

# When blues & jazz go 360: Taj Mahal Trio performs with Shemekia Copeland (Photos)

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- BY: CAROL BANKS WEBER



*“I’ve had success in my career, and I’m happy with that. But that doesn’t mean I don’t want to continue to grow. In order for an artist to grow – and for a genre to grow – you have to do new things. I’m extremely proud to say I’m a [blues](#) singer, but that doesn’t mean that’s the only thing I’m capable of singing, or that’s the only style of music I’m capable of making.” —[Shemekia Copeland](#)*

There’s often a thin line between jazz and blues. When the music’s in the capable hands of [Taj Mahal](#), 70, and [Shemekia Copeland](#), 33, well, it’s all good.

Both artists have a lot in common, despite their age differences. They come from Harlem and musical families, they love and bleed blues, but are not content to rest in that box. Their restless

spirits crave something different, pushing them to explore a 360 sound outside themselves and their roots.

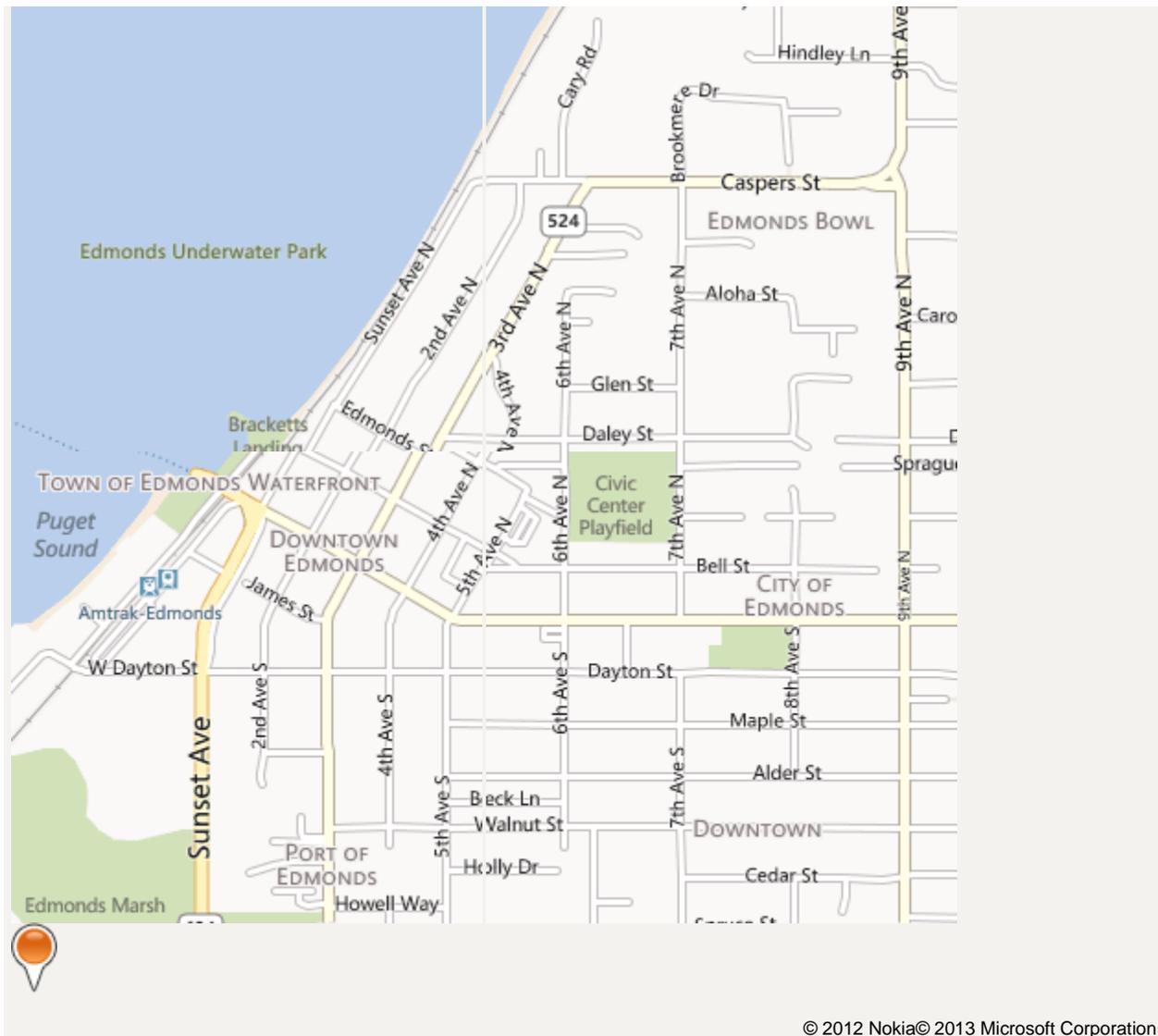


When Shemekia Copeland sings the blues, she takes it seriously. It doesn't matter if the subject matter's serious or light, the Queen of Blues feels every note.

Photo credit:

Sandrine Lee





Location: 410 4th Ave N, Edmonds, WA 98020

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For the Grammy-nominated [Taj Mahal](#) (born Henry St. Claire Fredericks), the world was out there and he meant to immerse himself in as much of it as possible. His worldly voyage reached Africa, the Caribbean, Hawaii — his home starting in the '80s, Latin America, and Europe, together with folk, jazz, gospel, R&B, soul, and gospel. All of the multi-cultural immersion came back in his albums. And he's still making records, enjoying a revival since his star-studded, 2008 release on Heads Up International, "Maestro: Celebrating 40 Years."

"The one thing I've always demanded of the records I've made is that they be danceable. This record is danceable, it's listenable, it has lots of different rhythms, it's accessible, it's all right in front of you. It's a lot of fun, and it represents where I am at this particular moment in my life," Mahal explained.

“This record is just the beginning of another chapter, one that’s going to be open to more music and more ideas. Even at the end of 40 years, in many ways my music is just getting started.”

The daughter of the late Johnny Copeland, famous bluesman from Texas, seems poised to take the same road as Taj Mahal back in his youth. Shemekia Copeland grew up steeped in blues tradition, while tapping into a jazz-speak the likes of Etta James. She performed for President and Mrs. Obama, and was given the title “Queen of the Blues” June 12, 2011 by the City of Chicago and the State of Illinois.

Like Taj Mahal, Copeland’s music mirrors the cultural cacophony of her childhood, the street performers, gospel, what was on the radio at the time, bands intersecting her life. Her loving father would gently introduce her to his Cotton Club audience in Harlem, but she couldn’t overcome her shyness then. When he began to suffer from illness, his health in decline, she found her courage and her voice. “It was like a switch went off in my head, and I wanted to sing. It became a want and a need. I had to do it,” she said. She was 15. By 19, she began putting her voice to music in the recording studio. “Turn The Heat Up!” on the Alligator label gained critical and popular notice in 1998, almost immediately. And at 20, she entered films, with an appearance on “Three To Tango” and song appearance in “Broken Hearts Club.” A subsequent album, “Wicked,” out in 2000 earned three Handy awards and a Grammy nomination. She had arrived.

Her 2008 album, “Never Going Back” — out on Concord Music Group’s Telarc label — indicates a growing, musical restlessness and willingness to venture farther than her blues origins for satisfaction. “I’ve had success in my career, and I’m happy with that. But that doesn’t mean I don’t want to continue to grow. In order for an artist to grow – and for a genre to grow – you have to do new things. I’m extremely proud to say I’m a blues singer, but that doesn’t mean that’s the only thing I’m capable of singing, or that’s the only style of music I’m capable of making,” Copeland said. “I want to keep growing. My main goal when I started this was that I was going to do something different with this music, so that this music could evolve and grow. I got that idea from my father. He didn’t do the typical one-four-five blues. He went to Africa and worked with musicians there. He was one of the first blues artists to do that. I want to be the same way. I want to be innovative with the blues.”

And her most recent album, “33 1/3,” has been hailed by critics as standing for something more than cool bluesy notes. It’s studded with socio-political statements about religion, economic inequality, and domestic violence. That’s a purposeful move on her part: “I’ve grown with my albums. For me, that’s been wonderful. This latest album is my best work. I’m so proud of it. ... I love that me and my team, we’ve actually figured out a way to take blues music and make it contemporary through

subject matter and through the message. That's what I've been trying to do with the music. As I get older, these topics that I want to talk about, I feel like I can. When you're young, it doesn't matter that you have an opinion because nobody wants to hear it. Nobody cares what you have to say. When you're 30-something and you've been paying taxes and doing your thing for years, people have to listen because you've been out here and you've been doing it. I love that part of it. It feels good. So if there's something that I want to talk about — like politics, like religion, like domestic violence and all the things that we're touching on, on this album — I do. I'm super proud of it. I mean, super proud [[CMT Edge](#) interview by Jewly Hight, January 31, 2013].”

The Taj Mahal Trio meets up with Shemekia Copeland at the [Edmonds Center for the Arts](#) in Washington, [April 24](#), 7:30 p.m. Talk about a major influence. Call (425) 275-4485 for more info.