

Sweet Honey In The Rock

with special guest

Toshi Reagon and Big Lovely

Friday, December 5, 8 pm, 2003

Zellerbach Hall

Eveningsong

Created by
Sweet Honey In The Rock
Toshi Reagon
Art Steele

Produced and directed by
Bernice Johnson Reagon

SWEET HONEY IN THE ROCK

Ysaye Maria Barnwell
Nitanju Bolade Casel
Aisha Kahlil
Carol Maillard
Bernice Johnson Reagon

TOSHI REAGON & BIG LOVELY

Toshi Reagon
Judith Casselberry
Jen Leigh
Fred Cash
Chicken Burke

Shirley Childress Saxton, Sign Language interpreter
Art Steele, sound design
Kevin Meek, light design
Saharah, Cassandra Shepard, Pah 'Ti, costume design
Miyuki Williams, associate director
Carol Lynn Maillard, assistant to the director

Commission Partners

Washington Performing Arts Society (WPAS); Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center, University of Maryland; University Musical Society, University of Michigan at Ann Arbor; Dartmouth College; New Jersey Performing Arts Center (NJPAC); University of Illinois at Urbana; University of Texas at Austin

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a federal agency that supports the visual, literary, and performing arts to benefit all Americans,
and the California Arts Council, a state agency.

Eveningsong

Fulani Chant
Aisha Kahlil

Breaths
Poem/Birago Diop, music/Ysaye M. Barnwell

No Mirrors in My Nana's House
Ysaye M. Barnwell

Ella's Song
Bernice Johnson Reagon

Hush

Spiritual, arr./Bernice Johnson Reagon

SET I

Steal Away
Spiritual, arr./Toshi Reagon, Black Elephant Music

River of Life
J.C. Burris, arr./Bernice Johnson Reagon/Toshi Reagon

Precious Memories
J.B.F. Wright, arr./Bernice Johnson Reagon

We Are
Ysaye M. Barnwell

Stranger Blues
Blues, arr./Aisha Kahlil/Bernice Johnson Reagon

Would You Harbor Me?
Ysaye M. Barnwell

Denko
Bambara song, arr./Nitanju Bolade Casel, Clear Ice Music

Yes it Was
Toshi Reagon, arr./Bernice Johnson Reagon

The Women Gather
Carol Lynn Maillard, 4Jagadish Music

Nature Song
Aisha Kahlil

I Be Your Water
Bernice Johnson Reagon, arr./Toshi Reagon

PAUSE

SET II

Give the People Their Right to Vote
Nitanju Bolade Casel

Motherless Chil'
Spiritual, arr./Carol Lynn Maillard

Sojourner's Battle Hymn
Lyrics, Sojourner Truth, arr./Bernice Johnson Reagon

How Long
Bernice Johnson Reagon, arr./Toshi Reagon

We'll Understand it By and By
Charles Albert Tindley, arr./Bernice Johnson Reagon

This Little Light of Mine
Freedom song, arr./Bernice Johnson Reagon

Ballad of Harry T. Moore
Poem/Langston Hughes, music/Bernice Johnson Reagon

I'm on My Way
Freedom song, arr./Bernice Johnson Reagon

We Shall Not Be Moved
Freedom song, arr./Bernice Johnson Reagon

I'm Gon' Stand!
Bernice Johnson Reagon

Ballad of the Broken Word
Toshi Reagon

South African Freedom Song
Lyrics/Otis Williams, music/Bernice Johnson Reagon

INTERMISSION

SET III

Improv Medley
Carol Lynn Maillard with Sweet Honey In The Rock/Toshi Reagon and Big Lovely

Mountain Top
Toshi Reagon

In the Upper Room
Lucie Eddie Campbell, arr./Bernice Johnson Reagon

Joan Little
Bernice Johnson Reagon

Prayer at the Crossroads
Aisha Kahlil

Somebody Prayed Me Over
Carol Lynn Maillard

Greed
Bernice Johnson Reagon

Living After All
Toshi Reagon

Old Ship of Zion
Spiritual, arr./Bernice Johnson Reagon

For 30 years, Sweet Honey has made her journey of conscience through songs and singing. During this period, we have often had to plow new territory right through the breath of world music culture. Through our performances—live and recorded—we have tried to share the belief that, in order to survive, some songs are better understood and accessible if sung by singers who carry the sound of their ancestors in their voices and who can still sing the songs of old as they were first sung. It is also important that these singers be composers and arrangers, creating new songs to document the times in which they live. We have learned through our work and the expanding support we have been given by our communities, that to be in and of the now, we do not have to leave the old. In fact, that which has been passed to us from those who have come before not only can sit beside the now and the unknown new, but can serve as guide and strength to those of us still on the journey—making a way out of no way.

With Eveningsong, the women of Sweet Honey, in collaboration with Toshi Reagon, set out to create an original production—an evening of songs and singing in a narrative journey that already exists in the real life experiences shared between the artists. Toshi Reagon was nine years old when I began to work with forming what has become Sweet Honey In The Rock. For three decades, we all grew and developed in supportive roles in relationship to each other and never did the support come only from one direction.

When Sweet Honey and Toshi met in our first workshop during the spring of 2002, each person wrote down all of the Sweet Honey songs she thought were important to who the group has become. It was inspiring and overwhelming to contend with that. There were those songs that were already documents of our relationships, Sweet Honey songs performed and recorded by Toshi, and Toshi Reagon songs that were a part of Sweet Honey's repertoire. As we continued to search for the structure of the production, we talked about the importance of coming together across genres. One central principle was support across generations and the notion of doing the work of your life so that you create space not only for yourself but also for others who travel with and after you. It was also crucial to create a sound environment that celebrates and protects the aesthetics of the a cappella ensemble and the rock band. We were fortunate to have Art Steele, Sweet Honey's engineer for a quarter of a century, join the creative team and take on the technical challenges of maintaining the integrity of both the a cappella and rock genres and creating an experience that a Sweet Honey audience would find satisfying, and—yes—stimulating and stretching. Sharing a collage of ideas and principles over a nine-month period gave us an outline that provided the foundation for a week-long residency at the University of Maryland in December 2002. It was there, during those five days at the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center, that *Eveningsong* came to life. This is a rare experience, and this special production will be performed in 12 cities during our 30th Anniversary year. Enjoy!

—Bernice Johnson Reagon

Sweet Honey at 30

During the fall of 1973, Howard University Arts and Humanities Institute, directed by Stephen Henderson, invited Bernice Johnson Reagon to open and close its centennial observance of the birth of blues composer W.C. Handy. Reagon opened the conference, leading the participants in the spiritual "Can't Hide Sinner." However, for the closing session, she requested that it feature a new group she had formed. On November 17, 1973, Sweet Honey In The Rock performed its first concert in the School of Social Work Auditorium on Howard University's campus. Today, 30 years later, Sweet Honey In The Rock is a Grammy Award-winning, African American female a cappella ensemble with deep musical roots in the sacred music of the African American church—spirituals, hymns, traditional gospel. In a repertoire that declares all life is sacred, this group stretches notions of the sacred with concerts and recordings that include the sounds of jazz, art song, blues, hip hop, rhythm and blues, and improvisation. The Washington Post describes the uniqueness of this Washington, DC, ensemble: "The sound of Sweet Honey In The Rock is a wide-open sound, one that invites you in. Female a cappella groups are a rare thing, and no group of either gender has pushed the boundaries of unaccompanied choral music to the level Sweet Honey has, or made stylistic iconoclasm seem more natural." The group's dedication to accessibility is expressed in the brilliant and deeply moving translations created by Sign Language interpreter Shirley Childress Saxton, who has worked with the group since 1980.

Sweet Honey In The Rock has been a path, a way, a discipline, and a process, as its founder and mainstay Bernice Johnson Reagon wrote in the book *We Who Believe in Freedom—Sweet Honey In The Rock... Still On The Journey* (Anchor Books, 1993). Indeed, Sweet Honey has displayed a glorious, evolving process of growth and change throughout its existence. But one thing has remained constant since Reagon first formed the group—a quartet then, a sextet now—Sweet Honey's commitment to the black musical forms of its heritage, ancestral and modern, as a unifying, communal force against oppression of all types—racial oppression being just the starting point. Stating it simply, "Sweet Honey In The Rock," Reagon wrote, "is a woman born of a struggling union of Black Woman singers."

The 30th Anniversary tour (January 2003 – January 2004) features a number of outstanding opportunities to experience Sweet Honey In The Rock—more than 30 concerts in the United States and a week-long tour of the United Kingdom during July 2003. The anniversary year will also mark a

milestone for Sweet Honey, that of transition and planning; it being the final year of touring and performing with founder Bernice Johnson Reagon as a member of the ensemble.

January saw the release of the group's newest CD, *The Women Gather* (EarthBeat! Records), produced by Toshi Reagon (producer, singer/composer, and daughter of Bernice Johnson Reagon). Toshi has witnessed, been influenced by, and supported the work of this ensemble. In the past, she has assisted Bernice Johnson Reagon as co-producer and assistant producer, but for *The Women Gather*, it is Bernice who was the assistant. Of this project, Bernice Johnson Reagon says of the work of her daughter and constant collaborator:

As someone who has, through the years, produced most of Sweet Honey's recordings, I deeply appreciate the stretch Toshi brings to this CD. Toshi was nine years old when Sweet Honey started and she has a 30-year-window perspective that is truly unique. Much of it took place as Toshi formulated who she would be as a musician. Even though Sweet Honey has made a deep imprint on her work, Toshi evolved her own instrumental-based sound, staying true to creating a generational sound that maintained strong traces of her foundation. When she took on *The Women Gather*, she sent us about five songs she had written. We selected the three on this CD. "Fly" and "22 Hours In A Day" were written especially for Sweet Honey, and I could feel our flavor, but there is no one in Sweet Honey who would have written those songs. For me, it is truly a blessing to be moving forward in my life and work and finding so much in the younger generation that is so strong and resonant.

In another 30th-year project that embraces the cross-generational theme, *Sweet Honey In The Rock* and Toshi Reagon and Big Lovely are featured in an original, live performance work called *Eveningsong*. The work, produced and directed by Bernice Johnson Reagon, premiered in January 2003, at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, under the auspices of the Musical Society. The work also credits the creative contribution of Art Steele, *Sweet Honey In The Rock's* technical director for the last 25 years. Steele brought his skills to bear on the technological challenges of balancing the strengths and vulnerabilities of aesthetics within the a cappella choral and rock band collaboration. *Eveningsong* will be performed in 10 cities before the end of the 30th Anniversary tour in January 2004.

Sweet Honey's 30th Anniversary year will be the subject of a new film produced and directed by independent filmmaker Stanley Nelson, recent recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship ("Genius") Grant. Nelson is the producer/director of the recently premiered documentary film *Emmett Till*. The *Sweet Honey* film project will follow the group through the year, and will be aired in 2004.

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The women who comprise Sweet Honey are more than entertainers. They are a quintet of artists dedicated to preserving and celebrating African American culture and singing traditions. They are poets and activists who cannot remain silent on the most pressing contemporary issues. And it is the activist's fervor and sense of urgency that fuels their sometimes tender and often explosive musical drive. Sweet Honey members continuously evolve as musicians, composers, arrangers, singers, and storytellers, retaining an unmistakable quality of sound, yet always sounding fresh.

Dr. Ysaye M. Barnwell is a native New Yorker now living in Washington, DC, where, since 1979, she has been a member of *Sweet Honey In The Rock*. Barnwell spends much of her off-stage time working as a master teacher and clinician in cultural vocal performance. Her signature workshop, "Building a Vocal Community: Singing in the African American Tradition," has been conducted for lovers of singing across the United States, England, and Australia. Establishing her as a unique master in the field, this workshop has been a source of inspiration for singers and non-singers alike. Dr. Barnwell is a prolific composer with commissions for original works in varied dance, choral, film, video, and stage projects, including *Sesame Street*, *Dance Alloy* of Pittsburgh, David Rousseve's

Reality Dance Company, Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, The New Spirituals Project, GALA Festival Choruses, and the Steel Festival: Art of an Industry (Bethlehem, PA). In 1996, she won a Bessie Award for her score *Safe House: Still Looking*, commissioned by Liz Lerman Dance Exchange. In 2000, Barnwell composed *Suite Death* (a set of four poems by Langston Hughes) for the Plymouth Music Series in St. Paul, Minnesota. Her composition *Truth Pressed to Earth, Shall Rise*, an a capella choral work commissioned by the Choral Arts Society of Washington, DC, premiered in January 2003. Dr. Barnwell's credits as an actress include voice-over narration for several films and videos, and an appearance in the film *Beloved*, directed by Jonathan Demme.

Barnwell produced *Sweet Honey in the Rock's 25th Anniversary CD, ...twenty-five...* (RYKO Records, 1998), and was editor of *Sweet Honey's* first songbook, *Continuum*. In 1998, her first children's book, based on her original compositions by the same title, *No Mirrors in My Nana's House*, and illustrated by Synthia Saint James (Harcourt Brace), was released, and her recording *Um Hmm*—a feast of personal and traditional stories, poems, and songs for children—was released in 2000 on the Sounds True label.

Dr. Barnwell holds a BS and MS in speech pathology, a PhD in cranio-facial studies, and an MS in public health. Her work in public health has included administering community health awareness and education projects at Gallaudet University and as director of training in the division of child protection at Washington, DC's Children's Hospital National Medical Center.

Nitanju Bolade Casel

As *Sweet Honey* moves into her 30th Anniversary year, and I move into the 17th year of work with this group, I have to ask myself, "what in the world have I been doing all this time? I certainly am exhausted, so something must have been going on.... Does the fact that I am an African American woman, wife, mother, daughter, sister, friend, Godmother, dancer, singer, choreographer, costume maker, homemaker, composer, cook, interior decorator, treasurer, writer, comedienne (well, to some...), jewelry maker, gardener, maid, and more... have anything to do with it? Or, is it just this basket I'm in the process of weaving? It has certainly taken time.... The colors are rich, and intense-deep oranges/greens/ browns/golds; the fabric is laced with laughter and tears; with past and present; with hopes and dreams; family and friends; threads of accomplishments and disappointments: with all the highs and lows of life's journey at its fullest.... Woven into the base of this basket is a long history of studying and performing African traditional dance and music; of creating jazz, spontaneous improvisation, and spoken songwords. I've had to listen to my inner voice in order to create the basket, and for that which I have been able to hear, I am eternally grateful. Into this basket I have put my heart, my soul, and I tie the connecting chords with my spirit. And in the basket handle I have placed my sense of humor, so in the event it is ever picked up, I pray that joy can be felt by the holder.... Happy 30th Anniversary, *Sweet Honey*... and thank you for helping me design my basket of life.

Nitanju Bolade Casel came to *Sweet Honey* with her unique performance experience in African vocal styles, jazz, improvisational rhythms, and hip hop after four years of study, performance, and cultural organizing in Dakar, Senegal. Her extensive training, research, and teaching experience in African-derived traditions has its base in those pioneering communities in the late 1960s that led the way to redefining and making accessible African expressive culture in the United States. Bolade's compositions have been included in *World of Music* (Silver Burdett & Ginn) and *The Box* (Tribeca Production Company). Casel was also commissioned to recreate performances for the Smithsonian Institution's production *Duke Ellington's Great Ladies of Song*. She is co-founder and co-director, with her sister Aisha Kahlil, of *First World Productions*, a cultural and arts organization. Casel made her film debut in *Beloved*, directed by Jonathan Demme. She is wife of Mfundishi Tayari Casel and mother of Obadele Jumoke Ajamu Jaja Tayari Bayete Casel.

Aisha Kahlil joined *Sweet Honey In The Rock* in 1981. An accomplished vocalist, composer, dancer/choreographer, and teacher, she came as an extraordinary vocal experimental innovator with

an impressive ability to explore jazz, blues, African traditional, and contemporary vocal styles and techniques. Kahlil received the CASA (Contemporary A Capella Society Association) "Best Soloist" award for her performances of Fulani Chant and See See Rider on the CD *In This Land* (Earthbeat!, 1992). Her original composition *Wodaabe Nights* is featured in the film soundtrack of the WGBH/PBS *Africans in America* film series. Her composition *Fulani Chant* is also heard on the soundtrack of Maya Angelou's film *Down in the Delta* (HBO Films), and in the documentary film *Climb Against the Odds* (Michelson/Carlson Productions with the Breast Cancer Fund). Kahlil is one of the Sweet Honey composers and performers featured in the soundscore created by James Horner for the film *Freedom Song* (TNT).

Aisha Kahlil's interest in music began early, when she sang in local choirs in her hometown of Buffalo, New York. As a member of the Eastern High School Chorus, she performed in numerous productions with the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra, including *Porgy and Bess*, *Carmen Jones*, and Handel's *Messiah*. While still in high school, she performed in the WGBH production of Menotti's *The Medium* and in the Carnegie Hall premiere of Julius Eastman's *The Thruway*. Working concurrently with the Studio Arena Theatre and the Buffalo Black Drama Workshop, she became interested in the music of jazz artists such as John Coltrane, Leon Thomas, Betty Carter, and Pharoah Sanders.

While attending Northeastern University as a theater student, Kahlil began to explore her interest in vocal jazz. Formally trained in the European classical vocal tradition, she began experimenting with innovative, improvisational vocal techniques. She studied voice and music theory at the New England Conservatory of Music, and performed with *Ebony Jua*, a regional jazz ensemble based in Boston. Completing her work at Northeastern, Kahlil moved to the West Coast and worked as a dancer and instructor for the Raymond Sawyer Theatre and Halifu Productions. During this three-year period, she continued her vocal work performing and recording with the avant-garde jazz trio *Infinite Sound*. Returning to Boston as an artist with richly developed prowess in music, dance, and theater, Kahlil performed and taught as a vocalist, dancer, and choreographer in a number of important and influential collaborations, including Stan Strickland and *Sundance*, *The Art of Black Dance and Music*, the Institute for Contemporary Dance, the Boston Center for the Arts, and as artist/consultant for the Boston public school system. In New York, Kahlil appeared in Joseph Papp's off-Broadway production of *The Haggadah*, co-composed the musical *Two Thousand Seasons*, and danced with Titos Sampas' *Tanawa Company*.

Based in Washington, DC, since 1981, Kahlil has worked and performed with the DC Black Repertory Theater and *The Sounds of Awareness*, and served as artistic director of the Youth Ensemble of Dancers and Drummers for the Levine School of Music. She was commissioned by the Smithsonian Institution's *Jazz in the Palm Court Series* to create special performances of the music of Gertrude "Ma" Rainey. Kahlil was also co-director of the *First World Dance Theater*, and with her sister, Nitanju Bolade Casel, co-founder and director of *First World Productions*.

Carol Maillard is a founding member of *Sweet Honey In The Rock*. As a vocalist, she has performed and recorded with Horace Silver's *Music of the Spheres*, Betty Buckley's *Betty Buckley: Live At Carnegie Hall*, and the SYDA Foundations recordings *Sounds of Light* and *Let Us Be United*. Maillard's compositions and arrangements can be heard on various *Sweet Honey In The Rock* recordings and in the soundscore of *The Visit* and *We Are Not Vanishing*.

Maillard's acting career in theater, films, commercials, and cabaret spans more than 30 years. Her theater work includes the DC Black Repertory Company, The New York Shakespeare Festival, The Negro Ensemble Company, The Actor's Studio, AMAS, and San Diego Repertory Theatre. On- and Off-Broadway credits include *Spunk*, *Beehive*, *Comin' Uptown*, *Eubie*, *Home*, *It's So Nice to be Civilized*, *Forever, My Darling*, *Don't Get God Started*, and *The Life and Life of Bumpy Johnson*, for which she won the Los Angeles Dramalogue Award as Best Actress in a Musical.

Maillard's film credits include appearances in *Beloved*, *Thirty Years to Life*, and PBS' American Playhouse productions of *for colored girls who have considered suicide... and Halleluia*. Carol Maillard lives in New York City with her son, Jordan. SGMKJ!

Bernice Johnson Reagon

It has truly been a blessing to have spent half of my life working to make *Sweet Honey In The Rock* real, and even more amazing to do it within the community of African American singing sisters who have reorganized their lives to make together what none of us could do alone. We sing because we have to—to be more fully alive—and we sing to give offerings as socially conscious members of our community. Beyond what the women of *Sweet Honey* bring, our life force, that energy which pulls us forward has come from our widespread and growing international audience community—those who come again and again, often bringing others for the first time, to complete the reality of a live *Sweet Honey* concert.

Celebrating 30 years of singing with *Sweet Honey In The Rock*, I give honor to my foundational source, the rich African American culture of rural Southwest Georgia; the Civil Rights Movement, which opened the door for me to become a freedom fighter; and my love for history and teaching.

Bernice Johnson Reagon's work as a scholar of African American cultural history parallels her work as a musician. She is currently the 2002–03 Cosby Chair Professor of Fine Arts at Spelman College in Atlanta. She is also Professor Emeritus of history at American University, and Curator Emeritus at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History in Washington, DC. As a musician, Reagon has produced most of *Sweet Honey's* recordings (several in collaboration with her daughter, Toshi Reagon). In her most recent work, Reagon served as assistant producer to Toshi Reagon for *Sweet Honey's* newest release, *The Women Gather* (Earthbeat! Records, 2003); co-producer with Belinda Gross for *Alive in Australia: Sweet Honey In The Rock* (Freedom Songs Productions, 2002, released only in Australia and New Zealand); and the Grammy-nominated *Still The Same Me* (RounderKids, 2001). Her work as a scholar and composer is reflected in publications and productions on African American culture and history, including a collection of essays entitled *If You Don't Go, Don't Hinder Me: The African American Sacred Song Tradition* (University of Nebraska Press, 2001); *We'll Understand It Better By and By: Pioneering African-American Gospel Composers* (Smithsonian Press, 1992); and *We Who Believe in Freedom: Sweet Honey In The Rock... Still on the Journey* (Anchor Books, 1993). Reagon has served as music consultant, composer, and performer for several radio, film, and video projects, including the path-breaking, Peabody Award-winning 1994 radio series *Wade in the Water: African American Sacred Music Traditions* (produced by National Public Radio and the Smithsonian Institution); composer, compiler, and performer in the creation of the sound scores for WGBH's Peabody Award-winning *Africans in America* film series for PBS (1998); consulting composer/producer on James Horner's film score for the TNT film *Freedom Song* (score performed and created by *Sweet Honey In The Rock*); and composer for the film *Freedom Never Dies: The Legacy of Harry T. Moore* (The Documentary Institute at the University of Florida and WUFT-TV, 2001). Reagon is also featured in *The Singing Warrior* (Veterans of Hope Video Series, Iliff School of Theology).

Shirley Childress Saxton is passionate about her work. She is a veteran professional Sign Language interpreter having learned American Sign Language from her deaf parents. In their honor, she founded the Herbert and Thomasina Childress Scholarship Fund to assist other children of deaf adults (CODA) to explore Sign interpreting as a career option. Saxton specializes in Sign interpreting performing arts/music events, and enjoys working in academic, employment, and social service settings. She began working as Sign Language interpreter for *Sweet Honey In The Rock* in 1980. Saxton is energized also when teaching beginners in the language of Sign. She holds a bachelor's degree in deaf education from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, with further studies in adult education and the University of the District of Columbia, where she was president of the Adult Education Graduate Student Association. Saxton is a certified member of the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, Inc. In their newsletter, *The View*, they published a tribute by Lori E.

Abrams, which pointed out the distinction that Saxton has brought to the field. She has been recognized for her interpreting and service to the community with awards from deaf advocacy organizations including Women Unlimited, Deafpride, Inc., and the Silent Mission at Shiloh Baptist Church in Washington, DC. Saxton served as a member of a literacy group for deaf youth and of the Mayor's Committee on the Handicapped in Washington, DC. She enjoys reading and photography and has authored several publications on her experiences as a CODA and her work as a Sign Language interpreter: *We Who Believe in Freedom: Sweet Honey In The Rock... Still on the Journey* (Anchor Books, 1993), *Continuum: The First Song Book of Sweet Honey In The Rock* (Contemporary A Capella Publishers, 1999), *Souls of My Sisters: Black Women Break Their Silence, Tell Their Stories and Heal the Spirit* (Kensington Publishers, 2000). Saxton's family (including sons Reginald and Deon and sisters Maxine and Khaula) all Sign.

Toshi Reagon, in many ways, is a throwback to classic R&B artists like Stevie Wonder and Prince, or old school rock groups like Led Zeppelin; she can take any style, update it, and make it her own with incredible ease. Despite (or because of) her genre-bending, Toshi fits comfortably on a stage with any of the Lilith artists, at Carnegie Hall, or in a dirty rock club. After listening to song after song on Reagon's fourth studio album, *TOSHI*, the descriptions—innovative rock crossed with soul-influenced, blues-tinged folk—do not seem adequate for this perfect antidote to today's cookie-cutter pop music. As *Interview* magazine said in 2000, "Anyone who thinks rock is a dead medium need only listen to the music of Toshi Reagon and her almighty band Big Lovely."

As an already seasoned live performer, Toshi jumped into the spotlight when she dropped out of college after Lenny Kravitz tapped her to open for him on his first world tour. And Toshi hasn't stopped earning the respect of musicians, the praise of critics, and the love of fans since then. Just ask Elvis Costello, who was hooked after one high-energy evening in New York City—he even invited Toshi and her band to back him up on a *Late Show with David Letterman* appearance. Reagon first started gathering songs for her new album in August 2001, but a series of events—including the devastating attacks on September 11—delayed the recording process. Toshi and her bandmates regrouped in November at Globe Studios and recorded the 12 tracks that Toshi crafted, many of them written at the last minute, as a result of a personal experience or dreams. Many of the songs were inspired by her circle of friends and the personal experiences they had gone through. Says Reagon, "I had felt a tremendous sense of light and hopefulness this past year, and songs like "Mountaintop" and "Little Light" reflect those emotions. Communicating what is true in your life and what others need to see as true in there is—that was very important to me." Reagon also kept in mind her seven-year-old daughter while writing, saying "my daughter loves every song on the record and can sing them all, so it makes me think much more about what kind of messages I am conveying and what I am saying in my songs."

Most people would just tell you that to truly understand how Toshi can seamlessly transcend all of these genres, you have to check her out live. She has earned countless rave reviews in the years that she has been performing. *The New Yorker* said ". . . her live shows shower retro funk, urban blues, and folk on the audience with evangelical fervor. To hear her is to believe."

Toshi can (and will) show up anywhere with anyone, whether a Central Park Summerstage benefit/Joni Mitchell tribute with artists like Vernon Reid and Chaka Kahn, a tribute to Prince, the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, the Annual International African Arts Festival in her home borough of Brooklyn, or a sing-along performance at her young niece's school. She has also shared the stage with numerous musicians, including Nona Hendryx, Pete Seeger, and Lisa Loeb. Whether playing solo or with her band, her fusion of styles and forms draws listeners in, embraces them, and sets them off in a rapturous, hand-raising, foot-stomping delight. Toshi often leaves the stage with the audience clapping and screaming for more.

Born in Atlanta and raised in Washington, DC, Reagon cites her musical abilities as coming from her family, particularly her mother, Bernice Johnson Reagon. Both parents belonged to SNCC's

(Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee) The Freedom Singers, a folk group that sprung from the Civil Rights movement and toured the country to teach people about civil rights through song. Her rich musical heritage led her to become saturated in many traditional styles of music, feeding her desire to explore a range of music that was not as accessible. Admittedly, Toshi says that she attempts to “take whatever I’m really into and try to learn it and put it into music.” This trait results in a musical style that not only transcends classification, but also expresses a political consciousness that is as ingrained in her music as the multiple genres she embraces. Believing music is the best way to deal with her political energy, Toshi once told Curve magazine, “From where you are, from who you are in your everyday life, that’s where you make change. . . .Whatever your gig is, make change through your strength.”