

COMMENTARY / CULTURE

African American History Month- Zakiya Hooker



“The apple never falls far from the tree.”

Now we don't have to look to go too far for a truism of that adage. You see, Douglasville native Zakiya Hooker shares

a striking resemblance to her father in addition to their demeanor and sheer talent.

On my way to finishing up my last installment for African American History Month and wanting to depart from historical figures who typically get recognized during the month, I stopped by the home of Zakiya Hooker, a progeny of the blues legend, the late John Lee Hooker.

I sat on her couch with her husband, R&B singer Ollan Christopher Bell, (her dog Lisa) and talked about the latest news before shifting to a conversation about her and her remarkable life and career.

At first glance it would seem that Zakiya Hooker was born into the blues. You could even say she had a front-row seat to view the best the genre had to offer, right in her own living room as the daughter of John Lee Hooker. She started to follow in her father's career path in 1991, a year that turned out to be bittersweet for the younger Hooker. That was the year she took to the stage with her dad for the first time, and father and daughter delivered a duet.

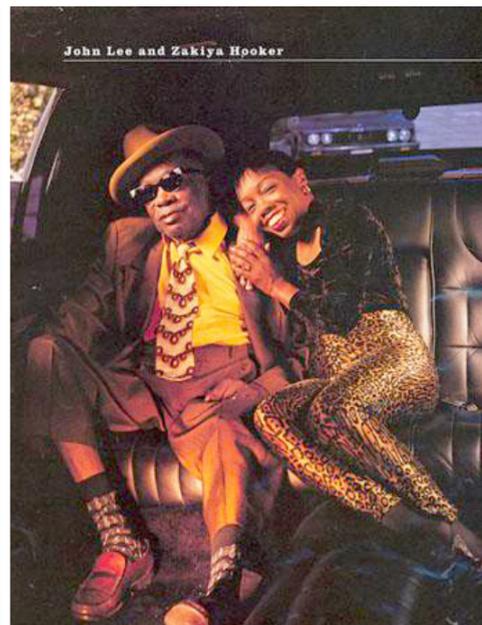
“I remember that as an intense, stomach-tightening experience,” she said. “I got sick after I left the stage and went straight home.” She was quick to say that in the end it was a heart-warming experience being on the stage with her dad.

“There I was a nobody on stage performing with one of the all-time greats who just happen to be my dad. There are no words to describe the bond and special love between father and daughter. None.”

As happy as that occasion was, Zakiya soon was forced to face tragedy. The youngest of her three children, John, 20, was killed in a car crash. Three years earlier, her son Maurice was jailed and faced a long confinement behind bars. But like



Left: Photo of John Lee Hooker & Zakiya Hooker, Hooker's 50th Anniversary Show (Photo by Jon Sievert/Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images) Right: Zakiya Hooker shares a striking resemblance to her father John Lee Hooker.



her father and a generation of blues artists before her, she learned how to prevail in the face of adversity.

“My mom was 18 when I was born and for years, I had a strained relationship with her. But she did the best she could raising eight kids and was always involved in our school activities. We reconciled before she passed away.”

After a 28-year career as a supervisor in the court system in San Francisco, she joined her dad on stage and afterwards launched her own singing career and performed on stages globally.

Zakiya, whose name at birth was Vera Lee Hooker, didn't change her name until after she'd relocated to California following the breakup of her first marriage. As a single parent, she re-christened herself with a first name that translates from Hebrew as “pure,” and from Swahili as “intelligence.” In 1987, she became acquainted with her next husband, Ollan Christopher, who had worked previously with Curtis Mayfield. The couple owns a recording studio, and Ollan contributes to his wife's music as bass player, co-songwriter, and producer. He also sang background on her second album. Zakiya has performed on shows with Etta James, Jon Hammond, Taj Mahal, Peter Green, Narada Michael Walden, Charlie Musselwhite and many more from all genres.

In 1993 she released her first CD “Another Generation of The Blues” on Silvertone Records. In 1997 she released her second CD “Flavors of The Blues” on Pointblank/Virgin Records. Her Flavors of The Blues opens with the Robert Johnson classic “Stones in My Passway”, illustrating Zakiya's supple blues and smooth, jazz-inflected style. The rest of the songs range from tempestuous (“Art of Divorce” and “Let's Do Something”) to delicate and moody (“Protect Me from The Blues”, “New Orleans Rain” and the torch gem “Drowning in Your Love”).

A recipient of numerous awards in her career, Hooker received awards from numerous Blues Societies in and out of California for her innovative style of music. In 2010 at the West Coast Blues Hall of Fame & Awards Show, Zakiya won “Blues CD of the Year” for “Keeping it real;” on Boogie with The Hook Records. She has spoken on Blues panels and given spoken word performances about this unique American art form. She was selected to give a spoken word performance at film director Martin Scorsese's Radio City Music Hall Blues Concert in 2003 in New York City.

Her style was on full display when she, husband Ollan and band delivered a jam-packed Valentine's Day concert at Douglasville's Vine Café and Market. The audience went

wild when she tossed off her wig and threw it on a table because it grew hot in the room.

“I think he would have really like it, especially since the rap music was clean and without profanity,” said Zakiya when asked how her dad would have reacted to the recent super bowl halftime show. “He would have especially liked the style of the women performers,” she said with a smile. Horticulture, baking, and jewelry making is how Hooker spends her time when not performing.

“With me, you see what you get,” she said. “I'm born to be a homemaker. Folks are surprised that I'm basically an introvert although I'm outgoing in public with people.”

When asked what advice she would impart to a young Zakiya Hooker 40 years ago, she paused before answering: “As my dad said, always be true to yourself and choose a mate wisely. And never forget to say I love you to people you do love. I never got to say those words to my late son John and really regret that.”

© Terry Howard is an award-winning writer and storyteller, contributing writer with the Chattanooga News Chronicle, The Douglas County Sentinel, The BlackMarket.com, The American Diversity Report, Hometown Advantage News, co-founder of the “26 Tiny Paint Brushes” writers' guild, and recipient of the 2019 Dr. Martin Luther King Leadership Award.

This Week in African American History

Augustus Washington 1820-1875



African American Daguerreotypist

Augustus Washington was one of the most talented and successful photographers in mid-1800s Connecticut. He was also an African American. Washington lived in Hartford from 1844 until 1853 and was actively involved in the Abolitionist Movement and the life of Hartford's free black community. Though his work depicts people of different classes and cultures, ironically, no portraits of African Americans survive from his years in Hartford.

Augustus Washington, the son of former slaves, was born free in Trenton, New Jersey, in 1820. Determined to get an education and working against the odds of poverty and racial prejudice, he attended schools in New Jersey, New York, and New Hampshire.

Although he was ultimately admitted to Dartmouth College in the fall of 1843, he was forced to leave after one year for financial reasons.

In addition to working at a variety of other jobs, Washington learned the skill of “daguerreotypy” in order to make money to pay for his education. The daguerreotype, named for Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre who invented the process in 1839, was the earliest form of photograph to become widely available. Its precise mirror-like images seemed miraculous to a public that previously had known only artists' renderings.

Washington came to Hartford in the fall of 1844 to run Talcott Street Congregational Church's North African School, one of two schools in Hartford for black students.

Under the leadership of the Reverend James W. C. Pennington, this church was a hub of regional anti-slavery activity.

In 1846, Washington left teaching and opened his daguerreotype studio on Main Street, one of 20 such studios that opened in Hartford between 1840 and 1855. Although many of these businesses quickly failed, Washington established a reputation for quality and prospered for more than six years. A newspaper advertisement at the time read “Washington is at home, and daily executing beautiful and correct Miniatures, equal to any in this country, at his uncommonly cheap prices.”

Believing that African Americans could not “develop [their] moral and intellectual capacities as a distinct people” in the United States, Washington and his family left Hartford for Africa in 1853. He became a prominent citizen of Liberia, a West African colony founded in 1820 for freed American slaves and others of African descent. ((by Mary Muller for your public library)



Top: Chancy Brown. Sixth Plate Daguerreotype by Augustus Washington, between 1856 and 1860. Bottom Left: Daguerreotype portrait of Eliphalet Bulkeley. Bulkeley was one of the wealthiest men in Hartford, Connecticut. Bottom Right: Unidentified Woman, Probably a Member of the Urias McGill Family. Sixth Plate Daguerreotype by Augustus Washington, 1855.