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Portland Observer

Volume XLVII • Number 45



www.portlandobserver.com
 Wednesday • November 28, 2018



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A diverse group of Portland writers and musicians are the creators behind "From Maxville to Vanport" a new CD of songs and original music telling the stories of two Oregon towns rooted in early African American history. Pictured (from left) are Gwen Trice, Douglas Detrick, S. Renee Mitchell, Marilyn Keller and Ezra Weiss.

Maxville to Vanport

Musical journey a focus on two historic black towns

BY BEVERLY CORBELL
 THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

A couple of years ago, five diverse Oregonians stood in the middle of an empty, snowy field in northeast Oregon — a vocalist, a composer, a filmmaker, a historian, and an artistic director — and each of them knew they were onto something special.

All of them were familiar with the history of Vanport, but most had just recently learned of similar history about they were standing, the former settlement of Maxville, near the town of Wallowa in northeast Oregon. Like the black laborers who came from all over the country to build ships in Vanport during World War II, another

migration of African Americans had come to Maxville to work in the logging industry in the 1920s and '30s.

The group in the cold field that day, where Maxville existed from 1922 to 1933, was composed of artistic director Douglas Detrick, executive director of the Portland Jazz Composers Ensemble; jazz composer and pianist Ezra Weiss; historian Gwendolyn Trice; jazz and gospel singer Marilyn Keller, and historian and filmmaker Kalimah Abioto. S. Renee Mitchell, a poet, lyricist and author, had visited the site earlier.

Those six people had one collective goal: To tell the stories of both Vanport and Maxville through song, original music and film, a goal they accomplished earlier this

year and performed to acclaim several times this spring. A CD of the music "From Maxville to Vanport" was released earlier this month, and more performances of the music and film showings will be held in Corvallis in February, in Portland in March, and possibly beyond.

Trice provided historical research and Mitchell wrote the lyrics. Weiss composed the music that was sung by Keller and for two films created by Abioto. Detrick is creative director for the entire project, and the music is performed by Detrick's jazz ensemble. CDs are available at pjce.bandcamp.com.

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