouldn't have been able to otherwise. We tend to think of life as some linear straight path. It rarely is."

In 2011, the White House asked Ms. Freelon to headline the Asia Pacific Economic Summit for 300 heads of state from around the world. This was on the heels of receiving the YWCA of North Carolina's inaugural "Legend Award" for her outstanding artistry and dedication to education.

She has dedicated herself to educating young people of all ages, and toured the U.S. for four years as national spokesperson for Partners in Education.

Ms. Freelon has performed in Langston Hughes' "Ask Your Mama" at The Apollo Theater and a Hollywood Bowl concert with opera superstar Jessye Norman and the "Tonight Show" house band The Roots. Other gigs include the Tanglewood Jazz Festival with classical star Harolyn Blackwell, and last fall's run of "Georgia on My Mind: Celebrating the Music of Ray Charles" at the Venetian Hotel in Las Vegas.

Ms. Freelon toured with Mr. Charles in the '90s. "Before he even opens his mouth, the crowd is on its feet. The command he has on the stage...", she said. "This guy is blind, but he can see -- he could light up the room with his energy. My goodness, every night."

Daily Variety has written: "Freelon continues to grow and deepen as a vocalist...but still with a crystalline, impeccably tuned voice, with often imaginative, percolating, funk-based backing from her combo."

This year, she took her new theatrical presentation of "The Clothesline Muse" (a work of dance, music, spoken word, art and projections) on tour. She wrote music for it, and premiered it in 2013 in Philadelphia.

"The goal is to have a long and satisfying career with a lot of different things -- length, depth and breadth," Ms. Freelon said. "For every person it's going to be different."