

# Arts/Entertainment

## Sweet Honey in the Rock leaves audience refreshed, empowered

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Special to The Recorder

NORTHAMPTON — A capacity crowd packed into John M. Greene Hall at Smith College to hear the a cappella group, Sweet Honey in the Rock, in their 20th anniversary concert. This was the first time this year, direc-

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tor Bernice Johnson Reagon told us, that this hall had been sold out. Sweet Honey in the Rock, named for one of the first songs the group rehearsed, normally consists of five African-American women — but in performance they are joined by a sixth, sign-language interpreter Shirley Childress Johnson.

A total of 21 women have been members of the group at various times. Apart from Reagon, Carol Maillard is the only original member, while each of the others have been with the group no less than eight years.

The performers began the concert seated in a semicircle, wearing long dresses in solid colors. Reagon started the spiritual "Ain't No One Knows at Sunrise" softly by herself. The other singers came in subtly, each with her own character and style. In bold contrast, the singing became much louder in the next section, the lines more tortured, then subdued again, and so on back and forth.

With this dramatic opening piece, I was struck by what made this so unique a performance: these were not simply five voices delivering pleasing harmonies, fulfilling their role in the ensemble. These were six souls being bared — each bringing unique experiences of defeat and victory, of love and repression — no, not just six, in fact: a whole culture seemed to be having its story told through these spiritual "mediums."

Most pieces featured one singer on the main melody

while the others provided harmony, vocal "percussion," counterpoint or sound effects. Hand percussion instruments were used judiciously to great effect. The singers changed their seating frequently so that the lead singer, a role they each took at one time or another, was seated at one end.

In the second song, "Another Man Broke His Word," a repeating "ooh-wah" was intoned by the harmonizing voices, suggesting the upbeat "thwack" heard in slave work songs. Reagon added punch to the arrangement with the drum-like sound achieved by puffing on the microphone and a growling noise reminiscent of early synthesizers.

Many of the evenings' songs had been composed by Ysaye Maria Barnwell, whose background ranges from choral directing to public health. She plied her rich voice to the bass lines, so evocative of a bass guitar or string bass that she often mimed as though playing those instruments, going as low as two "G's" below middle "C" — that is, incredibly, the bottom of a male baritone's range.

Her "Wanting Memories to Teach Me" employed a lulling ostinato (a repeating figure) texture composed of her bass line and two Shaker rhythms. "There Were No Mirrors in my Nana's House" was also hers, describing a loving sanctuary from the racism outside.

In "When I Rise," Reagon often interrupted the song to affectionately berate the audience: "There some people they like this!" She crossed her arms, "You sing like that you gonna hurt yourself. You're gonna have to jiggle your body a bit!"

Aisha Kahlil took the lead for "Wodaabe Nights." This tone poem without words evoked the rainforest. The range of sounds and moods she offered up was nothing short of astounding. I can see why the program notes credit her with "moving the ensemble into new ground."

I was particularly moved by "I Don't Understand in

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This Land," soulfully led by Carol Maillard — who has acted in a number of PBS "American Playhouse" productions among many other theater/music credits. "Why am I homeless? Why am I hungry? Why am I naked? Why am I shaking? ... It takes more than boxes to house this nation!" A driving rhythm was established by the accompanying voices — but it wasn't just their accents and inflections that moved this piece forward and into our hearts, it was the rage and indignation emoting from each "instrument."

There followed "Just Like a Patchwork Quilt," remembering the victims of AIDS, and a setting of civil rights leader Ella Baker's speech, "We Believe in Freedom and Cannot Rest."

Sweet Honey finished their first half with a bold rap, "Women Should Be a Priority," which brought Kahlil and her sister, Nitanju Bolade Casel, to the front of the stage — giving us a powerful sequel, and response, to the two-male-peacock raps of years ago.

Sweet Honey in the Rock reappeared for the second half in new flamboyant outfits: brightly colored pants,

asymmetrical jackets and hats of different shapes — some painted with African motifs.

The blues, "Trying Times," allowed individuals to solo as though in a band. If I had to name what instrument Kahlil was evoking in her uncanny solo, it would be "space banjo." Her stovepipe hat and movements evoked Bojangles Robinson. "Wade in the Water" was positively trance inducing.

In "Sojourner's Battle Hymn," we heard a rewrite of "Battle Hymn of the Republic" by a black woman of the Civil War era, taking pride in black Union forces.

There followed Barnwell's setting of a poem from Senegal and "I'm on a Long Journey Home," throughout which Reagon produced a pedal tone as low as any Tibetan monk. Next came three love songs: "You are my Forever," "Til Then I'll Lament" and "How Long."

"State of Emergency" provided a thrilling ending, with its strange combination of fear and celebration; Barnwell made the sound of a siren behind each chorus. "The Waters of Babylon" — some of us remember the Jimmy Cliff version — was the first of two or three encores, for which audience members danced in the aisles.

My only complaint would be that it was often difficult to understand the words, given the nature of the hall and the high level of amplification. Perhaps their sound engineer — local blues talent Art Steele (who, so far as I know, is not my relative) — could try some tricks with signal processing to minimize the problem.

Clearly there is much to experience in a Sweet Honey concert that cannot be gotten from their many recordings, let alone a printed review. They confront you, yet welcome you; they show you their rage, then soothe you to sleep; they challenge you to take on the world's injustice, yet let you know you are lovable just as you are. If each of their audiences leaves feeling as refreshed and empowered as appeared to be the case in Northampton, we have many reasons to be hopeful.