

# THE NEWEST DIXIE CUP

## Naydja CoJoe Joins Renowned '60s All-Girl Group

By Anita Oubre



PHOTO BY AB SYKES PHOTOGRAPHY

**A**s the newest member of the iconic 1960s all-girl group, The Dixie Cups, Naydja CoJoe is elated to be part of the group whose biggest hit, "Chapel of Love," sold over one million copies and was awarded a gold disc. In June 1964 the record hit number one on Billboard's Hot 100 chart.

## COVER STORY

The homegrown New Orleans trio originally consisted of sisters Barbara Ann and the late Rosa Lee Hawkins and their cousin, the late Joan Marie Johnson. Naydja proudly joins the current lineup consisting of herself, original member Barbara Ann Hawkins and Athelgra Neville Gabriel, sister of the Neville Brothers.

“I am thrilled to be part of the group and I look forward to performing some of the favorite songs I grew up listening to like ‘Iko Iko’ and ‘People Say,’ Naydja said. “It is incredible that I get to perform with a legend like Barbara and I stand on the shoulders of these pioneers in the music industry. They truly paved the way for an artist like myself. I respect them for the hardships they endured during that era.”

Naydja was hired in February and she flew to Tampa and started rehearsals with the other members. “I’ve had to learn a host of new songs I had never heard before but I told them, ‘Teach me and I’ll learn. I am a team player.’”

Naydja’s first couple of performances as a Dixie Cup were in March, with two live performances and one television appearance. At one of those performances Naydja realized the enormity of what was taking place. Though she had performed countless shows and prepared for numerous performances she was in awe of what was happening.

“I had been in the dressing room at Tipitina’s hundreds of times but his time was different. I looked up at Barbara and Athelgra and tears started running down my face,” was how she described the experience.

Naydja compares the group dynamics to the “Golden Girls” from the television show. She says “I was made to feel welcome from day one and it feels like I have been with the group forever”. It was a thrill for her to perform with the Dixie Cups on the first weekend of the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, as well as appear on NBC’s Today show.

Naydja said she always knew that one day she would be an entertainer. As a child

she attended camp with the New Orleans Recreation Department. It was in the music class at a NORD facility where her amazing vocal talent was unveiled. An ambitious and confident Naydja was given a cassette

and lyrics to practice over the weekend and when she returned on Monday morning she was cast as Dorothy in “The Wiz.”

“I remember it so vividly. The instructor started playing the piano and when I



*Hoda Kotb, Jenna Bush Hagen, Naydja CoJoe, Barbara Ann Hawkins, Athelgra Neville Gabriel*



*Naydja CoJoe, Wanda Rouzan, Barbara Ann Hawkins, Athelgra Neville Gabriel*

PHOTOS COURTESY OF NAYDJIA COJOE



Naydja CoJoe, Della Reese



Naydja CoJoe, Leah Chase



Naydja CoJoe

PHOTOS COURTESY OF NAYDJA COJOE

opened my mouth to sing her eyes got big. Little did she know she created a monster,” laughed Naydja. And even though she likes to joke about it, in reality it was a pivotal moment in her life.

As a student at John F. Kennedy High School, Naydja sang in competitions and talent shows and brought home many trophies as a young songbird.

It was at one of these performances at a visiting school that she was noticed by the legendary St. Augustine High School bandleader and community pillar, Edwin Hampton. He invited the talented JFK High School student back to perform in the spring concert.

“I jumped at that chance,” Naydja said. “I told Mr. Hampton I did not have to go home and discuss it with my parents. I was committed and got on board.”

This was when she was introduced to the music of Billie Holiday, whose music she fell in love with and covers to this day.

If Naydja could do it all again she feels that she would have thrived in a school for the arts. After graduating high school she attended Louisiana State University for a few semesters but, looking back, Naydja says school wasn’t really her thing.

“I really didn’t need to be in a regular school,” she reflected. “I didn’t fit in. I should have been in a school that focused on the arts, dance and music. It would have been ideal for someone like me.”

Naydja’s dreams of being an entertainer took a back seat for many years as she entered the world of adulthood. Marriage, the birth of her daughter and moving first to California and then spending many years in Dallas took precedence in her life.

But Naydja did not stay away from the stage for long. In 2001 she started singing backup for Mel Waiters, a Southern soul singer who achieved fame in the ‘90s for hits and barroom classics. As she fondly recalled, “Mel was such a huge influence in my life. I learned so much being on the road with him. It was through him that I was ready to return to New Orleans with experience under my belt.”

By 2008 Naydja was ready to come home to her beloved New Orleans. “God was ready for me to come home and He rolled out the red carpet for me,” she said.

Naydja had never heard of the French Quarter Festival before experiencing it for the first time. As she swayed to the music, she came to the realization that not only did she *want* to be on that stage but that she *needed* to be on that stage.

Naydja credits Michael “Soulman” Baptiste and Kermit Ruffins as being instrumental in her success. She sat in with both of them many times after seeing them perform at that life altering FQF. “I wouldn’t be where I am today without Michael and Kermit. They embraced and encouraged me.

Making people laugh and making her audiences happy is why Naydja says she performs. As she put it, “I have to be receptive and open to the audience. Once I walk on that stage, I become the entertainer, the artist. It’s not about me; it’s about the people and the joy the music brings to them.”

Naydja’s musical influences are Billie Holiday, Deniece Williams, Whitney Houston, Jody Watley and Chaka Khan. She enjoys Brazilian artist Paula Lima, Gloria Estefan and Celia Cruz.

Whether entertaining with Sharon Martin and Rechell Cook as Ladies of Soul or with her band The Lagniappe Section, Naydja is known for her smooth soulful sounds. She covers a diverse repertoire from Motown to jazz, blues and pop. And now, as the newest member of the Dixie Cups, Naydja looks forward to bringing the iconic sounds of yesteryear to new generations of music fans.

To the next generation Naydja offers this advice: “Sing your heart out and don’t let anyone stop you. Be strong, make sound decisions and depend on yourself.”

Naydja is grateful for her success and the gifts she has received. She says coming back home to New Orleans was the best decision she made. “This was not supposed to happen to me,” she said. “God went out of His way and opened these doors for me. He put me in places I could never have imagined.”