

Music: Feature

Solid bond

Sweet Honey in the Rock celebrates 30 years of music and messages

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By Al Kaufman



Dwight Carter

WOMEN GATHERED: Sweet Honey in the Rock at 30

For Bernice Johnson Reagon, there was never a need to draw a line between her passions for music and activism. As founder of the all-female, African-American a cappella group Sweet Honey in the Rock, Reagon has been spreading her music with a message for the last 30 years.

"I came to this through the Civil Rights Movement, and my biggest contribution to the Civil Rights Movement was as a song leader," she says. "I walked day by day hearing songs talk about what the issues were. I've never had to choose. The thing that has made this a life's work is that blend. And that's who I am."

The daughter of a Baptist minister in southwest Georgia, Reagon served in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's original Freedom Singers. Today, she serves as a history professor at American University and curator emeritus at the Smithsonian. When she founded Sweet Honey in the Rock in 1973, she was serving as vocal director of Washington, D.C.'s Black Repertory Company. The idea was to celebrate the African-American woman, for which the group's name is a metaphor: sweet as honey, solid as a rock. It quickly became more.

"I felt like the one way I could be true to what I discovered in the Civil Rights Movement was to be open to the fact that I would take positions on other issues," she says. "When Sweet Honey started, the women's movement was one of the biggest issues around. And as we began to perform, we discovered there were a lot of women on the local level who would bring us to town. And they were overwhelmingly white. We were going into a movement as African-American women, where the issues were shaped by women who were not black, predominantly. One of the

things we learned was that we could actually participate and be not just women, but African-American women. We could bring a contribution to the issues being raised by the women's movement in general. From that, you can go to our work with the ecology movement, work against military intervention in certain places in the world -- the group has just moved through a lot."

The group has moved through a lot of members as well -- 22 in its 30-year, 18-album history. Its current lineup of Reagon, Carol Lynn Maillard, Ysaye Maria Barnwell, Nitanju Bolande Casel, Aisha Kahlil and Sign Language interpreter Shirley Childress Saxton has been steady since 1990, when founding member Maillard rejoined the group. Many of the women pursue other projects -- in music, writing, acting and film production as well as in education, speech pathology and book editing. Their rich backgrounds help bring even more depth to the ensemble.

Maillard, for example, is a violinist and actress as well as a singer. She calls herself "the least political out of everyone in the group," but it's Maillard who wrote the title track on the new Sweet Honey CD, *The Women Gather*. The song deals with women coming together to try to make sense of the random violence around them. In her introduction, Maillard specifically refers to the students at Columbine and Amadou Diallo, the unarmed African immigrant shot and killed by New York police. She's also not shy when it comes to discussing what she sees as George W. Bush's determination to squash the rights of Americans and start wars under the guise of searching for terrorists.

"There's something that's just not sitting right," she says. "This administration is trying to drum something up. If it wasn't the tragedy that happened on the East Coast, they would have found something else, because there's something they want. Power, loyalty, dictatorship -- I don't know what it is, but that whole idea of, 'If you're not for us, you're against us,' that's not civilized. The U.S. of A was built on the idea -- and I'm speaking specifically of the Revolutionary War -- of people saying, 'We're not taking this anymore. We want to establish a way of being that is free and open.' I think about that during these times of injustice."

Other songs on the new CD, the group's first since 9-11, deal with loss and death, while still others confront issues ranging from racial injustice to statehood for Washington, D.C. While some of the songs come across like history lessons, there has never been a history teacher with this kind of flair and vocal prowess. For Reagon, the two go hand-in-hand.

"I come out of a singing culture," Maillard says, "where there's no difference between the music and breathing. If there's going to be a

healthy black struggle, having singing people is going to keep you saner longer. I know people who heard of Soweto for the first time because they heard us sing about it, so there actually is information you can give out; you can stimulate discussion. So in addition to nurturing, bonding, pulling people together, affirming people and celebrating life, there's also a lot of information sharing and stimulation. The way we sound when we sing makes a difference. It's the power of music as a force in your life -- to hold you, to rock you, to tap into your energy, to release energy in you. It is most healing, most invigorating and most comforting."

Indeed, many have left Sweet Honey concerts feeling energized, invigorated and healed. Drawing from rich gospel and African backgrounds, the group also incorporates jazz, blues, world folk styles and hip-hop into its music. The result is a very danceable, very intellectual, revival -- sometimes bordering on miraculous.

For a children's show in D.C. the weekend before Martin Luther King Day - - while war protests raged nearby in the capital -- the group opened with "Down by the Riverside." Saxton taught all the kids to sign the refrain: "I ain't gonna study war no more."

"You should have seen the little bodies," Reagon says, her pride practically bursting. "And they were really singing it, and I just felt, 'Oh my goodness, this is really important.'"

Reaching out to children has always been important to Sweet Honey, but the idea really blossomed after the Atlanta child killings in the early '80s. Reagon's daughter, singer Toshi Reagon -- who produced the new Sweet Honey album -- was born in Atlanta, so the horror hit home even more.

Gearing special performances, and two albums, specifically to children, Bernice Reagon says, "was the other side of the tragedy. It was a chance to participate with parents and families. It's worked."

Reagon now remembers being in an airport and getting introduced to a little boy by his mother as "the woman who sings 'Little Red Caboose.'"

Sweet Honey's range extends beyond activism and children's music. The group has worked on numerous film scores, including collaborating with James Horner and Carole King on the soundtrack to *Freedom Song*. They also worked with the Washington Ballet Company, singing the ballet score live during dance performances. Members also wrote the group's own biography, *We Who Believe in Freedom*, for Sweet Honey's 25th anniversary.

For the current 30-year commemoration, award-winning filmmaker Stanley Nelson is putting together a documentary about the group that he hopes to have out by spring 2004. Sweet Honey is also performing many dates on its current Black History Month tour (though not the Atlanta concert) with Toshi's rock band, Big Lovely. The collaboration began when Sweet Honey sang background on a song, "Real Love," from Toshi's 1999 album, *Righteous One*.

"If you're a cappella, you really don't see yourself messing with a rock band," she says. "But the way she mixed the song, we were not background singers. We actually fired the energy. After that, I said, 'Do you think we could do that live?' Toshi said, 'We can work on it.'

"Then we were talking about what we wanted to do for our 30th year, and I said, 'What about some shows with Toshi, who was 9 when we started, so we'll have a cross-generational, cross-genre, evening?' And it has just been amazing."

Collaborating and trying new things has always been what the group is about.

Says Reagon, "Sweet Honey in the Rock has been the most powerful vehicle for someone who wants to be contemporary. And even as we're contemporary, we have not had to give up those parts of ourselves that are quite ancient. Our audiences have thanked us for struggling to do what we try to do."