NNENNA FREELON

Biography

Award-winning Jazz Vocalist / Composer / Actress / Playwright

Six-time GRAMMY® Award nominee Nnenna Freelon has earned a well-deserved reputation as a compelling and captivating live performer.

Nnenna is also a wife, mother, and sister who has experienced life's amazing gifts, and also its heartbreak. The loss of her soulmate and husband, renowned architect Phil Freelon, in 2019 to ALS, followed by the loss of her sister Debbie in 2020 to cancer, have reshaped her way of being in the world.

Nnenna has felt the need to find her "voice" once more through the lens of grief and loss. Her new recording "Time Traveler" is a reflection of this new territory, an intimate expression of her love for Phil and their 40 year journey and a universal love letter to all who’ve lost someone dear. Her award-winning new Podcast, Greatgrief with Nnenna Freelon, is her effort to create a safe space to share others' stories of loss and grief, and to help build and strengthen community through words and music.

Through these difficulties, Nnenna has received remarkable accolades in the past year. First, she was inducted into the North Carolina Music Hall of Fame. Second, Nnenna received another GRAMMY® Award nomination for her recent album, 2021’s Time Traveler. Third, and to round out 2022, she received the Jazz Masters Award from the prestigious “Women’s Jazz and Blues Association of Palm Springs”

As touring in live performance returned after the pandemic, Nnenna starred alongside Take 6, Tom Scott, Kirk Whalum and Clint Holmes in the critically acclaimed show “Georgia on My Mind: Celebrating the Music of Ray Charles,” where she is no stranger to the music of the
master singer – she toured with Ray Charles, as well as many other greatest jazz artists including Al Jarreau, George Benson, Benny Golson, Ellis Marsalis, and others.

Nnenna has always been respected as an artist and for her passion for education. In November 2011, The White House asked Freelon to headline the Asia Pacific Economic Conference (APEC) for 300 Presidents, Premiers and Heads of State from around the world. This was on the heels of receiving the YWCA of North Carolina’s inaugural “Legend Award” for her outstanding artistry and her dedication to education.

Freelon has dedicated herself to educating young people, both musicians and non-musicians, and students of all ages. She toured the United States for four years as the National Spokesperson for Partners in Education. Her master classes and workshops, from “Sound Sculpture” to the ground-breaking “Babysong,” teach adults and children that you too can change the world – even one person at a time. With her anthem “One Child at a Time” found on her Soulcall recording, Freelon took on the task of fundraising and bringing greater attention to the needs of children in education through mentoring and the arts. It has become a sought-after song by countless organizations including the United Way.

As writer, composer and producer, Nnenna’s productions include the original theatrical presentation of The Clothesline Muse, a devised theatrical work of dance, music, spoken word, vibrant art and projections. She is also one of the stars of the musical theater piece. The Clothesline Muse premiered at the Painted Bride Arts Center in Philadelphia in 2013 with a national tour underway in 2015. The production was accomplished with the assistance of her daughter, visual artist Maya Freelon-Asante and Kariamu Welsh, Chairman of Dance at Temple University. The play won a National Theater Project creation grant from the New England Foundation for the Arts (NEFA), a much sought after honor only awarded to six worthy recipients. The play has also been supported by the National Performance Network.

The play explores the intergenerational relationship between Grandma Blu, played by Freelon, and her granddaughter Mary Mack, played by Cloteal Horne. The clothesline becomes a magical place where memories are shared and stories told. “The young Mary has little interest in the past,” explains Nnenna, “but discovers that there are more than just clean white sheets hanging ‘on the line’.” In addition to Horne and Freelon, The Clothesline Muse features a cast of five dancers and live original music composed by Freelon. This is not her first stint acting. Freelon made her feature film debut in “What Women Want” starring Mel Gibson.

In the company of other great artists, Nnenna triumphed in composer Laura Karpman’s undertaking of Langston Hughes’ “Ask Your Mama” at The Apollo Theater and at an astounding the Hollywood Bowl concert with opera superstar Jessye Norman and the indie phenom band The Roots. She also wowed audiences at SRO shows at the Tanglewood Jazz Festival with the Duke Ellington inspired “Dreaming The Duke,” with classical star Harolyn Blackwell and pop-jazz-crossover pianist Mike Garson.

Nnenna’s talent is not limited to performing. Her TV appearance on In Performance At the White House, celebrating the 20th Anniversary of the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz, led to the versatile songstress/composer having a featured song on the hit TV show Mad Men. That was
followed by a new collaboration on tour with legendary guitarist Earl Klugh and with legendary pianist Ramsey Lewis.

Honors and awards are nothing new for Nnenna. In 2019, she received from the National Association of Women In The Arts the “Youth Empowerment Through the Arts” Award and “Artist of the Year” Award. “She was named a 2010 “Woman of Substance” by Bennett College for Woman, delivered the Keynote Address for the 2010 Arts Midwest Conference, and much more. Freelon is a winner of both the Billie Holiday Award from the prestigious Academie du Jazz and the Eubie Blake Award from the Cultural Crossroads Center in New York City. She was nominated twice as “Lady of Soul” by the Soul Train Awards.

At the 43rd annual GRAMMY Awards telecast from Los Angeles, she inspired an enthusiastic standing ovation from 20,000 music industry insiders and other celebrities when she took to the stage. She receives similar reaction for her ongoing concert, television and special event performances such as the prestigious headline spot for ActionAID, Sir Elton John’s International AIDS fundraiser.

Born and raised in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Freelon received her undergraduate degree from Simmons College in Boston. Her parents and singing in the church gave the singer her first exposure to the arts – especially to the art of jazz. Her father played Count Basie recordings and her mother’s active involvement in their church led Freelon to an appreciation of all music. Ultimately she pursued a career in jazz in which she has excelled. All the while, Freelon has cherished and held dear her two most important lifetime roles – wife and mother. Her husband, the late Phil Freelon was an award-winning architect whose work as the lead architect of The Smithsonian Institute’s Museum of African American Culture and History has received worldwide praise. As the mother of three, Freelon has led by example – follow your dreams, dedicate yourself, and work hard in all you do.

Her recording career has brought consistent respect and sales for the artist, both for her solo albums and those on which she collaborates or is featured in duets. Nnenna Freelon prepared to go back into the recording studio with Take 6, and others for a forthcoming new studio recording as she continues to create a diverse and outstanding legacy from her performances to her recordings to her theatrical endeavors, which have garnered an ever-growing fan base from audiences to leaders worldwide.

Additional Awards and Honors include...

- 2022 – Grammy Award Nominee (Time Traveler), Best Jazz Vocal Album
- 2022 – Ambie Award Nominee (Great Grief), Best Original Score and Music Supervision
- 2022 – Ambie Award Nominee (Great Grief), Best Personal Growth / Spirituality Podcast
- 2022 – Induction into the North Carolina Music Hall of Fame
- 2022 – Jazz Masters Award from Women In Jazz
- 2011 – President’s Selected Performance for World Dignitaries at the Asia-Pacific Economic Conference (APEC)
- 2010 – Women of Substance Award – Bennett College for Women (Greensboro, NC)
- 2007 – Spirit of Hayti Award (significant contribution to the arts and education)
- 2005 – Grammy Award Nominee (Blueprint Of A Lady), Best Jazz Vocal Performance
• 2004 – “Women Of Note” – Raleigh, NC
• 2003 – Outstanding Artistry, “Airmen of Note”, United States Air Force Band
• 2000 – Grammy Award Nominee (Soulcall), Best Jazz Vocal Performance
• 2000 – Grammy Award Nominee (Soulcall), Best Jazz Arrangement w/Accompanying Vocal
• 2001 – Trailblazer Award, International Women in Jazz
• 2001 – California Partner’s In Education Award
• 2001 – Durham Council for the Arts Walter J. Norflett Award – Artist of the Year
• 2001 – National Inventor’s Hall Of Fame – Artist Award
• 1998 – Grammy Award Nominee (Maiden Voyage), Best Jazz Vocal Performance
• 1999 – “Lady of Soul” Nominee – Soul Train Awards
• 1999 – Honorary Doctor of Music, Elizabeth City State University
• 1996 – Grammy Award Nominee (Shaking Free), Best Jazz Vocal Performance
• 1996 – “Lady of Soul” Nominee – Soul Train Awards
• 1993 – “Indie Award”, Best Jazz Vocal
• 1993 – “Billie Holiday Award”, Academie du Jazz (France)
• 1993 – “Eubie Blake Award”, Cultural Crossroads Center
• 1992 – Grammy Award Nominee (Nnenna Freelon), Best Jazz Arrangement w/Accompanying Vocal

Appearances
• Movies What Women Want – soundtrack and feature film debut The Visit – soundtrack and video
• Radio NPR’s New Year’s Eve National Broadcast Jazz Set with Branford Marsalis Voice of America, With Willis Conover NPR Piano Jazz, Marian McPartland NPR’s “All Things Considered” NPR’s “The State of Things” XM Satellite Christmas Special

Noteable Appearances
• 2003 National Minority AIDS Council International Conference
• 2003 DIVAS: Simply Singing
• 2003 Vagina Monologues
• 2003 International Association of Jazz Educators (Gala performance)
• 2002 Society of Singers Gala – Honoring Placido Domingo
• 2002 Soul Gone Home – Langston Hughes’ one woman play with Mallarme Chamber Players
• 2002 Luyala Folk Opera (c. William Banfield)
• 2001 Society of Singers Gala – Honoring Julie Andrews
• 2001 Jerry Lewis’ MDA Labor Day Telethon
• 2001 VARIETY: The Children’s Charity
• 2001 DIVAS: Simply Singing
• 2001 Presidential Inaugural Gala Performance
• 1999 National Mayor’s Conference
• Carnegie Hall, Monterey Jazz Festival, Atlanta Jazz Festival, The Kennedy Center, Ravinia Festival, Montreux Jazz Festival, Montreal Jazz Festival; with National Symphony Orchestra, and numerous other major festivals, symphonies, and concerts venues worldwide

Composition Awards & Honors
• “Button Up”, Grammy Nominated Arrangement
• “One Child At A Time”, Theme Song for Partner’s In Education

Discography

• Columbia Records: Listen 1994 Heritage 1993 Nnenna Freelon 1992


• Associates

Yusef Lateef – Heart Vision 1992

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