

Hallelujah!

Written by Margaret Evans

Tuesday, 24 May 2011 15:45 - Last Updated Wednesday, 25 May 2011 08:17



Marlena Smalls & the Hallelujah Singers are home for Gullah Festival... and, hopefully, for good.

“We haven’t done this in years,” Marlena Smalls tells me, sounding almost giddy. She’s referring to her upcoming performances with the Hallelujah Singers, happening at USCB smack dab in the middle of Gullah Festival.

“I’m always here for the Tour of Homes, but as for Gullah Festival? It’s been a very long time. I feel like I’m coming home.”

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After twenty years with the Hallelujah Singers, performing across the country at distinguished venues like the Kennedy Center and the Smithsonian – not to mention abroad – Smalls would like to make that “homey” feeling a bit more permanent.

“I want to flip it,” she says. “Instead of performing mostly away from home, I want people coming to Beaufort to hear what we do. I want to do more here in my own community. I’d still travel a bit. Go out every now and then... or prepare students to go out.”



Students? You heard that right. Marlena is currently working with another local music legend, Delbert Felix, to start a music school here in Beaufort. The plan is to offer instruction in both

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voice and instruments (keyboard and strings), for children and adults. Though the location is not yet certain, Smalls says things are moving along nicely, and she hopes to be open by September.

But back to her more immediate plans: Felix and Smalls are teaming up for a Blues & Jazz performance on Saturday, May 28th, during Gullah Festival. A graduate of the Berklee School of Music who's performed with the likes of Branford and Wynton Marsalis, Felix is bringing in his Delbert Felix Trio. They'll be playing with Gina Renè, a well-known jazz vocalist from Savannah, and newcomer Sumitra Red... who just happens to be Smalls' daughter. Smalls says she'll finish up the night, herself, "with some lowdown blues."

The next afternoon, Sunday, the Hallelujah Singers will perform what Smalls calls "a timeline of gospel music." They'll be joined on stage by an *a capella* group called The Men of Praise, from Columbia. Each ensemble will do its own thing, then the show will culminate with the two groups singing together.

Shivers running up your spine yet? Mine too.

I ask Smalls if her dreams have changed at all, now that she's looking at spending more time in Beaufort.

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“Our goal is the same as it’s always been. We want to continue the preservation of SC Lowcountry culture... while, at the same time, offering some wonderful entertainment for visitors and locals alike.”

Let this local be the first to say... welcome home.

If you go:

Saturday, May 28th

Blues & Jazz

Marlena Smalls, Gina Renè, Sumitra Red & the Delbert Felix Trio

8 pm

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Sunday, May 29th

Sounds of Gospel

Marlena Smalls, Hallelujah Singers, Men of Praise

5 pm

Both performances take place at the USCB Performing Arts Center; Tickets are \$22 (adults), \$18 (seniors & military), and \$15 (students) for each performance; On sale now at the USCB Box Office, or call (843) 521-4145.

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