

# Pamela Williams

*The award-winning saxophonist promises good music, fun, high energy, and a very memorable show at the Palm Springs Women's Jazz Festival. She reflects on the importance of family; knowing where you came from; the connection of black history to her music, and how jazz reaches across cultures to connect us.*

*by Sweet Baby J'ai*

**W**e can often mark cultural events by what songs or which famous jazz musicians were performing during that time. Since the Harlem Renaissance, African-American musicians have portrayed black history as extended musical works. "Strange Fruit", a song based on a poem about lynching sparked outrage and protest over the tragedies happening in the Deep South during the early 20th Century. Miles Davis marked the experimental 60's with his free jazz and fusion; songs like "Bitches Brew" and "A Silent Way" set the tone for a generation. Throughout time jazz has had the ability to reach across cultures - that ability will be tested again in April when jazz comes to Dinah.

With Dinah Shore Weekend right around the corner Palm Springs ready's itself for the onslaught of women pouring into the desert. It is the largest lesbian event in the world and hosts one of the most prolific

women's jazz festivals in the country; one can already hear the crowds purring about the talented female musicians scheduled to perform at the Palm Springs Women's Jazz Festival. People who think of jazz as intellectual, elitist and sometimes unapproachable music will once again have those preconceptions blown away and be able to breathe a sigh of relief: "Whew! This is the most fun I've had at a concert in as long as I can remember!" Contemporary jazz saxophonist Pamela Williams recently shared some insight into shattering the image of the pretentious jazz musician and the unapproachable genre.

## The Early Years

Little Pamela Williams was a free-spirited, lovable, talented, intelligent, sassy, stubborn and adventurous little tomboy. She grew up in Pennsylvania, PA in a very

close-knit family. She was the second child of three born to her parents Mary and Mayo Williams. Some middle children might get the short end of the stick compared to over indulged older or doted on younger siblings, but not in the Williams household. The precocious toddler found her voice from a very early age. She was particularly close to her maternal grandmother, who she describes as a Southern woman with integrity, wisdom and spirituality. "Grandmom had enough love to last endless lifetimes, but boy she did not play around when it came to discipline," said Williams of her grandmother, Mrs. Lena Bell, whom she credits for teaching her about how to be respectful to others - especially her elders.

Williams makes it clear that who she is today was shaped by her beginnings. She believes in family togetherness and attributes her success to her strong family

values; her parents were her role models, bringing their Southern mores with them to the "big city" when they moved to

stock brokerage firm; administrative assistant at the Veteran's Administration; artist for a billboard company, and a free-lance graphic

gay sexual orientation is regarded as private and taboo – particularly in the African-American community.

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Philadelphia. "My father was in the military when he met my mother. They fell in love at first sight", recalls Williams. Her father Mayo later worked for the federal government at the Veteran's Administration. Her mother Mary was a stay at home mom when the kids were younger, and later worked in a clothing factory to help with the family finances.

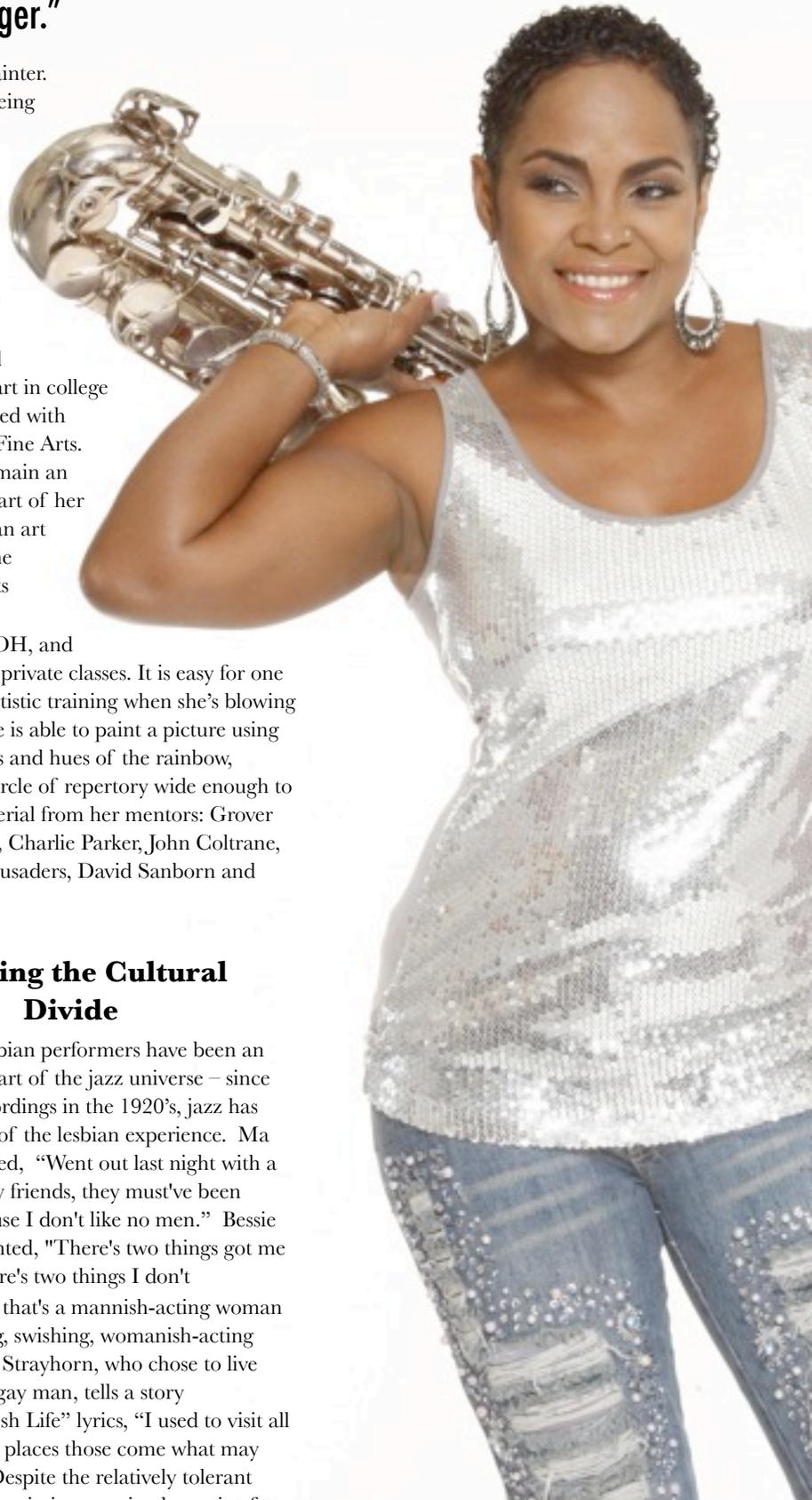
Philadelphia's rich history, diverse mix of cultures and music, provided Williams with a well rounded background. "There's so much I explored there; museums, concerts, and great radio stations, that helped to shape the musician and artist I was to become." She discovered early on that she was drawn to music. At 8 years old she already knew she wanted to be a musician. Back when music education was a regular part of the elementary school curriculum – helping to build reasoning and cognitive skills and encourage social interaction – children could choose a musical instrument to study. The violin was her first choice, but the school had no more violins left, so she settled for playing the xylophone during the annual Christmas shows. "When I finally reached junior high school, I tried to join the jazz band, but you were required to already know how to play the instrument before you could join – obviously, I didn't", Williams adds. However, by high school she had learned to play the saxophone and clarinet and joined the school jazz band. Finally her opportunity to become a "real jazz musician" had come. She later added clarinet, piano and flute to her studies. "Attending Martin Luther King High School was great for an aspiring musician because I was fortunate to have seen many jazz greats perform in our school auditorium, such as Lionel Hampton, Mercer Ellington, and Grover Washington," she recalls. "It is clear that exposure to that wonderful art form helped to shape who I am today."

Although Williams describes music as her dream job, it hasn't always been her career. She's had a wide variety of occupations including; dental assistant; receptionist at a

artist and painter. The latter being a talent she says came naturally from her father who was a very gifted visual artist. She pursued her love of art in college and graduated with a degree in Fine Arts. The Arts remain an important part of her life – she is an art teacher at the Creative Arts Institute in Cleveland, OH, and also teaches private classes. It is easy for one to see her artistic training when she's blowing her sax. She is able to paint a picture using all the colors and hues of the rainbow, drawing a circle of repertory wide enough to include material from her mentors: Grover Washington, Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, The Jazz Crusaders, David Sanborn and Spyro Gyra.

### Crossing the Cultural Divide

Gay and lesbian performers have been an important part of the jazz universe – since the first recordings in the 1920's, jazz has been a part of the lesbian experience. Ma Rainey roared, "Went out last night with a crowd of my friends, they must've been women, 'cause I don't like no men." Bessie Smith lamented, "There's two things got me puzzled, there's two things I don't understand, that's a mannish-acting woman and a lisping, swishing, womanish-acting man." Billy Strayhorn, who chose to live openly as a gay man, tells a story with his "Lush Life" lyrics, "I used to visit all the very gay places those come what may places..." Despite the relatively tolerant attitude shown in jazz music, the topic of



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However, with more states passing bills legalizing same-sex marriages attitudes are beginning to change, creating a climate where people can feel comfortable about who they are. “I think when you’re gay, to be happy you have to first accept yourself for who you are and be totally comfortable with that. When you reach that point in your life, and it’s different for everybody, other people will accept you for who you are as well,” Williams said of being comfortable in your own skin. According to recent polls, more Americans support gay marriage than oppose it. One cause for this increased tolerance could be public figures are talking about gay rights and their own sexual orientation – joining Ellen DeGeneres, Melissa Etheridge and KD Lang are Maria



the jazz tradition since its inception when Harlem’s “Jazz Rent Parties” were places where gays and lesbians could socialize.

“I came out publicly about 8 years ago. It was really a very liberating experience for me,” Williams recalls. “I grew up in a very traditional family and it was not easy for me being a gay teenager.” She has been with her partner for what she described as 11 wonderful years. They are registered domestic partners in the state of California, though they now reside in Cleveland, Ohio, a state that currently does not recognize same-sex marriages. “Unfortunately, the United States has not been fair in legalizing same-sex marriage nationally, but we plan on moving back to California and we will most certainly be tying that knot officially,” she says. “I was fortunate to find the love of my life, and I think marriage is a way to express

your love and commitment to your other half. We have 3 girls, a grandson, a Staffordshire

Bello, Jodie Foster and Cynthia Nixon. Hollywood, however, is much more tolerant than the world of jazz. It takes a great deal of courage for a gay jazz musician to come out – though breaking taboos have been a part of



Terrier named Roxy, and a little Maltese/Shih Tzu Terrier named Sushi – I think it’s time!”

## Jazz is Rooted in Black History

February marks Black History Month, an annual celebration of achievements by black Americans and a time for recognizing the essential role of African Americans in U.S. history. It's difficult to write about black history without talking about the indelible impression jazz musicians have made on American life. Jazz is an art form, which originated in America – it is as American as baseball and apple pie.

Jazz was born in New Orleans, but its roots can be found in the musical traditions of both African music and European harmonies. It grew out of the vocal traditions that flourished among African people under slavery, songs used to mollify their plight and send messages of possible escape routes. "We have come from greatness, endured the unthinkable, and have been

blessed with a few wonderful men and women who have lived and died trying to make us remember who we are and where we come from. We are actually connected more than we realize. The path for all of us (European, Asian, African, and American) began in Africa, our Motherland," Williams said.



"Kings and Queens have been a part of our heritage since the era of the great African civilizations. So much of what we utilize in our modern world

comes from the Egyptians; forerunners of science, mathematics and astronomy."

Royalty continues to be a part of the American experience. Since the inception of jazz at the start of the 20th Century, musicians have been affixed with royal titles: Cornetist Buddy Bolden was popularly known as "King Bolden"; Dinah Washington was the "Queen of the Blues"; Nat "King" Cole; "Lady Day"; "The Count"; "The Duke", and "The High Priestess of Soul", Nina Simone. The tradition continues – Williams has been dubbed "The Saxtress" named for her solo debut album, which peaked on Billboard's Contemporary Jazz Top 10 and remained on the charts for five months earning her the title of Best Female Contemporary Jazz Artist that year.

Williams stands on the shoulders of every one of the Kings and Queens that came before her, from Makeda, The Queen of Sheba to Aretha Franklin, The Queen of

Soul. Pamela Williams exhibits the kind of captivating focus in her playing that each of the great performers she has had the fortune of playing with have. She has shared the stage with such notables as Patti LaBelle, Prince, Teena Marie, Earth, Wind & Fire, Al Jarreau, and India Arie. This April in Palm Springs, audiences will be able to witness for themselves why this popular saxophonist is able to electrify festival attendees with her blend of jazz, R&B, hip-hop and Latin. A word of advice - be ready to get your royal groove on!

You can catch Pamela Williams on Friday, April 4th, 2014 at The 2nd Annual Palm Springs Women's Jazz Festival - Dinah Weekend with the Women in Jazz All-Stars at the Indian Canyon Golf Resort, 1097 E. Murray Canyon Dr. Palm Springs, CA 92262. (760) 833-8704 Showtime 7:00 PM

The Festival features an amazing lineup of talent, including Smooth Jazz Superstars, trumpeter Cindy Bradley, Living Blues Legend, vocalist Lady GG, Grammy nominated vocalist Perla Batalla and saxophonist Carol Chaikin, Multi-award winning guitarist, Mimi Fox, Internationally renowned violinist Karen Briggs and many more! Four days of music, 10 concerts, over 40 top celebrated female musicians, a gala Brunch show, the full spectrum of jazz and blues, after parties, tributes to legendary jazz and blues divas, nationally and internationally acclaimed artists, food, drinks and much more! For tickets and more information visit [www.pswomensjazzfestival.com](http://www.pswomensjazzfestival.com)

Sweet Baby J'ai is a writer, a singer, composer, arranger, educator, and the Artistic Director of the Palm Springs Women's Jazz Festival. A creative force on the music scene for over two decades, she tours the world with her genre-defying work, which both embraces and expands the jazz tradition. She has worked in various capacities, including talent buyer for major music events throughout the country. She also serves as Creative Managing Director for the Educational Theatre Institute. J'ai brings a new perspective to programming choices featuring some of the world's most visible, high level jazz artists. You can also catch her on Friday night, April 4th with her Women in Jazz All-Stars. By bringing together a carefully crafted, eclectic selection of exceptional performers, her Women in Jazz All-Stars always produce memorable and unexpected surprises!

