



# Josephine "Jo" Austin

*aka – Ibibio FUNDI .... a*  
**Renaissance woman**  
**(2/28/29 – 7/11/07)**

## **... The Source**

Fundi, as she was fondly known for most of her adult life, was born Josephine Isadora Austin on February 28, 1929, in the Suffolk area of Boston, Massachusetts. Her parents Earnest Austin and Helen Gordon-Austin were immigrants from Jamaica.

## **... The Discipline**

Fundi attended Girls High School and graduated from Roxbury Memorial High School in Boston. Later she attended the Massachusetts School of Art. As a child prodigy, classically trained in piano, she performed many recitals.

As did so many youth during this period, upon graduating from high school, Fundi served two years in the Army-Women Army Corps.

But her thirst for education continued; she obtained a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Art with a minor in Anthropology from U.C. Berkeley graduating with honors as a Phi Beta Kappa. She completed one year in the Master of Fine Arts program at U.C. Berkeley, majoring in Sculpture. Fundi was among those who received the last of the life-time teaching credentials in the State of California in Art/Social Sciences/Anthropology for grades 7 through 12.

Fundi, her African name meaning one who shares, was a teacher at heart. She wanted to change the educational system to have a positive impact on children and their families, especially those of color who were economically and socially challenged. Fundi taught in the Oakland Unified School District for twenty years as an art and music teacher at Madison Junior High and served as chairperson of the Art Department as well as teacher at Dewey High School in Oakland, California.

The emergence of Jo Austin as an author began when Fundi took a leave of absence for one year from the Graduate Studies Program at UCB to produce an educational publication for school age children entitled "The Little Sister Series" published by Leswing Press in Marin County, California.

## **... In the Community**

- Fundi created, designed and directed the stage production for the play, "Look for a Wonder," starring folk singer Odetta.
- In 1969 Fundi was featured in the reproductions of art work by Samella S. Lewis and Ruth G. Waddy, *Black Artists on Art*, Vol. I.
- As a musician, composer and arranger, Fundi created the music and lyrics for "Freedom Suite." She wrote original music covering a range of lyrics and styles from jazz ballads to songs that inspire political action like "It Looks like a Cloud, but It's Toxic Waste."
- She played piano and sang original compositions at Ollie's restaurant/bar and Yoshi's restaurant in Oakland. Yes, Fundi could sing – she was known as having a voice comparable to that of Sarah Vaughn and she loved jazz.
- Dr. Shirley Moore featured the life and times of Fundi in a panel discussion of "Women Activists: You Have Struggled like a Rock" at the Organization of American Historians annual conference in 2005.
- Fundi's cartoons have been published in Bay Area newspapers and in her last five years she created a new whimsical series of animal cartoons.

During the anti-apartheid movement, Fundi designed and painted posters for Artists Against Apartheid and her art was used on numerous flyers, posters and program booklets for organizations such as the Bay Area Free Southern Africa Movement (BAFSAM), Bay Area Anti-Apartheid Network (BAAAN), the Bay Area Southern Africa Network (BASAN), and for Vukani Mawethu Choir.

As an accomplished artist, educator, author, musician, composer, arranger and conductor, Fundi was a progressive activist who expressed solidarity with Native Americans and the people of Africa, Haiti, Palestine and Cuba (former Brigadista) through her words, art, music and deeds. Before the onset of Parkinson's disease in the last decade of her life, Fundi was active in progressive politics: singing on picket lines with the Freedom Song Network, marching in demonstrations; standing and inspiring others to join in labor demonstrations to boycott South African cargo during the former racist regime; at anti-war marches and at homeless shelters; in prisons, battered women shelters, health care centers, and schools -- everywhere people were demonstrating for peace and justice and against racism, war and oppression.

Some progressive organizations in which she actively participated include:

- Community Action Center – Richmond, CA
- Freedom Song Network
- Billie Holiday Club
- Music for Peace & Liberation
- KPFA, KQED
- East Bay Peace Action
- Harambee Gardens
- Finn Hall Board
- Vukani Mawethu Choir
- and various other anti-apartheid groups and committees

Most notably, Fundi was the beloved original long-time Musical Director for Vukani Mawethu Choir-- one of her main “gifts” to the Bay Area. One of the highlights of her work as a cultural activist and leader was teaching and conducting 250 singers from many church choirs to back-up Vukani Mawethu Choir at the Oakland Coliseum. The event featured Nelson Mandela who visited the Bay Area following his release from 27 years in South African prisons and just prior to his becoming President of the new South Africa. In 1997, Fundi led Vukani Mawethu on a musical tour of South Africa where the choir was enthusiastically received and where her personal impact on at least one South African Boer was so dramatic that she brought him to tears and a change of heart.

Fundi was a blend of strength, wit, wisdom and analytical brilliance; she was warm, loving, caring, giving, serene, and selfless – and always a principled leader who unified all types of people and had the respect of all – believing “we are all works of art in process....”

A personal quote of hers reflects her perspective as a Black artist, “Art and life can never be divided – ask me.”

Our beloved Fundi will be terribly missed by all of us. We know that her spirit is a beacon giving us encouragement and lighting our way, saying, “Keep up your good work, you wonderful ones.”

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On Sunday, September 23<sup>rd</sup>, a culture-filled Celebration of the Life of Josephine 'Jo' Austin, aka Ibibio FUNDI, will be held from 2:00 - 5:00pm at St. John's Presbyterian Church, 2727 College Avenue, Berkeley, California. Please join Vukani Mawethu Choir in keeping Fundi's spirit alive!

*[Donations in Fundi's honor can be made to Vukani Mawethu Choir, Haiti Action Committee, or to KPFA.]*