

Soul Survivor
**She's conquered cancer, now Sharon Jones is ready to reclaim
the stage**

By Brett Koshkin
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The outdoor crowd of some 6,000 fans in [Boise](#) that night in April probably remember a few distinct things about the show they'd come to see.

"Once the cancer got me, I thought, 'Oh, this is it; I'm getting ready to die.'"

One: It was great. Of course it was. This was [Sharon Jones and the Dap-Kings](#), after all — the raucous but tight-as-a-drum soul powerhouse fronted by a not-quite-five-foot dynamo. The group, together nearly twenty years, has made a living putting smiles on the faces of crowds around the world.

Those in attendance also likely remember how very cold it was. *So cold*. It had dipped into the twenties. You could see the breath of the trio of Dap-Kings horn players between blows.

Despite the frigid [Idaho](#) air, Jones was everything fans have now come to expect — a whirling firecracker of a woman whose megawatt smile alone could generate enough electricity to power [Times Square](#). They surely remember that despite the cold, she didn't wear a jacket. At one point she even kicked off her shoes, shimmying across the stage for the remainder of the set barefoot, in a sequined black dress complete with tassels that shook in unison with her shoulder-length locks.

They remember a *party*.

What they don't remember — what they couldn't have known — is that Jones was hurting that night.

Sometime midway through the show, she felt as though she'd been sucker-punched in the small of her back. The instant it happened, she turned away from the audience. Only her band could see the rictus of pain etched across her face.

Then it seemed to pass. Maybe the cold had exacerbated the aches she'd grown accustomed to, the price of a life lived on the road.

Maybe.

But the pain she felt that night never did really go away. Jones knew something was terribly wrong.

Six months after that Idaho concert finds Jones convalescing in her friend [Megan Holken](#)'s home in [Sharon Springs](#), New York. It's a speck of town upstate where thousands once flocked hoping to remedy a litany of ailments via the curative springs that percolate up from the rocky terrain.

Rectangular pads of beige Berber carpet line the wooden staircase, placed by Holken to ease the burden on Jones' sore feet and lessen the chance of a painful spill. At 57, the woman known for being a ball of endless energy is constantly exhausted. Something as mundane as showering feels like running ten blocks.

Autumn came quickly to this sleepy town on the edge of the [Catskills](#), and the frosty October has Jones feeling cautious. "I've been doing things, but since my white blood cell count and immune system has been down, I'm careful. It's important. I don't want to be around too many people right now," she says, curled up in an oversized lavender reading chair whose swirling floral pattern matches the daisies on her silk blouse.

The pain she felt in Boise that night worsened over time. She made multiple visits to various masseuses who worked on the gnawing knot, but nothing seemed to untie it. By the time the long tour wound down, she needed a bandmate to place her items in overhead bins during between-concert flights.

From massage therapists, she graduated to doctors and hospitals and seemingly endless tests in her native [South Carolina](#). Then, finally, she got the ugly truth.

In early June, Jones was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. Stage II.

"I just started crying," Jones recalls of the day a doctor delivered the news. "It all came out at once. I always figured I was going to die at a young age."

It was only three short years ago that Jones lost her mother to cancer. By the time they had it located, it was too late to treat.

"Once the cancer got me, I thought, 'Oh, this is it; I'm getting ready to die.'"

How can you really respond when you hear something like that?" asks the Dap-Kings' handlebar-mustachioed bandleader and Daptone label co-owner, [Gabe Roth](#). The band has been together eighteen years.

"*Tightly* together," he notes. "Rolling around in vans, smelling each other, yelling at each other. Laughing, getting drunk and crying. Everybody's been through a lot together. It's really a close group of people."

Roth says he's closer to Jones than to some of his siblings.

It's not hard to understand why. More than a band, Sharon Jones and the Dap-Kings, who play the Pageant this Sunday, are a business. Built from the ground up, the band is the flagship property of the Daptone label Roth founded with fellow Dap-King Neal Sugarman after the two grew tired of being manhandled by a largely unfeeling, uncaring, behemoth music industry. But more than a business, Sharon Jones and the Dap-Kings are also family. And the family business has been very good.

It took a lot of work.

Sharon Jones grew up in North Augusta, South Carolina, a town just across the Savannah River from Georgia, in a house that had no running water. "Had to carry water in and had an outhouse in the back," she remembers.

A wood-burning stove kept her and five older siblings warm in colder months. Her father, Charlie Jones, taught her how to use a slingshot and to fish, a hobby she finds peace in and remains passionate about today. But peace was rarely present in her parents' caustic relationship. "He used to beat her," Jones says. Eventually they split, and Jones moved with her mother to New York to start a new life.

Jones began singing in church when she was very young, picking up any instrument she could get her hands on. She went to Brooklyn College. Got a part in an Off-Broadway play, *Sister Salvation*. She wound up singing in a wedding band and, famously, picked up work as a corrections officer at Rikers Island. (One day while on lockdown for fear of a riot, prison staff erected bars around the booth Jones worked in, as a precaution. "The rumor was inmates were going to take a female hostage," she says. She resigned shortly after. That was 1990. "It was an omen," she says. "It wasn't meant for me.")

When smoky-voiced soul singer Lee Fields needed a trio of girls to sing backup, Jones' then-boyfriend told her she'd be perfect for the gig.

"I knew from the day I met Sharon, she was destined to be a star," says Fields.

Nearly two decades since Jones first took the stage with the Dap-Kings, playing tiny clubs then building upward, she has repeatedly validated Fields' first impression. Live, she's a ball of kinetic energy: a bopping spitfire with a silken voice unlike anything in modern music. She and Daptone are an anomaly in the music business — a financially viable and critically acclaimed independent label in an era when such a thing is at best implausible.

They're also an introduction to soul music for some, harbingers of a sound that once was but largely is no more.

"I never would have thought that I would be doing this for a living," muses a silver-soul-patched [Sugarman](#), poking at a bowl of pho at a Vietnamese restaurant not far from Daptone's Brooklyn headquarters. "I remember thinking at some point along that, 'Wow, Sharon could be a star.' I'm the proudest that we've done it on our own terms."

"Our own terms" means Daptone is a completely homegrown, in-house operation whose members write, produce, record and release their own records. They started with a handful of 45 rpm singles (including ones by Sharon Jones and the Dap-Kings) and now regularly release albums by other groups with close ties, like the Sugarman 3, Antibalas, [Charles Bradley](#) and the [Menahan Street Band](#) (who have been sampled by [Jay Z](#)).

It's an environment in which most groups take turns playing musical-contributing chairs on projects that only seem to knit the familial web tighter. It's a creative hothouse where musicians are able to pay the rent without having to resort to picking up gigs in a cover band.

"Sometimes the world actually works the way it's supposed to work. People who are actually incredibly musically talented, like Sharon Jones and the Dap-Kings, catch on the way they should," says [Richard Lewis](#), who, along with [Michael Robinson](#), created Dig Deeper, a recurring Brooklyn event where long-lost or underappreciated soul and reggae performers get their due onstage, often performing for the first time in decades.

"The first time I ever saw Sharon was with Lee Fields at [now defunct] Wetlands," says Robinson. "They were just a knockout. How the hell did I not know about these guys? I'd listen to Sharon if she sang the phone book."

Much of the initial success of the Daptone label — and certainly what first got people interested and then fully onboard — was Sharon Jones and the Dap-Kings. That first handful of 45s has grown and grown. The band's 2010

album, *I Learned the Hard Way*, has sold more than 150,000 copies domestically and 200,000 copies in Europe, numbers most major labels would be happy about.

Sharon Jones and the Dap-Kings have gone from covering their favorite artists to sharing the stage and studio with luminaries such as [Al Green](#), Prince and [Lou Reed](#). In 2007 producer [Mark Ronson](#) recruited the Dap-Kings to lay the foundation for [Amy Winehouse](#)'s *Back to Black*, an album that would quickly go platinum, garner an astounding quintet of [Grammys](#) and elevate the group into the top tier of hired musical guns.

"When we first started, we'd go to Europe and make, like, \$50 a night. I'd come home, and I'd go to my church to ask the deacon to borrow money," Jones says. "Then at some point, I'd go away again on tour, come back and I didn't have to borrow money. You got to crawl before you can walk," she says with a nod more to her future than her past.

In seventeen-odd years, Sharon Jones and the Dap-Kings have managed what remains seemingly unattainable for many musicians: top-to-bottom creative control. Cancer, however, can't be managed so easily.

The chemotherapy Jones underwent last year sapped her of most her strength and caused her ubiquitous box braids to fall out.

"They sent me to get a wig. I put that thing on and I looked like [Dionne Warwick](#). I'm not wearing this wig! I always wear my hair natural. I'm not going to do the wig thing," she says.

While at Holken's home in October, Jones lifted her blouse to reveal the shiny, six-inch incision north of her navel from which surgeons removed her gall bladder, the head of her pancreas and about a foot and a half of diseased small intestine. "They had to rebuild a bile duct to my stomach and connect it," Jones explains.

The operation rid her body of cancer, but a hellish cycle of preventive chemotherapy came next. Every Tuesday she made the snaking 30-minute drive to Cooperstown, New York, to receive chemo and steroids. By the time she recuperated from the radiation on Monday, it was time to begin the process once more.

With a significant portion of her pancreas removed, Jones' body no longer produces enough enzymes to properly digest food on her own. She'll have to supplement with enzyme pills with every meal for the rest of her life — a lesson she learned when she unknowingly took too small a dose that had her freshly sewn-together organs in an agonizing knot and required a trip to the ER.

"I was in such pain that I couldn't stand up. I threw up cups and cups of this stuff that was yellow and green. I was about to die," she says, wincing at the memory.

A regimen of prescribed drugs brought their own unpleasant side effects. Fed up with all the pills for pain, nausea and heartburn, Jones inquired about medical marijuana. "I kept reading all this stuff about it," she says. She discovered that marijuana alleviated the discomfort and bought herself a pocket vaporizer pen, a truth she doesn't mind divulging, though she declines to go into detail. "I hate taking pills, because those things are dangerous," she says. "I stopped taking four different medications when I started using [marijuana]."

While recuperating in upstate New York she modified her lifestyle to include a healthy diet, regularly sucking down "green drinks" that Holken made for her. "First I was choking it down, but now I'm like, 'Where's my juice?'" says Jones.

The months of forced therapy left her with too much time to fill, but it wasn't all bad. Jones began frequenting the opera. "I love how they sing and howl! You don't know what they're singing, and they don't speak the language. How do they do that? I keep telling people I've been culturized up here."

In early November, Jones steeled herself for a trip to a ramshackle and boarded-up billiard hall in Queens to shoot a video for her band's new single, "Stranger to My Happiness." The song is a baritone-sax-filled romp that sees Jones purring along about stealing hearts and then stealing away. The set for the video resembles the remnants of a wedding reception with half-eaten slices of cake and empty beer bottles strewn everywhere. Wearing a sparkly dress, Jones dances alongside the Dapettes, backup singers [Saundra Williams](#) and [Starr Duncan](#). On this day the fragile convalescent from Sharon Springs is nowhere in sight — only a confidence-filled woman who wants nothing more than to get back to work.

The band has been working through the same song for five hours, and whenever they take a break from shooting, the musicians jam. It's as if they can't resist, after all this time. When they finally do stop playing, it's because they've dissolved into laughter after Roth grabs Duncan for an impromptu slow dance.

When Jones isn't needed for a few shots, she wraps herself in a coat and sinks onto a canvas director's chair. Despite the chill in the unheated building, she has been grinning nonstop all day. Then Jones studies the palms of both hands and furls her brow. "Would you look at this?" she exclaims.

A side effect of the chemotherapy drugs has caused her hands to become parched and rough. She digs in her purse for a small jar of organic hand cream. She places a dollop on her left palm while reminiscing about performing "Sweet Jane" with the late Lou Reed.

When they call her back to the set, Jones takes a deep breath and throws off her coat like a prizefighter dropping a robe before a bout.

That painful night in Idaho last April was part of a tour designed to prime fans for the group's new album, *Give the People What They Want*. A single, "Retreat," had just premiered on [National Public Radio](#). The promotional machine had just begun to churn before the cancer diagnosis last June

ground it to a halt. Finally, six months later, a defiant Jones announced the prognosis she, the Dap-Kings and her many fans had been waiting to hear:

"I just got the best news in my entire life!" Jones posted on Facebook January 24. "I AM CANCER FREE!!! The doctor looked at my scan and said that everything looked normal and healthy. It's been a tough road, but this is the moment I have been praying for. I cannot thank you all enough for your positive energy and prayers, I truly could not have done this without your love!"

Two weeks later — on February 6 — Sharon Jones and the Dap-Kings played to a packed house at New York's [Beacon Theatre](#). It was the band's first concert in nearly a year. Jones, still bald from chemotherapy, burst onto the stage and quickly kicked off her shoes before belting out song after song for two straight hours. The highlight of the show, though, came when Jones dragged a fan and fellow cancer survivor onstage for a dance-off.

"There are a lot of people that are nervous about us playing again, but I'm not one of them," says bandmate Roth. "Sharon gets onstage and everything gets real."