

# The Business of the Blues

By Nicole Barley, on September 24<sup>th</sup>, 2010

**Vocalist Jessica Lee mixes entrepreneurship and music to encourage social and artistic progress.**



A chance encounter in the Mary Duke Biddle Music Building at Duke University in Durham, N.C., provided Jessica Lee with her musical “aha moment.”

It was in a practice room in that building that the classically trained Lee met Paul Jeffrey, Director of Jazz Studies at Duke University. Jeffrey walked up to the piano where Lee was playing, took the music from the stand, and said, “Ok, young lady. Now, sing me something, and play me something.”

A surprised Lee said in reply, “Oh, I’m sorry sir. I was trained through my eyes, and I’m really not sure what to do.” Smiling, he said, “You don’t know all of music yet.”

Jeffrey soon became Lee’s mentor. One of his greatest teaching moments came when he created a cassette tape for Lee filled with songs by jazz vocalist Sarah Vaughn. “I listened to that tape for three years. It was in my little tape deck in my un-air-conditioned Toyota Tercel. The nuances of what she was doing, how she could improvise, and how she really was so sincere in telling you the story of the song — it blew me away. That’s when I fell in love with jazz and blues. The classical training [I had] was wonderful, but everybody has a moment in their artistic life when something grabs them. And for me, Sarah Vaughn was it.”

Even now, nearly 20 years later, Lee listens to that inspirational tape of songs (along with close to three hours daily of any kind of music she can get her hands on). “I still find new lessons in her singing. I never forget to listen to the old greats and stand on their shoulders,” she says.

Lee grew up in Franklin, Pa., playing the piano since the age of 5 and singing (“loudly”) in the church choir. Though the encounter with Jeffrey proved significant, Lee had come to an earlier fork in her musical path at the age of 8. “I told my mother I wanted to quit. And she said, ‘Well, you have to tell your teacher yourself.’ So I went to the phone to place and the call and she said, ‘No, no, no. You have to do this in person.’ I thank my mother to this very day because I never had the guts to quit in person.”

Lucky for us. Lee has made a name for herself in Pittsburgh and beyond through



both her musical talent and her entrepreneurial spirit. Throughout her undergraduate tenure, Lee continued to deepen her study of jazz and blues before continuing on to Duke University’s School of Law, where she earned her degree with a concentration in Business and Entertainment Law. Family brought her back to Pittsburgh in 1994, which she chose over pursuing musical ventures in Austin, Texas, or Nashville, Tenn.

Lee’s passion for music pushed her to seek out a new mentor in Pittsburgh. What she found was more than one. “We have some of the deepest and most wonderful music mentors here in the Pittsburgh region. Tony Janflone, Sr., was one of my great mentors. He took me in and started teaching me by taking me out singing, the type of thing where [he’d say,] ‘I’m not going to tell you what the intros will be, I’m not going to tell you how to get out of the song, I’m not going to tell you what we’re going to do. I’m going to change up the arrangements and the chord changes

while you’re singing. Welcome to jazz. Good luck, kid.”

She cites a number of other prolific Pittsburgh jazz musicians on her mentor role call, including Roger Humphries, Etta Cox, Dr. Nelson Harrison, and Dr. James Johnson. From them, she learned that “the Land of the Giant Killers still lives.” That nickname for Pittsburgh’s Hill District came about during the 1930s and ‘40s when there were between 40 and 50 jazz clubs in operation, including two prominent clubs: The Crawford Grill and The Hurricane. It was there that musicians such as John Coltrane would come to play, and local artists, “would blow them off the stage,” says Lee. “Pittsburgh became quite a crossroads of culture.”

Lee's deep knowledge of and appreciation for that time in Pittsburgh's musical history is just another complimentary square in her diverse quilt of musical talent and initiatives. Lee heads up America's Music Crossroads Center, an initiative of the Pittsburgh Gateways Corporation. The organization works to accelerate the work of American art and music ventures that are both educationally and entrepreneurially minded. "I believe that, for me, as an artist, it's important to always learn. Second, practice, whatever your particular art form is. And third, give back. For me, that giving back involved taking that law degree and really helping people to start up educational and entrepreneurial ventures that pass the arts on."

For my music, I tell people this is how I vibe:  
**SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW, SOMETHING BORROWED,  
BUT IT'S ALWAYS BLUE.**

If I don't hear the blue, then I don't feel it.  
I really, really love, love, love  
to hear the blues in my jazz.

One of the projects that has come out of this initiative is a three-year-old program known as the DreamMakers Professional Artists Mentoring

Series, which works to build programs in schools to promote music and the arts to students. As part of this initiative, photographer Duane Rieder, who runs Engine House No. 25 and the Roberto Clemente Museum, has started the Clemente Society. Celebrities, athletes, entrepreneurs, and others (David Conrad and Franco Harris are a few of those already involved, along with Lee) are invited to make wine, the bottles featuring pictures of them shot by Rieder, to be auctioned off. A portion of the proceeds (at least 21 percent, for Clemente's number) will then be gifted back to the Clemente Museum and the DreamMakers initiative. Says Rieder, "Jess is an incredible person. I could go on and on about how talented she is, but the way she's helping these kids dream through this program is incredible."

Says Lee of the partnership with Rieder, "That's an example of bringing different ideas together to create sustainable ventures both in the for-profit and non-profit sectors." She is enthusiastic about the America's Music Crossroad Center and the Pittsburgh Gateways Corporation's work and partnerships with "many other non-profit and individual philanthropists, to help save some wonderful sacred sites. And probably the best one is the Crawford Grill [in the Hill District]. Now were raising money to renovate it."

Lee is actively working to expand her personal music repertoire and the reach of her music locally, nationally, and internationally. "I am committed to basing out of Pittsburgh. I just think it's a great place for entrepreneurial artists," she says.

In part, she's promoted herself by founding a production company and record label, ViveVenture Productions, and putting out two albums: Bluebird Fly and From a Silent Heart. She plans to release a new studio album by year's end, and on October 7, she will perform for a new, live recording during one of Velocity

Broadcasting First Spin sessions, a nationwide broadcast system created locally by Elias/Savion. Lee has been part of that changing music industry — “The goal is not necessarily to get a large record label deal anymore. The goal for a lot of American musicians is, rather, to create your own, independent artist entrepreneurship kind of presence, and then, partner with all kind of innovators to get your music out there to the world,” she says — leading the way with weekly Thursday night jazz networking meetings, an idea that she created in 2001. At the time, Lee was being recruited by Clifford Antone, owner of Antone’s Blues Club, to bring her entrepreneurial ideas to Austin, Texas. However, when she returned to Pittsburgh after their meeting, the idea for Entrepreneurial Thursdays was soon developed. The networking night, now in its 10<sup>th</sup> year, is held at Little E’s Jazz Club on Liberty Avenue. Over the course of its history, “We’ve had all kinds of people get funding for their ventures, getting new jobs from these connections, starting up new businesses, finding people who are encouraging artist entrepreneurship, creative entrepreneurship, and general entrepreneurship. It’s been a labor of love, but it’s amazing that we’re going to be 10 years old. And that’s a testament to the fact that we have so many people doing so many good things in Pittsburgh.”

*For more information on **Jessica Lee** and to view her performance schedule, visit [jessicaleesong.com](http://jessicaleesong.com).*

September 24<sup>th</sup>, 2010 | Category: Arts + Entertainment, Celebrity, Life, Music