



## Ndegeocello, Meshell (b. 1968)

by Krista L. May

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.  
Entry Copyright © 2008 glbtq, Inc.  
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Singer, songwriter, and bassist Meshell Ndegeocello is a notably eclectic artist whose music frequently confronts social and sexual issues, including racial identity, same-sex attraction, and homophobia.

Born Michelle Lynn Johnson on August 29, 1968, in Berlin, Germany, where her father, a lieutenant in the U. S. Army, was stationed, Ndegeocello is also known by the name Meshell Suhaila Bashir-Shakur, which she adopted several years ago after converting to Islam.

Throughout her career, Ndegeocello has been open about her bisexuality. In interviews, she has spoken about her relationships with choreographer Winifred R. Harris and writer and activist Rebecca Walker, and she sports a "Rebecca" tattoo on her neck.

However, while she continues to sing and write about sexual identity and sexuality, since the break-up of her relationship with Walker, Ndegeocello has become more reticent with interviewers about details of her private relationships with lovers, friends, and family members.

"My personal life is my haven, my sanctuary," Ndegeocello told Michele Kort of *The Advocate*, "so I'm going to treat it as such."

As a teenager living in Washington, D. C., she chose the name "Ndegeocello," which is Swahili for "free like a bird." Ndegeocello attended the Duke Ellington School of the Arts and briefly studied music at Howard University.

One of her earliest musical influences was her father, Jacques Johnson, who plays saxophone. Go-go, a subgenre of funk, also strongly influenced Ndegeocello's early musical career, and she honed her skills on bass with several bands--including Prophecy, Little Bennie and the Masters, and Rare Essence--active in the Washington, D. C. go-go scene.

She was also influenced by jazz, rhythm and blues, rock, funk, folk, and soul, all of which can be detected in her music. As a result of this eclecticism, Ndegeocello's music is difficult to categorize according to genre. Commercial radio often neglects her music because it does not fit neatly into stations' mandated formats.

Ndegeocello has expressed her distaste for the commercial aspects of music. Her outspoken insistence upon artistic integrity and her refusal to record more commercially viable music has resulted in some listeners criticizing her for not recording music that appeals to a broader commercial base. However, her music continues to attract fans who become loyal supporters. FreeMyHeart.com, a web site that Ndegeocello has described as being the "definitive" authority on her career, was developed and is maintained entirely by volunteers without any corporate contributions.



Meshell Ndegeocello.  
Photograph by Flickr contributor scorpius73.  
Image appears under the Creative Commons Attribution-Sharealike 2.0 license.

In 1988, Ndegeocello gave birth to a son and moved from Washington, D. C. to New York, where she performed as a solo artist in clubs and attracted the attention of several record labels. She signed with Madonna's Maverick Records (a subsidiary of Warner Brothers) and released *Plantation Lullabies* in 1993.

"If That's Your Boyfriend (He Wasn't Last Night)," a track on *Plantation Lullabies*, received some critical attention, but Ndegeocello did not get widespread exposure until the following year, when she collaborated with John Mellencamp on "Wild Night," a song written by and originally performed by Van Morrison. Released on Mellencamp's *Dance Naked* (1994), "Wild Night" reached number three on the *Billboard* Hot 100 chart, and the video received a good amount of airplay on MTV.

The songs on Ndegeocello's second solo release, *Peace Beyond Passion* (1996), focus on the connection between the spiritual and the sexual, a motif that occurs throughout her work. Rather than envisioning a world of boundaries and binaries, the songs explore the intermingling of spirituality and sexuality. Several songs reference the Bible in their titles, as Ndegeocello interprets biblical texts through the lenses of racial and sexual identities.

"Leviticus: Faggot," for example, foregrounds religious sanctioning of homophobia by recalling Leviticus 20:13: "If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them."

The song tells the story of a father who kicks his sixteen-year-old gay son out of the house while a complicit mother watches, praying that God will save her son from a sinful homosexual life. Notably, the son does not need saving from homosexuality; rather, he needs to be saved from the violence and intolerance of his family and religion.

The video for "Leviticus: Faggot" (directed by Kevin Bray) highlights the heavy price of religious intolerance: the danger the gay son faces hustling on the street is less of a threat than the violence he is subjected to at the hands of his Christian father.

With the release of *Bitter* in 1999, Ndegeocello shifted her attention from an electronic, funk-heavy vibe toward a sonically softer, contemplative soundscape that utilizes orchestral strings and acoustic guitars. This musical shift caught many listeners off guard, leading some to conclude that Ndegeocello had irreparably damaged her career because she had alienated so many fans. However, *Bitter* was critically well received, and Ndegeocello was compared to such musical legends as Nina Simone and Joni Mitchell.

On her fourth release, *Cookie: The Anthropological Mixtape* (2002), Ndegeocello explores racial, national, sexual, and cultural identities, as well as individual and social transformations. The tracks also trace Ndegeocello's musical journey through jazz, rock, funk, hip-hop, and soul.

"Berry Farms," one of *Cookie's* tracks, tells the story of Shorty, a woman who enjoys sex with the female narrator of the song but makes sure that people see her out with her boyfriend rather than with a female lover. Ndegeocello asks, "Can you love me without shame?" Even though Shorty enjoys sex with women, she retreats into the closet, afraid to live her life openly loving someone to whom she is attracted.

As Martha Mockus explains in "MeShell Ndegéocello: Musical Articulations of Black Feminism," "Central to [Ndegeocello's] musical ethnography are her political convictions about the search for freedom and the struggles against capitalism, racism, sexism, and homophobia in African American cultural history."

*Comfort Woman* (2003) finds Ndegeocello shifting to a soul-infused reggae groove. Lyrically, the songs are focused on the peace achieved through fulfilling romantic relationships; many critics have noted that the songs on *Comfort Woman*, which include "Love Song #1" and "Love Song #2," represent a notable departure

from those about the disappointments of love relationships found on *Bitter*.

After converting to Islam, Ndegeocello legally changed her name to Meshell Suhaila Bashir-Shakur. Although she still records using the name Meshell Ndegeocello, she produced *The Spirit Music Jamia: Dance of the Infidel* (2005) as Meshell Suhaila Bashir-Shakur.

Although she rarely speaks publicly about her conversion to Islam, much of Ndegeocello's music has always dwelled on spiritual matters, and has made references to various religions (including Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam).

She explained to Teresa Wiltz of the *Washington Post* that, having been raised as Baptist, she was used to "fire-and-brimstone ideas going through the house." As a Muslim, she prays five times a day. Prayer, she told Wiltz, "gives you a moment to stop, to think outside yourself, not wallow in your own dismay."

On *The Spirit Music Jamia: Dance of the Infidel*, Ndegeocello worked with several established jazz musicians, including saxophonists Oran Coltrane and Kenny Garrett. Though the tracks are mostly instrumental and Ndegeocello does not sing on any of the songs, some notable jazz vocalists, including Cassandra Wilson and Lalah Hathaway, contribute to a few tracks.

In the liner notes, Ndegeocello explains that her goal with *The Spirit Music Jamia: Dance of the Infidel* was to compose songs that encourage the artists to interpret and improvise as they collaborate and communicate with each other. In this spirit of collaboration, she dedicates the track "Dance of the Infidel," to "those who struggle for community."

Ndegeocello's most recent release, *The World Has Made Me the Man of My Dreams* (2007), incorporates tracks from *The Article 3*, an EP released in 2006. The songs on *The World Has Made Me the Man of My Dreams*--an eclectic mix of hip-hop, rock, funk, and soul--continue to resist clean categorization. In many ways, this CD represents a culmination of her musical efforts, containing some of her most complexly textured musical compositions, including "Michelle Johnson," "Lovely, Lovely," and "Relief--A Stripper Classic."

In addition to containing a meditation on a parent's love for a child (Ndegeocello dedicates "Solomon" to her son), *The World Has Made Me the Man of My Dreams* also reflects on apocalyptic war ("Haditha") and suicide bombers ("The Sloganeer--Paradise").

Ndegeocello's music has also been featured on several motion picture soundtracks, including Kevin Rodney Sullivan's *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* (1998), Moisés Kaufman's *The Laramie Project* (2002), and George C. Wolfe's *Lackawanna Blues* (2005).

There are surprising twists and turns to Ndegeocello's music. Long-time fans of Ndegeocello appreciate the breadth of her talent and anticipate each new release, wondering what kind of album she will make next.

These fans know that they can count on Ndegeocello's talent wherever it leads her. They also know that she will not compromise when it comes to her beliefs about living life by being true to herself and to her values as an artist.

## **Bibliography**

Dunning, Stefanie K. "'Ironic Soil': Recuperative Rhythms and Negotiated Nationalisms." *African American Review* 39 (2005): 231-43.

Kort, Michele. "Jazz Metamorphosis." *The Advocate* 940 (June 7, 2006): 66.

Meshell Ndegeocello Website: [FreeMyHeart.com](http://FreeMyHeart.com).

Mockus, Martha. "MeShell Ndegéocello: Musical Articulations of Black Feminism." *Unmaking Race, Remaking Soul: Transformative Aesthetics and the Practice of Freedom*. Christa Davis Acampora and Angela L. Cotton, eds. Albany: SUNY Press, 2007. 81-102.

Wiltz, Teresa. "Meshell Ndegeocello Breaks Step with Pop." *Washington Post* (June 19, 2005): N1.

### **About the Author**

**Krista L. May** is Associate Editor of the World Shakespeare Bibliography Online at Texas A&M University. She has written CD and concert reviews for *Popular Music & Society* and the online magazine *Popmatters*, and has contributed to *The Gay and Lesbian Theatrical Legacy: A Biographical Dictionary of Major Figures in American Stage History in the Pre-Stonewall Era* (Robert A. Schanke, Kim Marra, and Bill Harbin, eds.) and *LGBTQ America Today* (John Hawley, ed.). She teaches a course on gay and lesbian literature at Texas A&M, where she is co-advisor to Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Aggies.