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JANIVA  
MAGNESS

by B.J. Huchtemann

Like many people touched by the blues, Janiva Magness was swept up in the healing power of music at an early age. In recent years, she's been open about her difficult youth, which included losing both parents to suicides, going through 12 foster homes in three years, and giving up a child for adoption when she was 17 years old.

"It's been a long journey and it's been very crooked, and the music, art, has always, always taken me out of that pain. It takes me to another place. It speaks to that place in me that I can't — there're no words I can make to articulate what that part of my insides is. I don't have the words for that. But the music does."

Magness takes a long pause and sighs, remembering a life-changing night when she was 14 years old. "It's perfectly predictable and perfectly understandable that I would stumble across the threshold of a blues club in the middle of a snow storm and become one lucky [expletive] to get to see Otis Rush, some guy who I had no idea who he was. That, for me, was the beginning of being taken hostage by the music. I'm still following that. I still need it. I still need music to help me make the world an OK place to be.

"Now I understand what that experience was and that *gift* — and he was just playing a god-damned gig in Minneapolis on a Tuesday night. But that was a *gift* for me. 'Cause it connected me. It connected, at that point, this young girl, who at that point in her life was pretty much untethered; I wasn't connected to anybody or anything. And that was not a good place. That was a dangerous place. So the music did that for me and it's been doing it for me, I think, probably, always."

Being "taken hostage" by the music helped her find a refuge and healing force in the blues. The music has propelled her from her start as a young, woodshedding vocalist to becoming a 2017 Grammy nominee for Best Contemporary Blues Album. Along the way, she's received over two dozen Blues Music Award nominations and remains the only female other than Koko Taylor to receive the Blues Foundation's B.B. King Entertainer of the Year award.

Speaking by phone on a January afternoon about a month before the February Grammy ceremonies, the fact of her Grammy nomination is still soaking in.

"I'm totally blown away and incredibly grateful and humbled. I've used those two words really a lot in the last two years," Magness says with a laugh. "It blew my mind, and I was not

expecting it. I never expect an accolade. But this is a big deal for me." She sighs a deep, thoughtful sigh. "Somebody's been giving me money to sing songs for 40-plus years, and I just never would have anticipated this. It means quite a lot," her voice grows quieter as she reflects, "It means quite a lot."

The Grammy went to Fantastic Negrito, but Magness remains truly moved by the nomination. "I'm super-happy for all the nominees. And I am reminded by my manager and by my producer that for the rest of my life I'm a Grammy nominee. And that is huge!"

Magness' Grammy nomination came for *Love Wins Again*, an inspiring disc full of heart and grit that she released on her own Fathead Records label in a partnership with Blue Élan Records. It followed *Original*, the 2014 disc that saw her make a remarkably independent step in her artistic evolution after a six-year deal with Alligator Records. While many artists are still focused on trying to get signed to labels, Magness made the decision to step out on her own.

"It was time to go, it's really that simple," Magness says of the decision. "It was time for me to leave. Alligator's a great team! They did three releases over basically six years. I knew that I needed to move on from the comfort of having a really strong record company with a really strong in-house team battling it out for me.

"If you were a person who were to have all of my recordings, or to have access to all of my recordings," she continues, "you would see that there is an arc, there is a creative curve that is going on.

"I'm pretty sure I've never made the same record twice, and the current record, *Love Wins Again*, which is nominated for a Grammy, is my twelfth release. It was time to have the freedom that I had had before. It was time to revisit, to come back to that. The record that I made when I left Alligator was titled *Original*, and it was all original songs. I had to serve that recording project. I had to serve those songs, without being encumbered by anyone else's agenda, anyone else's input."

To fund *Original* on her resurrected Fathead Records label, Magness did not do crowd funding. Instead, she used her own savings, had some support from several private individuals, and offered a limited edition, premium box set. She "sold them for a premium price" to fund the project. Supporters purchased 149 of the sets. She saved one that sits in her office.

"I was so nervous," she admits

of taking the leap. The response from fans, she says, was a tremendous, affirming surprise. "We got started and it was very hard. I learned a couple of things. First, social media is an incredibly powerful medium.

"And I relearned that what people want is authenticity. And as long as I'm willing to do that, as long as I'm willing to be authentic in my craft, in my songwriting, and in my interactions with people, that is what the true value is to the relationship with fans. That's the priceless stuff. That's what motivates and helps music lovers feel like they're engaged and feel like what they do matters.

"I think of it as walking the plank," Magness explains. "I knew I had to walk the plank. I did not expect the reaction from my fans that I got, which was an overwhelming standing ovation. It absolutely blew my mind. And a lot of people stood up and said 'Yes.' That was so beautiful for me. I have been a fighter my whole life and sometimes that's been puzzling to me, because I don't necessarily feel like it [fighting], but it's what I do. I'm pretty good at fighting and swimming upstream.

"But," she takes a pause. "There's no but. It's just it. I didn't expect the kind of reaction that I got. It was so overwhelming; it was such a big, fat 'Yes.' I didn't grow up thinking that there would be any safety net for me. And that has been my entire adult process: of cleaning and clearing and trying to heal from that position of not trusting people, not trusting the world. Not believing you are gonna to be there just because you say you're gonna be there: 'it doesn't mean anything, you're not gonna to be there.'

"So the greater experience for me with *Original* was that I didn't realize that my fans were the safety net. And it blew my mind. In a very, very deep kind of way. It really, really blew my mind. In a good way. So *that*, in and of itself, really means a lot."

*Original* also gave birth to a musical based on Magness' powerful life experiences. The story "of a woman who chose to survive," according to *originalthemusical.net*. The musical was showcased for potential investors in 2015. Magness has also completed a book about her life.

"We're looking for financing on the musical. I'm seeking publishing for the book," Magness says. "It would have been great if I could have gotten publishing for the book and financing for the musical right in the year 2014 or 2015. And it looked like that might be

happening, but neither of those things came to fruition. I may go with self-publishing, I'm sort of on the precipice of that. I don't really sit on my hands very well. It makes me feel bad if I complete a creative project and it just sits there. It doesn't feel very good.

"The book is a memoir; I am telling the truth." She laughs. "I'm not making anything up, there's no fiction. It is non-fiction," she adds emphatically.

"I'm the fighter," she explains. "I am the angry, broken piece of merchandise. The young, angry, broken girl. I am *Girl, Interrupted*. God, that movie was brilliant. I'm that girl. If you wanted a movie, that would have been it for that particular period of time in my life. Yes, locked in the psychiatric unit. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Three times. In two-and-a-half years. Twelve foster homes in two-and-a-half years. So that's my hard-wire. Now I've done a lot of work, worked really, really hard, and I've had great fortune in the healing process. I can say that to you with absolute authority and absolute authenticity.

It took Magness a long time to decide to be open and tell the story of her early life. For years she rejected the inner voice that told her time and again that she should write her experiences down.

"No, it's not anybody's business, go away. I'm not talking about this. It's not anybody's business." Magness acts out the inner dialogue she dealt with. It wasn't until her 40s and repeated conversations she had with a dear friend that she began to consider sharing her experiences.

"When. The. Idea. Got. Through. To. Me.," She pauses on each word for emphasis. "It was when he framed it as 'Look, how many of YOU as a young kid are still out there? How many kids are struggling? How many adults are walking around on stun because of what they went through when they were young? And they can't figure it out and they're

just scratching their heads. How many do you think? I know we don't have an answer to that. Remember, you're always in control of the content, remember at any point that anybody makes you uncomfortable or you decide you don't want to talk to them, you cut it off. You are in control. But do you suppose that if you were to tell your story, do you think it *might* be able to help anybody else?"

She cautiously re-wrote her professional bio to include her personal experiences and gave a magazine interview detailing her difficult youth. "And it turned out that I started getting this fan mail, and this reaction from people,

now. The hard-wire is still there. I still have days, moments, hours, sometimes consecutive days, where I just wanna get the hand grenade and pull the pin and stand there and look at you. That's what I wanna do. But I don't do that; I don't self-implode now. And that's good fortune. That's great luck. That is great healing. Much of which, I'm just gonna say it, the music is responsible for."

Love and music are healers. In June 2015 she married UK blues musician T.J. Norton. In a blog post from 2016 she pronounced, "I GET TO BE HAPPY. I ACTUALLY get to be happy. I get to have a happy life. Have a happy

**"I'm pretty good at fighting and swimming upstream"**



and people coming to shows that brought the experience and the exchange with the audience to a complete and entirely different level of intimacy."

She also became the spokesperson for National Foster Care month, for Casey Family Programs. She serves as an Ambassador for both the Foster Care Alumni of America and the Child Welfare League of America. She always invites audience members at her shows to come talk to her about their own experiences in foster care or to find out how they can change a young life by considering being a foster parent.

"I can look you in the eye and say that is part of my experience, but the beauty of all of this isn't the Jerry Springer drama of it," she says. "The beauty of it is that I'm not in *that* most days anymore. I'm not in my hard-wire. I'm in my re-wire

third or fourth quarter of my life – who knows how long really? I get to have love and hold joy. To hold happy and even celebrate that. To learn to actually trust the experience of happy."

Announcing the release of *Love Wins Again*, she wrote, "The album's title is a mantra to the concept of love as a physical, psychic, and spiritual force that has the strength to conquer darkness, sorrow, and personal demons."

In early February 2017, she was heading back into the studio again to work on her next record. Look for a late-summer/early fall release on Fathead Records again in conjunction with Blue Élan Records. Magness said she is writing more songs and invites her audience to stay tuned for some surprises. "The new release is titled *Blue Again* is definitely back to my blues roots

and beginnings. My band – Zach Zunis on guitar, Garrett Deloian on guitar, Gary Davenport on bass and Matt Tecu on drums – is on it, and they sound killer! I am so excited for folks to hear it.”

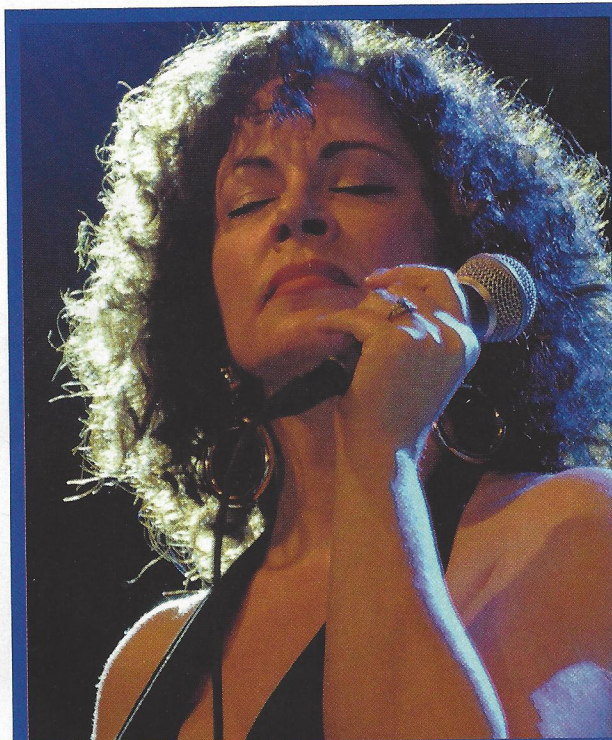
The new release continues her creative partnership with longtime producer David Darling. Magness says, “I know he’s got my back. It’s been proven over and over again, therefore, it allows me to exhale and trust this person. I just don’t have a lot of those kinds of relationships; I don’t let very many people lead me,” she laughs, “you might have guessed. But I will listen to him, and I will let him lead me. That’s the kind of trust we have. And that is true creatively and certainly is true as a songwriter and a producer, and as a collaborator. It’s very intimate. It’s very fortunate to be comfortable enough to actually give him the reins, pretty big deal, for me, a pretty big deal. So I feel very, very blessed and I mean that in every sense.”

As a youth, Magness remembers getting comfort from music cranked up loud on her teenage record player, her head lying against the speakers.

As young woman, she recalls another pivotal encounter with a life-impacting live performance. In the ‘80s, she saw Etta James on a three-way package concert featuring James Brown, Martha Reeves & The Vandellas, and James. Dressed in basic black “fat girl stretch pants” with no bling, Magness laughs.

“She walked out, she kicked off her shoes, and she was barefoot. And she completely stole the show. Etta did it,” Magness vividly recalls the moment

“And so when we do that as artists and entertainers and performers, we hope to set a mark. And she set another mark for me that day. And I began to understand: this is what I *have* to do. I want to reach for *that*. I want to reach for that level of experience for myself and for my audience members. She must’ve sung ‘I’d Rather Go Blind,’ by that time, in the ‘80s, a squillion times. She’s noted as saying how much she hated that song. And yet, and still, I’ll never forget the first time I saw her perform that song. It was brutal. It was real. It was true. It was authentic. And I realized this is what I have to reach for. I have to reach for that. I don’t anticipate that I’ll ever be that one-hundredth of what Etta was. But I’ve gotta reach for that, I’ve gotta reach for that standard, I’ve gotta reach for that mark, I’ve gotta reach for giving the audience and for giving myself the kind of experience I got when I was 14 years old with Otis.”



# “Billy Got Slide” Billy Pierce



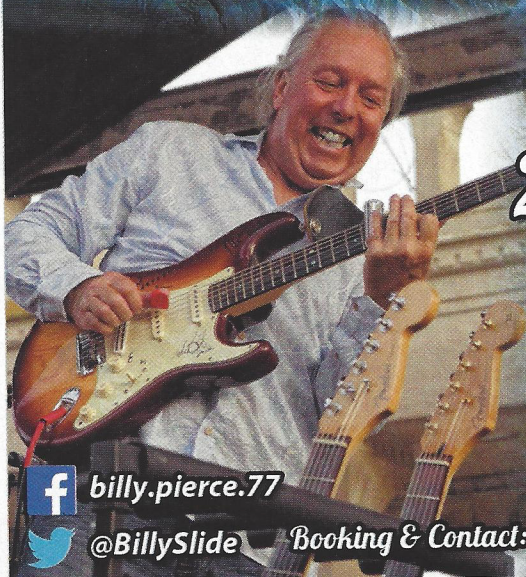
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