

On the Freedom Highway with Rhiannon Giddens

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15 April 2017

There are few singers today as powerful as Rhiannon Giddens, and fewer still with so commanding a stage presence. Born February 21, 1977 in Greensboro, North Carolina, Giddens first made a name for herself as a member of the folk revival group Carolina Chocolate Drops. In addition to her singing, Giddens is an accomplished violinist and banjoist.

Giddens' 2015 solo album *Tomorrow is My Turn* was among the best of that year and featured a striking version of the traditional folk song "Waterboy," often associated with the late folksinger Odetta (1930-2008). Her latest album, *Freedom Highway*, will almost certainly be counted among the best of this year.

Giddens wrote nine of *Freedom Highway*'s 12 songs. In these, she reveals a deep feeling for her fellow human beings, as well as a seriousness about history. Moreover, there is nothing, not one note, on this album that feels self-involved or trivial. That, alone, is something remarkable given the current state of both popular and "indie" or "alternative" music.

Accompanying Giddens' originals are strong versions of "The Angels Laid Him Away," by blues singer Mississippi John Hurt, and two songs associated with the Civil Rights movement: "Freedom Highway" by the Staples Singers, and "Birmingham Sunday" by Richard Fariña. The latter concerns the 1963 bombing by the Ku Klux Klan of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama which left four little girls dead.

Perhaps the most haunting of the many haunting songs on *Freedom Highway* is "At the Purchaser's Option." It was inspired by Giddens' discovery of an advertisement from the 1830s announcing the sale of a young female slave. The ad mentions, in passing, that the woman has a nine-month-old child who is also available "at the purchaser's option." Giddens' puts

herself in the woman's shoes and sings movingly of her suffering: "Day by day I work the line/Every minute overtime/Fingers nimble, fingers quick/My fingers bleed to make you rich."

Returning to modern day, "Better Get It Right The First Time," sees Giddens turn her attention to police killings of innocent youth. She sings: "Young man was a good man/Did you stand your ground/Young man was a good man/Is that why they took you down/Young man was a good man/Or did you run that day/Young man was a good man/Baby, they shot you anyway."

Called a "Black Lives Matter" anthem in many reviews, the song doesn't actually emphasize race. While many of *Freedom Highway*'s songs do concern the history of what is commonly called the "African-American experience," the poison of racialism does not make itself felt here. There is something far more humane and universal at work. Class, in a somewhat limited way, is also a part of many of the songs. This history, at any rate, is not the sole property of any one "race" and certainly not of the pro-capitalist Black Lives Matter movement.

The instrumentation and arrangements employed by Giddens throughout seamlessly blend a wide variety of influences. On many songs, the grooves of R&B meld with the growling, muted trumpets of 1920s jazz, while old-time Appalachian banjos thump out their always-mournful melodies.

Giddens' banjo playing has none of the biting twang commonly associated with the instrument today. It has a thick, full sound. She uses slides to great effect in her phrasing. It's perfect for the flirtatious "Hey Bébé" which resides somewhere between jazz, folk and blues music.

Freedom Highway and *Tomorrow is My Turn* before it are a step forward for Giddens. They are superior to

her work with the Carolina Chocolate Drops, however interesting that effort was at times.

Folk music is easy to do wrong. A dull, pedagogical tone creeps into the work of many revivalists. The importance of certain songs is explained and then they are performed in such a way that one never feels this importance in the music itself. They become museum pieces. This is often combined with a silly sentimentality for the “simple lives” of “pure” folk. Period dress and exaggerated “folk” accents are adopted and exploited. It feels like acting, and bad acting at that.

The Carolina Chocolate Drops were by no means the worst offenders in this regard, but neither were they entirely immune to it. Giddens appears to have broken free of many of these limitations. She retains her folk roots while singing and performing in a way that feels very much alive and relevant, both traditional and modern.

Unlike many folk revivalists (and occasionally her bandmates) Giddens does not pretend to be less sophisticated than she is. And why should she?



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