

# THE MESSAGE LASTS: AN INTERVIEW WITH PAULA SAUNDERS AND DAVE BRICK OF THE FREEDOM AFFAIR

INTERVIEWED BY GABRIEL ERTSGAARD

*Paula Saunders and Dave Brick are members of The Freedom Affair, a female-fronted juggernaut inspired by the traditions of soul music's past with an enduring message that looks toward the future. Paula Sanders shares lead singer duties in the band and also works in medical IT. Dave Brick is the band's drummer as well as a director/cinematographer who has filmed across the globe.*

**GE:** How did your band, The Freedom Affair, come together?

**DB:** I grew up in Kansas City but lived in Oakland/the Bay area for about fifteen years—had kids out there. My wife and I decided to move back to Kansas City to be closer to both of our families. I was in a group in California called The Grease Traps, and our guitarist suggested that I get in touch with Sunflower Soul Records. I sent an email, and about twenty minutes later I got an email back from Chris Hazelton. He said, "I know your band. I have your 45, and I'd love to get together."

Chris and I had a vision for a soul group. At some point I said, "Hey let's try to get three female singers to front the band." He wasn't sure how that would work. It's not the easiest thing to put together. But sure enough, he was on a gig with Paula, and she was singing a Chaka Khan song. He realized that she was the right fit for the vision we had. It just came together from there. Within a few weeks, we had this band and were writing music. The first session, we were writing songs that are on our first album, *Freedom Is Love*.

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**PS:** It was pretty cool how it came together organically like that. Like Dave said, Chris and I did that gig together with another singer. Then that singer said, “I have a friend who writes and sings,” so she came in. Everybody in the band has their own thing that they’d been doing. But we formed this band, and it came together so beautifully. We probably couldn’t have orchestrated it like that if we tried. It just worked.

**GE:** What brought both of you into music?

**PS:** I grew up on it. A lot of people say that, but my dad has tapes of me singing when I was two. My mom is the director of our choir at church. My dad comes from a family of eleven, and they’re all singers. They had a group for a while called the Saunders Family. My great-uncle played behind some jazz greats in Kansas City. It’s literally in my blood. I couldn’t turn it off if I tried. I actually tried one year—sixth grade. I decided not to do choir. I was miserable! I will never do that again. I started out with gospel roots, but always had an appreciation for everything else. My dad played classical, jazz, soft rock, all that stuff—so I got to appreciate all of that. As I learned how to use my voice, I could do a lot of riffs and runs that aren’t really appropriate for gospel. So over to jazz I go, then over to R&B, then over to soul.

**DB:** Music has been part of my life forever as well. For my fourth birthday I got a toy drum set. It all started there. Then I slowly moved to a real drum set. Actually, one of my brothers got a real drum set, and I just started playing it. At age seven, I think, I started teaching myself how to play. I was just addicted. I would play along with my favorite tunes. Around sixth/seventh grade I started getting exposed to more soul music. Friends introduced me to pretty deep stuff, actually, like Roy Ayers, Tower of Power, The Meters, and Sly and the Family Stone. It all resonated with me. So I got into jazz and deeper into soul music. I’ve played in bands from middle school until now. I’ve always been in a band.

**GE:** It seems like a social justice vision infuses a lot of your music. Would you consider that accurate?

**DB:** When we were starting the band in 2017, social justice was such a large part of our conversation in this country. It was at the top of all of our minds. One way or another, I think we were all looking for a way to express that. I definitely had been doing that in my filmmaking career. I work with a lot of nonprofits and people who do good in the world, both

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socially and environmentally. So that was inspiring me to write songs based on what I was seeing in the world. When we started the band, there wasn't a mandate or a mission statement that said, "We're going to talk about social justice." It's just what we all gravitated towards.

**PS:** Again, it speaks to the organic nature of this band. We just came together, and this is what we were all thinking and talking about. It's amazing. How are we all like minded, and thinking about the same stuff, and writing and creating the same stuff? It's pretty powerful. Even looking at us as a band, you see there's three black women, and a bunch of white guys behind them. Immediately, you're going to think, "Hmm ... what's that?" It's so cool that we're talking about things like coming together, working together, loving each other. We're showing you—you're looking at us and seeing it—but now we're going to sing about it, too. So if you missed that message, I don't know how you missed it.

**DB:** Where we are in the country, smack dab in the middle, you find people from all different sides of every coin—with multiple perspectives and experiences. That conversation is happening constantly around us, whether it be with our own families, or even with each other. I'd be lying if I said that we all had the exact same beliefs and views about everything. But I think what's special about our band is that we've created this space where we practice what we preach. If you know our song "One Nation" that Chris wrote before we were even a band, it goes, "We'll never be one nation if we can't have a conversation." I said we didn't have a mission statement, but maybe we do! We have that love approach of trying to hear each other with respect and understanding rather than being opposed to someone's view.

**GE:** Your first album is entitled *Freedom Is Love*. How do you think freedom and love are linked?

**PS:** I look at the whole line from our song "Love Liberates." Beautiful song. "Freedom is love, and love liberates."\* We sing about that a lot: love being the key to everything; if you can just find some love in your heart. We tend to end our shows on stuff like that. Like Dave said, we're different, but can we have a conversation about it? Can we talk about it? Love is at the root of all of that. If you do love somebody, if you're willing to listen and talk to them, then they're free to be who they are just like you're free to be who you are.

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**GE:** Music had an integral role in the Civil Rights Movement. Does that history have an influence on your music?

**PS:** “Love Liberates” feels very churchy, very choir-y. I didn’t write that song, Chris did, but that’s how I feel that song. And civil rights and church went right together.

**DB:** The Staple Singers say they sing message music, and I think our band is very similar in a lot of ways. That is, in approach—I don’t want to say that we’re as good as the Staple Singers, but we’re inspired by that music. We saw that some of those messages could make a difference. Why not talk about issues that matter in your music? Why not inspire someone to make a difference in someone else’s life? Music can be powerful like that. Music can create change.

**PS:** And that type of music lasts. James Brown. You can walk up to any Black person and say, “Say it loud!” and they’ll go, “I’m Black and I’m proud!” We know that, you know what I mean? That music lasts and the message lasts. You can make music that has an impact. It’s been proven that it works, so let’s do it.

**GE:** The theme for this issue is “intimacy.” How does intimacy manifest in the process of creating and sharing music?

**DB:** Paula, I have an answer *for* you. I don’t want to put you on blast ...

**PS:** No, go ahead.

**DB:** In “Don’t You Wanna Love Me,” a song from our upcoming second album, when you sang about intimacy in a personal way, you got to explore a level in your voice that you’re not usually allowed to explore. And in live performances of “Anchor,” another song from that album, Paula has shown a level of vulnerability with our audience that’s created a level of intimacy beyond what we’ve ever done or seen before as part of this band.

**PS:** We’re tracking together. Intimacy is all up and through this album. “With You” is a good one about intimacy, about how much we’ve missed being with each other and our audience. There’s a song about a couple, “Tell Me I’ll Be Yours”: We get into it, and life happens, but in the

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end please tell me that we belong to each other. "Don't You Wanna Love Me" is seductive and intimate. Typically, I'm the powerhouse, lower register vocalist, but I use my upper register in this song. It's soft, it's sexy.

Then this song "Anchor" brings out vulnerability that I didn't even mean to explore and share. It was an accident! Chris wrote that one. It's talking about somebody in your life whose love is the anchor that keeps you from falling and drifting. The first time we performed it Chris said, "At the breakdown, talk to the audience. Say something." So while singing this song, I started thinking about my grandmothers who had been the anchors for me. I had a baby in college, and they stepped in to help me finish school. One of them babysat my daughter for free. The other one gave me a hundred dollars every month. I don't think about that very often—this was 23 years ago—but on the stage that night I was telling and remembering how important these women were to my life. So I start crying on stage, and that is so not me! That created a level of intimacy with the audience. People were coming up afterwards saying, "That's my story, too. I was a single mom. I had help." It helps show how alike we really all are. If we tell enough stories, we'll find that we have more in common than we realize. That level of intimacy is pretty much our goal at every show.

**DB:** The intimacy that Paula curates in these shows leads to these conversations that promote peace. I know for a fact that we have people from very far ends of the political spectrum at our shows. It always blows my mind. And they're all there together dancing, laughing, crying, and telling each other that they love each other. When we talk about the power of music and the power of community, it's all coming together at our shows.

*\*Editor's note: As David Brick helpfully pointed out, the phrase "love liberates" comes from Maya Angelou. The OWN Network YouTube channel has a short but powerful video of Angelou invoking this phrase while discussing her grandmother. Dr. Maya Angelou: "Love Liberates" | Oprah's Master Class | Oprah Winfrey Network:*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d7dxnQQEpXs>

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