

## **Lady Is Lonely**

*Karen Carroll is one of the few women left in the blues.*

Karen Carroll does not sing the blues like most women. Her gruff blasts of jazz-tinged, deep bass vocals recall the gritty tradition of Chicago bluesmen Junior Wells and Syl Johnson. It's a sound she comes by naturally. "Growing up, my voice was so deep, I couldn't sing high," says Carroll, 50, who is one of only two women—the other is Koko Taylor—headlining the Chicago Blues Festival in June.

What's happened to all of the women in the blues? Despite the key role played by Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Ida Cox in the 1920s, contemporary blues remains largely a man's domain in terms of both musicians and fans. Carroll's own blues pedigree flows from her mother, Jeanne Carroll, a noted Chicago musician who performed with Muddy Waters. "She didn't want me playing music because it was too hard," says Carroll, who sneaked into South Side clubs anyway without her mother's approval. When Carroll was 17, her godmother, the late blues belter Bonnie Lee, coaxed the teen onstage to sing. "My mommy gave me a look that said, 'You got a lot of nerve,'" she recalls. "But over the years, she saw it as not such a bad thing."

In the early 1990s, Carroll followed her mother to Europe, where she makes a good living playing only four nights a month. "Blues is a courageous music, and I'm happy to be a conveyor," she says. "But blues has to evolve so that it continues to touch people"—hence her recent forays into hip-hop and her decision to enlist her son for a guest rapper spot at Blues Fest on Sunday, June 8th.

—ROSALIND CUMMINGS-YEATES



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