

“When I start writing a poem, I don’t think about models or about what anybody else in the world has done.”

– Gwendolyn Brooks

from “An Interview with Gwendolyn Brooks” in *Contemporary Literature* 11, no 1 by George Stavros (Winter 1970)

Tonight’s program, inspired by the life of Gwendolyn Brooks, is in fact an opportunity for us of Imani Winds to celebrate many of our historic and present day heroes and sheroes. In small or large ways, this quote of “Miss Brooks” is a tenet of each of the composers whose works will be performed. In paying tribute to her meticulous nature and endless creativity, she symbolically sets the bar high for us as performers, composers and creators of high art.

Whether it’s the African inspired “call and response” style of Titilayo or the music of Wayne Shorter, arguably the most creative voice in jazz improvisation and composition today; or music written as an homage to the great entertainer and humanitarian, Josephine Baker; or world premieres by three African-American women composers moved by Gwendolyn Brooks and her legacy; or the music of Jason Moran, that tells the story of an ancestral matriarch with a remarkable life...tonight’s program is chock full of beautiful, thrilling new sounds and concepts that we hope will leave you stimulated and uplifted.

Welcome to A Song in the Front Yard.

– Toyin, Valerie, Mark, Monica, Jeff

a song in the front yard

I’ve stayed in the front yard all my life.

I want a peek at the back

Where it’s rough and untended and hungry weed grows.

A girl gets sick of a rose.

I want to go in the back yard now

And maybe down the alley,

To where the charity children play.

I want a good time today.

They do some wonderful things.

They have some wonderful fun.

My mother sneers, but I say it’s fine

How they don’t have to go in at quarter to nine.

My mother, she tells me that Johnnie Mae

Will grow up to be a bad woman.

*That George'll be taken to Jail soon or late
(On account of last winter he sold our back gate).*

*But I say it's fine. Honest, I do.
And I'd like to be a bad woman, too,
And wear the brave stockings of night-black lace
And strut down the streets with paint on my face*

– Gwendolyn Brooks

Jeff Scott

Titilayo (notes by Jeff Scott)

Titilayo (Yoruban for ‘eternal joy’) is a collection of sounds and rhythms associated with African and particularly Yoruban culture. The melody on which the piece is based was written by Nigerian soprano Titilayo Adedokun. It is dedicated to her and her talents.

Valerie Coleman

Suite: Portraits of Josephine (notes by Karissa Krenz)

Josephine Baker was more than just the woman whose body emulated “Le Jazz Hot.” She was more than the comedic temptress who wowed audiences in Europe as a chanteuse and dancer from the mid-1920s until her death in 1975. Josephine Baker was an amazingly prescient, progressive thinker whose dedication to racial and religious equality motivated her to break barriers, aid the French resistance during World War II, and fight for civil rights across the globe.

Imani Winds created a biographical, evening length, multi-media program in honor of her centennial, comprised of original and arranged music by two of Imani’s members, Valerie Coleman and Jeff Scott, with guest percussionist, dancer and singer, as well as a film component.

Valerie Coleman’s musical memoir, *Portraits of Josephine Baker*, represents the behind-the-scenes woman. The suite (shortened from the original full length production that included eight movements) is in four movements and begins with a representation of her youth, with “*Ol’ St. Louis.*”

“*Paris 1925*” represents Josephine’s entrée into stardom. “I wanted to create a lively piece that showed the enthusiasm Josephine had for Paris and the daring life of extravagance that she led,” says Coleman. With a clarinet solo dedicated to clarinetist Sidney Bechet and the rhythms of “The Charleston” (which Josephine

danced), Coleman offers a musical window into the immense joy Josephine felt at the acceptance and success she had in Paris.

“*Les Milandes*” is a tone poem symbolizing another of Josephine’s great passions – the home in which her “Rainbow Tribe” could live together and prove to the world that race and religion did not matter. She had dreamed of the chateau (named Les Milandes) as the perfect realization of her ideals, and she wanted to found a school there that promoted tolerance and equality. But in spite of Josephine’s continued success as a performer, she couldn’t pay the tax debt on the property. She put up an incredible fight, but lost Les Milandes in 1968.

The final part of Coleman’s work, “*Thank You Josephine*,” is an arrangement of Josephine’s most famous song, “*J’ai Deux Amours*” (I have two loves) and represents her amazing, generous spirit. She often said that she had two loves – her country and Paris – but she had two lives as well: vivacious performer and dedicated human being. Josephine Baker was truly a remarkable individual, and the world is a much better place having had her in it.

Wayne Shorter

Terra Incognita (notes by Wayne Shorter)

Terra Incognita is a musical dialogue on the nature of the unknown and the unexpected. It seems as if every aspect of living has been subject to “not knowing” where life takes us, or what it will bring. The courage needed to live with dignity in a world beset with the unimaginable is the catalyst to the creation of this work. In the face of an unpredictable future, the story of the “human condition” promises to transcend even the unknown.

Courtney Bryan

Blooming (notes by Courtney Bryan)

Blooming for Wind Quintet is one work of a collective project including works by Valerie Coleman and Nkeiru Okoye, in addition to mine, commissioned by Imani Winds and the University of Chicago, in tribute to the life and legacy of American poet Gwendolyn Brooks on the occasion of her centenary. “*Blooming*” is inspired by the closing lines of Brooks’ “*The Second Sermon on the Warpland*,” written in 1968 as part of “*In the Mecca*.” It is lonesome, yes. For we are the last of the loud. Nevertheless, live. Conduct your blooming in the noise and whip of the whirlwind.

Valerie Coleman

***Bronzeville* – Sextet for winds and piano** (notes by Valerie Coleman)

I am a mother of a very active toddler so Gwendolyn Brooks' children's poems have drawn my attention. "Bronzeville Sextet for Winds" is based on selected poems from two of her books, "Bronzeville Boys and Girls" and "A Street in Bronzeville." Brooks' own childhood is of interest to me, and it is my desire to discover similarities between it and all young brown girls growing up within an urban landscape. It is truly fascinating to witness the divine workings behind how children grow as they are informed by landscape, community, routines, play, and parental interactions. This idea is further inspired by a soon to be released documentary entitled "Little Sallie Walker," by Marta E. Crichlow; a film that explores how black girls develop socially through rhythmic, hand clapping song play, while making geographical comparisons between various regions within the United States and the Caribbean. Serendipitous conversations with other parents while watching my daughter play made all of these components come together! There is an overarching thread about self-awareness and cultural identity – a thread that, I believe, motivated Gwendolyn Brooks' to share in her poetry. In this, we truly get to know her.

"The ballad of chocolate Mabbie" by Gwendolyn Brooks

From *A Street in Bronzeville*, Harper & Bros.: NY (1945)

*It was Mabbie without the grammar school gates.
And Mabbie was all of seven.
And Mabbie was cut from a chocolate bar.
And Mabbie thought life was heaven.*

*The grammar school gates were the pearly gates,
For Willie Boone went to school.
When she sat by him in history class
Was only her eyes were cool.*

*It was Mabbie without the grammar school gates
Waiting for Willie Boone.
Half hour after the closing bell!
He would surely be coming soon.*

*Oh, warm is the waiting for joys, my dears!
And it cannot be too long.
Oh, pity the little poor chocolate lips
That carry the bubble of song!*

*Out came the saucily bold Willie Boone.
It was woe for our Mabbie now.
He wore like a jewel a lemon-hued lynx
With sand-waves loving her brow.*

*It was Mabbie alone by the grammar school gates.
Yet chocolate companions had she:
Mabbie on Mabbie with hush in the heart.
Mabbie on Mabbie to be.*

“The ballad of chocolate Mabbie” tells of a seven-year-old African American girl who has a bubbly spirit and dark brown skin. Mabbie experiences colorism for the first time when the object of her affection, a classmate named, “Willie Boone,” rejects her in favor of a light-skinned African American girl.

Described as a “lemon-hued lynx with sand-waves loving her brow,” she has light brown eyes, and what would have been deemed “good hair.” Walking with catlike grace, her self-assuredness comes from having privileged status that accompanies her complexion. She contrasts sharply with Mabbie, whose thick, brown-black ‘wooly’ hair would be considered “nappy” and thus inferior. It is relegated to being bound up in cornrows, twists, and similar styles, unlike the free-flowing waves of her competitor. Mabbie is neither privileged nor deemed beautiful by a world whose aesthetics leave her disenfranchised.

In the seven decades that have passed since the poem’s publication, Black women are better represented in public media, yet still struggle with ‘colorism’ and racial prejudice.

“Affirmations for Mabbie” represents not only chocolate skinned little girls and the women into which they evolve, but also all women who fall outside of the world’s beauty aesthetics. Mabbie’s name is transformed into a motif and used thematically throughout the piece.

Jason Moran (b. 1975)

Cane (notes by Jason Moran)

"At this point in my creative life, lineage is a key theme. I feel this on three levels: (1) the aforementioned family lineage, (2) the jazz piano lineage and (3) the path of American history at large. I have composed pieces that scratch the surface of these ruminations. But I've yet to dig that deep into the resources the Southern landscape provides. What awaits me there? A beer at a blues joint, locusts and cicadas, cotton fields, fried chicken and PLANTATIONS? As a jazz musician interfacing with stereotypes and expectations is important. As a contemporary musician, sometimes it's about shunning the stereotype, and other times it's about playing into the stereotype – magnifying it until it's abstracted.

My commission, CANE, for Imani Winds is a four movement piece inspired by the landscape and sounds of Cane River, Louisiana. Cane River runs through the northern Louisiana town of Natchitoches that my ancestors made home, dating back to the early 1700s. I am interested in the way that multiple periods are brought together within the same time line, and how they interact not only aesthetically... but based on the contextual factors in which the works were written... setting up historical antipodes that swim towards conflict, then arrive at the possibility of resolution.

Jean Toomer's 1923 classic, CANE, is, as literature, what I would like my music to be. He tells the stories through the landscape:

*"Earth is a waxen cell of the world comb,
And I, a drone,
Lying on my back,
Lipping honey,
Getting drunk with silver honey,
Wish that I might fly out past the moon
And curl forever in some far-off farmyard flower."*