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Traditions With a Sweet New Twist

Written by Cyndi Lieske

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Carolina Chocolate Drops

Ladies Literary Club

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Carolina Chocolate Drops is a multi-instrumentalist trio rooted in tradition while exploring new kinds of music. Examples of such include a new version of a century-old song like "Cornbread and Butterbeans," or an older-style version of a current song such as a cover of Blu Cantrell's R & B song "Hit 'Em up Style." The group is made up of Dom Flemons, Rhiannon Giddens, and Justin Robinson, three musicians whose love of string band music brought them together in the musically rich North Carolina Piedmont in 2005.

Currently on tour supporting its new CD, *Genuine Negro Jig*, REVUE recently spoke with Giddens about the band's shows, new album, and upholding musical traditions.

Why is string band music so important?

It is important because it is kind of the product of the crossroads of cultures, really. It is at the base of most important American music with blues and jazz and rock and roll hip hop. It really is the creation of American music. You have the banjo which an African instrument. You have tunes coming from Europe and Africa. You have all of these cultures meeting. String band music really comes out of that and I think that is one of the reasons it is so important. It is like the ultimate American music, really.

Do you feel like your band has a responsibility to carry on that tradition with your meetings with string band musician and producer Joe Thompson and learning from him?

We don't feel like we need to be playing Joe's music note-for-note the way he plays it. That's not what we need to do. We need to carry on the spirit of the music that is what we get when we play with him the feeling, the heart and the spirit of it. We don't want to be beholden to the tradition and feel like we can't put ourselves into it. But at the same time, we want as many people as possible to have a little snippet of it - to just give them the feeling of Joe Thompson's music. If we can give the audiences a little bit of how it is going down to visit him. It is a great honor to be able to do that.

***Genuine Negro Jig* is your first record for Nonesuch what was it like recording that?**

Joe Henry was a great producer and brought out some good things in us we hadn't expected to bring out in the recording. We were able to stay true to the arrangements that we had been playing for the last year. It was a nice combination of being able to get the old style stuff down and be able to get the new things out that Henry suggested.

I liked what you said about not being defined only by string band music. Listening to your new CD, it seems like there is a great deal of freedom in what you do as a band.

Absolutely, we all came to this kind of music later in life - college age. We had all been exposed to the music that came after [string band music] like jazz and blues and R & B. We hadn't really known about the roots style of it until we were in our 20s. We don't feel tied to any one thing because we didn't grow up with it per se. We all grew up with music, but not this particular kind of music. In that way, it does allow us a little bit of freedom. All we can do is bring what we are to it. What we are now with our modern influences and everything, that's what we bring to the music. We don't stifle that. We can say what we play is a combination of what we've learned from different people and who we are inside.

What can people expect at one of your shows?

At a typical Carolina Chocolate Drops show we don't really like to let the audience sort of sit back and be passive. They can if they want, but we encourage active participation. Whether that is singing or clapping or just going 'hey' at a part that they really like, or dancing in the aisles. Never in front of people, we don't want people getting in trouble, but that's it first of all. We want it to be more of a community experience.

You have gained momentum with the performance on National Public Radio and the new album coming out - your band's name is all over the place. How are you feeling about that?

It is kind of weird. We are of course extremely grateful. But we are just kind of holding on for the ride, really. That's kind of the way it has been since the beginning. We have put the hard work in. We work really hard. With all of our shows we put 200 percent in there. We have had really great timing and have

come along at a time when people are really digging this kind of music. We have a great team. We put the work in, but we also are aware that other people are working very hard with us and for us as well. The audiences, people who are buying our music and coming to our shows, they are the most important thing. We want to just keep being ourselves and not get caught up in anything but making good music for great people ...We're not really interested in fame and fortune other than it would be nice to be able to buy a house someday. We are really into entertainment and making people happy and staying musically centered ourselves of course, staying true to ourselves. As long as we can do all that we're doing great.

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