

Life

NOVA SCOTIA MUSIC WEEK

Still Standing: Four the Moment legacy honoured

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When a quartet of Halifax women began singing together a cappella in the name of social justice in 1982, there was little in the way of a “music industry” at play in Atlantic Canada. And even if there had been, it’s likely that Four the Moment would still have had to do it all themselves, and trust in the community groundswell that supported the group in its mission to sing the truth, and present a Black Nova Scotian perspective on record and stages around the world in a way that hadn’t been heard before.

Forty years later, the group’s members past and present will be honoured with a special tribute at Sunday’s Music Nova Scotia Music & Industry Awards Brunch at Cape Breton’s Membertou Trade and Convention Centre. For a group that stopped performing full-time in 2000, it’s part of a stream of recent recognition that’s also included the presentation of the Slaughter Family Heritage Music Prize — a companion to the annual Polaris Music Prize which celebrates artistic excellence in Canadian recordings — and a new documentary, *Music Resistance* by Erica Meus-Saunders.

SINGING FOR A CAUSE

When sisters Delvina and Kim Bernard joined friends Deanna Sparks and Jackie Barkley to sing publicly for the first time, it was as part of a protest against the threat of a Ku Klux Klan chapter setting up shop in Nova Scotia. But there was also public action against racial profiling in Halifax and apartheid in South Africa, and that spirit of activism and community involvement is what made Four the Moment’s music so special from the beginning, and gave the group a sense of purpose that set it apart.

“These things all created a taxonomy, and an urgency to express ourselves as a community in different ways,” says Delvina Bernard, who continues that mission as Vice-Chair for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion for the East Coast Music Association.

“The fight of young people doing plays with the Cultural Awareness Youth Group, and Four the Moment doing what we were doing, and community organizers doing things as well, we were all part of that. But we were also trying to create an African Nova Scotian, and to some extent African Canadian, music aesthetic.”

The membership of Four the Moment would shift, with Barkley becoming the group’s manager and Andrea Currie stepping in, while Sparks left the group with Debby Jones joining prior to the recording of the debut album *We’re Still Standing* in 1988. When Jones went on to pursue her teaching career a short time later, actor/singer/dancer Anne-Marie Woods became the fourth piece of the puzzle for the lineup that played festivals and concert halls across Canada, the U.S. and in Europe, and released two more albums, *Live!* (1993) and *In My Soul* (1995).

‘A PERFECT STORM’ OF BLACK CULTURE

What didn’t change was that reliance on the power of the



Two decades after they stopped singing together full-time, Halifax vocal group Four the Moment will be honoured for its contributions to East Coast music and activism at this weekend’s Music Nova Scotia Awards in Sydney. **PETER MARSMAN**



Four the Moment released its third and final album *In My Soul* in 1995. **FLORIAN KUCHUREAN**

human voice to paint a picture and tell a story, weaving together harmonies that invoked the spirit of Africville families and West Hants County gypsum miners, or the lives of a slave, Lydia Jackson, and murdered South African activist Steven Biko. Largely sung without instruments, so Four the Moment could perform anywhere, anytime.

Bernard calls it “a perfect storm” of influences in the mid-’80s, with the music of Canadian political folk-roots artists like Faith Nolan and Lillian Allen, and Nova Scotia poets Maxine Tynes and George Elliott Clarke, plus Bernard’s husband, musician and St. Mary’s University professor Harvi Millar, who became the group’s technician in the studio and on the road.

“George’s poetry spurred me to begin writing in the same vein, and then people were coming to us to write songs. An incident would happen like (racial violence at) Cole Harbour High, and we wrote *Lullaby for Cole Harbour*. Or Sylvia Hamilton asked us to write a song for a documentary, and Christene Browne flew us to Toronto to look at rushes for a National Film Board documentary, and out of that came *Voices in the*

Dark and Arlina’s Prayer.

“So there was this conversation between Four the Moment and the community that cross-pollinated and fertilized what became the music. It was kind of special.”

Woods remembers auditioning for Four the Moment shortly after *We’re Still Standing* came out. They met in the Kiddy Capers preschool room at George Dixon Centre where she was working the front desk while also attending theatre school at Dalhousie University. CBC Radio had been playing the album across Canada, summer tour dates were on the horizon, and Jones was taking her leave from the group.

“Being so young, I was still working through who I was as an artist, I was probably trying to be a rapper and a singer,” says Woods, who would go on to establish herself as a playwright and actor locally and eventually in Toronto. She remembers the moment when everything clicked, while performing for a high school class in Kingston.

“A young person gave me a poem that they wrote, and that’s when it all came together, and I realized I was in the right place, doing the right thing. It was when that young per-



We’re Still Standing, the debut 1988 album by Halifax’s Four the Moment, received the 2022 Slaughter Family Heritage Music Prize from the Polaris Music Prize association in October. On Sunday the group will be honoured by Music Nova Scotia at its annual Music & Industry Awards Brunch at Nova Scotia Music Week in Cape Breton. **JAM PRODUCTIONS**

son felt comfortable enough to come to me and share that poem so proudly.”

A MUSICAL EDUCATION

Woods calls her time in Four the Moment the ultimate education, expanding on what she’d learned about Black history from her brother, writer and historian David Woods, and feminism, but also as an artist, learning to be confident on stage and “making sure that you don’t settle for less than you’re worth, not letting people dictate what your artistry should be. Four the Moment never did those things.”

Decades later, the music remains powerful, and the message is still potent, at a time when many of the same issues are being confronted, in the face of racial profiling and in the name of Black Lives Matter. Four the Moment last sang together at a 2019 event for Adsum House and a packed 2018 *Belong Forum* with legendary activist Angela Davis at Dalhousie University, and its efforts to foster young artists

through a Nova Scotia Talent Trust scholarship and her cultural foundation Imani Enterprises, and the music of the Kim and Delvina’s daughters Amariah Bernard-Washington and triple Music Nova Scotia Award nominee Zamani.

Both daughters will perform in Sunday’s tribute, along with North Preston’s Haliey Smith and Michah Smith, in the awards show that also features this year’s top nominee, Fall River songwriter DeeDee Austin, Music Nova Scotia artist-in-residence Jody Upshaw and Kxng Wooz.

“Being in Four the Moment helped me to be an ambassador for my province, to go to these events and bring our stories of the Black Nova Scotian experience; the good, the bad and the ugly,” says Delvina Bernard. “We weren’t doing it to talk Nova Scotia down, we just wanted people to learn about the stuff that none of us got to learn in school.

“So we became the curriculum, and that was our classroom, and the stage was really a wonderful marriage.”