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Meshell Ndegeocello: Pour Une Ame Souveraine-A Dedication to Nina Simone

by Winnie McCroy
EDGE Editor
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With little fanfare, singer Meshell Ndegeocello and her band took the stage of Jazz at Lincoln Center's Appel Room on the evening of February 11 for **Meshell Ndegeocello: Pour Une Ame Souveraine-A Dedication to Nina Simone**.

Against the stunning backdrop of a snowbound Central Park West, the glittery lights of the avenue stretching right down the to 59th Street Bridge, Ndegeocello picked up her long-necked black and red bass and began the evening with "Be My Husband," a song rumored to have been written by Nina Simone's second husband, a New York Police detective. The tune, recently picked up by Ed Sheeran, comes with the refrain,

"Stick the promise man that you made me."

Behind her was her band, Chris Bruce on guitar, clad in spats and a denim dashiki; Jebin Bruni on keyboards, rocking a burgundy velvet jacket; and Abraham Rounds, working his drum kit over like a junky searching for that one good vein. Ndegeocello was similarly low-key, in a watchman's wool cap, red-rimmed shades and trousers.

They played to a packed house, full of both people of color and members of the LGBT community, among them lesbian power couple Kate Clinton and Urvashi Vaid.

"I chose Nina Simone because so many of her songs were so important, both lyrically and musically," said Ndegeocello, musing on her participation in the American Songbook series. She noted that Simone's first husband, a white man she met while singing in a club in Atlantic City, introduced her to artists like Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen.

She ripped into a funky version of "Either Way I Lose" by Van McCoy, writer of the disco hit, "The Hustle," singing, "If I stay I know I'ma share your love, and that I couldn't take / And if I go we'll be apart, and I know my heart would surely break."

Inviting singer Toshi Reagon to the stage, they launched into Simone's "Real Real," singing high and sweet, "our love is real to me." She then added to the mix three fabulous back-up singers, and sang, "The House of the Rising Sun," one of the original American folk songs. Reagon followed it up by singing Led Zeppelin's "Nobody's Fault But Mine" with just acoustic guitar and keyboards. It was spare and very cool.

Like Simone, Ndegeocello is a fan of taking songs from others and making them her own. Her voice is deep, but she sings soft and smooth like Joan Armatrading. She put a psychedelic spin on Simone's "Sealine

Woman," a tale about sailors coming into ports and choosing prostitutes.

"Nina Simone is important to me because there are so many things you can pull from her stories: Dissatisfaction, joy..." said Ndegeocello. "She didn't write most of her own songs, so she didn't get the royalties or accolades she deserved, but she was a real voice for civil rights. There is still strife, but it is so much better."

Simone rocked the funk with a cover of The Animals, "Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood," and its off-filter, bouncy gait bled into her next song, Simone's "Black Is the Color of My True Love's Hair," which was a crowd favorite. She followed with Simone's "Four Women," singing, "My skin is black, my arms are long, my hair is wooly, my back is strong." Again, she made it her own.

She closed with Simone's "Baltimore," singing, "The city's dying and they don't know why." After a standing ovation, she returned to sing a few of her own hits, including "Good Day Bad" and "Tom."

Ndegeocello's choice of songs and her invitation to other artists to join her onstage truly underscored what Lincoln Center is aiming at with this American Songbook series.

Lincoln Center's American Songbook Series runs through March 28 at Lincoln Center. For information or tickets, visit www.americansongbook.com.

Winnie McCroy is the Women on the EDGE Editor, HIV/Health Editor, and Assistant Entertainment Editor for EDGE Media Network, handling all women's news, HIV health stories and theater reviews throughout the U.S. She has contributed to other publications, including The Village Voice, Gay City News, Chelsea Now and The Advocate, and lives in Brooklyn, New York, where she writes about local restaurants in her food blog, <http://brooklyniscookin.blogspot.com/>

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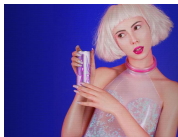
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