

From Toshi Reagon, a musical history lesson

The singer and guitarist brings her show “Celebrate the Great Women of Blues & Jazz” to the Annenberg.

By A.D. Amorosi
FOR THE INQUIRER

Composer, player, and singer Toshi Reagon has done it all in her time. It started with her parents. Cordell Reagon and Bernice Johnson Reagon were original members of the Freedom Singers, and Bernice Johnson Reagon later founded Sweet Honey in the Rock. They raised their daughter amid a mash-up of socially conscious folk and gospel. Toshi Reagon’s early albums, such as 1990’s *Justice* and 1997’s *Kindness*, showed an allegiance to blues and soul. From there, she has moved through American musical idioms with ease and ardor.

See **WOMEN OF JAZZ** on C6

Except for jazz.

“Yeah, that one took a minute,” Reagon says from her Brooklyn home. But she has set that right: On Saturday, Reagon brings her show “Celebrate the Great Women of Blues & Jazz” to the Annenberg’s Zellerbach Theater, where she will play with other artists, performing work associated with Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, Nina Simone, Sarah Vaughan, and others.

“I was slow to jazz,” Reagon says. “There was a complexity there that I had to master.” To gain that mastery, she listened to a lot of jazz and apprenticed with singer Teri Lyn Carrington and Reagon’s pal Allison Miller, a jazz drummer and co-musical director of the “Celebrate.”

Reagon’s aim was to get inside jazz. “I had to have it broken down to me,” she says, “just like watching football during the Super Bowl.”

Recently, Reagon has been focusing on multiple-artist tribute events, shows such as “Celebrate” and “Great Women of Jazz” and “Sacred Revolution: The Music of Mahalia, Mavis, & Sister Rosetta Tharpe,” two shows that started at Manhattan’s Schomburg Center

CONCERT

► Toshi Reagon: Celebrate the Great Women of Blues & Jazz

8 p.m. Saturday at the Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts, 3680 Walnut St.

Tickets: \$45-\$75.

Information:

215-898-3900 or annenbergcenter.org

for Research in Black Culture.

As she worked up these shows, Reagon started with foundational artists such as Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Mary Lou Williams, “born in the 19th century, building the enterprise of the 20th century,” in Reagon’s words. She studied what they said and did, their effect on music and the wider society, their roles in the early history of recording technology and mass-market music consumption.

Many of those stories entailed struggles of past and present, involving black rights and women’s rights. Which brought Reagon to the arc of Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, and Sarah Vaughan. As she created the shows, she worked hard to select songs with social resonance — and singers to perform them.

“I didn’t want it to be just me — or any one of our singers — copying Sarah Vaughn songs,” she says. “You need the gratification that happens



Toshi Reagon

when you hear your same voice coming from someone else, that you come from something really good and that’s what it sounds like.”

She has new original work, too, songs currently available on Sound-

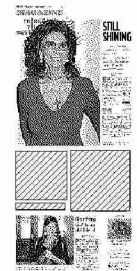
Cloud and being readied for a project (*Holler and Damn*) penned with Miller. There’s an album of *The Parable of the Sower*, an opera she workshopped last year at Annenberg with her mother.

“I’m all over the place,” says Reagon, “and I’m still feeling very political, just like everybody is at present.”

She also says she’s writing “motivational, uplifting” songs. Is that difficult in the present conflicted political climate? “I’m black,” she says with a wry chuckle. “For black people, that’s been our journey, determined to exist — often not well — and to keep our minds, wits, and souls about us. When your origins come from the worst of circumstances, you have to invent systems that are inside-out. With that, the voice is important. Congregation is important. Oral communication is important.”

Reagon insists that whatever she’s done, it’s to unify one nation under the groove. “There are people who don’t like others who aren’t their same color, same religion, or don’t share their sexual preference, but if they’re stuck in a concert for three hours, they become human beings. It’s just like getting stuck in an elevator with a black person for a while if you’re prejudiced: You’ll probably like each other when the door opens.”

She sees such unification as her job. “It’s mushy,” Reagon says, “but we need to be more generous and brave and less egotistical and fearful to overcome the violence and stupidity.” All Reagon can do is keep listeners thinking positive-



ly while on that elevator ride.



“I was slow to jazz,” says Toshi Reagon says. “There was a complexity there that I had to master.” In her show, she plays, with other artists, work associated with Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, Nina Simone, Sarah Vaughan, and others. KEVIN YATAROLA