

AMERICAN MUSIC REVIEW

The H. Wiley Hitchcock Institute for Studies in American Music

Conservatory of Music, Brooklyn College of the City University of New York

Volume XLIV, Number 2

Spring 2015

Rhiannon Giddens, *American Angel: Tomorrow is My Turn*

Susan Davis, Brooklyn College, CUNY

Rhiannon Giddens' solo debut, *Tomorrow is My Turn*, is not only a brilliant expression of musicianship and a Billboard chart-topping album, but it is also an incisive folk narrative and survey of influential women in American music. With *Tomorrow is My Turn*, Giddens continues the important work she began with The Carolina Chocolate Drops¹, re-envisioning gems of the past in a new context and for a new audience. The Chocolate Drops, an African American string band dedicated to rediscovering, reinterpreting, and reinvigorating string band music for a new generation, were initially inspired by visiting with and learning from the style of old-time North Carolina fiddler, Joe Thompson. Their 2010 album, *Genuine Negro Jig*, earned a Grammy for Best Traditional Folk Album. Although Giddens' solo album encompasses a wider purview musically, featuring blues, gospel, soul, jazz and country, what drives this album is her evocative reinterpretation of vocal music from another time. Each song is its own rich story and reminder of the lineage and progression of American music. Mellifluous, commanding, and vulnerable all at once, Giddens' vocals mesmerize through this tapestry of interwoven stories, voices, genres and expression that combine unabashedly into a woman's point of view. With this album we hear, not only from Giddens, who displays extraordinary range, but also from the women who inspired her and paved her way. Nina Simone, Elizabeth "Libba" Cotten, Geeshie Wiley, Dolly Parton, Odetta, and Sister Rosetta Tharpe are among the "angels," as Giddens calls them, who contribute their voices and verses to this transcendent album.²

The raw simplicity of the opening track, "Last Kind Words," sets the tone for the narrative that unfolds. Although Giddens' version is atmospherically laced with mandolin and bass, the effect feels rather faithful to Geeshie Wiley's 1930 recording (<https://archive.org/details/Words>), letting the heart of the guitar and vocals speak this simple yet haunting minor blues melody. Giddens explains her choice for opening with this tune:

I thought it would be really cool to open up with "Last Kind Words" because most people have no idea who Geeshie was or what she did; it kind of represents every woman from her time, every unknown black woman toiling away. I really liked that idea. Who knows how many more were making incredible music, and writing incredible songs like that, living these lives?³

Giddens' decision to open her album singing the words of an essentially anonymous woman, validates not only Wiley's voice, and Giddens' voice, but every woman's voice.⁴ It announces the album as a telling of every



Tomorrow is My Turn
Album by Rhiannon Giddens

American Angel: *Tomorrow is My Turn* (cont.)

woman's story through the language of love, loss, relationships, regret, ambition, spirituality, vulnerability, and, ultimately, strength.

Although Giddens tackles a remarkable range of styles on the album, all equally compelling, the showstopping number is clearly Giddens' rendition of "Waterboy," the traditional work song popularized by Odetta in the 1960s.⁵ Similarly, in 2013, Giddens brought the house down with this song during a Town Hall concert for the live performance of the music from *Inside Llewyn Davis*. Excerpts from that performance can be seen in the Showtime movie *Another Day Another Time: Celebrating the Music of Inside Llewyn Davis*. Giddens' command of the music, her fellow performers and the audience is palpable in the silence surrounding her last phrase, "If you don't come right here, gonna tell your pa on you." "Round About the Mountain," the spiritual as arranged by Roland Hayes, is another intriguing vocal performance tackled by Giddens. Inspired by Florence Quivar's classical performance and then reinterpreted through a folk lens, the version on Giddens' album is a slightly slower groove and is accentuated by ethereal tremolos and glissandi creating a meditative effect. Giddens' upbeat, hip-hop-flavored interpretation of "Black is the Color" is probably the most playful and surprising track on the album. She has taken the traditional folk tune, often performed in a melancholy and reflective manner, to new heights as a giddy dance reminiscent of blossoming love.⁶ Giddens has rewritten the lyrics into a hybrid of new and old sentiment. All of these features coalesce into a light-hearted, yet addictive take on love.

Musically Giddens is backed by some of the most impressive folk and bluegrass musicians playing today. T-Bone Burnett (*O Brother, Where Art Thou; Walk the Line*), the album's producer, has brought together an all-star lineup including Jay Bellerose (drummer); Gabe Witcher (fiddle), Noam Pikelny (banjo) and Paul Kowert (bass) from the Punch Brothers; Hubby Jenkins (bones and guitar) of the Carolina Chocolate Drops; Keefus Ciancia (keyboard) and Dennis Crouch (bass). Even Jack Ashford of Funk Brothers fame can be heard on multiple tracks. The resulting sound is rich, layered and diverse as the musicians embody decades of experience and perspectives on the American music scene.

In reviews of this album and her current tour, Giddens' voice has been described as "a revelation," "soulful," "sumptuous," "phenomenal," "so powerful it could scorch the rafters," and "mobile, intelligent, ready to talk back to anyone's presumptions."⁷ It is no wonder that she appears on the album exclusively as a vocalist. However, it is also slightly disappointing that Giddens' instrumental talents are not featured in this context. One of the powerful things about her as a force on the American roots music scene is the fact that she is more than a singer; she is a talented banjo player, fiddler and songwriter. In most all of the videos found of Giddens prior to this debut album, we see her with an instrument as an accompaniment and extension of her voice. Fortunately, Giddens is showcasing her multi-instrumentalist talents on the tour associated with *Tomorrow is My Turn*, utilizing fiddle and banjo to accompany herself and lead the band.⁸ Hopefully that will continue. As I'm sure Giddens is aware, women in folk and bluegrass have been fighting perception issues for years. Murphy Hicks Henry's 2013 book, *Pretty Good for a Girl*, highlights the fact that women are still often underestimated or marginalized as bluegrass and roots instrumentalists, while they have achieved some acclaim and acceptance as vocalists.⁹ As a fiddler myself, I am thrilled to see women musicians (both singers and instrumentalists) like Rhiannon Giddens, Sarah Jarosz, Sara Watkins and Brittany Haas gaining in prominence and appreciation on the American roots music scene, fiercely paving the way for further transformation!

While some may see *Tomorrow is My Turn* as a disparate collection of tunes, Giddens likens it to the early tradition of singers:

... there were no 'blues singers' or 'country singers'—there was no such thing, there were just singers. You had Jimmie Rodgers doing blues hollers and you had black string bands doing what we now call hillbilly tunes. It was a much more fluid thing. So to me this record is just in that tradition. It's just American music.¹⁰

American Angel: *Tomorrow is My Turn* (cont.)

Perhaps the album is like Giddens herself—the embodiment of a new American voice and a new American musician. Giddens walks multiple paths and inhabits multiple, sometimes seemingly contradictory perspectives. She is both gritty folksinger and classically-trained opera artist (Oberlin Music School); mixed race (African-American, European, and Native American); vocalist and multi-instrumentalist. Giddens speaks of her own soul-searching for identity, “I always felt culturally adrift as a child,” she says, “because I’m mixed race. I’ve had to deal with that since I was little. Who am I? What makeup do I have? What are the black and the white?”¹¹ And in another interview, Giddens recounts, “Where I found my identity was when I realized that I’m from North Carolina. It’s not so much that I’m black or I’m white or I’m Indian or whatever. I’m Southern. And furthermore I’m a North Carolinian. That was a really important part of this music—finding the identity.”¹²

Ultimately, the identity seems embedded in the narrative—the voices of women who came before Giddens and all of us, the stories that resonate with our shared humanity. Giddens’ only original composition on the album, “Angel City,” caps off the narrative as tribute to the pioneering women who paved her way. Written as an inspired response to her experience working on the Bob Dylan tribute project, *Lost on the River: The New Basement Tapes*, Giddens, includes the song here acknowledging the rich lineage of women who paved a way in stories, songs and suffering.

Time and time at hand
You helped me over the sand
Gently rising to be
You walked a mile with me

Giddens explains, “I’m standing on their shoulders,” and acknowledges her angels, “You were all so good to me.”¹⁴ There is no doubt she will be an angel of inspiration to generations of musicians to come.

Notes

¹ The Carolina Chocolate Drops were originally comprised of Rhiannon Giddens, Dom Flemons and Justin Robinson. The 2014-15 lineup of the band includes Rhiannon Giddens, Hubby Jenkins, Rowan Corbett and Malcolm Parson, www.carolinachocolatedrops.com.

² Rhiannon Giddens, liner notes to CD *Tomorrow is My Turn*, Rhiannon Giddens (Nonesuch Records, Inc., 2015).

³ Michael Hill, “Rhiannon Giddens,” Concert Lineup, 13 June 2015, <http://lineup.bonnaroo.com/band/rhiannon-giddens>.

⁴ John Jeremiah Sullivan, “The Ballad of Geeshie and Elvie: On the Trail of the Phantom Women who Changed American Music and then Vanished without a Trace,” *The New York Times Magazine*, 13 April 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/04/13/magazine/blues.html?_r=0. Geeshie Wiley and fellow musician Elvie Thomas are the subject of this controversial *NY Times Magazine* article that explores what little is known about these artists and where they fit in a blues history, however many believe the research material was obtained through dishonest means.

⁵ Odetta performed the song Waterboy on Harry Belafonte’s television show, “Tonight with Belafonte” and it can be seen in the Bob Dylan documentary, *No Direction Home*. Garth Cartwright, “Odetta,” *The Guardian*, 3 December 2008, <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2008/dec/04/odetta-film-folk-music-obituary>.

⁶ Well-known versions of this folk-tune include that of Joan Baez (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ic7vQGrtOjc>) and Nina Simone (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TJRh7PSaOzI>). Both of these stand in sharp contrast to Giddens’ recording.

⁷ James Reed, “Rhiannon Giddens: *Tomorrow is My Turn*,” *Boston Globe*, 2 February 2015, <http://www.bostonglobe.com/arts/>

American Angel: *Tomorrow is My Turn* (cont.)

music/2015/02/10/rhiannon-giddens-tomorrow-turn/uqiCqeh9f05Lj3fEvQdIHO/story.html; Jonathon Burnstein, "Tomorrow is My Turn," *Rolling Stone*, 10 February 2015, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/albumreviews/rhiannon-giddens-tomorrow-is-my-turn-20150210>; Martin Chilton, "Rhiannon Giddens, *Tomorrow is My Turn*, Album Review," *Telegraph*, 13 February 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/worldfolkandjazz/11411074/Rhiannon-Giddens-Tomorrow-is-My-Turn-album-review.html>; Neil Spencer, "Rhiannon Giddens, *Tomorrow is My Turn*, Review," *The Guardian*, 1 February 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/feb/01/rhiannon-giddens-tomorrow-is-my-turn-review>; Chrissie Dickinson, "Rhiannon Giddens Brought Humility, Magic to the Vic," *Chicago Tribune*, 24 April 2015, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/ct-rhiannon-giddens-review-carolina-chocolate-drops-20150424-story.html>; Ann Powers, "First Listen: Rhiannon Giddens, 'Tomorrow is My Turn,'" *NPRMusic*, 1 February 2015, <http://www.npr.org/2015/02/01/382372052/first-listen-rhiannon-giddens-tomorrow-is-my-turn>, accessed 2 May 2015.

⁸Chrissie Dickinson, "Rhiannon Giddens Brought Humility, Magic to the Vic."

⁹Murphy Hicks Henry, *Pretty Good for a Girl: Women in Bluegrass* (Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2013). Reflecting on the International Bluegrass Music Association (IBMA) Awards, Henry notes that very few women have ever won in the Instrumental Performer category and "never has a woman received the award for guitar, fiddle, mandolin or dobro."

¹⁰Jones, "Patsy Cline, Alison Krauss, and Now... Rhiannon Giddens," *The Daily Beast*, 8 March 2015, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/03/08/patsy-kline-allison-krauss-and-now-rhiannon-giddens.html>.

¹¹George de Stefano, "Rhiannon Giddens *Tomorrow is My Turn*," *Pop Matters*, 10 February 2015, <http://www.popmatters.com/review/190347-rhiannon-giddens-tomorrow-is-my-turn/>.

¹²Malcolm Jones, "Patsy Cline, Alison Krauss, and Now... Rhiannon Giddens."

¹³Lyrics from the song "Angel City," as heard on the CD *Tomorrow is My Turn*.

¹⁴David Fricke, "Rhiannon Giddens' Old Time Religion," *Rolling Stone*, 5 March 2015, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/features/rhiannon-giddens-old-time-religion-20150305>.