

MUSIC

Sitting in a small café in one of New York's leading gay and lesbian bookstores, her hair pulled back, dressed down in brown slacks and turtleneck, Joi Cardwell is a stark contrast from the powerhouse diva that ignited the pulses of a packed gay crowd at Vinyl, one of Manhattan's hottest Sunday night dance clubs, just four nights earlier.

Subdued, relaxed and soft-spoken, she sits in contrast to the jazz-tinged vocalist who, supported by her band and two backup singers (including dance favorite Sandy B.), captivated a standing-room-only crowd with her emotion-filled performance in December at The Cooler, a West Village haunt for cutting-edge musicians and performers.

But the contrast is not surprising for the diverse and multi-talented singer/songwriter/producer. A savvy performer who is gaining a strong hold in a male-dominated industry, the 30-year-old mezzo-soprano with a four-and-a-half-octave range is a mixture of many things musical: jazz, R&B, dance, pop. And nothing proves this more than her recent self-titled Eightball recording—a delicious collection of upbeat, mid-tempo and sultry tunes.

With more than a dozen club hits behind her, Cardwell is one of today's hottest dance artists. Her single "Soul to Bare" made it to No. 2 on *Billboard's* club play chart last year, and this year she was nominated for a Gay and Lesbian American Music Award for the song "You Got to Pray."

"I'm very pleased and excited about the new album because it's really all about me. It's all about my vision and my production," she says. "It started out as two albums—one dance, one R&B—but we took all the dance songs, kept one R&B ballad, and put it all together. I worked with eight producers. I was the only one connected with each song and had the vision all the way through. One producer didn't know what the other one was doing—only I did. So they had free rein to produce it the way they wanted."

Cardwell is much more than a dance vocalist. While she recalls the magic of Donna Summer or other disco divas, she also evokes images of Billie Holiday, Dinah Washington and early Diana Ross. She's as comfortable with a soul or jazz tune as she is with the groove of a high-energy kicker.

Cardwell is equally comfortable with her sexuality. She makes no bones about being gay;

it's something she's never tried to hide or disguise. Out since she was 21, Cardwell says she's never thought about compromising her personal self-worth to achieve commercial success. To her, being a lesbian is just part of her makeup, along with being African American and Latina.

"I don't go around telling everybody I'm gay...but if someone asks, I am more than

like I decided to do this," she recalls. "It was decided for me. I just went with it."

It wasn't until her late teens, however, that she took it seriously. While a student at NYU, where she earned a bachelor's degree in liberal arts, she was coaxed into entering amateur night at the Apollo Theater in Harlem. Singing "For Your Eyes Only," the Sheena

"Holdin' On"; and Epic's "Was It Something I Said?"

When it seemed she was headed toward the fate of a forgotten diva-wannabe, Cardwell did what few in her field do: She took matters into her own hands. By 1994 she negotiated a contract with New York indie label Eightball Records and recorded, produced and wrote her first full-length album, *The World Is Full of Trouble*.

The album was a blend of down-tempo cuts with a few dance tunes tossed in, and Cardwell gained attention from the fierce remixes that followed.

"It was promoted to the public as a dance record, almost exclusively, even though most of it wasn't. If you picked up that album, many of the songs like 'You Got to Pray,' sound totally different. The only single that sounds the same is 'Trouble,'" she says. "But it was written that way. To me the songs on that album were the songs to listen to on the way out of the club."

Four years later, Cardwell has paid her dues and earned the title of diva. No longer a faceless voice lost in the crowd, the multi-talented performer is now a force to be reckoned with.

She attributes her ability to get around the road blocks and curve balls to her strong determination and belief in her talent.

"I've always been an individual. I've never wanted to be one of the flock. My grandmother always said she saw a strength in me, that I walked my own path," she says. "Ultimately, your life is in your hands and you have to be in control of it. And I want to make a difference in this world. I want to be known, ultimately, as a great songwriter and vocalist. My goal is never to be faceless."

She's determined to continue moving into the mainstream and to gain more crossover appeal.

"I want to be seen and heard by as many people as possible. I want to be out with my band on the road, going on at eight o'clock instead of three o'clock in the morning. Every artist wants to be bigger. I see myself as being a popular artist, not just a dance artist," she says. "I'm not the Debbie Gibson, bubble gum pop singer. I want to be popular on the basis of being exposed to that type of audience who have all types of music coming at them through various channels."

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She did it her way

Dance diva Joi Cardwell has broken from the pack and she isn't looking back

BY JEFFREY L. NEWMAN

happy to tell them. I'm very proud of being gay," she says.

In fact, one of the album's best tracks, "Found Love," was inspired by her girlfriend of three years.

The singer, who says her sexuality has never held her back professionally, says part of the reason she feels strongly about being out is to show the younger generation that it's OK to be who you are.

"Children never see people who are out in this industry. I think it's important to show diversity and individuality, especially to minority children, who say, 'What about me? Who's like me?' There is no one else out there to represent them. I think it's important to show that not every lesbian singer is a white folk singer," she says.

Born and raised in New York City, Cardwell first realized her musical calling at age 5, when her school class performed a segment of "The Three Blind Mice," at Carnegie Hall. "It wasn't

Easton ditty, Cardwell went on to win the competition five times. Soon after, she joined singer Ben E. King ("Stand By Me") on his Black America tour.

In 1989 she was selected by R&B producer Kashif to be part of the all-female singing act The Promise. After two years of turmoil, disappointment, and the recording of an album that never saw the light of day, Cardwell quit the group and went solo.

In 1992 she achieved success as the faceless voice on the dance rompers "Club Lonely" and "Saved My Life," produced by Li'l Louis. She followed that with background singing for recording artists L.L. Cool J., Jermaine Jackson and the Pointer Sisters.

She bounced around from label to label, churning out one single track after another. These included Tribal America's "Hot Little Body," a collaboration with Fred Jorio and Behavior; U.K.-based Freetown Records'

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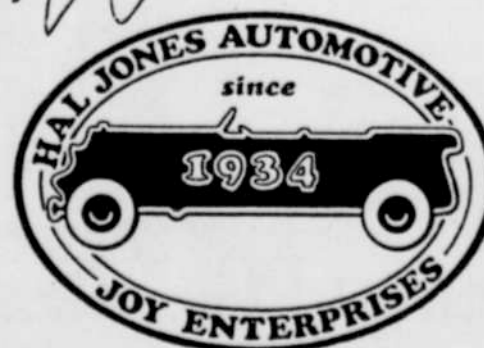
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