



# Master of the Mood

Singer-songwriter, electric bass luminary, producer, improviser, pop star: Meshell Ndegeocello recounts a career spent bridging musical worlds—with unique poise, and without compromise

by David R. Adler

“I’M JUST A SOUL WHOSE INTENTIONS ARE GOOD.”

The crowd at New York’s Highline Ballroom knew the next line well before Meshell Ndegeocello delivered it: “Oh Lord, please don’t let me be misunderstood.”

Nina Simone began her 1964 album *Broadway-Blues-Ballads* with that song, shortly before the Animals covered it and landed a major hit. Ndegeocello, the uncategorizable bassist and singer-songwriter, also chose it to kick off her new release, *Pour Une Âme Souveraine (For a Sovereign Soul): A Dedication to Nina Simone* (Naïve). But at the Highline in mid-October, she saved it for the encore. Just before the opening riff she proclaimed it to be her theme song.

The show was thick with echoes of rock, soul, gospel, even country, all tied together with Ndegeocello’s sense of deep and atmospheric groove. Lizz Wright, Toshi Reagon and Cody ChesnuTT, three featured singers on the disc, proved even more powerful live. Guitarist Chris Bruce wrung tasty sounds all night from his electric and acoustic guitars, propelled by the spot-on drumming of Michael Jerome and the subtle, enveloping keyboards of Jebin Bruni. Ndegeocello played bass and sang, leading with assurance but never really dominating the stage.

“Sorry if I sound like I have a shtick. People ask me about this Nina Simone thing, but she’s dead and I’m not her spokesperson,” said Ndegeocello roughly two weeks before the gig, from her home in upstate New York. “The goal is to have you look at all the aspects of her life.” Well, for one thing, Simone was misunderstood, and the parallels to Ndegeocello’s career aren’t hard to draw: both politically outspoken singers with serious instrumental chops; both relevant to jazz but not defined by it; both gaining a measure of pop stardom but ultimately declaring independence from the miseries of the music industry. Both sovereign souls.

Ndegeocello mentions the book *I Put a Spell on You: The Autobiography of Nina Simone* and remarks, “[Simone] essentially said,

‘I’m not a jazz musician, but I’m a person of jazz: I want to live my life and have the freedom, the mind of a jazz musician.’ I admire that. I’m never going to be a virtuosic soloist, but I can improvise on groove and arrangement, I can improvise the song. That’s where I feel my heart is really close to jazz.” Yet Ndegeocello’s track record in jazz remains underappreciated, a seldom-told story—from her 2005 instrumental release, *The Spirit Music Jamia: Dance of the Infidel*, to her bass playing on CDs such as Steve Lehman’s *Demian as Posthuman*, Nguyễn Lê’s *Purple* and Daniel Freedman’s *Bamako by Bus*, to her role as producer of Ron Blake’s *Sonic Tonic* and Jason Lindner’s *Gives You Now vs. Now*.

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FOR MANY A MUSIC FAN, NDEGEOCELLO DEFINED A decade with her first two albums, *Plantation Lullabies* (1993) and *Peace Beyond Passion* (1996). These were extraordinary epics, steeped in R&B and hip-hop but free of genre clichés. They exploded with fierce funk, high-level songcraft and brilliant musicianship from the likes of Geri Allen, Joshua Redman, David Fiuczynski, Bennie Maupin, Gene Lake and many others. Ndegeocello was herself an ear person, not schooled in theory but still able to summon the most sophisticated and beguiling harmonies. “You couldn’t get by as a straight rock or pop player,” says Fiuczynski of his time as a band member. “You had to know changes.”

At the same time, her songs had the hooks, beats and strong melodies that spell pop appeal. (The albums were released on Madonna’s Maverick label, after all.) Ndegeocello had a breakout hit with 1993’s “If That’s Your Boyfriend (He Wasn’t Last Night),” and to watch the video today is to be reminded that history goes in cycles. A jazz-savvy female bassist and vocalist gaining exposure with a mass audience—sound familiar?

Any similarity to Esperanza Spalding stops there, however; Ndegeocello’s vibe in the video was closer to LL Cool J in “Mama Said

▼ **For Nina:** Ndegeocello, drummer Michael Jerome, guitarist Chris Bruce and keyboardist Jebin Bruni at New York City’s Highline Ballroom, mid-October



PHOTOS BY MATT KARP

Knock You Out.” She appears with a shaved head and white tank top, slapping and popping and utterly dominating her Fender bass. (Fiuczynski is briefly shown playing a hip jazz lick on a Silvertone guitar, in real time with the track.) Her low-pitched vocals seemed to blur the line between rap and spoken-word, but she could also slip with ease into her high register and sing the softest of aching melodies. Her lyrics could be introspective and vulnerable but also militant, informed by currents of black cultural nationalism that weren’t uncommon in the ’90s. She made no secret of her bisexuality.

“For us as young players, that was the absolute coolest, most current music ever to be checking out and digesting,” says bassist Kaveh Rastegar, whose band Kneebody performed with Ndegeocello at Brooklyn’s Littlefield in March 2012. “There are aspects of her that I’ve sought to emulate in my own musical path,” Rastegar adds, “so playing with her was a dream come true for us as fans.”

The Kneebody guys weren’t alone in their enthusiasm. Fiuczynski vividly recalls seeing Prince on the road around the time of *Plantation Lullabies*, and “he had written ‘I love Meshell’ on his face and he went on and performed.”

The buzz was growing. “Romance me with the funk, Meshell!” shouted late-night TV host Arsenio Hall in April 1994, when Ndegeocello appeared as a guest and played a brilliant, spontaneous slap-bass solo while seated on the couch. (“I think she’s one of the top five funkier bass players in the world,” Fiuczynski says.) With John Mellencamp she covered Van Morrison’s “Wild Night,” and danced her behind off in the single’s widely aired video. She was called upon to play with everyone from Santana and the Rolling Stones to Alanis Morissette and even Madonna herself.

But the culture of celebrity held no allure, and Ndegeocello refused to coast on her successes. With *Bitter* (1999), produced by Craig Street, her sound mellowed into something more poetic and folk-like. “That was a big one for me,” wrote pianist Jason Moran via e-mail. “I was dating my wife and we listened to *Bitter* a lot. It

was as if Meshell were writing a song cycle with as much depth as Schumann’s *Liederkreis*. It was luscious and spare.” (At press time, Moran and Ndegeocello were preparing to record their Fats Waller Dance Party project for Blue Note.)

Pianist Robert Glasper, who co-wrote “The Consequences of Jealousy” with Ndegeocello for his current release, *Black Radio*, describes her as “the master of the mood.” “When you put her music on,” he says, “all guys melt and all women melt. You don’t listen to it and not melt. There’s something in it that takes you and you have no say in the matter. She’s taking you and that’s it. There’s not many people like that.”

The recordings that followed *Bitter* were marvelously varied, from the hard funk and hip-hop of *Cookie: The Anthropological Mixtape* (2002) to the expansive *Comfort Woman* (2003), to the experimental groove-jazz opus *Dance of the Infidel* (2005), which included players on the order of Jack DeJohnette, Oliver Lake, Don Byron, Wallace Roney, Kenny Garrett, Gregoire Maret, Chris Dave and Ron Blake. Referring implicitly to Bud Powell in the album title, Ndegeocello called this unit the Spirit Music Jamia (Arabic for “gathering”), and she formed a gigging incarnation to support the release.

“I had a lot of confidence with Meshell,” says Blake, who played tenor on the tours. “There was never a set formula. She could look at you at any time and say, ‘Let’s go.’ You’d be in the heat of something and she’d walk over and say, ‘We’re going to break it down, or we’re going into this next tune, right now.’ It was like orchestrating live. So I had on my explorer gear, and I was ready to do that kind of thing musically. I was yearning to have an experience that would force me to think and feel differently, and think about, ‘What do you need to say?’ And not have it be so much about, ‘Well, it’s my solo now.’ You can play all your bad shit every night, but at some point it’s got to contribute to what’s happening on the bandstand, and that energy has to be conveyed to the listener in front of you. I think I got a lot of that from Meshell.”



MESHELL NDEGEOCELLO WAS BORN MICHELLE JOHNSON in 1968 in Germany (where her father, noted saxophonist Jacques Johnson, was serving in the army). She came to the U.S. around the age of 5. “We moved to Hampton, Virginia, lived in Georgia, then Alexandria, then right on the Maryland-D.C. line,” she says. Coming up in the D.C. go-go scene with her friend and longtime keyboardist Federico Gonzalez Peña, she gained experience with such acts as Little Benny and Prophecy. She also absorbed every kind of music she could find. “In D.C. I could go see Allan Holdsworth,” she says, “or I could go to Blues Alley and see traditional jazz. I saw Van Halen, I saw George Clinton.”

What people tend to miss about Ndegeocello is that she’s a rocker. Some of the material from *The World Has Made Me the Man of My Dreams* (2007), *Devil’s Halo* (2009) and *Weather* (2011) makes it clear. “Oh yeah, I’d go see Fugazi and I’d go see [go-go legends] Trouble Funk,” she concurs. “I think my next personality study is going to be George Clinton, because that’s what got me to go check out Ozzy Osbourne and Black Sabbath, David Bowie, all that stuff. It was those Parliament-Funkadelic records that led me down that avenue.”

Jason Lindner, acclaimed jazz pianist and Ndegeocello’s keyboardist from roughly 2006-2009, recalls that “she was really exploring punk and New Wave when I joined her, so I started exploring it, too. I also started playing the Moog [synthesizer] in her band, that and the Prophet ’08. I really got to know some other instruments working with her. She spurred that on.” Lindner has since brought those sounds to his work with Ben Allison, Donny McCaslin and his own *Now vs. Now*.

In 1992 Ndegeocello played bass on three tracks from *Drop Kick* by Steve Coleman and Five Elements. “I wasn’t ready for him,” she insists. “He’s a genius. I’m just glad he was a patient person. That’s who connected me to Gene Lake and other interesting people. He’s the professor par excellence.”

She was still Michelle Johnson at that time, I observe. “I still am, probably,” she retorts. Right on the inside sleeve of *Plantation Lullabies* was printed the Swahili meaning of Ndegeocello, “free like a bird.” “C’mon, you know the story, we all have it,” she chides when asked about the name change. “Between 18 and 20, that whole, ‘I don’t want my slave name, I want a name that represents who I’m trying to be, black consciousness blah blah blah.’ It just came out of that. I think I’ve evolved to where I’m just who I am; the name doesn’t matter.” (On early releases her name was printed as Me’Shell NdegéOcello, but it’s since been simplified.)

“Michelle Johnson,” a funky track from *Man of My Dreams*, puts

these sentiments to music. “I do some right/I do some wrong/I pray/ To let light guide me/I’m just a soul on the planet/Trying to do good, be good, feel good,” sings Ndegeocello over a crushing slow groove. The similarity to “I’m just a soul whose intentions are good” is clear enough, but there’s another point as well. “You can change your name, you can move out of the country, you can try to run,” Ndegeocello explains, “but you’re always stuck with yourself. I’ll always be Michelle Johnson. I think it hit me when I was about 10. I’ve had an existential crisis since then, and I’m pretty much still that person. I’ve had a lot of other experiences lumped into it, but I just try to stay open to the now.”

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WHETHER SHE’S ASSERTING HER OWN VISION, REIMAGINING a revered figure like Nina Simone, or facilitating the work of others as a collaborator or producer, Ndegeocello continues to affect music in profound though unassuming ways. One key to her success, according to Robert Glasper, is brute honesty. “‘The Consequences of Jealousy’ was the third song I sent her,” he recalls of the planning for *Black Radio*. “She didn’t like the first two. If she doesn’t like what you’re doing, you won’t have to guess. That’s the beauty: She makes situations better by being honest. A lot of people beat around the bush, but she’ll just let you know, ‘I’d like to do something else.’ It worked out for me, because ‘The Consequences of Jealousy’ was much better than those other two.”

Regarding the Fats Waller Dance Party with Jason Moran, Ndegeocello knew what to do. “I wanted to embody Fats Waller,” she says, “a New York emcee and a House DJ. I wanted somehow to be all those three people and myself.” Moran, assessing the live sets to date, comments on her one-of-a-kind role: “It was great to hear her offer different ways to play a bassline, how to change from ‘Detroit House’ to ‘English House with a broken beat,’ using all of that history to pepper the grooves. She also plays piano really well, so she’s aware of the sheer madness of how stride players get down. She would always force me take a solo, because she wanted to hear how that stride-piano history would sound up against Afrobeat.”

As a producer, Ndegeocello is whimsical, attuned to the gifts and abilities of everyone present. Trumpeter Avishai Cohen, who enlisted her for his quartet with drummer Adam Deitch and pianist Omer Klein several years back, remembers her guidance during Lindner’s *Now vs. Now* sessions: “I was overdubbing a solo, and from the control booth she tells me, ‘You’re a sea creature!’ It pulled me in a certain direction, and I loved that.” Lindner recounts how “she ran into

▼ Ndegeocello and Jason Moran (in mask) during their “Fats Waller Dance Party” at Harlem Stage, May 2011



COURTESY OF HARLEM STAGE





▲ Ndegeocello with her Spirit Music Jamia band including Oliver Lake (far left) and Ron Blake (behind Ndegeocello) in 2005

Mark Guiliana's drum booth and took all the cymbals off his drums, put them on the floor and said, 'OK, have a good time' and left."

After drummer Daniel Freedman made Ndegeocello's acquaintance on the scene, they would talk, as musicians do, about working together. But Freedman was struck by her genuine eagerness. "She doesn't want to sit around and be idolized," he explains. "She wants to play the bass and work on music." It stands to reason that she didn't just clock in as the bassist for Freedman's *Bamako by Bus* sessions; she gave input, both practical and imaginative. "She has more abstract ways of looking at things," the drummer says. "She told me something about how the left hand, the one that's playing the snare drum, is like water. I was like, 'Huh, OK. Let's do a take now and think about that.' I saved all her charts from my session, because she made really cool notes on them. If it was an open section maybe she'd draw a sun, or a wave."

Upon meeting Pat Metheny at the North Sea Jazz Festival, Ndegeocello enticed him to appear on "Shirk" and "Article 3" from *Man of My Dreams*. "When I was young in D.C.," she recounts, "it was a pivotal moment for me hearing the record he did with Lyle Mays [*As Falls Wichita, so Falls Wichita Falls*]. I idolize him, so there was no way I was going to miss out on the chance. I'm happy to say that's the first record he ever played on with a wah-wah pedal. He played a Gibson SG. He was willing to do whatever I asked."

On "Shirk" (featuring Oumou Sangare on vocals), Ndegeocello took the step of giving Metheny co-composer credit. "I had a really simple guitar part and he made it transcendent," she says. "There was no way I couldn't go, 'That's mostly you. I'm in that documentary *Standing in the Shadows of Motown*, and ever since then I really take these sessions to heart. It takes everybody in the room to make that sound. It's sort of lofty for one individual to think that they're the sole creator of that piece of music. It takes everyone's energy, the space they create, to make a song."

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IN 2005, NDEGEOCELLO AND THE SPIRIT MUSIC JAMIA played the Blue Note in Manhattan. About two-thirds through one of the sets, the leader began getting heckled. "Sing!" someone shouted. And again: "Sing!" Nothing dramatic or sustained, but the moment was uncomfortable and revealing. "That was more the experience in the U.S., unfortunately," says Blake. "It happened a few times in Europe but very rarely." Jahi Lake, the turntablist on the gig (and son of Oliver Lake), took it upon himself to answer these rude demands,

in a quiet tone: "The question is, are you open?"

The answer is, no, listeners are not necessarily open to the questioning ethos of Ndegeocello and artists of her stripe. She's long resisted being pinned down or forced to play only familiar roles. In retrospect, she shrugs it off. "I have just enough autism [that] I don't process life that way," she explains. "I guess I would just say, 'Well, that's just not happening tonight. Tonight, I play the bass!' And yet now I go out and people want to hear jazz: 'Do that music!' It bounces back and forth—everyone wants something different all the time. I just want to stay creative and sincere with what I'm doing."

The Naïve label, based in France, allows her to do just that—and it partly explains the French title of *Pour Une Âme Souveraine*. "I'm far from rich and I'm far from poor," Ndegeocello says. "I still need a patron of the arts. Just because you have Pro Tools and Logic doesn't make you an engineer. I always want to make sonically credible records. I'm into three-dimensional listening, and I need a patron to be able to afford the tools to make the things in my head sound good in zeroes and ones. That's where [Naïve] is very helpful. I don't think I could have made that record here [in the U.S.] There are very few labels here that will even acknowledge my ideas."

The guitar textures on *Pour Une Âme Souveraine* are strikingly broad and resonant. Some tracks, like the barnburning "House of the Rising Sun," are rigorously faithful to Simone, while others like "Real Real" take on a gentler, more lilting quality (both find Toshi Reagon in great form). Lizz Wright slays "Nobody's Fault But Mine"; the arrangement scrupulously preserves Simone's ingenious chords but expands on her sparse piano-voice instrumentation. "Turn Me On" and "Don't Take All Night," the latter featuring an otherworldly Sinéad O'Connor, have a country-ballad twang in keeping with Simone's North Carolina roots. "[Co-producer] Chris Bruce and I have a love for all music, but we definitely get our country on," says Ndegeocello. "We are not afraid."

Just as striking is Ndegeocello's choice of "Be My Husband," rendered in the high old-timey voice of guest Valerie June. The song is credited to Andy Stroud, Simone's husband and longtime manager—far from the loveliest of characters in her autobiography. Simone performed it nearly a cappella, with just a hi-hat cymbal and handclap hitting on the "and" of four. Ndegeocello addresses it with full band and adds her own haunting harmony for the repeated lyric "Oh daddy, love me good." When Lizz Wright sang it to open the Highline show, the beat shook the walls—and the disquieting sexual politics hung in the air. "If you want me to I'll cook and sew," Wright belted. "Outside of you there's no place to go."

It takes guts and good instincts to conjure a moment so fraught and intense, five minutes into the evening. But we're talking about the master of the mood. It's what makes Ndegeocello's appeal so lasting and inclusive. Her view of music as a spiritual force beyond genre, and her ability to steer the talents of high-echelon musicians toward unexpected ends, is prescient and still unfolding. Yet her method is ultimately simple: just gather the right folks together. "That's why I enjoy music so much," she says. "There's a common language. There's a group of people there concentrating on one thing, that song at the moment. That's amazing to me." **JT**