

# VANESE THOMAS

## THE SOUTHERN SOUND: African-American Musical Traditions Educational Programs



### the artist

Part of a musical royal family, Vaneese Thomas spent her childhood on the vanguard of Black southern musical culture in Memphis, Tennessee. Her father is Rufus Thomas, whose career spanned half a century in R & B recording and radio, and her sister is the chart-topping “Memphis Queen” Carla Thomas. Vaneese lived and breathed the rhythms of Memphis. Steeped not only in the music but in its history, she is an authentic link to the early years of soul and rhythm-and-blues. Her latest CD, *Soul Sister Vol. One*, is a tour through two decades of seminal soul and a tribute to the original soul sisters who helped shape it.

Vaneese has sung with major artists from Aretha Franklin, Michael Jackson and Sting to Luciano Pavarotti. She has performed at concerts and festivals around the globe and for television and film. She taught middle school French and Social Studies and has directed both children’s and adult choirs. She helped found the Swarthmore College Gospel Choir and continues to direct the school’s Alumni Gospel Choir. She has developed educational programs for: the University of Memphis; Bergen and Essex Community Colleges, NJ; Greenwich YMCA, CT; and other schools and organizations.

### the program

Vaneese is committed to preserving and passing on the musical traditions she inherited. As a former teacher she also understands that nothing happens in a vacuum, that the Southern Sound is both bound up in and reflective of the struggles of mid-century Black American life.

Vaneese has developed a flexible array of educational residencies that offer students and communities a better understanding of African-American culture through the prism of Memphis and its position as a focal point of music and the Civil Rights Movement. Her programs recognize the societal significance of soul and rhythm-and-blues, and place the music’s origins and growth within a historical context.

Customizable for students from elementary school through college, this cross-curriculum program can be made relevant to African-American Studies, Women’s Studies, American History, and Religious Studies, as well as Music and Performing Arts. Events and activities can also be made available to surrounding communities.

#### **Components can include any or all of the following:**

- in-school musical workshops and clinics that culminate in student performances
- lectures that include music and personal stories enhanced by video projections
- a full concert – *Soul Sister: Celebrating the Women of Soul* – by the artist and her band

### workshop & performance activities

Activities can be customized to the student population but the possibilities include:

- Singers’ clinic: Soul and R & B stylings
- Singers’ clinic: Harmony and background vocals
- Musicians’ clinic: Playing in a rhythm section
- Broad-based student body workshop: Create a “live radio show” WDIA-style
- Music ensemble/choral workshop: Form a Memphis-style band and create a Stax Tribute Concert
- Choral workshop: Create an evening of spirituals and freedom songs

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## lecture topics

- **Women of Soul:** The Unique Strength, Perseverance and Influence of the Southern Sound Pioneers
- **A History of Stax Records:** The Cultural Phenomenon of Soulsville, USA
- **Memphis and Black Radio:** WDIA and the Transformation of the American Sound
- **Freedom Songs:** A Thematic Exploration of the Civil Rights Movement Soundtrack
- **Memphis at the Crossroads:** How Rhythm-and-Blues, 50's Black Culture and the Civil Rights Movement Meet

## concert

*Soul Sister: Celebrating the Women of Soul* is a raise-the-rafters evening of soul and rhythm-and-blues presented by an incomparable performer. It can be presented with smaller or larger band configurations, although the full complement of 12 musicians and singers offers the greatest impact. To experience such an authentic live rendering of this music is a rare and memorable treat. Even more rare is to hear the inside anecdotes and personal stories that bring to life the songs and singers celebrated here.

With her superlative vocal gifts, her warm and compelling stage presence, and her encyclopedic knowledge of the genre, Vaneese draws her audience into the experience of growing up within the Memphis musical inner sanctum. Her renditions of many lesser-known classics illustrate how R & B has crossed so many divides and touched several generations. Even while reminding listeners of the harsh realities of being Black in the turbulent South of the mid-60's, Vaneese shares her belief in the redemptive power of these – and all – songs. One is left with the profound understanding of why this infectious and irrepressible music came to be known as “soul.”

## educational objectives

### • Musical literacy

Concerts, lectures and workshops will hone listening skills and expose students to seminal works in R & B and Soul – works which are often referenced in current rock and hip-hop. This will foster a better understanding of the continuum of musical development from the southern folk tradition to contemporary popular music.

### • Cultural, Historical & Community Connections

Students will connect R & B and soul music to important events in the history and culture of the United States. And through exposure to arts professionals they will become aware of arts opportunities and resources in their communities.

### • Music making

By working under the direction of music professionals students will understand the skill and discipline required by the art of music-making. They will also learn to recognize the power of music to express one's personal vision.

### • Life-Long Learning

Students will be encouraged to extend their learning beyond the classroom and their educational careers by seeking out music and the arts for a lifetime of enrichment.

**“With righteous interpretations of sophisticated soul classics, Vaneese Thomas reminds us: she's the real deal!”**  
– Paul Shaffer