

'Let it out'

For LaRhonda Steele, gospel music is about freedom to express. The Portland singer talks about interfaith choir, the city's pollution crisis and musicians' gift to the world.

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LaRhonda Steele has been a part of Portland's musical landscape for a little over 20 years. Her partner in life and one of her musical collaborators is her husband and keyboardist, Mark Steele.

She is the choir director for the Portland Interfaith Gospel Choir, which is made up of both seasoned vocalists and novice performers representing many faiths and cultures. The group's mission is to use black gospel music to bring together people of different backgrounds, ethnicities and beliefs to celebrate diversity, social justice, equality and peace.

There are only a handful of other interfaith gospel choirs – one in Oakland, Calif., and another in Arcata, Calif.

"It's not about color," Steele said. "It's about people wanting to experience the freedom that gospel music brings. ... The freedom to be spiritual and be connected and be healed."

Additionally, Steele is music director for Unity West Linn and performs with several local blues, R&B and gospel artists. One of those groups is the Adrian Martin Sextet, which are taking their Nina Simone tribute show, "I Put a Spell on You," to Portland's Alberta Rose Theatre on March 19.

Asked about the changes she has seen in Portland, Steele cited the population growth and the legalization of marijuana, something that she said would never happen in her home state of Oklahoma.

She also talked about the gentrification of the city.

"A lot of the black businesses are gone. It's become so very – what is the word? Not yuppie. Hipster!" she said.

"We live right in Northeast and have been over here 14 to 15 years. My husband is white, so maybe we were a part of that gentrification? I don't know.

Suzanne Zalokar: *Black gospel music. This sounds like a great opportunity to experience it and learn about it. How can I get involved?*

LaRhonda Steele: We have been in existence for about four years: Each year it has grown in size, and so we've had to learn how to manage that.

We have auditions two seasons each year. We have had wonderful involvement.

We've been a part of the Martin Luther King Jr. celebration that World Arts Foundation puts on each year – the largest one in the country with Ken Berry. We've been at that for the past three years. We've done the Grotto. This year we are doing A Life for Lynn, a benefit for Dave Kahl and his family. We have been up to Western Washington University.

We also have two large concerts a year, which are our fund raisers. We teach traditional black gospel music, and we teach from a span of history. In a season, we cover several tunes and genres across historical eras.



PHOTO BY DIANE RUSSELL

LaRhonda Steele performs with Louis Pain. The Portland musicians recently released a CD together, "Rock Me Baby."

I love gospel music in the way that you are able to express. I grew up Baptist – not quite Methodist or Catholic, but we were a bit more subdued than what your holiest of Pentecostal expressions are. But it is all so good. You are so free to just express, let it out.

I tell the choir, because the group is largely older white people, I am usually having to pull the expression out of them. I'm like *come on*. We each know where this music comes from. A song might come from African slavery. If they can sing it in a joyous way, you need to come on with it. So we teach the history of the song and what was going on in the country at the time, and we try to relate that so that people can open up to its expression. It's really wonderful.

S.Z.: *You are taking a Nina Simone show to the Alberta Rose Theatre. Tell me about that.*

L.S.: We're doing a number of tunes that span her career. She is so deliciously – what is it – I don't like to use the word "tragic." (Her performance) is the full expression of the highs and lows of an artist. That's what that is. It's a full expression, not tragic.

S.Z.: *There's nothing that can quite describe the feeling that comes over me when I put on Nina Simone.*

L.S.: She has a very different voice. She started as an African-American girl being taught classical piano. That's what she

thought she was going to do. Then she had to drop out of school to support her family. She worked in clubs, playing piano.

She had this classical training along with this gospel and blues, and that's the style that you hear, that isn't like anyone else.

S.Z.: *I saw you play Jesus Christ a couple of years ago in an instrumental production of "Jesus Christ Superstar." I have to say, I always suspected God was a black woman.*

L.S.: (Laughter) Playing Jesus was really tough. I have been invited as a musical guest at New Thought Center for Spiritual Living for the last decade or so.

David York, who leads the music ministry at the New Thought Center is an Oklahoma boy too. He pushes me beyond what I believe that I can do, and that's a good thing.

Several years before I played the role of Jesus, I played Mary Magdalene. I had never done anything like that before. So it was all new.

Three years later, I had had the mastectomy and my hair was just coming back from the chemotherapy (Steele had been diagnosed with breast cancer). I don't know why I said yes to that man. I could have easily said I've been through too much and I can't (take on the role of Jesus). But I agreed to it.

When my kids saw me play that role, I affected them in a way that I didn't really think about because one of the last songs when Jesus is saying, "Kill me, take me,

now," my kids didn't like that. I get it, but I'm still here and I'm not going anywhere.

S.Z.: *Have you been following the story about air pollution in Portland?*

L.S.: A bit. Just a couple of things in the news, but (something caught my eye): Precision Castparts?

S.Z.: *They are one of the polluters. In 2013, a team at the University of Massachusetts ranked them the No. 1 toxic air polluter in the country.*

L.S.: When I first worked here (in Portland), I worked for a company called Unit Parts. It was a coating company. We coated nails or washers or other (small pieces of metal). I worked there for about a year or so, and then I got pregnant. My husband, Mark, said, "You have to quit this job." All of the fumes that were being released there with how they treated the metals and stuff?

Precision Castparts was one of the larger clients of Unit Parts. To have that come full circle and to know (personally) what that air is like? You know, it's kind of scary.

And that was 20 years ago. The company was cited for not dealing properly with their hazardous waste. There were just open containers of whatever was left from the treatment of these metals. And not everybody wore masks. It's really shocking.

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