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"THE BEST ART IN THE WORLD"

## **Poets and People Fix the World at Meshell Ndegeocello's James Baldwin Tribute Concert**



*Candles on the stage with a portrait of James Baldwin*

**By JAN GARDEN CASTRO, February 2022**

Electricity permeated the audience as the sheer magic of Meshell Ndegeocello's ensemble and their harmonies wrapped us all in a giant empowerment-togetherness blanket at the sold-out Symphony Space

concert on February 26. Songwriter, composer, and bassist **Meshell Ndegeocello**'s music amplifies James Baldwin's legacy of language and nuggets of black experience that teach inner self-knowledge, spirit, and love.

From the moment the audience was addressed by Baldwin's words from a powerful offstage voice and up to the standing ovation and the encore's last notes, searching, searing, and delicately delicious musical harmonies stole the show. Stacey Ann Chin delivered several sermons as part of the set titled *No More Water/ The Fire Next Time/ The Gospel of James Baldwin*, both quoting and updating Baldwin. She joked that her preaching was according to the Lorde—"Audre Lorde, that is." Whether or not we have read Audre Lorde and James Baldwin, we were told, bluntly, to start reading, and to teach our brethren, children, and friends what we were not receiving from politicians and preachers. We were told to teach love and that poets and people know better than their leaders how to fix the world. The evening's encore was a song about having a hole in one's bucket that, somehow, was fixed by the closing soundscape.



*Bass/Vocals: Meshell Ndegeocello*

Ndegeocello (pronounced N-dee-gay-o-cello), whose name means ‘free like a bird’ in Swahili, was born in Germany in 1968, and she remarked onstage that she didn’t think her parents, born in the 1940’s, were as equipped as she was, speaking for younger generations, to fight race and gender abuse and violence. One theme of the evening was honoring and fighting for black women and children. Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time*, a book which came out in the 1960s, is not only about his becoming a writer rather than a preacher but also about how to navigate negative experiences from growing up black and how to face one’s fears. Parts of the earlier performance for the original Harlem Stage production in 2016 is on YouTube. The evening celebrated black achievements and mourned brutal tragedies. Just as Baldwin’s intent was to empower his 1960s audience, the evening was about the necessity for white people to not make false assumptions about how much they know about black experience and for each black individual to stand up, to own his/her/their identities, and to act in his/her/their own behalf. Ndegeocello also invited audience members to lay their burdens down by writing them on white cards given out as we entered and delivering them to the stage.



*Bass/vocals: Meshell Ndegeocello, Vocals: Kenita Miller-Hicks, Guitar: Chris Bruce, Vocals: Justin Hicks*

Ndegeocello's ensemble of eight performers sounded like a symphony, and the music will be out soon, the artist promised. The musicians, of her generation or younger, include Jebin Bruni on keyboards and synthesizer and keyboardist Jake Sherman, who began playing piano at age four. Justin Hicks, an actor who was in *The Color Purple*, offered nuanced, expressive vocals and was front and center for most of the evening. His petite, radiant pregnant wife Kenita Miller-Hicks added vocal support and occasionally took the lead. Christopher Bruce on electric bass, and Abraham Rounds on drums rounded out the multi-talented ensemble. Ndegeocello's electric bass was at the heart of the performance, and she sang only twice. Part of the evening's message was: be a team player to bring out everyone's best.

I'm listening to Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* and to the fiery fiction *Go Tell It On the Mountain* as free audiobooks from the New

York Public Library; *Notes of a Native Son* and *Giovanni's Room* are in my library. Any Baldwin book you pick up –or even Baldwin's famous debate with conservative William F. Buckley on YouTube-- offers important life lessons. **WM**



*Organ/Electric Piano/Piano: Jake Sherman, Drums/Percussion: Abraham Rounds, Vocals: Meshell Ndegeocello, Vocals: Kenita Miller-Hicks, Guitar: Chris Bruce, Vocals: Justin Hicks, Keyboards/Piano: Jebin Bruni*



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