

Opening Chorus



MARC SELIGER

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Meshell Ndegeocello's jazz-spirit music

Meshell Ndegeocello has built a solid career in the socially conservative world of R&B by being a provocateur. She fearlessly sings about religious hypocrisy, homophobia and sexism, all in a dark, mellifluous voice. It also doesn't hurt that Ndegeocello's amorous rhapsodies often rival those of Prince in terms of salaciousness, and she can thump a mean electric bass as well, adding to her girls-kick-ass appeal.

Yet without making any overt political statements or singing about carnal lust, Ndegeocello makes her most courageous artistic move yet on the forthcoming CD *The Spirit Music Jamia: Dance of the Infidel* (Shanachie), which is set for a mid-summer release. She eschews her randy art-funk in favor of tunes that emphasize her compositional and arranging skills. Only three of the eight songs feature vocals—and Ndegeocello doesn't sing lead on any of them. *Dance of the Infidel* also features an amazing ros-

ter of jazz artists: Jack DeJohnette, Don Byron, Kenny Garrett, Wallace Roney, Oliver Lake and more.

Even for someone like Ndegeocello, who challenged the status quo with songs like "Leviticus: Faggot" and "God.Fear.Money," her new disc is a chancey venture given the R&B/hip hop audience's impatience for instrumental music. "Right now I have nothing [verbally] to say," Ndegeocello says. "What I feel, I can express a lot better in instrumental music."

Dance of the Infidel may place her in the company of top-tier jazz artists, but Ndegeocello makes no bones about her technical limitations as a bassist in comparison to these virtuosos. "I'm very clear that I just write a couple of little R&B tunes," she says. "I just wanted to be a good bass player, not virtuosic in the sense of soloing and improvising. I improvise more on color and groove."

Saxophonist Ron Blake, who's a member of Ndegeocello's Spirit Music Jamia band, says, "She knows how to lay a groove right where it feels good. I think a lot of it has to do with a female energy. Her energy is a real nurturing kind and she gets real inside the music, giving it a Mother Earth vibe."

"As a composer and producer, I think she excels in the studio," adds Jamia bandmate and saxophonist Oliver Lake. "I've been watching her creativity in the studio as well as the way she puts musicians together, which is a part of composing."

Anyone who's paid close attention to Ndegeocello shouldn't be surprised that jazz is in her blood or that she can attract such a high caliber of musicians. Her father is a Jacques Johnson, a D.C.-area saxophonist, and Ndegeocello has featured jazz artists such as pianist Geri Allen and saxophonists Joshua Redman and Bennie Maupin on her albums, from her 1993 debut, *Plantation Lullabies*, up to 2003's *Comfort Woman* (both for Maverick). She's also made noteworthy contributions to alto saxophonist Steve Coleman's *Drop Kick* (Novus, 1992) and guitarist David Fiuczynski and keyboardist John Medeski's cult classic *Lumar Crush* (Gramavision, 1994).

The seeds for the Spirit Music Jamia band were planted a long time ago with drummer Gene Lake and keyboardist Federico González Peña. Ndegeocello says that she

wrote music sketches, mostly for personal use, but eventually started recruiting other collaborators, such as saxophonist/guitarist Oran Coltrane and harmonica player Gregoire Maret. Then she started sending her sketches to Oliver Lake, who helped flesh out the melodies and horn charts.

"He's such a soulful player and such a heavy spirit," Ndegeocello says of Oliver Lake. "Every time he plays, it's like a pulsating journey. I gave him these rhythmic and harmonic sketches, but I really didn't know how to explain how I wanted the horn lines to go. All I could give was a feeling or an idea. I literally didn't hear the melodies he had written until we got to the rehearsals."

"Improvisational music has always been something I've gravitated toward"

Undulating grooves characterize much of *Dance of the Infidel*, but to call the CD a jazz-funk date cheapens it. Ndegeocello crafts some intriguing harmonies by grouping Lake's bright alto with the muted textures of Byron's bass clarinet and Josh Roseman's trombone on the titillating opener "Mu-min." She also devises simple, spiritual melodies over complex rhythms, giving the tunes dramatic displays of tension and release. "Al-Falaq 113" features Roney's and Garrett's solos slowly cresting from lonesome lyricism to cathartic screams, and "Luqman" boasts invigorating improvisations from Byron, Lake and Maret atop surging Afro-Latin percussion. Elsewhere, Ndegeocello embroiders elements of Gambian and Middle Eastern music, reggae, rock, gospel and blues into the richly textured sonic tapestries.

The disc's three gorgeous vocal songs feature a lead each from Cassandra Wilson, Lalah Hathaway and the Brazilian Girls' Sabina Sciubba. Wilson's sensual contralto nestles nicely in "The Chosen," a haunting ballad distinguished by Brandon Ross' delicate guitar strumming, Michael Cain's graceful piano accompaniment, Matthew Garrison's massaging bass lines and Gene Lake's caressing brush strokes. Ndegeocello

describes Wilson as a "great stylist" and finds another equally captivating one in Sciubba, who also cowrote the enchanting, "Aquarium." Supporting Sciubba's longing soprano are gentle electronica flourishes, clay drums, majestic horns and Ndegeocello's dubbed-out bass, and it's one of those magical tunes that pulls you into another realm. "The song was really connected with me spiritually; it just explained my existential crisis to the hilt," Ndegeocello enthuses.

"It's about animal rights," Sciubba jokes, when asked about the melancholy lyrics about being a fish, cut off from the rest of the world. "I'm a Pisces and an escapist, but the song's more about a seclusionary thing," Sciubba says. "I have a tendency to need more space. I think Meshell is also someone who requires a lot of space. We're very similar in that aspect."

The most enthralling vocal performance, however, appears at the end with Hathaway, whose alto gives a hymnlike rendition of Walter Bullock and Richard Whiting's "When Did You Leave Heaven?" Hathaway's mesmerizing croons, nuzzled inside Neal Evans' misty piano and Cain's keyboard drones, makes you thankful just to be alive to hear it.

"When Lalah sings, I just feel all my burdens lifted," says Ndegeocello, who came across the song after guitarist and frequent collaborator Doyle Bramhall II made her a tape of it performed by Johnny "Guitar" Watson. "When Doyle gave me the song, I played it over and over again," she says. "Johnny's version was so funky, and he plays piano just as soulful and proficiently as he played guitar. I wanted to take the song into a whole other direction."

In addition to touring with the Spirit Music Jamia ensemble in support of *Dance of the Infidel*, Ndegeocello is fronting another fascinating band, Black Gold of the Sun, featuring drummer Chris Dave and turntablist Jahi Sundance (Oliver Lake's son). Ndegeocello also produced Blake's new, magnificent *Sonic Tonic* (Mack Avenue) as well as Lake's upcoming Steel Quartet project for his Passin' Thru label.

"Improvisational music has always been something I've gravitated toward," Ndegeocello says. "I'm having a great experience; I guess this is where I need to be for now." **JOHN MURPH**