

For more than four decades, award-winning R&B singer and songwriter Chaka Khan has been wowing audiences of all ages with her soulful vocals, unforgettable performances and flair.

Now the singer, born in Chicago as Yvette Marie Stevens, is coming home to headline the 21st African Festival of the Arts in Washington Park, this Labor Day weekend, and fans will get a chance to experience the passion in action.

“I always love coming home,” says the native south-sider. “I think Chicago is a unique, amazing city. I think it’s a great place to be from. It’s a great place to come home to.”

Chaka’s performance at the African Fest will definitely be a touch of heaven for her, as she will be doing what she loves most in her old Hyde Park neighborhood.

In addition, Chaka will be performing at an outdoor venue. “There’s nothing like God’s own acoustics,” she says.

Performing outdoors allows Chaka to be free, and to interact with her audience more intimately because she can see everyone and everything going on. Chaka adds that there’s a higher level of freedom, happiness and friendliness among the attendees. They are dressed for the occasion, they don’t mind sweating, and they don’t care how they look. And, she doesn’t have to work as hard to get people grooving.

Chaka’s favorite memories of the city include friends and family, blues and jazz clubs, riding the “EL” and hanging in community parks. And, Chaka says there is nothing like the honesty of Chicagoans, “we tell the down-home naked truth.”

togetherness, nothing will happen. In this world there are also forces that are in place to keep us from coming together; to keep our minds from meeting.”

Chaka also acknowledges that the community-wide meeting of the minds is not as simple as it sounds.

“We have to fight a lot of forces in order to stay balanced. We have to fight a lot of internal and external worldwide forces that are well in place, since the inception of this country. It’s no mistake. I don’t believe anything happened by accident.”



Chaka: On the Flipside...

There’s a flipside to Chaka’s return to Chicago and she becomes emotional over the spate of shootings—with so many young victims.

“It’s got to stop!” she fumes. “I don’t know what’s going on with the kids killing each other like they’re doing. *That’s so disturbing to me.*”

Chaka adds that the lack of resources—and more ominous reasons—may be at the root of the violence. “I think it has a lot to do with economics; money’s tight, and that has had a big effect on crime everywhere. I think that’s *one* of the reasons. There is racism going on in a very...intellectual way. They’re keeping people pitted against one another. If *we* take each other out, then *they* don’t have to do it. If [violent individuals] were just thinking of that bigger picture, they would stop. We could come together and reverse that whole cycle. Without

Chaka Khan Foundation: Encouraging a Healthy Mind

Chaka Khan is on a mission to help “get young people back on track and thinking about the right things,” which is the mission of the Chaka Khan Foundation. The artist started the foundation in 2003 to address the youth violence happening in her current home, California.

Through the three programs offered under her Chaka Believes Education Initiative, she inspires children to reach and achieve greatness.

In the first program, University of Southern California students tutor fifth graders. This one-on-one tutoring is done at the university so young people can get a “real” college experience while receiving the help needed to maintain “grade level proficiency” in math and reading.

Young people are also offered mentoring opportunities to gain exposure to business owners and successful entertainers in the second program. Last but not least, children from different cultural backgrounds are brought together to appreciate themselves and the differences in others.

Chaka says that the educational system, parents and the community are failing today’s children. “A school is only as good as the community around it,” she says. “Schools have become a pseudo-demented babysitting service where they label kids [with] attention deficit disorders (ADD) and give them drugs to sleep, while they baby-sit. That’s ridiculous! How are these children going to run a country or look after you and me when we get old? It’s going to be like a damn circus. We need to really get on it!”

Chaka’s frustration comes from knowing what the youth are missing; she had a middle class upbringing, with a two-parent home, filled with music.

For her family, the music came naturally.

“It was a natural part of life for me. I never considered it anything special. When I was a kid, I thought everyone sung with their families and I had a regular childhood. I was, for the most part, raised in Hyde Park. I went to two or three schools in the Hyde Park area, including Kenwood, where I finished.”

Chaka married Hassan Khan (a bass player, who played with the Staple Singers) to gain her independence, she says. “I married because I wanted to get away from home. It was like my way of stamping myself as an adult. My first record deal, at the time, was coming into play. They wanted my mother to sign because I was 18. I said no way. I told my mother I was pregnant and right away she rushed us to City Hall and we got married. *Then* I was an adult. We were kids. We were just kids having fun.”

These days, between her 250-day travel calendar and foundation responsibilities, Chaka takes time for “things that people take for granted,” such as spending time with her children and grandchildren, listening to music and watching her favorite TV shows and movies.

But make no mistake; Chaka is a devout workaholic, which has also paid off for this musical legend. In addition to her numerous Grammy and achievement awards for her works in the entertainment industry and community, Chaka will be honored with the UNCF “Award of Excellence” at their annual Evening of Stars gala; and in May 2011, Chaka Khan will receive the coveted star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

“That has been a big thing for a lot of my friends,” she says. “They wanted to see that happen. That’s not lost on me, that’s not near the top of my list of things...but it’s nice.”

Chaka performs at The African Festival of the Arts on September 3-6, during Labor Day Weekend. This year’s theme is “Creating and Keeping the Culture.” For more information, visit www.africanfestivalchicago.com or call 773.955.2757.