

New York Theatre Guide: “Leyla McCalla at Rockwood Music Hall”

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Leyla McCalla is a humble, free spirit. As she peruses with the audience before the show, you are left in awe that this graceful talent is such a casual person. There is absolutely no arrogance or flashiness to her. Her sole desire is to engage the audience in the stories of her songs, which she does by exuding kindness.

One thing that stays with me about McCalla, in concert, is that for how vastly talented she is. There is meekness to her sound and spirit. This is not to say that she is unassertive in presence. On the contrary, I have never met anyone so highly aware of her audience. She is constantly looking at her listeners and using the sweetness of her voice and eyes to captivate them. She is confident in her mission: to use music as a tool for human connection and historical education. McCalla is proud of her Haitian heritage, and it is sewn into her songs like a golden thread. The passion she feels for black folk music and Haitian culture is infectious and seeps into her voice like crystal water. She is singing directly from her heart, which makes her lyrics rich with love.

McCalla is far from “mainstream”, but that is her charm. Her music ranges from picturesque folk to Parisian style jazz, but always keeps an intimacy that makes it grand in how simple it is. For instance, how she plucks the strings of her banjo is as if she were plucking the strings of her heart. She is deeply connected to her songs as seen by her musical renditions of the Langston Hughes poems, “Heart of Gold” and “Girl.” Knowing that from his prose she heard and composed music is proof of her brilliance. Her version of the Haitian folk song “Manman Mwen” is also uniquely hers, which is common in her covers. She has an innate capacity to cover a folk song with her own enlightened essence. This enlightenment comes from the range of string instruments she plays with a delicate elegance that seems only used by angels. Hearing the viola, cello, and timbre throughout her songs brings coziness to her music that is transcendent.

There is an odd mixture of depth and simplicity to McCalla. Her concert makes you feel like you are by a warm fireplace tucked under a tender blanket. Meanwhile, McCalla is your old friend sharing her fascinating knowledge and surprising wisdom for her youth. She is an intellectual artist, whom sings in French, English, and creole, and is unabashedly intelligent. She speaks on Haitian history and socio-cultural analysis with a boldness and beauty that makes you want to listen. Moreover, she tells of life’s struggles in Haiti with a warm familiarity that binds you to empathize. Because she is an artist that sings upon and from the wisdom of her heart, she has unlimited potential. She is such a present musician that as she grows in spirit so will her music, which means she will always be fresh with musical virtue

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