

Sweet Honey in the Rock: The Message and the Music

by Corinne Mackey

Ntozake Shange writes about colored girls considering suicide when the rainbow is enuf; Alice Walker writes that the nature of this flower is to bloom; Zora Neale Hurston declares how much she loves herself when she's laughing... and then again when she's looking mean and impressive; and Sweet Honey in the Rock come on singing, casting their own spells and everybody knows that they are, Sweet Honey is, in essence, all at once, that rainbow, that flower, that laughing, mean and impressive woman and much, much more.

It's all in the music. Or it's all in what they do with the music. Or it's all in the lyrics. In the combination of it all. In their everything. Five black women singing unaccompanied by any instrumentation. Patting their feet. Clapping their hands. Occasionally shaking and tapping the percussive African shaker.

Their voices weave and dodge, dip and swell around each other. Voices that can create patterns and configurations so complex no computer could ever decipher, or voices that can drift down into a beauty so quiet and powerful in its simplicity, that even the most hardened heart cannot help but be overwhelmed.

Their performances are always ones of passion and intensity, that chill and arouse, comfort and, most of all, reveal love. Magic. Amazing the way they change rhythms, shift leads, moan and holler, come together as one or separate into a myriad of voices. You cannot listen, you cannot be there, hearing these sounds — Bernice's heavy contralto, Evelyn's sweet alto, Yasmeen's shouts and wails, Asaye's deep, utterly deep, bass, and Aisha's electric resonance — and walk away untouched.

You cannot hear the words without being touched. The messages. All the old familiar spirituals and protest songs. Other songs with most of the lyrics written by the members themselves, telling, testifying on a range of subjects from El Salvador to South Africa

from life and love to lynchings and rapes, from Fannie Lou Hamer and Sojourner Truth to a celebration of all black women and all peoples.

Words asking:

If you had lived with Harriet Tubman
would you wade in the water
If you had lived with Fannie Lou Hamer
would you shine her light

Or words reminding us that:

The hands of oppression
are the hands of hunger
The waters of Chile
fill the banks of Cape Fear

Or lovingly, using the words of poet June Jordan:

But what I need is quite specific
terrifying rough and terrific
I need an absolutely one to one
a seven day kiss

Lyrics, music, all of it forces response and will not leave you untouched.

I recently spoke with Dr. Bernice Reagon, founder of Sweet Honey, and for many years cultural historian for the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C.

It was twelve years ago that Sweet Honey emerged, out of a vocal workshop of the Washington, D.C. Black Repertory Theatre Company. Bernice was the vocal director. Over the years several things have changed about the group: "nineteen black women have lent their voices so that there could be a 'Sweet Honey in the Rock.' The repertoire has changed — expanded and extended by the additions of different women.

But remaining the same throughout, has been the presence of Bernice Reagon, the shared commitment to the style of Sweet Honey, and to being socially conscious, politically aware black women artists.

When asked whether Sweet Honey had accomplished all they had set out to do, Bernice explained that "initially, with Sweet Honey, there were no goals, at least in the usual sense of the word. At its inception, Sweet Honey was intended only as an avenue of expression for black women who simply



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wanted to sing, needed to sing." What she envisioned was a group of black women, rooted in traditional black American music, "that could vocally explore a range of contemporary issues, both political and personal." The response to Sweet Honey — singing unaccompanied in an era where electric music was/is the rule — has been profound.

Sweet Honey's lyrics are often difficult for some to digest — Not because of their complexity but because too many are reluctant to hear about, and thus acknowledge, the existence of racism, of discrimination, oppression, rape, nuclear energy, homophobia, sexism, hunger. The decision to explore and delve into topics that may be uncomfortable to some, speaks well of Sweet Honey's commitment to resist with their voices and words, always, those "isms" of the world that constantly deal death blows. The world may be the way it is, but we can change it. That we can rebuild and re-create is the major chord that runs throughout their music.

After commenting on Sweet Honey's appeal to groups as diverse as Lesbians and Gays, Black church members, peace activists, Central America and anti-apartheid activists and feminists, I asked Bernice for her thoughts on coalition building.

"Coalition is something we struggle with, and of course it's important. And our com-

mitment to building our particular issue/community is important. The struggle is in balancing those. It requires a great deal of intensity and work, but we *have* to work at changing things that are oppressive and exploitive."

Finally I asked Bernice how the excitement she and Sweet Honey generate becomes more dazzling with each year. I wondered where "it" keeps coming from, that force inside them that keeps the audience re-acting, moving, responding.

Bernice, a smile in her voice, replied that no matter what, Sweet Honey believes strongly in remaining positive, believes strongly too in the values of what they sing. And when they sing, while they sing, they get tremendous strength, peace, and serenity from each other.

"People ask me all the time," said Bernice, "how do I do what I do." She paused and then several times, with wonder, repeated herself. "I always think, how could I *not* do what I do."

It is a question we hope she nor any other member of Sweet Honey ever has need to answer.

Members of Sweet Honey are: Bernice Reagon, Evelyn Harris, Yasmeen Williams, Ysaye Bamwell, Aisha Kahlil, and Shirley Johnson, interpreter for the hearing impaired. Don't miss it!

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