



Sweet Honey in the Rock

by Carla Williams

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"An ensemble of Black women singers" is how Sweet Honey in the Rock defines herself. A group of cultural and political activists, whose repertoire includes everything from Negro spirituals to civil rights movement freedom songs to a feminist anthem by lesbian folksinger Ferron ("Testimony," 1983) to their own original compositions, Sweet Honey has included in its roster, to date, some twenty-two women.

Early on, founder Bernice Johnson Reagon realized that, because the group defined itself as professional but part-time, it was best to keep membership open, allowing members to go and come depending upon the demands of their lives.

Born in 1973 in Washington, D.C., out of a vocal workshop led by Reagon, whose own roots were in the church and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Freedom Singers, Sweet Honey is currently composed of founding members Reagon and Carol Maillard, Nitanju Bolade Casel (joined 1985), Aisha Kahlil (joined 1981), Ysaye Maria Barnwell (joined 1979), and sign language interpreter Shirley Childress Saxton (joined 1980).

Although an early member of Sweet Honey, Dianaruthe Wharton, played piano and the performers do use hand percussion instruments, Sweet Honey remains an a cappella vocal group.

A Grammy-winning ensemble with an international following, Sweet Honey in the Rock incorporates spiritual, gospel, blues, jazz, folk, African, and rap musical styles to sing about the political as well as the personal.

Sweet Honey in the Rock's enduring connection with the gay and lesbian community dates back to a 1977 California tour arranged by feminist activist Amy Horowitz. Through Horowitz the group was also invited to perform on a record by Meg Christian, who self-identified as a "political lesbian."

According to Reagon, on that tour their audience went from "Black people, churches, schools, theaters, folk festivals, and political rallies, to the radical, separatist, White-women-dominated, lesbian cultural network in California."

While only one member of Sweet Honey was self-identified as a lesbian (Evelyn Maria Harris, who sang with the group for eighteen years), the experience of working with and performing for political lesbians led Reagon to write songs specifically about women loving women and to reevaluate the group's overall political mission.

That first song included the powerful lyric: "Every woman who ever loved a woman / You ought to stand up and call her name / Mama, sister, daughter, lover." As Reagon explains, the group's exposure to the lesbian community led them from that point forth to "sing about oppression of every kind, including the oppression experienced by the homosexual community."

From songs specifically about lesbianism to the simple but defiant act of not switching genders in songs sung from the point of view of a male, such as "I'm Going to Get My Baby Out of Jail" (1993), Sweet Honey in the Rock has embraced homosexuality as a life force that deserves a voice.

In 1981, Reagon and Harris helped Horowitz and her organization Roadwork to found Sisterfire, a "women's cultural day" that eventually became a two-day, multistage festival. In its six years, Sisterfire hosted many lesbian artists, including Reagon's folksinger daughter, Toshi Reagon, June Jordan, Holly Near, Cris Williamson, Ferron, and Kate Clinton, among many others.

Solidifying their relationship with the lesbian community, Sweet Honey has also performed at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, the legendary annual women-only music festival.

Bibliography

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About the Author

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