

The Boston Globe: “On new album, cellist McCalla echoes Langston Hughes”

By James Reed

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Leyla McCalla, a folk musician with a keen prowess on cello, doesn't find it especially remarkable that she was drawn to Langston Hughes at such an early age. Her parents encouraged her to read books by the writer who was a pivotal part of the Harlem Renaissance beginning in the 1920s. Even as a kid, McCalla recognized what made Hughes such an extraordinary voice.

“His books were around the house, and I read both of his autobiographies,” she says. “My parents were also pretty radical human-rights activists, so there's a context for it. I fell in love with his work, and it was something I kept going back to as I got older, his words, the stories of his life.”

McCalla salutes his legacy on “Vari-Colored Songs: A Tribute to Langston Hughes,” her thoughtful debut that will be released on Tuesday. (She celebrates the album with a show at Club Passim in Harvard Square on Feb. 14.) A rumination on Hughes's poetry, in which McCalla sets his words to her music, the album also explores her Haitian heritage through original and traditional songs that McCalla arranged. It's a beguiling album in the way it pulls the listener in distinct directions. At once unvarnished and sparse, like field recordings in high definition, it's also rich with the organic suppleness of someone like the late Lhasa de Sela, whom McCalla admits she admires.

“I think the commonality of these songs is the African-American experience in the United States, but also just the experience of being human,” she says. “The idea that we constantly have to learn and process and figure out who we are – those seem to be big themes in Langston Hughes's work, and that's also a big theme of my life.”

The album is centered on McCalla, mostly on cello and banjo, with subtle flourishes from pedal steel, bass, and guitar. She sings – in English, French, and Creole – with ease, in a conversational tone that sometimes suggest she's simply reading Hughes's poetry to you. She's an expressive musician, both in voice and on instruments.

McCalla's versatility made her a good fit for the Carolina Chocolate Drops. McCalla toured with the African-American string band for 2½ years, adding cello to the mix. She calls herself a former member of the group but doesn't rule out the prospect of collaborating with them again. It sounds like she'd be welcome back in the fold.

“I was impressed with her lovely sense of melody and arrangement ideas. From the beginning I knew she had a strong identity as her own artist,” says Rhiannon Giddens, who sings and plays with the Carolina Chocolate Drops and also sang some backup on McCalla’s album. “I think [her new] album, with its unfussy and elegant production, really showcases her lyricism, unique voice, and the great material she wrote and chose.”

Born in New York, raised in suburban New Jersey, McCalla found her footing when she moved to New Orleans a few years ago. The Crescent City, with its mix of cultures and peculiarities, triggered a reawakening. She took up the tenor banjo, which is all over her new album; learned different styles of songs and how to two-step and swing dance; brushed up on her Creole. It was the antithesis of New York, the city she gave three years to make it work for her until she decided she needed to live somewhere with space to think and process.

“Moving to New Orleans, I felt like I was asking myself if I really wanted to be a musician, to follow a creative path, while at the same time asserting that I do want to do that. I had a lot of affirmative moments in New Orleans that I don’t think I could have had anywhere else.”

She also steadied her focus by picking up a booking agent and a manager, the latter of whom happened to be working already with the Carolina Chocolate Drops. It was among the first steps she took toward channeling her artistry into something closer to her own vision.

“I think I did feel unfocused, and that’s why I moved to New Orleans. When I was in New York, I was teaching cello and freelancing for all these different projects,” she says, mentioning that playing in an all-female string section behind Mos Def (before he was Yasiin Bey) at Carnegie Hall was a particular highlight. “I always felt like I was wearing a lot of different hats, but none of it was really me.”

In Hughes, she found a kindred spirit whose path to enlightenment mirrored her own.

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