

# Music Review: Martha Redbone Roots Project – *The Garden Of Love – Songs Of William Blake*

By Richard Marcus | Monday, October 22, 2012

We hear a lot about roots music and Americana nowadays, but do we ever stop to ask ourselves whose roots people are talking about? Whenever I hear people talking about Americana music, I can't help thinking of the movie *Songcatcher*. A music anthropology professor travels to the Tennessee hill country to record so-called mountain music and discovers the people are singing the songs their Scottish and Irish ancestors brought over from the old country. This so-called American folk music is transplanted songs of another culture sung with new accents. Of course there are other roots aside from the Anglo/Irish/Scotch in the music of the Appalachians. There were the Native Americans who were the area's original inhabitants and the African Americans who were brought in as slaves to work the land. While the former might not have contributed much directly to the music it was their land in which it took root. The latter contributed the banjo, the instrument no self-respecting roots music group can live without.

Therefore, it makes perfect sense to me that a woman of Native and African descent would put out a disc of music with lyrics taken from the poems of the 18th-19th century British poet William Blake set to the sounds of all three of the region's inhabitants. *The Garden Of Love: Songs Of William Blake* by the Martha Redbone Roots Project is one of those wonderful meetings of minds and culture that comes along once in a while that literally takes your breath away. On the surface it might sound like the most outlandish thing you've ever heard, setting the words of William Blake to the music of North America. However, there's a long tradition of adapting his words to music. The British hymn "Jerusalem", taken from the short poem "And did those feet in ancient time" from the preface to his epic *Milton a Poem* is the best known example. Of course history has shown us there's an equal precedent for adapting the work of the British Isles as American folk music.

There was always a very strong spiritual streak to Blake's work and while it was firmly rooted in Christianity, he expressed it in terms transcending the confines of doctrine. Instead of poetry worshipping his God directly, he wrote pieces of gratitude for what he saw as the gifts given humanity by its creator. The poems Redbone has elected to adapt praise the natural world around us, love, and the gift of freedom. These themes are not only universal, but are ideally suited to the unique combination of musical traditions Redbone draws upon for this disc. There's a rawness and honesty of emotion in Blake's poetry that requires it be set to music capable of expressing their ideas in an as unaffected and straightforward a manner as possible. However, it also requires the music to be emotionally and spiritually honest and powerful.

I don't know about anyone else, but as far as I'm concerned I can't think of anything more emotionally and spiritually honest than either African American gospel music or traditional Native American music. Nor can I think of anything more unaffected and direct than old time mountain music. When you listen to what Redbone and co-composers Aaron Whitby and John McEuen have come up with to accompany Blake's poems on this disc, I think you'll hear just how well these work together. There's a body and a depth to the music you don't normally feel with just straight-ahead country, as elements of both Native and African music are interwoven with it. The arrangements are such that in those songs where all three elements come together they sound like three-part cultural harmony. While the European-derived music might be in the forefront most of the time, without the other two strains you just know the tune wouldn't be the same.

To pull something like this off you need incredibly skilled musicians. Thankfully that's the case here, as the people playing on this disc have the ability to play at a level equal to the sublime nature of the lyrics. As well as composing, co-producing, and arranging, McEuen also plays banjo, guitar, dobro, fiddle, mandolin, autoharp, and lap dulcimer. While that might seem like an album's worth of instruments, he's

not a one man band. There's also David Hoffner (keyboards, pump organ, accordion, hammered dulcimer, and tack piano), Mark Casstevens (guitar and harmonica), Byron House (upright bass), Debra Dobkin (percussion), and Keith Fluitt, Michael Inge, Ann Klein, and Mary Wormworth as backing vocalists. Rounding out the bill are special guests David Amarm (flute), Lonnie Harrington (Seminole chant and rattle on "A Dream"), and Jonathan Spottiswoode, who recites "Why Should I Care for the Men of Thames".

Save for "Men of Thames", Redbone handles the lead vocals on all the songs and also adds traditional chants and rattles as required. While the band is important, without somebody with as gifted a voice as Redbone the whole project would collapse. In the past she has shown herself capable of singing traditional native music, R&B, and soul with grace and style. However, this sounds like the music she was born to sing. She seems to only need to open her mouth and start singing the words to this music to open a direct channel to her heart and soul. Every word and every note she sings not only rings true, she also imbues them with every ounce of passion she apparently possesses. Yet there's nothing melodramatic or overblown about her performance. She makes herself the perfect conduit for the words and music so we hear Blake through the filter of the music's soul, without any unnecessary garnish.

What that means is while the lyrics retain the original meanings given them by Blake, they also take on new meanings because of the music and the arrangements. When Redbone sings the final verse in "The Garden Of Love" (the introduction from Blake's notebook for *Songs and Ballads*), "And I saw it was filled with graves/And tombstones where flowers should be/And Priests in black gowns were walking their rounds/And binding with briars, my joys & desires", we hear Blake's condemnation of the clergy for taking the joy out of his religion. We hear how Christianity was used as a weapon against Native people.

Redbone is able to perform this type of delicate balancing act throughout the course of the whole recording. In some cases they are rendered as African American spirituals ("I Rose Up At The Dawn Of Day"), while others ("Sleep Sleep Beauty Bright") are played in a way that captures what must have been Blake's original intent with the poem. It might seem an unusual combination, this mixture of Native, African, and European American cultures with the words of William Blake. However, together they create music that not only crosses cultural and racial barriers, but can more honestly be referred to as Americana than most. The work of Blake as interpreted by Martha Redbone and the Martha Redbone Roots Project gives proof to the words of another great British poet, John Keats: "A thing of beauty is a joy forever".

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