

## **Martha Redbone Roots Project: community and storytelling in Oberlin (Apr. 6)**

by Stephanie Manning



Martha Redbone knows how to tell a good story. So you'd better listen up, and get ready to sing along.

"This really will be a church tonight," the singer promised Oberlin's Finney Chapel and its assembled audience on April 6. The mood was indeed congregational — sometimes religious, but always communal. Redbone, pianist Aaron Whitby, violinist Charlie

Burnham, and bassist Fred Cash, Jr. fostered an intimate evening of American Roots music with their performance as The Martha Redbone Roots Project.

The four-piece group slides between folk, country, gospel, and more with ease. They also combine those genres in creative ways, like in their 2012 album *The Garden of Love*, which recontextualizes the poetry of 18th-century Englishman William Blake via this musical melting pot. The musicians began their Oberlin set with an irresistibly toe-tapping rendition of that album's title track, embellished by Redbone's folksy and assertive voice.

The group returned to more Blake selections throughout the evening, including "On Another's Sorrow," where the pizzicatos from violinist Charlie Burnham eventually morphed into a bluegrass-esque solo. Redbone lent a gentle touch to "The Fly," which highlighted her singing technique without the need for flashy acrobatics.

In between numbers, the vocalist addressed the audience with warmth and candor. The mellow underscoring from Aaron Whitby on keys made these moments feel equally integrated into the show, as did Redbone's impeccable comedic timing as she shared some family anecdotes.

Her commentary also contextualized her music choices and interpretations. Before Paul McCartney's "Blackbird," she explained what goes through her head while she performs

it. “I’ll be singing this from a place of resilience, resistance, and joy,” she said, before the band launched into a moving, gospel-infused version of the famous tune.

Coordinated church claps from the audience kept the momentum going, as they also did in The Staple Singers’ “Long Walk to D.C.” This Civil Rights Era song brought out the Roots Project’s infectious energy early on, and Redbone had the crowd singing a call-and-response in no time. When the traditional Spiritual “You Must Have That True Religion” rolled around, the eager attendees needed hardly any prompting to begin mirroring back the cries of “Hallelu.” Redbone dipped into her lowest register while Whitby spun out some jazzy, improvisatory solos.

Bassist Fred Cash, Jr. enjoyed some well-deserved time in the spotlight during his soulful, captivating interlude before Peter La Farge’s “Drums.” La Farge’s song puts forth some powerful lyrics about the tragedy of Indian reservations and the strength of Indigenous people in resisting colonization. So Redbone smartly pared down one of the last versus to a minimum — just the heartbeat thump of a drum, the shakers in her hand, and her voice, conveying La Farge’s stirring words.

The energy in the room reached a joyful climax with the Roots Project rendition of the traditional gospel number “This Train (Is Bound for Glory).” As usual, Redbone’s eyes closed while she sang, channeling enough power behind her long notes that they felt as if they could last forever.

But the moment that lingered in my memory the longest was from an unreleased song from the group’s upcoming album. The whole band and audience raised their voices for an inspiring tune based on the words of civil rights leader James Foreman. “Who will lend a hand?” Redbone sang, and the audience repeatedly answered back, “We will!”

*Photo by Mike Crupi*

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