

Interview – The Guardian

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Beverley Knight: ‘It’s been a harder journey than if I’d acquiesced. But sod that’

Returning to the stage to play Faye Treadwell, formidable manager of the Drifters, the singer and actor explains how she faced down sexism and racism to forge her own career path in Britain.



Beverley Knight strides out of rehearsals for her new musical and breaks out a smile, a few bars of song and a box of biscuits. “That’s a bit more like it – come on!” It’s the end of a long day’s practice for *The Drifters Girl* and Knight doesn’t seem the least fatigued – she is cheery, focused and unerringly upfront. What does she think of the government’s initial pandemic response? “A deer in the headlights.” Luvvie-bashers? “They need the arts more than they think.” Another winter lockdown? “Hell no! We’re on stage!” And diversity in theatre? “It’s not just needing a few more black people up in this building. We need all kinds of everyone.”

Knight became famous as a singer, but has been involved in the theatre, on and off, since she was five. This musical gives her latest lead role as Faye Treadwell, formidable manager of the Drifters, the honeyed R&B vocal group behind the 50s

and 60s classics There Goes My Baby, Saturday Night at the Movies and Under the Boardwalk. “She was ex-tra-ord-in-ar-y,” she declares, slapping out the syllables on the table with joy and awe. The Drifters’ music has been with Knight, 48, since her dad crooned Save the Last Dance for Me around their Wolverhampton home. It’s easy to be sentimental about their lush ballads of last dances, first kisses and magic moments, but those harmonies give the songs a smoothness that belies their fractious backstage dramas. Treadwell took over managing the band from her husband, George, when he died in 1967, and transformed their fortunes. “She was a firefighter,” reckons Knight. “A couple of the Drifters, Faye had to kick to the kerb – they’d endure anything but being told what to do by a woman.” After more than 25 years in the music business, Knight can relate. “My own career has been about maintaining control of the art at all costs. A lot of it has been men trying to tell me what to look like, what to sound like.”

Take the song Gold, from 2002. Knight wrote it as a paean to self-worth and practised what she preached when it came to recording it. She thought it needed simplicity because it was a “message song”. But one potential producer wanted “this huge orchestration” on the recording. “I said, ‘No, that is absolutely not my vision for the song.’ ‘I’m the producer,’ [he said]. Well, I am the writer and the artist. I said: ‘I’m in my 20s; I don’t want to sound like I’m in my 40s.’”

The producer stepped out of the session, never returned. “Because this young woman who knew exactly what she wanted, and how she wanted it, had spoken her mind. Had I been a male artist ...” Her eyes widen. She needn’t finish the sentence. When she eventually recorded the song, it was the standout of her Top 10 album Who I Am.

After the abandoned session, Knight remembers being asked: “What did you say? What did you do to upset him?” Her face is indignant. “I was not having that. That has been the template of my career. I know what I want to do. I don’t want to go down that route. You’re not going to make me.” In 2009, she says, “Parlophone wanted me to sign one of those 360-degree agreements [a contract whereby artists give the company a percentage of different income streams beyond record sales] ... But I’d established a long career. I said bye-bye.”

She left to set up her own label, releasing the album 100%, which included a pointedly titled track, Soul Survivor (featuring Chaka Khan, no less). Knight can slay

a soul song, and has covered classics by Ann Peebles and former Drifter Ben E King, but she's also a power-balladeer and a fiend for funk. Prince and David Bowie were fans and mentors to her – she cherishes her memories of meeting both. There have been major gear changes in her career, such as a switch from R&B to pop with her single *Come As You Are* in 2004 and her entry into musical theatre with *The Bodyguard* in 2013. Both were seen as risks, she says. Both were big hits. “It’s been a harder journey than if I’d acquiesced on certain things,” she accepts. “But sod that.”

To be single-minded, says Knight, is interpreted as “you’re a diva, you’re difficult”. But she has found ways to hold her ground, to borrow a phrase from her defiant dancehall-inflected anthem *Get Up!* “I am aware of what I look like. I have these big eyes, I look like a child. My face is open and very expressive. I know I can disarm hostility.” She’s been code-switching since her youth, she explains. “The way you spoke to your mates at home, and then, without taking a breath, walk into a world of straight, white, powerful men and know what would be the language they’d want to hear. Without losing yourself and compromising who you are. We did it effortlessly.” As did Faye Treadwell. “She spoke the language of the powerful men like [Atlantic Records president] Ahmet Ertegun. She could speak to the Drifters on their level.” Faye’s daughter, Tina, now oversees the group’s legacy, and *The Drifters Girl* is based on her idea. Knight, Tina Treadwell tells me, has “an undercurrent of metal” like her mother.



Beverly Knight and Tina Treadwell last year in Los Angeles

Gospel music was a foundation to the Drifters sound – and Knight’s childhood home. Her dad was raised in the Moravian Church, her mum in a Pentecostal church. As a performer, Knight – who did a degree in theology – draws on the “order, presence and delivery” of the former church and the “passion, soul and unbridled emotion” of the latter.

The Drifters Girl was originally due to open last year, then postponed because of the pandemic. It has taken on deeper meaning in the interim. Initially, Knight was just drawn to the story of a “badass”, complex and inspiring woman. “And then” – she pauses for a breath – “George Floyd was murdered in front of our eyes, in real time, for nine minutes. That changed everything.” The Black Lives Matter protests cast a new light on the production, which will consider “not just the racism of the Jim Crow era in which Faye grew up. That’s the surface. The rest of it is a conversation about what’s going on right now.” She reflects on the Sewell commission’s race report earlier this year, which was widely accused of playing down the effect of racism on Britons’ life chances. “It’s not just black people who were saying this is ridiculous – of course there’s systemic and institutionalised racism! A majority voice in this country said, ‘Well, that’s an absolute whitewash, isn’t it?’” The Windrush scandal, she says, is “absolutely the result of what happens when an institution is inherently racist or has racist practices”.

Her Jamaican parents came to England as part of the Windrush generation. Her father arrived in Wolverhampton in 1959, her mother five years later. “Dad came with his brothers. They all turned up and worked in factories. My dad had a plan to build his own business, learn as much as he could. He went off and did exactly that. Mum came over and wanted to train as a nurse in the NHS. The families knew each other because they came from the same village in Jamaica.” Knight’s parents married in 1968 – the year, she points out, that their local MP, Enoch Powell, gave his inflammatory “rivers of blood” speech. “It wasn’t easy,” she says, talking about the racism she experienced at school. “People would say stuff to us that now wouldn’t just get them sacked, but would probably get them a spell in prison.”

Her dad told her “there was nothing that would hold me back apart from myself”, she says. “I never grew up with the sort of inferiority complex that I saw some of the other kids who were black did. It became resentment, which became anger. I never grew up with any of that because I knew my own worth from a tiny age. It enabled me as an adult to be able to walk into a record label – especially with a degree behind me – and think: none of you intimidate me. My voice is valid – it will be heard.”

When she was younger, says Knight, she had partners who could be controlling and jealous. “They could see I was on a path to something else, and that they probably couldn’t come with me, so they wanted to rein me in.” Since 2012, she has been married to James O’Keefe, who launched a podcast last year called *The Plus Ones*, about what life is like for the non-famous other-halves of celebrities. Its artwork is a caricature of O’Keefe smiling, holding Knight’s handbag as she sashays down the red carpet.

The Drifters Girl is the latest in a line of revisionist musicals – including *Six* and *Emilia* – about women written out of history. “People were up in arms about statues being toppled,” she says of last year’s protests. “But everyone knows that history! The history’s stamped all over Bristol in the names of streets and venues. But there are so many women – and women of colour – who are invisible. Until guess who puts it to the fore? The arts.”

Casting has become more inclusive – in 2018, Knight played suffragette leader Emmeline Pankhurst in the musical *Sylvia* at the Old Vic – but there is much progress to be made backstage. Last summer, an open letter from the Black Theatre Collective, signed by more than 400 theatre figures, called for “actionable reform”

and highlighted that black performers feel unsupported in hair and wig departments. Knight recently made her film debut in Amazon Prime's Cinderella and was "shocked out of my life" that the head of hair and makeup was black. "I was hopeful just to get a makeup artist who at least knew what the hell they were doing with the makeup. And dared to dream they'd know what to do with my hair." She clicks her fingers. "But we just got on with it. It wasn't a thing."

Now she's getting on with *The Drifters Girl* and the nerves that don't come with music gigs. "If I am on a stage, performing with any band anywhere, there's no fear," she says. But when it comes to learning where to stand, when to exit from a scene in a play? "It's nerve-racking!" She leaps up from her seat to explain how loose the show will feel, without cumbersome set changes. "I'm here outside the courtroom," she says, then takes a few steps. "Now I'm in the club, and Nat King Cole is trying to chat me up."

She's alive to the magic of it all, the rush of sharing the story with an audience. So what's her favourite Drifters song? On Broadway, no question: "Because of the desire to move up, be better, be a star. Something about that spoke directly to me. I had no doubt that I would sing for my supper for the rest of my life."

The Drifters Girl opens at the Garrick Theatre, London, on 4 November.