

Toshi Reagon pays tribute to jazz greats

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A musical tribute to Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughn and other female pioneers of jazz will be featured in "Celebrate the Great Women of Blues and Jazz," Saturday at 8 p.m. at Annenberg Center Live, part of the "African Roots, American Voices" series.

Directed by Toshi Reagon and Allison Miller, the show honors the musical mothers of these performers in an evening of jazz standards and blues hits which celebrate the women whose immense talent and unbreakable spirit shaped the future of jazz and blues. Reagon and Miller will be joined by a cast of vocalists and musicians as well as renowned dancer/choreographer Michelle Dorrance.

First performed at The Schomburg Women in Jazz Festival 2012, Reagon said, "I created this show thinking about the audience at the Schomburg. Whenever I was in the audience watching a show, I would be blessed to sit next to some serious music lovers and historians. They would tell me about seeing Ella, Billie, Sarah — all the ladies we know by one name because they were so powerful. I wanted to do something to not only honor these artists, but show respect for these women who helped nurture their careers and, in turn, give birth to mine."

But this show is different, says Reagon, who is the daughter of Freedom Singers

co-founder Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon, with whom she still collaborates. "I didn't want to do a show where singers are just copying the voices of these special ladies, something you've seen a million times. So I pulled together a variety of fine musicians and six vocalists who can sing these great standards as themselves.

"We start mainly with women from the 19th century who sort of created the musical landscape that almost everyone who does American-based popular music does today," Reagon continued. "We then bring it through the 20th century and up to the 21st century, making it contemporary and still talking about current issues, but making people feel good and hopeful."

Reagon began performing when she dropped out of college. Soon afterward, Lenny Kravitz invited her to open for him on his first world tour. Since then, she has shared the stage with performers ranging from Ani Difranto to Elvis Costello.

She started her own band, BIGLovely, in 1996, and to this day hesitates to define the kind of music they play. "I just say it's good," she said, laughing. "We cover a lot of things, from folk to rock to soul music. We just do what makes us feel good and makes us happy.

"When you hear us you're gonna sing and dance and feel something happening to you," Reagon concludes. "Unless you're resistant to having a good time."

For tickets and more information call (215) 898-3900.





Toshi Reagon will pay tribute to female jazz greats at the Annenberg Center. — PHOTO/BERNIE DECHANT

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