

In jeans and T-shirts, with ladders abound and wires hanging from the ceiling, I was watching *Ruby Velle and The Soulphonics* warming up on stage, two hours before show time.

At one of the world's most recognizable venues, the Hard Rock Café, the sleek lounge is set to hold more than 300 of Atlanta's chic-cocktail-dressed and silken-black-tied patrons of the official "After Party" for the *2009 Georgia Music Hall of Fame Awards*. The band is preparing diligently for their primetime show while a whole other production is setting up backstage.

This is not just a production of colors, fabrics and hairspray – there is something deeper coming together, along with the make-up for this Southern soul singer. Backstage, I take notice of the level of specialized involvement and dedication of not just talent, but of character it takes to perfect an artist's look for this caliber of an event.

If you were not aware prior to reading this, you will come to realize this is not an undertaking to be discussed dismissively as simply picking the right dress or bracelet. Behind the professionalism of each individual is an innumerable renewable source of passion that drives them.

With less than two hours before Velle sets the stage afire with her "Soul Hot" band, the Soulphonics, tonight – in the background, waiting with targeted purpose, is a team readied to turn this already sassy singer into a work of art.

In the dressing room – the hair, the wardrobe, the makeup..."the works" – are all waiting to be executed adeptly and exclusively to appeal to an audience who knows all too well award-winning musical performances when they see one...let alone hear one.

What makes *Ruby Velle and the Soulphonics'* adventure into this next stage of their career all the more inspiring tonight over other great performances of the same ability?

Partly it is the sheer dedication her team has. Her amazing team consists of dedicated design company owner and lead fashion designer O'Neal Wyche, seasoned New York City in-house stylist Shay Baker, and warm-hearted make-up artist Yasmine Jackson.

What makes this team, this band and this soul singer stand out? It is *the* common element that bonds everyone in that dressing room together – everyone is in their quarterlife.

They are all part of young Generation Y, whom is currently in the midst of a global-generational crisis. Velle, who is at the core of this seemingly frenzied but rhythmic styling routine, speaks in harmony for everyone in the dressing room watching the foundation brushes fly and bobby pins being positioned.

"...Being in the quarterlife is not bad; it's definitely a motivating factor."

*Motivation*...that *had* to be the key component behind everyone there that evening, myself included. Everyone backstage was well aware that the "normal" road to success is currently blocked by a multi-faceted pileup that has left Generation Y waiting impatiently at the on-ramp.

This awareness, for some, is an indicator to seek a new route to their destination. While for others, like the design team, it is the proverbial green light to build new roads and make new destinations.

The new roads these young entertainment professionals are currently traveling is obviously uncharted and unique. From the start of their professional careers – all within metropolitan areas – these individuals have had to learn how to operate when conducting business with other Generation Y entrepreneurs and clients; while at the same time, defining their own level of distinction amongst the flailing economic and social world around them.

Their past experiences of trials, successes, diversions and reaffirmations have placed them all here today; concluding in the new found spirit that is reverberating loudly within this sample group of Generation Y.

Each of these skilled individuals have been shaking up how they think of business, right down to the very basis of, and what most consider *the “American Ideal,”* of how all business is initiated, executed and closed – money.

When I ask Velle and the styling crew how they came to work together professionally, Velle lets out a small laugh and recalls, “I found them...and at first, I approached it *all wrong!*”

Velle is a graphic artist by day and soul singer by life. After she completed her formal education as a graphic designer with professional social media experience, her professors told her “You *gotta* charge this – You *gotta* say this and you *gotta* do that!” And like all good students heading out into the ‘real world,’” Velle listened.

As she went to solicit her graphics skills to her current styling team’s company following “normal business practices”, she quickly came to the realization for most Generation Y entrepreneurs, monetary gain is not always the bottom line. Moreover for Velle, who works fulltime as a graphic designer, she faced time constraints and limitations disallowing her to perform within the capacity they needed.

Clearly, the advice she was provided during her higher education was not applicable in dealing with professionals in the realm of Generation Y, or really with most companies in these times; leaving her and her seemingly would-be clients at an impasse.

However, most naturally for people of the resourceful and determined Generation Y, both sides realized the potential in working with one another and formed an agreement to appease the desires of both entities; while minimizing costs to virtually nothing.

They agreed to where Velle would create graphic design and manage social networking for her styling team’s company and in turn, they would style her and her band, Velle stating “I chose to volunteer my time with these guys instead of charging a fee, because ultimately, I sincerely believe in them and their inner passions.”

As Jackson, the make-up artist dexterously applies the sultry and sophisticated retro-styled eyeliner to the young singer, and Baker, the in-house stylist, preps Velle’s attire – I ask them both about their

professional backgrounds working in major cities and how they stood out amongst the ground swell of Generation-Y entertainment entrepreneurs.

As though practiced in synchrony, Baker and Jackson pause, sigh and let a smile creep up on their faces, as they internally recant their ambitious struggles to make it through the competition of urban entertainment styling and make-up artistry.

Baker started in New York City a little over 6 years ago and has been the in-house stylist for *Archives, LLC* for two years now. Baker then relocated to Atlanta and is described by her peers as, “taking the town by storm, not wasting any time.” She finds her inspiration and drive from walking the streets of her clientele’s market, and finding the appropriate end-result of niche styles and esoteric flairs to assemble the right eclectic look.

Baker observes, “New York City is really over-saturated right now. *Everybody* wants to be in the fashion/music industry, someday, *somehow*.”

She has been able to, over the past six years, book her own clients and work under some of the more notable magazines and fashion directors to gain experiences most in their 20s only dream about.

“I’ve done a lot,” she starts, as she critically identified the accessories to adorn Ruby, “but it was always under the title of ‘assistant.’”

She speaks highly of her experiences and how they have shaped her professional career – but one of the things she mentions that makes everyone nod in agreement is that everyone can have the same level of talent – but it is necessary to specialize and know where to execute your talents to get you noticed.

Asserts Baker, “...Being in the right place, right time and knowing what you’re passion and job is – either as a stylist or as a make-up artist, will get you noticed.

“It’s not that everyone out there isn’t talented – but they aren’t putting in the same level of commitment, drive and research that we have been putting in to get where we are.”

Naturally, what came to mind was what exactly did the competition look like in New York and Atlanta?

Were they facing the same disadvantages as recent marketing, business and English graduates faced? Were they interviewing against seasoned professionals in their respective fields? Or were these artists up against our own peers in Generation Y?

As Baker pins up Velle’s classic, yet edgy bouffant-bob, she recalls her main competition being in the age bracket of 20 to 30-year-olds – the heart of Generation Y.

“Everyone in our generation is watching these ‘Reality’ TV shows and thinks they can be fashion designers/stylists/makeup artists overnight with a carrying case of makeup and a tape measure...there’s more to it than that.”

Listening from the other side of the room, in front of the mirror under Jackson's brushes, Velle chimes in on Baker's comment, simplistically stating, "It's about building a brand – a brand that *authentically* represents you, feels good to others... *you* need to be 'present' in brand."

In a brief silence, everyone ponders and internalizes Velle's statement on branding. It becomes apparent to everyone that "building a brand" is what we all were doing on our "new roads" to success.

Baker breaks the silence with sarcastic laughter in her voice, and informs Jackson, "Now Yasmine...you know Ruby us used to doing her *own* makeup, hair and clothes!" and without skipping a beat, Velle reiterates, "I was JUST telling Yasmine that! I was trying to give her a hand, hold a brush...do something!" Everyone laughs.

We all laugh because Ruby Velle and the Soulphonics having built their brand from the ground-up over the past three years, now relinquishes control to Jackson, Baker and Wyche to further develop their concepts – Velle assumed she would continue to manually brand the band for some time.

This is a fair assumption for her to make, because prior to Velle's full-time position, she was working freelance. Even though she was 100 percent dedicated to her performances, various limitations left her doing a lot of the groundwork herself as opposed to the luxury of someone else doing it for her.

However, now that she has a balance of "responsibility" and "passion," she admits no matter how much she likes what she does 9-5 she affirms, "I need to be doing 'THIS' (*she waves hands to represent the aura and atmosphere of performing life*)."

She wittedly adds, "I'm 25; no more playing around...I need a GRAMMY!" A great laughter echoes down the halls of the Hard Rock's upstairs dressing rooms as we all joke about her statement.

Baker quantifies it best by saying, for her, the quarterlife was definitely an age period more than a state of mind.

The balance of responsibility and passion is something all in their quarterlife are no stranger to. I asked the creative team and Velle if they were struggling with a "Quarterlife Crisis" and Velle reiterates her balance between what she wants and what she is doing *is* her "crisis," however, she is closer to ultimate goal each time she takes the stage.

Jackson falls into this same category – as an "on again, off again" make-up artist for eight years, she has now been able to focus on her passion professionally for the past year and a half.

"I'd leave it [make-up artistry], come back to it, leave it come back to it – and finally I realized that *this* is what I need to do."

Everyone again nods in agreement, as it speaks true to what Baker had said earlier – if you find your passion, you will be noticed and be able to shine.

As professionals in their field, I wanted to know at any point during their "Quarterlife Crisis" if they ever felt successful, or when they had that *Wow, I can do this as a professional!* moment.

Just like before, Baker and Jackson pause and reply in-sync, “Hmmm!”

Laughter breaks out as they admit they had never considered themselves “just yet” as being successful – but realized there was a time when they crossed the threshold of being a professional.

Baker speaks first as she watches Jackson apply Velle’s lip make-up and muses Ruby Velle and the Soulphonics had been her best clients as far as fine tuning her skills to fit the client’s need.

Jokingly, Baker confesses, “I mean, when I first saw this *little* girl...I had NO IDEA **that** sound would be coming out of her!”

*Side statement: What Shay said is true! If you were to judge Ruby Velle like a book by its cover and heard her sing, you would have a similar shock as if you thought you purchased a cookbook in English, and ended up reading about electrical engineering in Greek. Her small stature and bubbly personality hides a voice unheard since the '50s and '60s.*

Continues Baker, “...But since I’ve been working with her, I realize, even though I have a very eclectic taste, I can conceptualize the client’s vision from understanding their profession, passion and vision.”

Before working with Velle, Baker tells us about a past experience which proved to herself that *Yes, I am a professional!*

“When I was in New York City assisting as a stylist, one of my bosses had double-booked two high-profile clients. We aren’t talking an overlapping hour...we had two clients, two shoots; same date, same time!”

Everyone in the room stops what they are doing and listens to her continue.

“I had to go and pretty much ‘be her’ at one of the shoots and style this client by myself and,” she smiles to herself, “I ROCKED IT OUT!!! And for a MAJOR magazine too! I just was like, ‘THIS IS AMAZING!’...it was really at that moment, just by being able to execute her vision without her being there, that made me feel successful!”

The question now turns to Jackson who is perfecting her mastery on Velle. Jackson gives a pensive sigh as she answers almost silently, “...That’s an interesting question.”

Straightening up from leaning into the details of Ruby’s face, she attests she definitely feels like a professional, but there has been really one identifiable period in her life were she felt a rewarding success from her work.

Jackson has been working on and off in make-up for some time, and has spent some of that time working as a volunteer artist at elderly care homes and for women who can’t afford professional work. Jackson recalls, “...it made them feel good, and ultimately at the end of the day, I just like the way a woman feels when she looks her best, and I just like sharing that feeling.”

A warm “awww” is verbalized by everyone as Jackson smiles and leans back into her work, at which I ask her if the feeling and fulfillment she achieves from doing makeup is almost worth more than the paycheck. She agrees with me, to an extent, as she nods, but verbally clarifies “not all the time!”

At this point, Velle is getting her lips painted, glossed and lined while lead designer Wyche, comes in from meeting with the rest of the band and camera crew. He announces the band’s excitement about being “styled” and getting “fresh stuff.” Everyone bursts into laughter when Wyche proclaims that they are no longer afraid of wearing colors...except for pink!

After I am mildly-heckled for being a fan of the popped-pink-collar-polo back in college, I turn to Wyche to catch him up on our conversation about the quarterlife in an urban area and as a Generation-Y entrepreneur.

Wyche, who calmly and collectively makes his presence known amongst the excitement of the dressing room emotively says, “Stay true to yourself – and your customers will follow.”

He describes his experiences from Atlanta to New York City and in his annotations of his experiences there are multitudes of people who were inspired by the reality TV designers, stylists, etc. and how you can try to accomplish your goals in this manner, however, you cannot appease the whims of every client, every time.

Wyche reiterates, “...Each designer has their specific customer.” And to be the star in your own creative sky, you need to focus on “you” and who your customers are.

To better understand this unruffled capitalist’s style and insight into his design – I ask him, when being true to himself, what were his favorite pieces to work on. Was he limited to Neo-Retro designs for women – or was his unique creativity capable of being flexible within his brand?

Without hesitation in thought, Wyche starts, “I take pride in being versatile in my market. I have done a lot of freelance and have been able to work at a lot of different brands; however for me, as I have a theatre background, so I love the dramatics.” He pauses, then chuckles, “...and I love dresses!”

He finishes his thoughts on his niches of work, “I like to experiment with unorthodox fabrics and materials to make traditional pieces.”

As everyone is on the same page – and Velle is just about done under the mastery of Baker and Jackson – I collectively ask the trio how they feel this economy has changed their professional plans. Were their multi-city aspirations too lofty in this day and age, or were they recommitted to their passions of labor?

Wyche, as stoic as before, says he started his venture right at the crux of the international economical downturn. He was right in New York when things crashed, creating and developing with his business partner.

“It was a hard time and very challenging but an adrenaline boost. It’s best to start in a down time, because when the economy starts back up, the ball is already rolling.”

What really sticks out is what I have witnessed not only amongst these young professional that night, but overall through my interaction with Generation-Y entrepreneurs and professionals alike.

Says Wyche, “People need a lot help when there isn’t a lot of money, I have found they are more open to do a lot of things when times are hard.”

As Velle is now free of the chair that held her for almost two hours and Baker and Jackson begin packing up, Baker recounts that while the economy grounds her, it certainly keeps her on her toes.

“...There are a lot of cut backs, tremendously on the editorial aspect, like a lot. I mean, at this point if you even find an editorial job with a budget ALONE you are happy. But on the consumer side I still see a lot of individuals spending on stylists.”

Jackson, now relaxing to the side says with a smile, “I keep moving forward and not let it affect me negatively, even though it is a down time and hard situation – I remain positive!”

Positivism seemed to be a theme through this group as they all look at their work of art, Ruby Velle, and reflect on the last two hours of questions and laughs. You can see that they are all at peace with where they are going, and how they are getting there.

Before we all head back downstairs to see Ruby Velle and the Soulphonics make those cocktail dresses and bowties dance, I ask Baker, Jackson, Wyche and Velle if they could impart a little inspiration or wisdom onto our Generation-Y family who are still struggling to find their own roads.

**Velle:** “Believe in your worth, seek your passions and authentic happiness – everything else will follow.”

**Wyche:** “Stay motivated and again, stay true to yourself. You can’t worry about what other people are doing. Dream big.”

**Baker:** “Go hard, or go home! That’s all you can do!”

**Jackson:** “Like O’Neal said – stay motivated!”