

Musical Gumbo with a Singular Voice

by Stephen Pitalo

Combining her Haitian heritage, New Orleans living, Cajun dancing, and growing up on the streets in Brooklyn, the bilingual multi-instrumentalist, cellist and singer known as Leyla McCalla is a world-class musician whose unique sound reflects her long road and her singular perspective. Her originals tap the depth of her experience and soul, and her interpretations of traditional songs traverse a river of emotions,

revealing a truly American experience and Leyla's struggles with and acceptance of her own cultural identity. Deeply influenced by traditional Creole, Cajun, and Haitian music, as well as by American jazz and folk, McCalla's earthy, elegant, soulful and witty compositions mine three centuries of history, while still feeling contemporary. McCalla has called the Crescent City her home for nearly ten years, soaking in all its influences and culture daily.

"It has been an extremely fertile and nurturing creative place for my music," McCalla said. "I fell in love with New Orleans culture and made many connections with my ancestral roots. I feel spiritually lifted by this beautiful city and its amazing people."



Leyla marinated in a gumbo of cultures from early on, having been born in New York City to Haitian immigrant parents.

“I first started playing the cello when I was eight years old through the public-school system in Maplewood, New Jersey, where I grew up,” McCalla said.

She relocated to Accra, Ghana for two years as a teen. She returned to the United States to study cello performance and chamber music at NYU; soon after, she found herself busking as a cellist on the streets of the French Quarter in New Orleans. Singing in French, Haitian Creole, and English, and playing the cello, tenor banjo and guitar allowed her to connect more to those areas of her heritage. Down the line, as cellist of the Grammy award-winning African American string band, the Carolina Chocolate Drops, she and bandmates Rhiannon Giddens and Dom Flemons found notoriety and followers. McCalla left the group in 2013 to pursue her solo career.

Leyla’s debut album, *Vari-Colored Songs: A Tribute to Langston Hughes*,

was named 2013’s Album of the Year by the *London Sunday Times* and *Songlines*. The next album, *A Day for The Hunter, A Day for The Prey*, continued to explore themes of social justice and included guests Rhiannon Giddens, Marc Ribot, Louis Michot of Lost Bayou Ramblers and others.



2019 saw the release of Leyla's third solo album, *The Capitalist Blues*. With this record, Leyla processed the current political environment in her own way, with New Orleans Cajun, zydeco and Haitian jazz, and lyrics sung in English, French and Haitian Creole. She recruited a tight group of local musicians to tour the album at its best level.

"The current lineup of my band includes Shawn Myers on drums and percussion, Pete Olynciw on upright and electric bass, and Dave Hammer on guitar," McCalla said. "I've known my bandmates for years as gigging jazz musicians in New Orleans. I'd admired their playing from afar and when I decided to expand my sound on stage to match the dynamism of The Capitalist Blues, I invited them to tour with me. I've been able to really expand the dynamic range of my sound with these musicians who handle my songs with sensitivity and mindfulness."

She was also a collaborator on *Songs of Our Native Daughters* (Rhiannon Giddens, Amythyst Kiah, Leyla McCalla, and Allison Russell), via Smithsonian Folkways, a project that pulled influence from past sources to create a reinvented slave narrative. The project involved confronting safer views about America's history of slavery, racism, and misogyny from a powerful, modern black female perspective.

Breaking the Thermometer to Hide the Fever is McCalla's latest project, which tells the legacy of Radio Haiti, Haiti's first

privately-owned Creole-speaking radio station, and the assassination of its owner through Leyla's own Haitian American viewpoint. Her own original compositions and arrangements of traditional Haitian songs combine in this performance, set to premiere next March at Duke University.

Picking her favorite songs in the set is a tough task for McCalla since they change all the time, she said.

"I think that the song 'Heavy as Lead' is one of the most important songs that I've written to date," McCalla said, "because it has affected my life and I see how prevalent and unspoken the problem is. The topic of lead poisoning in our children is something that I have become passionate about and feels most urgent. But when it comes to performing, the song I most enjoy singing is the Neville Marcano calypso song 'Money is King.' It speaks so cleverly to the problems that we face in society today – namely, our obsession with money and the value that we give it."