

(Artspeak) Transcending Sound-Affirming Humanity: Sweet Honey... “She Rocks!” the Twin Cities

Written by Irma McClaurin, PhD
Thursday, 19 March 2009 13:43



Those of us who go to concerts, and are not part of the deaf and hard of hearing communities, take sound for granted. We listen with our ears, occasionally move our bodies to rhythms and beats that we hear, and clap loudly when we are pleased with what we hear. But what if your world is soundless? How do you appreciate a concert? Sweet Honey in the Rock (www.sweet-honey.com) has the key to this conundrum.

For 36 years, Sweet Honey, founded by Civil Rights activist and artist, Bernice Johnson Reagon, has reigned as a cappella divas. There are six women on stage who represent the entire spectrum of African American beauty in size, shape, phenotype, color, hair style/ texture, and vocal range. Five of these women sing, write songs, and harmonize with each other in such a way that it sounds as if an entire orchestra is accompanying them. Bobby McFerran—move over. With Sweet Honey in the Rock—bodies become instruments, vessels for sound to travel through, hands become words and signs, hips sway to the rhythms and beats. But what makes Sweet Honey different from every other musical a cappella group, and other types of vocal ensembles, is that their sixth member is a CODA (child of deaf adults). Shirley Childress Saxton, through Sign Language, and dance, has opened up their world of sound to the deaf and hard of hearing communities.

The Sweet Honey in the Rock Project is the brainchild of Arlana Vaughan, a grassroots producer, who has partnered with Illuminadas Performing Arts School for almost 35 years to coordinate this event. The proceeds benefit battered women and domestic violence/sexual assault organizations. Two years ago, Vaughan invited Liz Brown, a Sign Language interpreter and consultant for the Department of Human Services, to join the Sweet Honey in the Rock Project educational planning committee, which has reached 25,000 youth since its beginnings. The inclusion of hard of hearing and deaf youth and educators in the Sweet Honey in the Rock Project in the Twin Cities is one example of Vaughan’s commitment to “empower our youth” and encourage them to be involved in social justice issues.

According to Brown, who can hear and learned to sign as a way to reach deaf and hard of

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hearing members of her church, the deaf and hard of hearing communities comprise one tenth of virtually every population—“8.4 percent are hard of hearing and 1.6 percent are profoundly deaf.” Brown views Sweet Honey as inspirational activist singers, but also “music and history in motion.” According to her, the group “teaches us, reminds us [of] where we come from and then encourages us to keep moving forward.” Brown, anxious not to speak for the communities with whom communities she works, invited/challenged me to directly interview a member of the hard of hearing and deaf, with her signing.

When Kim Wassenlaar “listens” to Sweet Honey..., she “hears” them through signing, body movement, and sound vibrations. I asked her how she reacted to the music of Sweet Honey in the Rock, as a member of the deaf and hard of hearing community. Her answer: “... My past experience with the group ...[was when] I first met [them] back in the 1980s; I just thought, what a fascinating experience. I can feel the music, the vibrations, as long as it is loud enough. It’s like when something is hollow and empty, you know that feeling you can get, you can feel the vibrations? That’s what it’s like to me—I can feel the music.

It is also extremely important to Wassenlaar, who is middle-age, as well as the enthusiastic deaf and hard of hearing youth in attendance at the concert, that Sweet Honey has a Sign Language interpreter as a core member of the ensemble. “...[It is]very important. We can really communicate with Shirley [Childress Saxton, CODA] and we can connect with her, and with the group because of her. I am so thankful she’s there.”

Dr. Ysaye Marie Barnwell understands Kim’s appreciation of having a Sign Language interpreter as part of Sweet Honey. Ysaye, according to her published bio, joined Sweet Honey in the Rock in 1979, after the ensemble’s founder, Johnson Reagon, “witnessed her as a singer and Sign Language interpreter and invited her to audition.”

Ysaye says being inclusive of the deaf and hard of hearing communities is consistent with Sweet Honey in the Rock’s core mission: to preserve and extend the African American vocal tradition; to support issues that affirm humanity; to raise peoples’ consciousness and thought in the world about issues we need to work on. Ysaye reflects, “we are human beings, walking this planet together and we need to hang together.”

For Sweet Honey, extending their music to the deaf and hard of hearing communities grows out of their understanding that “we share so many of the same struggles and it’s another culture, and someone needs to reach out...[because] music is something ...[we can all] appreciate.” And the sounds (applause) and signs of appreciation (wiggling fingers to signal clapping) were evident throughout the audience, and at the end of every number.

Sweet Honey, whether they are harmonizing on a unique arrangement of Bob Marley’s “Redemption Song,” or singing/scatting their own creations—“Trying Times”, “Forever”, or “The Song of Mother Nature,” **rocks**. Their music not only preserves the richness of the African American vocal traditions, but continues it with innovation. They are an authentic American treasure for those of us who hear with our ears and for those in the deaf and hard of hearing communities who both feel and see Sweet Honey’s music.

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For more on Sweet Honey in the Rock:

www.sweethoney.com

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