IN CONCERT: Banjo, History and Social Awareness

Acclaimed banjo and fiddle playing singer-songwriter Rhiannon Giddens returns to Campbell Hall, after having won the MacArthur Fellowship grant

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Rhiannon Giddens

When: 8 p.m. Thursday
Where: UCSB Campbell Hall
Cost: $25-$38, $15 UCSB students
Information: 893-3535, artsandlectures.ucsb.edu

It was a mighty fortuitous morning last week when I called the distinguished, definitively rootsy and much-celebrated Americana artist Rhiannon Giddens last week. She had just received some virtually life-changing news, as a new recipient of the MacArthur Fellowship — popularly known as the MacArthur Genius grant. She is a rare "folk" artist to win the prize, which this year also went to adventurous jazz/new music drummer-composer Tyshawn Sorey, who dazzled us at the Ojai Music Festival in June.

To quote the Fellowship's dedication last week, "Rhiannon Giddens is a singer, instrumentalist and songwriter reclaiming African American contributions to folk and country music and bringing to light new connections between music from the past and the present. The MacArthur Fellowship is a $625,000, no-strings-attached grant for individuals who have shown exceptional creativity in their work and the promise to do more."

More, indeed. The African-American banjo, fiddle and vocals artist from North Carolina entered the public sphere through her work with the band Carolina Chocolate Drops and, in the past five years, garnered board adulation for her commanding and historically important work as a solo artist. She has almost single-handedly brought the African and African-American heritage of the banjo and other rural folk elements to a general public, and earned acknowledgment and kudos from Barack and Michelle Obama, a Grammy nomination, and a fast-expanding contingent of fans and critical glow.

Rhiannon Giddens will play at UCSB in the wake of a stirring new album.

Tanya Rosen-Jones photo
On Thursday, Ms. Giddens returns to UCSB Campbell Hall, where she has previously performed with the Drops, in 2009, and as herself in 2015. This time out, she has her "genius" status in check, and a fascinating new album out, "Freedom Highway." Whereas her solo debut, "Tomorrow is My Turn," dealt with music by powerful women singers from various walks of musical life, the new record features nine original songs and two key covers — Richard Fariña's "Birmingham Sunday" and the Staple Singers' "Freedom Highway."

On that morning last week, the phone was ringing off the proverbial hook from major media outlets and such, for her personally, as well as for her harried publicist. Even so, she honored her schedule and spoke passionately to a curious reporter from Santa Barbara, Calif. She rolls that way.

**News-Press:** Congratulations on becoming a MacArthur Fellow — just this morning.

**Rhiannon Giddens:** Oh, thank you.

**NP:** Did you know you were in the running? Did this come as a surprise to you?

**RG:** Total surprise (laughs). I thought about it and thought "Oh man, wouldn't it be cool to get that." But I didn't ever expect it. It's pretty amazing.

**NP:** Part of the concept of the prize is to choose artists with something very special to offer and say, and with a broader view beyond just the music or art form they're engaged in. Do you have any ideas of what you might do with this prize and the money attached?

**RG:** Oh yeah, I've got some large-scale projects that I want to work on, and things where I was really despairing, thinking "How am I going to do this?" Then this came and now I'm thinking "Oh, this is how I'm going to do this" (laughs). It means a lot. It really does. I have lots of things I want to say and try to highlight.

**NP:** It seems like a great validation, not only for your music, but also the social, historical and political aspects of what you do with your music, and as an activist. Is that a part of the satisfaction for receiving this honor?

**RG:** Definitely. I'm in a commercial industry. Really, the music industry is a commercial industry, and the stuff that I do doesn't get on Top 10 radio. The "Hamiltons" are rare (laughs) in this industry, something that is artistically pushing the boundaries and becomes commercially successful. It's not a common thing.

I mean, we're doing ok, but I've had to stay on the road to support my family, to support the band, all the people who depend on that touring. I still want to do that. I told everybody that. I don't want this to die because I'm gonna go sit in a shack somewhere and write the next great American novel. That's not going to happen. That will always be a part of it, but this means I don't have to work quite so hard. I was constantly on the road and I didn't get to see my kids that much. Now, I can not only see them more, but also just have time to create.

I definitely have some things that I hope will start becoming "in the works" now, with this news.

**NP:** You studied opera as a younger singer, but then veered off into other musical areas. Could there be some kind of new, mutant form of opera in your future, in terms of creating a variation on that medium?

**RG:** Well, you'll just have to see. There are some exciting things on the horizon. I'll just say that. And opera might be in there. I'm hoping it is. I'm just going to continue not knowing I can't do something (laughs). I'm just going to jump in and do it and see how it goes.

**NP:** You mentioned "Hamilton." There's an exciting case study of something inventive and worthy, and wildly successful. There is hope yet.

**RG:** Yeah, exactly.

**NP:** "Freedom Highway" is a beautiful album. It's very different than "Tomorrow is My Turn" in some ways, especially given all the original tunes you wrote for this new project. Did you enter into this record with an idea of what you were going for, or did it evolve as you went?

**RG:** It definitely evolved. I knew that I wanted to have a home for these slave narrative songs that I'd been writing over the past few years. It came about through collaborating with my co-producer Dirk Powell, a fantastic musician and a really great songwriter. We'd been talking about issues, in the past and with current things going on.

The project shaped itself, really, through our conversations and songs and bringing the band in, and just a couple of things that happened to me during the process. It
really was a project with a life of its own and an energy of its own. Everything that went into that was just meant to be.

I don't think I'll ever have an experience like that again. I'll make other records, and I'll love them. But there's something special about that first statement. "Tomorrow is My Turn" was a statement, of a kind. But "Freedom Highway" was the first time I put myself into these songs in a major way. There's only one first time, only one of those moments, and I'm really glad it was that one. I will always be proud of it and it will always have a special place in my heart.

NP: Your original songs really tap into traditional, historic styles, rather than trying to be "current." That's part of who you have been, as a musician. Is that a very conscious decision and focus on your part?

RG: It's the music that I love. I've always loved the aspects of American music that are undefinable. There are aspects of different kinds of American music, in all the genres, to me. The back and forth of the hillbilly and race records, or whatever, and country records — that back and forth has been there ever since the banjo was first put with the fiddle. It goes back hundreds of years.

That, to me, is what's beautiful about my country, so that's what I like to celebrate and focus on, the commonalities and not the divisions.

NP: You won the Steve Martin Prize as a banjo player last year. He's a local, so we have a direct link to banjo consciousness in Santa Barbara. You are a part of this amazing rebirth sensation for the instrument. Bela Fleck and Abigail Washburn were at UCSB just a few nights ago. Bela has delved into the banjo's history, on film and elsewhere, and he spoke about the African roots of the banjo. Many people still don't recognize that history.

RG: Oh yeah. In terms of the average Joe Schmoe on the street, they don't even know the banjo. I've been asked, so many times, to put my "guitar" on the weighing scales at airports. I'm just "really?" There's still so much work to do.

There is a certain in-crowd that knows the history of the banjo now, which is great. But trying to get that out to the larger community is still difficult. Those images are very, very strong, those cultural memories of the "Beverly Hillbillies" and all that stuff. They're very strong and they're hard to buck. We just keep working and chipping away at it, every little bit we can.

NP: For you, it's particularly important to highlight the role of the banjo in the African-American experience, isn't it?

RG: Yeah. That's a huge part of the story, which hasn't been told. Or it has been told, but needs to be told in a bigger way, or whatever has to happen to reach the larger community. Trying to get to the black community is very difficult, but I'm going to keep pushing.

I really think it's important. I really, really do. It's important for what's going on now. I think it's important for restructuring how we think of the beginning of American culture. I'm just going to keep on until I'm blue in the face and people don't want to hear about it anymore.

NP: I'm guessing that you play to a lot of white audiences, as a rule. True?

RG: Yep. I love them. They're great. Our audiences are great. I've come to expect that. Wynton Marsalis — not that I'm comparing myself to him — plays in a discipline that is mostly for white audiences. I've talked with Tavis Smiley and I brought that up. He said, "Yeah, Wynton says the same thing to me."

This is born out of our culture, too. That has to do with an "always going on to the next thing" in black culture, because there is no nostalgia. Nostalgia has, heretofore, been a negative in the black community. I want to challenge that, and say, "Yeah, there are a lot of negative things in our history, but there are a lot of positive things, too, and there are a lot of stories overcoming some amazing, incredibly hard things.

That's part of what I'm trying to do, artistically and musically. I know there will be some connection that will get me in in the black community. It hasn't come yet, so I'm being patient and will keep working on things and playing to the amazing audiences that we have.

NP: Your musical life and voice has really grown in the past five years. It seems like things have really come to fruition for you. Does it feel that way from the inside?

RG: Definitely. The foundational work that I did in the Carolina Chocolate Drops was amazing and I'll always be proud of the time I spent with that outfit and with those people, and the time I spent with Joe Thompson.
Since turning solo, I've been able to do some things I've been wanting to do. It seemed like the world kind of opened up. T-Bone (Burnett) opened some doors and I certainly walked through them, and other doors have opened. I really believe if you're doing what you're supposed to be doing, that continues. I'm just doing what I think I'm here to do, and will keep doing that.

(Laughs) When I start running into walls, I'll step back and rejigger, but for the time being, I'm just going to keep going forward with what I think I'm supposed to be doing. Hopefully, people will continue to respond.

NP: And now, MacArthur has opened a door, as well.

RG: (Laughs). Yeah, a big old fricking huge door. Absolutely amazing.