

June, 85, will sing and take top honour at Jazz Day event

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Updated: Apr 20, 2023



Getting her flowers: June Caisey is looking forward to singing on stage as part of International Jazz Day on April 30 (Photograph by Jessie Moniz Hardy)

June Caisey found out she was going to be honoured for International Jazz Day and was thrilled – until she discovered she wouldn't be performing on the stage.

The veteran entertainer took the matter up with Shine Hayward, the organiser of the April 30 celebration, who told her to do whatever she wanted.

Ms Caisey, 85, will be singing John Lennon's *Imagine*, with her grandson Zion "Desta" Wilson as back up.

She is particularly excited about the performance at Cambridge Beaches as things have been very quiet for her since the pandemic began three years ago.

"Except for doing a funeral here and there, and an event every now and then, I have not been doing any singing," she said. "I found staying home during the pandemic very hard. It is stifling, literally. I have been an active person all my life and to have to be still is actually making me sick."

Ms Caisey grew up a "Pond Dog" – her home was only a short trip away from the "pond", the old Marsh Folly Dump.

"I was a tomboy in those days," she said. "I would do anything anyone dared me to do. I used to jump across the pond, just like the boys."

She started out singing in the choir at St Paul African Methodist Episcopal Church at the tender age of four.

She got a real taste for entertainment when she was in an operetta called *Zurika: The Gypsy Maid* put on by the late Olga Scott, then a music teacher at the Central School.

"I was about ten," she said. "I wasn't scared or nervous at all. I loved being in that production."

She went on to sing in the choir at the Berkeley Institute and at Alma College in Michigan.

"I did general studies," she said. "I had a teacher who wanted me to become a physical education teacher. I did love sports, but I was not particularly studious. I did what I had to do to pass my classes."

After college, she went to work for Terry Brannon at a record store called The Bandstand on the corner of Queen and Church Streets, where W J Boyle & Son Ltd is today. Mr Brannon later opened the popular 40 Thieves Nightclub on Front Street.

"I always liked to mess around and hum or sing while I worked," Ms Caisey said. "In 1958, a hotelier who had something to do with the Hamilton Princess died.

"I cannot remember what his name was now. He wanted a Black jazz singer at his funeral. Someone asked Terry for his recommendation and he suggested me."

Elsbeth and Don Gibson heard her sing at the funeral at St Mark's Church in Smith's, and were impressed.

"They asked me if I would be in a show they were putting on in the hotels called The Holiday Island Revue," Ms Caisey said. "I said, 'Yes, why not.'"

She performed with Pinky and Gene Steede, Dudley Browne and others. The show at Harmony Hall in Paget promised conga dancing and "bongo dynamics".

It was so popular they often performed seven nights a week.

"Sometimes we would have two shows a night," Ms Caisey said.

Over the years, she became known for limbo dancing but she insists she was more than a "limbo dancer" because everything they did was choreographed.

She married another entertainer, Albert "Whitey" Caisey, around the time that she started with the Holiday Island Revue, and they had four children – Phiemma, Albert, Clinton and Taur. They often performed together as a couple, but later divorced.

"I worked during the day at The Bandstand," she said. "Then I put my children to bed, and left them with my mother while I went out to perform. My mother was really good to me."

That gig led to many others throughout the 1960s and 1970s such as the Somers Isle Revue with Fred Smith and The Minstrel Follies at the Bermudiana Hotel.

Throughout her career she tried to stay true to herself.

"Although I was often nervous before a performance I still did what I wanted to do," she said. "If I did not like a song, then I would not sing it. I was singing at a funeral recently. The organist said, 'You can't sing that song that way.' I said, 'Then I'll sing it without music.' He ended up playing. I have to be me."

In more recent years, she often put on musical fundraisers with family members such as her daughter Phiemma, a singer in her own right, and her grandson Desta.

"Looking back at my career the most beautiful moments were singing in nursing homes," she said. "Ghandi Burgess was the one who introduced me to that at Lefroy House. Then Michael Perinchief and myself did a perfect combination at Lefroy House for two years and then we did rest homes all over the island."

They never did it for money. It was just to entertain the elderly and unwell. But it all stopped with the pandemic.

In October 2020, Ms Caisey had a mini comeback after appearing in a Scooter Mart commercial with John Burch and Cleveland "Outta Sight" Simmons.

"I even had schoolchildren recognising me from that commercial," she laughed.

At a martial arts event last year, one side of her face swelled up and she had trouble raising one of her arms.

At King Edward VII Memorial Hospital, doctors found that she had had a minor stroke.

"They said I had had several small strokes in the past," Ms Caisey said. "I am fine now. I just feel a little tired sometimes."

But she is looking for more opportunities to perform again.

"I would be happy to do one night a week," she said. "I would not mind if it was at a rest home."

Wendell "Shine" Hayward's Danji Productions has been producing International Jazz Day in Bermuda for the past decade. This year's concert, on April 30, will be held at Cambridge Beaches and will include Tiffany Fox, Conrad Roach, Shelton Bean, Tony Bari, Gita Blakeney and other entertainers. Tickets are available at www.bdatix.bm and are \$165 for dinner and the show, or \$75 for just the show