

# The power of soul: Joy Denalane in the heart of Hamburg's Elbphilharmonie

01/05/2023 From early on, Joy Denalane's life has revolved around music. Today, she is known as the German soul singer. She wants her music to bring people together.

When Joy Denalane takes to the stage, all is quiet for one brief moment. Then the audience begins clapping and cheering, until the singer brings the Grand Hall of Hamburg's Elbphilharmonie to life with the energy of her extraordinary voice. This is arguably Germany's best soul singer in Germany's most famous concert hall. It's an extraordinary experience for the audience – and for the singer herself.

Wind back just a few hours earlier, Joy Denalane is standing in the heart of the Elbphilharmonie for the very first time. Outside, the glass facade and the Elbe river glitter in the midday sun. Inside, dimmed spotlights illuminate the stage of the Grand Hall. Denalane's words resound clearly from the walls. In this empty space, which resembles a vineyard and is made from 10,000 white gypsum fibreboards shaped to absolute precision, every word has a pure ring to it. “It's an unreal place,” she says, her voice

full of wonder. “Aesthetics, architecture and sound design have been harmonised to perfection here.”

## ‘Mit dir’, her duet with Max Herre, was an overnight hit

The singer experiences close contact with a space during the sound check. “I feel the stage as soon as I stand there and sing the first notes,” says Denalane. She has been on countless stages during her career, from small clubs to big concert halls. “I’ve always done everything to deliver an unforgettable show, whether for an audience of 50 or 5,000.”

Hamburg has always been good to her. Her first performance in the Hanseatic city was 20 years ago, as part of hip-hop collective FK Allstars. In 1999, her breakthrough came practically overnight. She had recorded ‘Mit dir’ as a duet with Max Herre. It was her first big hit. “With you time stands still,” they sang. There are moments in which this still rings true for both of them. They are now married and have two children together. However, in reality, time marches on relentlessly. Their two sons, for example, are now grown up.

And Denalane has grown as a singer, from newcomer to becoming Germany’s Queen of Soul, as the media are fond of calling her. Personally, she finds the term incongruous. “I know that it’s meant as a compliment, but I don’t see myself as a queen,” she says. Especially as German soul music doesn’t actually exist as a genre. “I’m just Joy from Berlin, who loves making music and is a mother, a daughter and a really good friend.” And she’s a dreamer.

It’s almost impossible to believe that it wasn’t always her dream to be a musician. “Looking back, I often laugh about it now,” she says. Even her earliest memories are strongly connected to music. Her first favourite song was ‘Kung Fu Fighting’ by Carl Douglas. “I loved it so much that my father got me the single on vinyl,” she remembers. She was four or five years old at the time. This was part of a set ritual: “Every Saturday morning my father went to the record store, and around midday he’d play his new records while he cooked.” The timeless songs of Marvin Gaye, Diana Ross or Aretha Franklin were her gateway to the world of music. “This all happened subconsciously. It was simply a part of my life.”

She had different plans back then. At times she wanted to grow up to be a flight attendant, sometimes a vet, sometimes a nurse. “All very traditional stereotypes I was following there,” she says, before her laugh, warm and loud, resounds through the Grand Hall. However, as the child of a German mother and a South African father, her upbringing was anything but stereotypical. “I grew up as an outsider,” she recalls. It was inevitable that she would learn to fight against prejudices and work hard to find her way. “For me, even early on there was only one direction: forwards.” This attitude earned her a recording contract while still a student. “That was the first time I thought seriously about a career as a musician,” she says. The crowning glory came in 2020, when she had the opportunity to record an album on the legendary Motown label – the first German-speaking artist to do so. On ‘Let Yourself Be Loved’ she sings songs in the soul sound of her childhood. The sound that her father George brought home on the records he played for her every Saturday.

She has now brought this dream to the stage in the Elbphilharmonie. “It's really very special to be able to play here. I'm never going to forget this.” Maybe she'll be back again. After all, Denalane wouldn't be a dreamer if she wasn't already following her next dream: “I'd love to live to be 100 – and to keep making music and singing on stage for as long as possible.”

## Info

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Author: Kevin Schuon

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**Linda Riechers**

PR Manager Porsche Deutschland GmbH
+49 (0) 1523 / 911 8402
linda.riechers@porsche.de

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