

UNIVERSITY MUSICAL SOCIETY

Sweet Honey In The Rock

Sign Language Interpreted

Friday Evening, January 8, 1993, at 8:00
Hill Auditorium, Ann Arbor, Michigan



"Pop Music: When a Revival Becomes a Call To Political Arms"

by Douglas S. Barasch

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They stand out vividly against a black background, draped in rich earth tones and royal blues like jewels in a crescent-shaped diadem. Bernice Reagon, the founder and artistic director of the *a cappella* ensemble Sweet Honey In The Rock, rises from her seat and glides regally to center stage as if summoned by a higher power. She is in the throes of a Pentacostal gospel tune, and the audience – diverse in age, gender and race – has become the enrapt congregation. As she sings out "In the morning," the audience responds in a crescendoing wave: "When I rise...." Suddenly, she stops the audience and exclaims, "That was in harmony! I'm going to write home about that!"

The group's concerts have been described by reviewers, fans and Sweet Honey itself as a ritual, a revival, a mass meeting and a call to political arms. "The power of that many great singers singing at once, *a cappella*, is undeniable," says the singer Bonnie Raitt, an admirer who has shared a bill with the group at political rallies. "The depth of where they're singing from, politically and personally, is just unmatched."

Indeed, for the last 19 years, in this country and abroad, audiences have been stirred – "whipped up," as the group's leader puts it – by the powerful voices of these five black women, whose songs are deeply rooted in traditional forms of black music.... (Their latest album, *In This Land*, was released in September.)

Dr. Reagon, who is 50 years old, has been the guiding spirit of Sweet Honey since its inception. She holds a doctorate in history and is a curator at the Smithsonian Institution's Museum of American History, as well as a recipient of a MacArthur "genius" grant. Her work, her music and her life have been devoted to the preservation of black oral culture.

Under her direction, the Smithsonian has established a program in black American culture and has published books, released recordings and sponsored conferences, exhibitions and folk festivals on the subject.

Dr. Reagon's latest undertaking, co-sponsored by the Smithsonian and National Public Radio, is "Wade in the Water," a 26-hour series on 19th- and 20th-century African-American sacred music to be broadcast in 1994.

Sitting in her office at National Public Radio, Dr. Reagon talked about her music as an expression of the spiritual and political themes of her life; these were nurtured throughout her youth in the Mount Early Baptist Church in rural Georgia, where her father was pastor, and later tempered in the furnace of the civil rights movement. In 1961, as a junior at Albany State College, Dr. Reagon was suspended from school for taking part in local demonstrations that grew into what became known as the Albany Movement. Later that year, she was arrested during a protest march. She spent two weeks in jail, leading other protesters in freedom songs. She says she emerged with, literally, a "new voice."

She emerged, as well, to become a leader in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. With her former husband, Cordell Reagon, she formed the Albany Freedom Singers, which performed for black and white audiences around the country to galvanize support for the civil rights movement.

Sweet Honey In The Rock was formed in 1973, an outgrowth of a vocal workshop at the D.C. Black Repertory Theater in Washington. The group's name, explains Dr. Reagon, comes from a spiritual that tells of a land so fruitful one could get honey from a rock; for her, the name also evokes the strength and sweetness of the black woman.

In the nearly two decades since Sweet Honey's formation, there have been more than 10 albums, a Grammy Award and 20 singers who have been part of the ensemble at one time or another. All the members of the group have professional careers; as a result Sweet Honey primarily tours on weekends. Dr. Reagon works 60 hours a week for the Smithsonian, holds weekly rehearsals for the group at her home in Washington and has raised two children, both now in their 20's. The group member Ysaye Maria Barnwell, 46, another resident of Washington, holds a doctorate in speech

pathology and has completed postdoctoral studies in public health. Also trained as a classical violinist, she has recently become a full-time musician, composer and teacher of vocal workshops. Carol Maillard, 40, who lives in New York City, teaches voice and also conducts vocal workshops. Aisha Kahlil, 38, and Nitanju Bolade Casel, 39, who are sisters, have formed a company that teaches traditional music and dance in Washington.

Dr. Reagon likens the group's concerts to spontaneous compositions woven from the songs performed on a given evening. From night to night, the repertory changes; each concert is "programmed" by a different member, and only she knows which songs will be sung during a concert. Dr. Reagon says the practice draws on one she learned as a child at church, where a song leader would begin to sing and the congregation would simply join in. At other times, members might lead the singing. "The songs came from everywhere," she recalls.

Sweet Honey's concerts draw on the same kind of spontaneity and spirituality. "We're actually creating something in the way that I understand ritual and ceremonies to be," she says. "You know the structure. You know what you have to do, but it doesn't exist before you do it – and once you do it, it's gone. You never repeat it."

Sweet Honey's repertory encompasses gospel, spirituals, work songs, jazz, blues, reggae, calypso, traditional African songs as well as those of the civil rights movement. The group also performs compositions by its members – often in traditional styles (like Ms. Barnwell's lament "When I Die"). And there is at least one rap song in the repertory, including "(Woman Should Be) a Priority," the ensemble's answer to rap's misogyny. Sweet Honey has a concert-ready selection of more than 100 songs.

These songs address a range of contemporary issues, from racism and feminism to international economics and AIDS (as in the mournful "Patchwork Quilt"). Since 1980, their concerts have featured a sign language interpreter (usually Shirley Childress Johnson). "All of us understand the power of music to be very functional in

our community – as a tool to educate," says Ms. Barnwell. "We are a voice for the community."

Alice Walker, who has followed the group since its inception, describes that voice as "uncompromising. Sweet Honey has kept the flame of struggle bright for many of us during a long period when we have really felt under siege by the establishment."

At the end of a day that began before dawn, Dr. Reagon's immense vitality is striking. "I feel directly responsible for whether in the 21st century certain information about my people will be known to my people and whether they will have what they need to survive," she says. "It's still a racist society." But her message is not limited to blacks. "You really do have to change what's in the general culture," she continues. "So anything I do is both for African-Americans and for the larger culture."

About The Artists

The concept and leadership of the group rest primarily with **Bernice Johnson Reagon**, who, as vocal director of the D.C. Black Repertory Theater, founded the group in 1973. Reagon began her work as a socially conscious artist in 1961 during the Albany, Georgia Civil Rights Movement campaign. She continues her work as a solo performer, lecturer and scholar of African American community-based cultural life and history. The musical and political groundwork set by Reagon is constantly expanded by the other singers who join her on SWEET HONEY IN THE ROCK's stages. Twenty African American women singers have lent their voices over the past seventeen years so that there could be a SWEET HONEY IN THE ROCK.

Ysaye Maria Barnwell, who brings to the group an extraordinary vocal range (bottom and top) and has composed some of its most popular songs, joined the group in 1979. In her first year with the group, Barnwell provided leadership to the development of the group's practice of making their concerts accessible to the hearing impaired and Deaf communities. An experienced choral director, she currently con-

ducts choral workshops based in the African American song and singing traditions for exploring singers, while also pursuing an acting career. Barnwell also holds a doctorate in speech pathology and a post doctoral degree in public health. From this reservoir of experience, she administers and implements community-based projects in health, computer technology, and the arts.

Nitanju Bolade Casel, since her arrival in 1985, has brought the group ever expanding riches in vocal work in African traditional repertoire and rhythm styles, gospel, and jazz singing and arranging. Bolade Casel has extensive training, research, and teaching experience in African derived traditions, belonging to those pioneering communities of young African Americans who during the late sixties and seventies led the way toward the redefinition and accessibility of African expressive culture within the U.S.A. She also serves with her sister Aisha Kahlil as co-director of FIRST WORLD PRODUCTIONS, a cultural and educational organization in the performance arts.

Aisha Kahlil joined the group in 1981. As an experienced singer in jazz, gospel, and African traditional styles, she has moved the group into experimenting with vocal improvisations. She is Sweet Honey's strongest blues singer, a genre of song she had not explored before coming into the group. She also expands the group's repertoire with her innovative compositions. She is co-director, with Nitanju Bolade Casel, of First World Productions.

Carol Lyn Maillard, an original member of Sweet Honey In The Rock, is a versatile actress and singer. Her professional career began at the D.C. Black Repertory Company while she majored in violin and drama at Catholic University. Her television credits include the PBS American Playhouse production of "For Colored Girls..." Carol directs choral groups in New York City, her current home. She is mother to one son, Jordan Maillard Ware.

Shirley Childress Johnson joined the group as official sign language interpreter

in 1980. She works, through local producers, to make deaf and hearing-impaired communities aware of Sweet Honey In The Rock. A professional sign language interpreter, she conducts workshops and gives lectures and has worked to ensure minority representation in the sign language interpreter networks.

About Roadwork...

Founded in 1978, Roadwork is a non-profit, community-based cultural organization. It aims to provide women of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds with opportunities to express their own cultural perspectives. Roadwork also takes an active role in community projects that promote progressive thought through cultural expression. Roadwork has represented Sweet Honey In The Rock for thirteen years.

Roadwork has presented concerts, festivals and tours for over a decade, featuring artists such as Sweet Honey, Holly Near, Toshi Reagon, Alice Walker, Elizabeth Cotten, Moving Star Hall Singers, Cris Williamson, Buffy St. Marie, Pat Parker, and many others. In more than 100 national and international tours, Roadwork has brought the power of women's artistry to more than half a million people in North and South America, Japan, Europe, the Soviet Union, Australia, Africa, and the Caribbean.

"Sisterfire," Roadwork's open-air festival celebrating the diversity of women's culture, attracted thousands of people to Washington between 1982 and 1988. The festival emerged as part of a women's cultural network created in the 1970s to establish institutions dedicated to producing women artists. "Sisterfire" offered innovative programs such as the Deaf Women's Culture Stage in 1987 and a workshop with Palestinian and Israeli women in 1988. "Sisterfire" provided a stage for emerging artists including Tracy Chapman and Urban Bush Women early in their careers.