

<RT>Three Solo albums by the Original Carolina Chocolate Drops (Band)

<RPI>Prospect Hill

Dom Flemons

<C>2014 by Music Maker, B00KJFZXIK, Amazon Digital Download

<RPI>Tomorrow Is My Turn

Rhiannon Giddens

<C>2015 by Nonesuch, B00Q9KEZV0, Amazon Digital Download

<RPI>Bones for Tinder

Justin Robinson

<C>2012 by Spindle Music, B006GL8N6K, Amazon Digital Download

<TXT> Dom Flemons, Rhiannon Giddens, and Justin Robinson met at the Black Banjo Gathering at Appalachian State University in 2005. Inspired by this meeting in Appalachia, the trio worked to connect the legacy of Cumberland Plateau fiddler Howard Armstrong (of the 1920s band the Tennessee Chocolate Drops) with musical material they learned from their mentor, North Carolina Piedmont fiddler Joe Thompson. As the Carolina Chocolate Drops (CCD), these musicians explored a variety of black string band traditions. The group made their mark by engaging audiences as much with their enthusiastic explanations and easygoing contextualizations as with their performance. Their re-interpretations of African American

music, string band music, and rural music continue as the members of this founding Drops trio have gone their separate ways.

At a recent solo performance in Knoxville, Tennessee, Dom Flemons told an audience of ethnomusicologists in a conspiratorial tone that he fancied himself, like them, part of the effort to study music as culture. He is not alone as a post-Drop in linking musical efforts to larger social and aesthetic questions and concerns. Three recent albums by these musicians show concerted efforts to explore, educate, and even accuse through playful historiography and earnest musical performance. This review considers issues of representation, authority, and creativity that are relevant to Appalachia.

While traveling through Tennessee and elsewhere, Howard Armstrong negotiated color lines and regional divides by using a diversity of repertoires, styles, and performance approaches, playing what audiences (white, black, rural, urban, northern, southern) wanted to hear. The eleven tracks of Tomorrow Is My Turn reveal Rhiannon Giddens's versatility, to such an extent that it is difficult to imagine the one (singular?) audience she seeks. Giddens seems to channel an entirely different performer and musical tradition in each song on the album.

The opening track of Tomorrow Is My Turn betrays a self-conscious rootsy sensibility, with fuzzed-out electric guitar and jangly mandolin providing different versions of a blues sound. On the other hand, her decision to use a particularly polished dialect in "Waterboy" evokes the Fisk Jubilee Singers and similar groups who maintain and refine black vocality. Elsewhere, Giddens leaves vernacular music behind, immersing listeners in a lush Nashville soundscape with Motown horns added--all of which are background for a Dolly Parton-composed showpiece, "Never Let It Trouble Your Mind." Her spot-on version of Sister Rosetta Tharpe's

“Up above my Head” replicates Tharpe’s approach to the song, adding a fiddle break that seems to assure listeners that Giddens hasn’t severed her string band ties.

The Carolina Chocolate Drops’ band website (<http://www.carolinachocolatedrops.com/>), as of this writing, shows only news about Giddens’s solo record and tour: White House performances, recording with Elvis Costello as part of the New Basement Tapes project, and working with Americana tastemaker T-Bone Burnett. She has also taken new historiographic turns, for example, collaborating with the North Carolina Symphony Orchestra in 2014 on a performance of songs by fellow African American graduate of Oberlin Conservatory Will Marion Cook. Her focus on Cook, both a trained classical violinist and composer of so-called “coon songs” ca. 1900, points to the troubling situation of African American music-makers within the American cultural industries.

While Giddens’s training as a coloratura soprano undergirds her virtuosic stylistic range, Dom Flemons’s more vernacular vocality is no less striking, if less expansive. His adaptive voice rambles among a more focused set of sounds. Dubbed the “American Songster” in his emerging solo career, Flemons anchors his post-Drops persona in the common stock repertory that crossed race lines through the early 1900s. Drawing from native Arizona fiddling, rockabilly, and New Orleans jazz, Flemons also belts out hot, blue, and hokum material, with songs like “It’s a Good Thing,” “But They Got It Fixed Right On” and his original “Hot Chicken.”

Flemons’s record is remarkable in that it is mostly composed of original songs, but sounds like a collection of archival material. “Grotto Beat” references the fife-and-drum traditions from the southwestern rim of Appalachia, at moments sounding like the most antiquated material on the record, and then like the most up-to-date. This play of old and new might lead to accusations--like those Gillian Welch endured following release of her 1996 album

Revival--of posing in image and sound. The aged, cluttered memorabilia in which Flemons places himself for the album's liner note photos refer to a specific setting, however: a store in Prospect Hill, North Carolina, built by slaves in 1849. The legacy Flemons performs in this record is, as he implies in the record's detailed notes, his attempt to embody--not simply evoke--a fuller, more diverse, and historically informed Americana.

Flemons's record seems to most fully continue the Chocolate Drop founders' original intent to spread awareness and appreciation of African American string band music. Justin Robinson's Bones for Tinder is more difficult to classify. Where Giddens's album seems to set aside the black string band concept, Robinson's new work radically transforms it.

The striking creativity of Bones for Tinder reveals an eclectic and avant-garde approach to roots music that parallels work by artists like Bill Frisell to outline an "old weird America" using less accessible aesthetic models and musical material. Robinson turns Howard Armstrong's paradigm of versatility-as-"passing" on its head, choosing sounds and images that provoke instead of placating audiences.

Listeners expecting more traditional string band fare might be shocked by the explicit lyrics on one track, but also by the surprising musical textures and ingredients Robinson has assembled in this album. The opening instrumental section of "Neptune" has dense, acoustic layers that resemble the orchestral indie-folk of Fleet Foxes or Sufjan Stevens. Viola, cello, and harpsichord join Robinson's autoharp; it is an unexpected string band that at times sounds more like an experimental string quartet.

This record's most discernable nod to Robinson's time with the Chocolate Drops is "Kissin' and Cussin'," featured on their Grammy-winning "Genuine Negro Jig" (Best Traditional Folk Album, 2010). In this version, Robinson takes a darker turn than he did singing

with the Drops. The spoken-word introduction by collaborator Shirlette Ammons provides a cutting commentary on domestic disputes. Lines like “your kiss is fist-violent” and “dreams, about bruise-deep, of sweeter days” are more sinister than those sung by Giddens in the Drops’ cover of “Hit ’em Up Style.”

Robinson’s band name, the “Mary Annettes” finds visual play in photos on their website (<http://www.justinrobinsonandthemaryannettes.com>) that present the group dressed in eighteenth-century French court garb, complete with Marie Antoinette-style wigs. In more recent videos for “Vultures” and “Devil’s Teeth,” both on Bones for Tinder, Robinson’s visual image is one of a trickster. He smiles wickedly, his pseudo-Nudie suit sparkles, and hipster irony crackles in sound, image, and gesture.

While Flemons teams with a fellow songster (Guy Davis) and a rising African American fiddler (Ben Hunter), and Giddens seeks top studio professionals, Robinson returns to his roots in the Chapel Hill, North Carolina, indie music scene, with contributions by Mark Simonsen and Greg Humphreys as well as standout wordsmith Ammons. I read his alternative turn as an evolution, not a repudiation: Robinson is simply modifying the sort of challenge that his music-making presents.

Giddens’s album title, Tomorrow Is My Turn, refers not only to Nina Simone’s mystique and artistry, but also to the sort of celebratory reclamation central to the CCD project. Instead of a focus on black string bands, here, Giddens foregrounds female songwriters and performers, claiming with them that it is their time “to receive without giving, to make life worth the living.” In their own ways, this trio are maturing as artists as they continue to negotiate social and aesthetic politics in their musical work.

The Carolina Chocolate Drops have presented some of the most effective alternatives to narratives posing American string as a phenomenon that is strictly Anglo-Celtic (or “white”) and/or limited to the Appalachian region. Giddens, Flemons, and Robinson continue to craft nuanced and integrating stories about African American music, causing listeners to reconsider the links between regional and ethnic identities and individual creativity.

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