



It's a Bird...It's a Plane...It's Superwoman In the case of the Palm Springs Women's Jazz Festival - it's SUPERWOMEN!

Meet the Founders: *By Sweet Baby J'ai*

Palm Springs, CA is nestled in the hills of the San Jacinto Mountains, with breathtaking views and year round warm weather. This desert city is the ideal spot for a liberating weekend getaway because you can find everything you need - rich history and culture, exquisite spa resorts, amazing restaurants, casinos, shopping, lively nightlife and one of the most prolific jazz festivals in the country and the first of its kind on the west coast - The Palm Springs Women's Jazz Festival.

Is it a coincidence that a women's jazz festival would occur in the same week that the Kraft Nabisco Women's Golf Championship is held in Palm Springs, or the same weekend as Dinah Weekend; one of the largest gatherings of lesbians in the world? I think the answer is clear; there are some brilliant strategists behind that decision and they happen to be on a first name basis with not only their friends, but all their clients and business associates as well.

First impressions can be very deceiving. At a glance the festival promoters, Lucy DeBardelaban and Gail Christian appear to be mild mannered "Clark Kent" types, living

the life of gay retirees in Palm Springs. Their unassuming demeanors and casual attire do not suggest the fierce determination in which Lucy and Gail approach their company, L&G Events. The question is - at what point did they step out of the phone booth; sans glasses, donning red and blue Superwoman outfits? I was able to sit down with my good friend and collaborator Gail about the *Lucy and Gail* phenomenon and their journey to becoming leaders in the women's music industry.

Gail has learned to welcome surprises in her life and career. The retired NBC news correspondent started as an intern at the San Francisco Examiner in the 1960's. During the frenzied era of the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Kennedy, and Malcom X murders, groups like the Black Panther Party brought a more militant philosophy to the civil rights struggle. "Major newspapers and television news organizations around the country suddenly found themselves without access to the story. Up until that time a Black person couldn't buy a job with the mainstream press. All of a sudden there was this national effort to hire Blacks and Latinos to tell white people why we were being so mean," recalls Gail. "I jumped at the

opportunity to work as a journalist." Christian worked in Los Angeles for Channel 4, and later as a national news correspondent for NBC. "My claim to fame was the Patty Hurst kidnapping. How I loved that story. It went on so long I bought a new Mercedes Benz with my overtime. I was glad when Patty was finally free, sort of."

By the time the 80's rolled around Gail found herself in Washington, DC covering national politics for a small television network with stations from San Francisco to Omaha. After that assignment ended she remained in DC working as the News Director for the PBS Network where she met Lucy, who would later become her business and life partner. They had an interesting parallel. While Gail was reporting on the civil rights struggles, Lucy was living them. As a child, Lucy marched with Dr. King; was friends with the four young African-American girls killed in the church bombings in Birmingham, Alabama, and spent many nights hearing bombs set by the Klu Klux Klan go off in her neighborhood. Growing up in the segregated South, Lucy learned to rely on her ability to overcome obstacles. "She graduated from a high school where she was told by her counselor that she should try to get a job as a

file clerk," says Gail. "Lucy is a woman who should never be underestimated."

Winning a full scholarship to a women's college in Ohio was the catalyst that set Lucy on her path as an accountant. After college she traveled around the country working as an auditor with one of the largest accounting firms in the world, Deloitte & Touche. To maintain her sanity on the road, she would find the local lesbian bar often in small towns with little tolerance for gays and lesbians. She moved to DC looking for a more gay friendly atmosphere, and to move away from corporate accounting into a non-profit setting. "As it turns out Lucy and I lived only a few blocks from one another," Gail recalls. "At that time women's music was in its heyday and one of the biggest women's music festivals in the country, Sisterfire, was held each year in DC. The music was great and I discovered artists like Sweet Honey in the Rock, Holly Near, and Mary Watkins."

The two women's paths were destined to cross. Lucy became the accountant for the Sisterfire festival and Gail was asked to join the board of directors. "It was through Sisterfire that I developed my appreciation for the work of women musicians and met the love of my life, Lucy," says Gail, tracing the origin of their beginnings. They found they had a lot in common. They were both raised in households where music was integral to their daily lives. "During the day we listened to R&B and at night we listened to the blues," she adds. Their personal music collection covers everything from Dizzy Gillespie's "A Night in Tunisia", all recordings ever made by Etta James, and a collection of old vintage 78's by Nellie Lutcher, a rhythm & blues and jazz singer and pianist, who gained prominence in the late 1940's. "Our collection also pays respect to some of the most famous women in jazz; saxophonist Vi Redd, trombonist Melba Liston, piano players Marian McPartland, Mary Lou Williams and Alice Coltrane. While we love contemporary music and are big fans of hip hop and R&B - particularly Mary J. Blige and Fantasia - it's jazz and blues that make our day."

In the mid-90's Lucy and Gail moved from Washington, DC to Venice, CA, and in 2003 decided to give up the LA traffic and move to Palm Springs. By this time Gail had retired and Lucy had taken a job as the controller of the Palm Springs Art Museum. The slow pace of Palm Springs was relaxing, but soon they found themselves looking for something new to do and thought about Sisterfire and all the fun they had working on that festival. They

began producing Dinah in Color (later branded as Dinah Does...) concerts and parties for lesbians of color and their friends and partners at their home. "We started out doing a jazz concert each Sunday afternoon on the Dinah Shore weekend. The first year we did it, we invited San Francisco based pianist Mary Watkins from the women's music festival days, and Carol Chaikin, a Grammy nominated sax player from Los Angeles. The response was great. In 2012



Photo by Takemi

we invited Sweet Baby J'ai, who put together a world class all-star women's jazz band. Essentially borrowing characteristics of a jazz festival, she designed the concert to demonstrate how a diverse group of women; both culturally and musically, would go over with our audiences. The mini fest featured everything from jazz to poetry and when it sold out the house and got a standing ovation - we knew we were on to something," says Gail.

The success of that event fed their desire to move into a larger arena. Together they decided they wanted to produce a women's music festival, but not in the traditional sense. "We saw no reason to be a west coast version of the Michigan Women's Festival. While we were looking for a festival to highlight women artists, like the original women's music festivals, we thought about another genre of music to feature and figured that jazz was something that everyone could relate to, particularly if we included Latin Jazz and blues. We knew we had the production skills, but not the musical knowledge to pull off a big festival so we went to the person who did, Sweet Baby J'ai. She is not only an extremely talented musician, but she has the artistic sensibility and vision to make this work. We all chose the Dinah Shore Weekend in 2013 to debut the Palm Springs Women's Jazz Festival and our instincts were right. All of the concerts were sold out and we received rave reviews." Gail proclaims.

What started as a lawn party at their home in Palm Springs has grown to be a multi-cultural women's jazz festival emphasizing the great stylistic diversity of women of all backgrounds and ethnicities. With grass roots efforts and the recruitment of other retired superheroes, who brought their years of work and life experiences to the table, this team of superwomen managed to produce an outstanding event. "We can't say enough about the high quality of professionalism and skills of the team that puts this festival together. Sweet Baby J'ai is the Artistic Director and is joined by a staff of about 15 women who do everything from producing the individual events to managing the sales and marketing. Lucy handles the books and I handle the logistics. I also drive everyone crazy worrying about things like what to do if a hurricane hits in the middle of a performance."

This year the Palm Springs Women's Jazz Festival moves its "fun in the sun" concept outdoors to the beautiful Indian Canyons Resort, 1097 E Murray Canyon Dr, Palm Springs, CA 92264 (760) 833-8704. And although the jazz festival is open to all audiences (gay and straight), Lucy and Gail continue to host their "Dinah Does..." events for lesbians in cities around the country. And as a part of the Festival, they are offering their clients a *Lucy and Gail Lesbian Jazz Weekend Getaway*. This exclusive VIP package is designed to rescue you from your everyday routine and recharge your soul. It includes hotel, transportation, a dinner show, four days of music, 10 concerts, over 40 top celebrated female musicians, a gala Brunch show, the full spectrum of jazz and blues, singles breakfast, after parties, tributes to legendary jazz and blues divas, White Party nationally and internationally acclaimed artists, food, drinks and much more! For more information visit www.lucyandgail.com.

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Sweet Baby J'ai is a writer, 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 jazz tradition. She has produced many major music events throughout the country, and 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. By bringing together a carefully crafted, eclectic selection of phenomenal performers, her Women in Jazz All-Stars always produce memorable and unexpected surprises!

