

The

Inside ▶

- 14 | Riffs
- 15 | Intakt Records
- 16 | Vinyl Freak
- 18 | Mischief & Mayhem
- 20 | Players

Re-Imagining Porgy And Bess

A Conversation with Diedre L. Murray

It may have been written more than seven decades ago, but the controversy that has erupted over the new Broadway production of Gershwin's masterwork *Porgy And Bess* shows that it has lost none of its power to inspire passionate debate.

That debate began last August when Stephen Sondheim wrote a scathing critique in the *New York Times*—not of the show, which had yet to open, but of the creative team's intention to “modernize” and drastically trim it from a 4 ½-hour opera into a 2 ½-hour Broadway musical. Yet this is hardly the first production of *Porgy* to shorten and revise the work. Gershwin himself cut about 30 minutes of music from the score after its Boston tryout. The new production was authorized by the Gershwin estate, which also chose the creative team. Now called *The Gershwins' Porgy And Bess* and pointedly subtitled *The Broadway Musical*, it features a tour-de-force performance by Audra McDonald as Bess and opened to generally positive reviews—despite the complaints of some opera purists.

The enormous and sensitive job of re-imagining the colossal score fell on cellist/composer Diedre Murray. A pioneer of jazz cello in groups led by Marvin “Hannibal” Peterson and Henry Threadgill, Murray has written operas and new music compositions. She also worked extensively in the theater, winning two Obie Awards and becoming a Pulitzer Prize finalist. We spoke to her recently following a matinee performance.

How did you get involved with this project?

[Director] Diane Paulus called me out of the clear blue sky—I had worked with her on other productions. When she asked me if I'd like to arrange the music for *Porgy And Bess*, I sang “Happy Birthday” to myself. Of course! It's the ultimate American musical and also the great American opera. I grew up with this music.

Why should the new generation of jazz musicians and fans listen to and care about *Porgy And Bess*?

First of all, it's great American music. And for those who are still interested in the American songbook, it's got great tunes. The score is classical, but in many ways it looks like a contemporary jazz score for a large ensemble—like a Gil Evans score. Gershwin foreshadowed so many things that are still going on: cross-pollination and crossover, essentially, which is what we do now. It's amazing how many different styles of music are in it.



Can you give me an example of how *Porgy* foreshadowed modern music?

Look at the “storm music” [in Act II]. I think that John Coltrane took that motif and made it “A Love Supreme.” I definitely hear McCoy Tyner, too—the way the chords are structured. If you see the chordal structure, you say, “Oh, I know that—those are fourth chords.” And even in the overture, there are fourths; they're “susses,” to use current musical language. There are a million tunes that I think emanate from *Porgy And Bess*.

How did you research the project? What sources influenced you?

There are so many versions. It seemed to have a big renaissance in the '60s—Sarah Vaughan, Mel Torme, Ray Charles. I listened to as many of them as I could. I loved Ella [Fitzgerald]'s take—what Ella does is free you from thinking that it has to be “opera.” I also examined the scores to anything that Gershwin was interested in, like *Die Meistersinger* and *Carmen*. I listened to a lot of jazz of that era to see what his influences would be—stuff I wouldn't normally listen to, like Cab Calloway, Willie “The Lion” Smith. When he went to Harlem, that's what he would have heard.

Tell me about reducing the score for a Broadway pit orchestra.

The orchestrators [William David Brohn and Christopher Jahnke] did the reduction. What I did was sketch orchestrations, which are bigger than P/Vs [piano/vocals], but they're not the full orchestrations, either.

Red Holloway



RIP Red: Saxophonist Red Holloway died in Morro Bay, Calif., on Feb. 25 at the age of 84. Holloway, whose extensive discography included sessions with George Benson, Carmen McRae, Horace Silver and Sonny Stitt, recorded several albums as a leader. He also performed with such iconic blues legends as Willie Dixon, B.B. King and Muddy Waters while living in Chicago.

Eagle Standards: Glenn Frey, guitarist for iconic rock band The Eagles, will release a solo album of jazz standards in May. Titled *After Hours*, Frey's new disc is a collaboration with keyboardists Richard Davis and Michael Thompson. It consists of such classic tracks as "Sentimental Reasons," "Route 66," "Caroline No.," "The Shadow Of Your Smile" and "My Buddy."

Road to Soul: Chris Dave has joined neo-soul vocalist D'Angelo as the drummer and musical director of the singer's 2012 European tour schedule. Dave, who was featured on Robert Glasper's Feb. 28 CD release *Black Radio*, is also set to release a solo project this year entitled *Chris Dave & Friends*.

Les Label: New York venue The Iridium launched its new label, IridiumLive, on April 3. The first release on the label is *Les Paul Trio And Friends: A Jazz Tribute To Les*, which was culled from the club's trademark Les Paul Monday performances and features such artists as Nels Cline, Stanley Jordan, Jane Monheit and Bucky Pizzarelli. The album was celebrated with an April 2 release party that showcased a performance by Monheit.

Smul's Festival: The Litchfield Jazz Festival (LJF) announced that baritone saxophonist Gary Smulyan will assume the role of artist-in-residence for the 17th edition of the Goshen, Conn., event. Smulyan will pay tribute to George Coleman in his second-year appearance at LJF, which runs from Aug. 10–12.

In the sketch orchestration, do you assign instruments?

Sometimes you do, and sometimes you don't. But if I think something is really important, I will write underneath it, "violin" or "bassoon" or something like that. I got it down to six lines. Normally you only want to see three lines besides the vocals.

In the opera, certain scenes go on far longer than in this production. Yet it doesn't seem like you have lost any major arias.

That's right! That's what we were going for. We were trying to let the music speak, [even though] a lot of the songs are shorter than in the opera. [For example], "I've Got Plenty Of Nothing" is shorter.

It also has a different, more modern feel.

Yes, *Porgy's* normally a bass baritone, but our *Porgy* [Norm Lewis] is a lyric baritone. So we changed the song's tessitura—that meant there had to be certain changes. But the biggest change is that we made "I Got Plenty" swing.

How many instruments were you writing

for in the Broadway pit orchestra?

When we did the workshop production in Boston, it was totally different, sort of a big band with three strings, a different concept. You can't put in 30 strings on Broadway. No one can afford it. We have expanded the string section since Cambridge. There are now nine strings. And no synthesizers.

I noticed you used some instruments that were not in the original, like accordion, and dispensed with others, like the banjo.

The accordion takes the folkloric place of the harmonica and banjo. Whenever you hear accordion, it represents the folkloric element of the people, the blues element.

This is hardly the first production of *Porgy* to shorten and revise the work. What do you say to critics who have complained about eliminating parts of the Gershwin score?

Come see it, and see if they like it. I think art should be living and breathing. I'm an improviser and a jazz musician, so of course I think that.

—Allen Morrison



Caught A Wee Trio Chicago Odyssey

The members of the Wee Trio are chameleons in every sense of the word. Like the subject of their latest venture, *Ashes To Ashes: A David Bowie Intraspective*, the trio's ability to shapeshift musically, and adapt to an arsenal of individual influences, is what helped the group blend so succinctly into the raucous surroundings of Chicago's Green Mill on Feb. 5.

Over the course of three sets, the trio sauntered between the 2012 Bowie B-side revue and *Capitol Diner Vol. 2 Animal Style*, a whimsical account of the Brooklyn-based group's West Coast touring odyssey. What resulted was a perfect marriage of the straightforward and experimental: Vibist James Westfall's no-nonsense melodic lines on such Bowie cuts as "1984" harbored a wide-open rhythmic playground for percussive wun-

derkind Jared Schonig's obvious chops—an amalgamation of highly textured, harried hard-bop, punchy swing and vaporous bossa brushstrokes. Bassist Dan Loomis' steadfast low-end functioned as the rivet locking the group into seamless cohesion. Loomis straddled a fine line between understatement and aggression—a push-and-pull between the restraint of "The Man Who Sold The World" and Sufjan Stevens' "Flint (For The Unemployed And Underpaid)" and some otherworldly technical gymnastics.

But it's Wee's telekinetic, Bowie-esque metamorphosis from one theme to another—whether it's Crescent City mysticism, rock infusion or spacious pastoral wanderings—that contributes to seemingly premeditated but never stiff, airtight grooves. —Hilary Brown