Ears Embiggened: Rhiannon Giddens – Great Black Music, Redux



(The third in a series of preview posts as we count down to the
2019 Big Ears Festival in Knoxville, TN. Part 1 here on the 50 year legacy of ECM Records. Part 2 here on 50 years of the Art Ensemble of Chicago,
Great Black Music: Ancient to the Future.)

The eruption of way too many old photos of white politicians in blackface was a real chef's kiss for Black History Month. There quickly followed predictable hand wringing, assertions of surprise that such a thing was actually *still a thing,* and heartfelt intonations that such evidence "does not reflect who I am within my heart," a heart that surely resides in a body that contains not a single "racial bone."

Blackface has a long history, back at least as far as Shakespeare's *Otello*. More pertinent to the American experience is its introduction in the mid-1700s as a device to shorthand stereotypes about happy-go-lucky slaves and indolent and shiftless darkies. It was in the 1830s when Thomas Rice introduced the character of Jim Crow and the practice of whites capering in blackface – minstrelsy – became one of the most popular entertainment tropes in America and, often, in Europe.

Many of the songs were stolen wholesale from slaves and free Blacks and their wide popularity was tied to a significant act of erasure: White performers replaced Blacks as they purported to accurately represent the hijacked culture. See also, Dixieland, rock’n’roll, British blues, &c. These acts of cultural theft are well known.

The reality was different. While the overt acts of theft<fn>e.g., Elvis as the King, or the claim inherent in the name of the Original Dixieland Jass Band, an all-White ensemble that achieved notable popularity c. 1917-1935)</fn> are well-documented, the organic syncretism on the ground was the result of a more fluid commingling of whites and blacks, especially in rural and mountain communities.

A little less well-known is the centrality of African-American influence on musics that are widely regarded as “white” music: bluegrass and country. Much of this is an outgrowth of the sorting imposed by the recording industry in its early years and the separation of *race music* and old timey/country, which was allegedly the province of white folks. Jazz and blues were deemed to have slave and African roots, while country and mountain music was declared an offshoot of the Scots-Irish tradition, distinctly white. The markets for these now-sorted musics was presumed to be distinct, as well, though the reality of how music lovers seek out and collect music made these false distinctions somewhat irrelevant as American music developed.Categories are for sheep. Maybe that should be the Big Ears motto.

One of the most successful erasures in American music history lies in the revisionism that eventually decreed the banjo as the whitest instrument of them all, despite the fact that the *banjer*, or *banza*, came to America from Africa via slave ship, an unintended import, perhaps, carried in memory by the more intentional human cargo. The banjo, an instrument imported from Africa and subsequently employed to confer authenticity on the performers pretending to be black, was ultimately

stripped of its African identity.

For at least the past 15 or 20 years, there has been a concerted effort at re-framing the banjo and its associated musics in a more explicitly African-American context. One of the most successful of the musical archaeologist/apostles is Rhiannon Giddens, formerly of the Carolina Chocolate Drops, MacArthur "genius" recipient, trained operatic singer, and banjo wizard.

Aside from the sheer pleasure of her singing and playing, Giddens' work is a concerted campaign to undo multiple acts of erasure that have decentered African-Americans from a central component of their cultural legacy. Everything about her career asks us to reconsider the "facts" we all know are true. Things like "banjos and opera are for white folks.Among her many projects, Giddens hosts a podcast series called *Aria Code* that examines one great operatic aria per episode, with a variety of surprising guests. Her interests are broad.

In my last piece, I related how the Art Ensemble of Chicago rejected the jazz label and christened their genre Great Black Music: Ancient to the Future. It was a strategy that gave them access to the universe of musics that derive from the Black experience, which in practicality means just about any sound or style they found interesting. Unlike some acts of illegitimate appropriation (minstrelsy, Led Zeppelin, etc.), their claims represent a re-appropriation of something rightfully their own.

A survey of Rhiannon Giddens' career reveals a similar strategy. She may never have thought of herself as part of the Great Black Music: Ancient to the Future orbit, but to listen to the breadth of musics she has (re)claimed, it is hard for me not to put her under that banner. Just take a listen to her latest release on Smithsonian Records, *Songs of Our Native Daughters*. Her and her three partners in this project (all WoC who play the banjo, by damn) mine their various traditions –

both direct and inferred – to create a journey that is a model of intersectional storytelling.

Give a listen to “Barbados.” The wordless melody is every bit as harrowing as Blind Willie Johnson’s “Dark Was the Night, Cold Was the Ground.” But bracketing the lament is a polite recitation that slyly suggests: “So relax, my friend – we’re not all complicit.”

Buy this album. You will not be sorry.
In its own way, her embrace of the banjo and her ongoing musical archaeology are acts of cultural radicalism that have rippled out in ways she likely never imagined when she first hooked up with her eventual Chocolate Drop partners. It is a body of work that rejects and resists the acts of erasure and othering that underlie the greatest rifts in our culture.

And one of her most substantial acts of creative radicalism will be on display at the 2019 Big Ears Festival.



This machine kills fascists
In 2012, poet Caroline Randall Williams traveled to England to

pursue a hot tip about Shakespeare's sonnets, specifically numbers 127 to 154.

> *These sonnets have been called the "Dark Lady" sonnets for quite a while now, because of their focus (in contrast to the preceding 126, which are addressed to "a fair youth" and a "rival poet") on a woman who consistently figures as "dark" or "black," in his descriptions of her.*
>
> *p. 8, Lucy Negro Redux: The Bard, A Book, and ! Ballet, Caroline Randall Williams, Third Man Books, 2019*

Inspired by this research, Williams spun out a book of poems, *Lucy Negro, Redux*, informed by her experience as a Black woman and her identification with a woman who (may have) been like her, an unexpected identification with a central character in a canon of work that she loved deeply. The idea of William Shakespeare devoting a substantial portion of his work to Black Luce – a well-documented brothel owner in Shakespeare's London – generated both disquiet (Luce likely being a madam and/or prostitute, sparking parallels with the exploited Black bodies of slave women) and elation (the possibility of placing a Black body at the center of the *ne plus ultra* of the White European literary tradition). As the NY Times review of the ballet premiere points out:

> *Caroline Randall Williams also descends from white men who raped her black ancestors. She carries in her very DNA the conflict at the heart of "Lucy Negro, Redux": What does it mean for a woman to be both desired and reviled for the color of her skin?"*

It is one hell of a volume. The poems are gorgeous, angry, sexual, repellent, yearning. They are explicit and blunt and irresistibly musical. Her use of space on the page enhances this notion of rhythm and musicality. And their intensity made it difficult for me to read more than a couple at a time. Some

are stark revenge fantasy; others are demands to be seen or a fight against the ever-looming threat of erasure. Others are pained cries of yearning, of a wish to be loved for and as herself. Shakespeare as a deep blues. Or maybe the other way round.

The Nashville Ballet's artistic director, Paul Vesterling, read it and knew he wanted to stage the work. He had just the dancer in mind for the role of Lucy: Kayla Rowser, a Nashville Ballet company member who had been named one of *Dance Magazine's* Top 25 to watch.

Naturally, a ballet needs music. And that's where Rhiannon Giddens comes back in. Vesterling asked Giddens to create the soundscape. She collaborated with Francesco Turrisi to compose a score that they perform live for the ballet. (They will also appear in concert at Big Ears, separate from the *Lucy Negro, Redux* presentation, as they explore commonalities between American, Celtic, and Islamic musical traditions. World music, y'all.)

Lucy Negro, Redux, a ballet, is an assertive act of resistance against multivalent forces of erasure and false sorting. Imagine the stage. Giddens as a visual and sonic focus. Williams herself appearing as narrator and centering presence, her words and body claiming her place alongside ole Billy Bard. Kayla Rowser establishing the presence of Black Luce, her story retold through the imagination of Williams, the movements of Rowser, and the music of Giddens. It makes me shiver.

The programming at Big Ears encourages broader connection-drawing, grand schemes that dig for the meaning of life, the universe, and everything. Aside from the convergence of the 50th anniversaries of ECM and the Art Ensemble of Chicago – an obvious bit of harmonic convergence – there are the broader questions of how the programming might encourage us to ponder broader implications of how the music (and film and dance &c.)

we enjoy might direct us to finer considerations of the ways we all – all of us – might connect one to the other in the broader scheme of things.

Is Rhiannon Giddens really an expositor of Great Black Music: Ancient to the Future? Honestly, chances are good she would laugh in my face at the idea. But it seems to fit, in the same way that her work and the work of the AEC fit hand in glove with the admonitions of James Baldwin to open our eyes and ears and hearts, to make them bigger and more able to see and hear and feel a deep and rich history that has been largely hidden from us, one that could have disappeared entirely without the efforts of the artists and scholars who insist on keeping it alive. It is work that asks us to enlarge our vision to embrace the vast and wondrous possibilities that await, if only we could overcome the limitations imposed upon us by a social and economic system that profits by our ignorance and separation.

> *"And if the word integration means anything, this is what it means: that we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it. For this is your home, my friend, do not be driven from it; great men have done great things here, and will again, and we can make America what America must become."*
>
> *"The Fire Next Time," James Baldwin*

Maybe the whole idea of *"art"* somehow being a reasonably accurate and/or useful reflection of our shared human condition – and by extension, the possibility that *"art"* might somehow manifest something like a healing action or force upon our beleaguered condition – is somehow valid, somehow pertinent to our hourly/daily/weekly efforts to figure out the answer to what David Foster Wallace called our essential existential question: What does it mean to be fucking human?