



# BRINGING' on the

# FUNK

BY ASHLEY M. CASEY | PHOTOS COURTESY OF DAVE HANLON'S COOKBOOK

Music has always been a family affair for Ava Andrews. The lively, raspy-voiced chanteuse grew up singing in the choir of her father's church. Her sister, Marcia Hagan, is a singer and playwright. Most notably, Ava has been the front woman — and the only woman — in R&B/funk outfit Dave Hanlon's Cookbook for 32 years.

"It feels like having four brothers," Ava said of her band mates.

In 1983, Ava auditioned for Hanlon over the phone, singing Chaka Khan's "Ain't Nobody." Hanlon was sold. After a year of rehearsals, Cookbook made its debut at the Syracuse Jazz Fest at the Suburban Park dance club. Three decades later, Ava is still a mainstay in the band's current five-piece lineup, which has been in place for about 10 years. "Dave and I laugh now," Ava said. "I say, 'Some people don't even stay married that long.'"

While most of Cookbook's performances are at local clubs and restaurants, Ava said she loves performing at weddings as well. "People are there for one purpose: to celebrate that love," she explained, adding that when she sees someone whose wedding Cookbook performed at, she asks, "Are you still together? Was my work in vain?"

Ava got her start in the church choir circuit, touring the East Coast with a group of teenage gospel singers. She said she inherited her pastor father's voice. "He kind of had that Nat King Cole husky thing going on," she recalled. "I thought, *How come I can't be a soprano?* It wasn't meant to be."

Fortunately, Ava has embraced her unique contralto voice since then. She cites Aretha Franklin, Donny Hathaway and Stevie Wonder as her influences, but she pooh-poohs comparisons to other singers. "People always got a way to put you in a pocket and say, 'You sound like so-and-so,'" she told me.

*"Music has always been the sustaining thread through my whole life."*

She's never shied away from the stage. Her job as a National Grid customer service representative (she's now retired) and her work with Cookbook let her interact with people easily and confidently. She says meeting new people is "like a treasure" to her. "It just seems second nature to perform," she added. "Music has always been the sustaining thread through my whole life."

While music has been her lifelong passion, Ava said she realized early on that she didn't want to pursue stardom. She tried her hand at the New York City music scene and found that she didn't want to live out of a suitcase between late-night gigs.

"Everything that glitters is not gold," she said, noting that some of her favorite performers' lives ended in tragedy: Whitney Houston struggled with substance abuse before her 2012 death, and Donny Hathaway suffered from paranoid schizophrenia and depression. "I figured out right then this is not the life for me," she said.

Ava is happy to stick with the Syracuse music scene, which, according to her, is small but full of hidden gems. "There are so many talented people here," she shared. "I just feel blessed that I've been part of this journey." She hopes to continue performing for a long time to come, noting that "music brings youth."

As for her own musical legacy, Ava said that someday she wants people to remember her as someone who loved what she did. "I want them to remember that whenever they saw me perform, I gave it everything I had, whether there were two people in the room or a thousand."

For more information on Dave Hanlon's Cookbook or to find out dates for upcoming shows, visit [davehanlonscookbook.com](http://davehanlonscookbook.com) or like the band on Facebook at [facebook.com/pages/Dave-Hanlons-Cookbook/87424275217](https://www.facebook.com/pages/Dave-Hanlons-Cookbook/87424275217).