

Spirit and soul : Sweet Honey In The Rock

Written by Alaina L. Lewis



When harmony took a ride with spirit and soul the result of this union gave birth a sensation known as *Sweet Honey In the Rock* (SHIR). Born from Psalm 81:16, "He should have fed them also with the finest of the wheat: and with honey out of the rock should I have satisfied you," and timelessly regenerated through the vocal throws of five amazing songstresses, this Grammy Award-winning ensemble, founded by Bernice Johnson Reagon, now proudly celebrates their 35th year of commitment towards music and impacting the community.

On March 7, SHIR vocally shook the foundation of St. Paul's O'Shaughnessy Theater, giving more than just a roof raising and standing ovation-worthy performance for its eager audience of listeners and audio impaired followers. The audience was led through their choral message by the hands of SHIR's ASL interpreter Shirley Childress Saxton.

Members Ysaye Maria Barnwell, Louise Robinson, Carol Maillard, Aisha Kahlil, and Nitanju Bolade Casel easily led the audience through the powerful messages that always emerge from their Rock. Leading the audience in an intense journey of politics, heritage, moral responsibility, love, and spirituality, the a cappella quintet, who opened the show with their 1985 hit, *The Other Side*

continued to offer a breathtaking array of vocals, scats, light percussion and harmonic melodies through a mix of genre's including, jazz, gospel, folk, reggae and African hymns.

The glimpse at our heritage is fought by the story within the melody and won by a brief interruption nothing shy of amazing. Lyrically offering a celebration of our Freedom Fighters like Rosa Parks and sounding off on their outrage of injustice and greed at the hands of our national government, they generated a feeling not quite like any, that took you from a regular concert to the front row of a show like VH-1 Storytellers. Each offering, laced with a promise of understanding, left its listeners with a renewed vision of hope and spirit as their lecture through harmony and lyrics uplifted the quiet corner within your soul as you indulged in a peaceful celebration of music throughout the phenomenal evening.

SHIR, who were nominated for another Grammy Award for *Experience 101*, recently partook in

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an a fortunate invitation by our First Lady, Michelle Obama, to perform at the White House for a group of 7th and 8th Graders in celebration of Black History Month. Currently, alongside Alvin Ailey and the American Dance Theater, they have produced an incredible soundtrack, *Go In Grace*

. This piece of work expresses their timeless message rich in African American traditions through the choreography of Hope Boykin and the Alvin Ailey dancers.

SHIR, and their commitment to music, community and the Twin Cities, participated in a number of events surrounding their 35th Anniversary weekend via their community initiative Sweet Honey in the Rock Project (SHIRP). SHIRP, alongside their longtime producer, Arlana Vaughan offered a weekend of workshops, lectures, and a poetry and poster contest around the theme, "Peace Begins at Home- How Can I Change The World?" Their continual involvement with the unrecognized blessings that exist within the minority, hearing impaired and socially impacted individuals in our community are made possible through their partnership with Illuminadas Performing Arts Organization and several other community sponsors that work in unison to project their important message.

It was a weekend of music, heritage, peace, and possibility. We're always touched by a Sweet Honey experience because through their music, they continue to be the gift that keeps on giving. They are the imprints on the water that kiss the surface of a ripple. Sweet as honey and always solid as a rock, they make us proud to have them as our *Sweet Honey In the Rock*.