

Rhiannon Giddens
Tomorrow Is My Turn

It was toward the end of the T Bone Burnett–curated September 2013 *Another Day, Another Time* concert at New York City’s Town Hall—a celebration of the early ’60s folk revival that had inspired the Joel and Ethan Coen film *Inside Llewyn Davis*—when singer Rhiannon Giddens indisputably stole the show. Performing Odetta’s “Water Boy” with, as the *New York Times* put it, “the fervor of a spiritual, the yips of a folk holler, and the sultry insinuation of the blues,” Giddens brought the star-studded audience to its feet. She was the talk of the lobby during intermission as those attendees unfamiliar with her Grammy Award–winning work as a member of African-American folk interpreters Carolina Chocolate Drops wondered who exactly Rhiannon Giddens was, with her elegant bearing, prodigious voice, and fierce spirit.

Backstage, Burnett already knew the answer and was immediately moved to ask if she was ready to make her own record. “It was clear the first time I heard her at rehearsal that Rhiannon is next in a long line of singers that includes Marian Anderson, Ethel Waters, Rosetta Tharp, Odetta, Mahalia Jackson, Nina Simone,” Burnett says. “We need that person in our culture. She *is*, in fact, that person in our culture.”

On her Nonesuch solo debut *Tomorrow Is My Turn*, Giddens and Burnett revisit “Water Boy,” its Odetta-arranged work-song rhythm serving as both provocation and a statement of power. Giddens delivers an equally thunderous rendition, one made all the more striking when placed between a gentle, ruminative interpretation of Dolly Parton’s “Don’t Let It Trouble Your Mind” and a version of Hank Cochran’s “She’s Got You,” popularized by Patsy Cline, that Giddens imbues with “an old-timey R&B vibe,” abetted by Carolina Chocolate Drops band-mate Hubby Jenkins. The breadth of musical vision on *Tomorrow Is My Turn* fulfills the promise of that brief but stunning star turn at Town Hall. The album incorporates gospel, jazz, blues, and country, plus a hint of proto-rock and roll, and Giddens displays an emotional range to match her dazzling vocal prowess throughout.

Reviving, interpreting, and recasting traditional material from a variety of sources has been central to Giddens’ career, especially in her groundbreaking work with the Carolina Chocolate Drops (CCDs). With their two Nonesuch albums, the CCDs have investigated and promoted the foundational role African-American performers and songwriters have played in folk-music history, while making recordings that are vital, contemporary, and exuberant.

With *Tomorrow Is My Turn*, Giddens has embarked on a more personal sort of journey, but with a nod towards history as well. She’s chosen from a broad array of songs associated with the female artists who are her musical and spiritual forebears and fashioned an album that serves both as patchwork autobiography and as a subtle tribute to these artists and their often hard-won legacies.

Giddens charts a clear path through *Tomorrow Is My Turn*: “We start off with the unknown and end up with the specific.” Opening track “Last Kind Words” dates back to a rare 1930–78 “race record” and a largely unknown singer named Geeshie Wiley. To Giddens, “The timbre of the singer’s voice, the uniqueness of the chord structure...it reminds me of my grandmother and that era.”

Though she had recorded more songs than could fit on the final album, Giddens and Burnett spent considerable time pondering a track sequence could best help tell the story Giddens was constructing. It wasn’t until they decided at the 11th hour to cut “Last Kind Words”—a song they’d come across independent of each other—that they found the focus they’d been searching for. As Giddens explains, “I made the record with the idea of these songs either written or performed by American women. It’s sort of a survey. We know a lot about most of the people represented on the record, but 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?”

Her take on the traditional “Round About the Mountain,” inspired by African-American mezzo-soprano Florence Quivar’s recording, combines gospel fervor with operatic intensity. A version of Sister Rosetta Tharpe’s “Up Above My Head,” underscored by fuzz-toned rockabilly guitar, is, conversely, joyful call-and-response testifying. “O Love Is Teasin’,” popularized by the Kentucky-reared “mother of folk” Jean Ritchie, has a melancholic Celtic air, while her updating of “Black Is the Color” swaps somber for seductive. Its yearning lyric, largely rewritten by Giddens and propelled by a practically club-worthy R&B swing, is autobiographical—recast from a tribute to a departed partner into a love song for her very-much-alive Irish husband. (“He’s a ginger, but otherwise it’s pretty accurate,” quips Giddens in her album liner notes.)

The life that Giddens explores at the climax of *Tomorrow Is My Turn* is her own creative one, on the lilting, self-penned ballad “Angel City.” Though she regards herself far more as singer than songwriter, “Angel City,” composed in the course of a single night during the recording of the Burnett-helmed *The New Basement Tapes* project, fits perfectly at the close of the set, gently paying homage to the elder artists whose work comprise the rest of the album. “It was these women, these artists, who had helped me, who had come with me on this journey, and here are lyrics that represented that.”

Giddens’ journey, in a larger sense, began in the Piedmont region of North Carolina, where she was raised—an area with a rich legacy of old-time music, black and white, that Giddens would explore in depth after college. Much like the classically trained Odetta, she originally envisioned a career in opera and earned a degree in vocal performance at Oberlin Conservatory. A side interest in contra-dance calling led her towards old-time music. That became her overarching passion when she returned to the Greensboro area. She met her soon-to-be band members at 2005’s Black Banjo Gathering in Boone, North Carolina, and got schooled in the Piedmont’s traditional music by Joe Thompson, an elderly African-American fiddle player who passed on to Giddens and her cohorts many of the songs that would comprise their early repertoire.

As they began discussing a solo record, Burnett told Giddens, “Now is your time. Why don’t you just make the record you’ve always dreamed of?” And she had, in fact, been mentally preparing a rundown of songs she wanted to interpret and artists she wanted to acknowledge. Giddens found further inspiration via the choreographer Twyla Tharp, when Tharp was developing *Cornbread Duet*, a dance piece set to a suite of songs by CCDs that had its world premiere this past April at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Among the tracks Tharp had selected was the brash “Ruby, Are You Mad at Your Man?,” from CCDs’ second Nonesuch album, *Leaving Eden*. Giddens was explaining to Tharp that CCDs was in flux, its lineup changing, its next move undecided. They were listening to “Ruby” and, Giddens recounts, “It’s a really cool, strong, woman’s song, and Twyla asked ‘Who’s Ruby? I want to know who Ruby is. I think that’s what you should do: you should find Ruby.’ And that idea stayed with me.

“I had already started putting together a list of songs that didn’t really fit into the Chocolate Drops world,” Giddens explains. “I had this short list and at the top was ‘Tomorrow Is My Turn’ [co-written by Charles Aznanour but immortalized by Nina Simone]. Seeing Nina do it is revelatory. I was checking her out for some reason, to get a little deeper into what she did, and I stumbled across this YouTube video of her singing it live. I knew she’d gone through a lot of hard times, as so many people did in that time period. Watching her sing this song, with the words ‘tomorrow is my turn,’ I began to think about the struggle of her and women like her. It really hit me.” The significance of this song led Giddens to make it the title of the album as well. “Other songs started getting on my list and they were all by women or interpreted by women,” she says.

When Giddens sent the list to T Bone, he said, “Great, let’s do it all.” Well, almost all of it. He suggested Giddens swap out one Dolly Parton song she’d selected in favor of Parton’s lovely “Don’t Let It Trouble Your Mind.” Says Giddens, “That is where T Bone’s encyclopedic knowledge of music came in handy. He said, ‘I always wanted someone to do this song and no one has done it since Dolly.’ I had to go find it and listen. T Bone is so good at setting the table. He sets the table with a fine linen tablecloth, beautiful dishes, silver urns, everything is top notch, but you have to bring the food. You have to bring the meat of it, and he will take care of the rest. It’s a very cool way of doing things.”

Tomorrow Is My Turn was recorded in Los Angeles and Nashville, with a multi-generational group of players whom Burnett assembled. Among them are fiddle player Gabe Witcher and double bassist Paul Kowert of label-mates Punch Brothers; percussionist Jack Ashford of Motown's renowned Funk Brothers; inventive drummer and Burnett stalwart Jay Bellerose; veteran folk-blues guitarist Colin Linden; legendary backup singer Tata Vega; and Nashville session great, bassist Dennis Crouch. Giddens enthuses, "We had Dennis and Paul on stand-up bass at the same time on some of these tracks. They are all 'musicians' musicians' and they did cool stuff they don't always get the opportunity to play. It was a bit of a challenge for them too, all these different kinds of music; every day was something new. We'd start the day by watching the original inspiration for the song on YouTube, and then we would go cut it. They were a diverse group of people, but it felt like a real band." Giddens' bandmates from the Drops—multi-instrumentalist Hubby Jenkins, cellist Malcolm Parson, and multi-instrumentalist Rowan Corbett—are part of her touring band for *Tomorrow Is My Turn*.

Through the process of creating this album with such a disparate set of musicians and practically a century's worth of songs, she also illustrates the democratic way American music has taken shape and evolved: "The strength of American music is in bringing all these things together—Celtic, gospel, jazz, folk—all these things that make American music great. Putting them side by side and having a production that pulls it all into a cohesive whole shows how related all these things are."

The songs here, says Giddens, "are all facets of the human condition." Taken together, they answer the question Twyla Tharp posed at the beginning of Giddens' solo adventure. *Tomorrow Is My Turn* is a composite portrait of "Ruby," of America, and of Giddens herself, whose turn is clearly right now.

—Michael Hill