

songs of
our native daughters



featuring

Rhiannon Giddens

Amythyst Kiah

Leyla McCalla

Allison Russell

American
American
LEGACY
RECORDINGS



songs of
our native daughters

1. **Black Myself** (A. Kiah, ASCAP) 3:56
2. **Moon Meets the Sun** (R. Giddens-A. Kiah, ASCAP-A. Russell/Children of Llyr, BMI-Po'Girl Music, ASCAP) 4:08
3. **Barbados** (Poems by W. Cowper and D. Powell) 5:52
4. **Quasheba, Quasheba** (A. Russell/Po'Girl Music, ASCAP) 4:43
5. **I Knew I Could Fly** (L. McCalla-A. Russell/MAKALA Music/Strictly Confidential, ASCAP-Po'Girl Music, ASCAP) 3:42
6. **Polly Ann's Hammer** (A. Kiah, ASCAP-A. Russell/Po'Girl Music, ASCAP) 3:00
7. **Mama's Cryin' Long** (R. Giddens/Children of Llyr, BMI) 2:11
8. **Slave Driver** (B. Marley/Kobalt Music Publishing America o/b/o Blackwell Fuller Music Publishing, LLC, ASCAP & Fifty-Six Hope Road Music Ltd., ASCAP) 4:42
9. **Better Git Yer Learnin'** (Music by Thomas F. Briggs-Lyrics by R. Giddens/Children of Llyr, BMI) 3:57
10. **Lavi Difisil** (L. McCalla-A. Russell/MAKALA Music/Strictly Confidential, ASCAP-Po'Girl Music, ASCAP) 2:30
11. **Blood and Bones** (A. Kiah, ASCAP-A. Russell/Po'Girl Music, ASCAP) 4:45
12. **Music and Joy** (R. Giddens-D. Powell/Children of Llyr, BMI-Crying Bayou Music, BMI) 3:19
13. **You're Not Alone** (A. Russell/Po'Girl Music, ASCAP) 5:36



Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

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co-produced with the Smithsonian National Museum of
African American History and Culture*

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Introduction

Rhiannon Giddens

William Wells Brown, hired out to a slave trader named Walker, recalled seeing a baby given away on the road:

“Soon after we left St. Charles, the young child grew very cross, and kept up a noise during the greater part of the day. Mr. Walker complained of its crying several times, and told the mother to stop the child’s d—d noise, or he would. The woman tried to keep the child from crying, but could not. We put up at night with an acquaintance of Mr. Walker, and in the morning, just as we were about to start, the child again commenced crying. Walker stepped up to her, and told her to give the child to him. The mother tremblingly obeyed. He took the child by one arm, as you would a cat by the leg, walked into the house, and said to the lady,

‘Madam, I will make you a present of this little nigger; it keeps such a noise that I can’t bear it.’

‘Thank you, sir,’ said the lady.’

— *from* The American Slave Coast: The Making of a Breeding Industry

Is you warshed in the blood of your chattel?

’Cause the lamb’s rotted away

When they stopped shipping workhorses


You bred your own anyway

— *Amythyst Kiah*

Songs of Our Native Daughters shines new light on African American stories of struggle, resistance, and hope, pulling from and inspired by 17th-, 18th-, and 19th-century sources. Interpreting, changing, or creating new works from old ones, this album confronts the ways we are culturally conditioned to avoid talking about America's history of slavery, racism, and misogyny, knowing that what's past is prologue—but only if we let it be. Paying homage to James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), this project reflects one of the many strains that Baldwin intones: "It is only in his music...that the Negro in America has been able to tell his story. It is a story which otherwise has yet to be told and which no American is prepared to hear" ([1955] 2012, 25).

Songs of Our Native Daughters began at two very clear moments. The first was at the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC. My then seven-year-old daughter and I were lucky enough to have Rex Ellis (the museum's associate director) take us on a private tour, so we really had time to look at so many things in silence and focus. I came across a quote by William Cowper that read: "I admit I am sickened at the purchase of slaves...but I must be mum, for how could we do without sugar or rum?" Not knowing then that the author was most likely an abolitionist and had written the words in deadly earnest satire, I was massively struck by the sentiment, and I thought of the modern-day slavery that produces all the things we can't do without—iPhones, TVs, and so much else. I took a picture with my iPhone, and I remember immediately texting the image to my co-producer Dirk Powell, saying *this needs to be a song*. That quote stayed with me for a long time afterward.

The second moment was during a screening of *The Birth of a Nation*, the much-heralded but little-seen movie by Nate Parker—taken down, along with him, due to some unsavory behavior in a prequel to the #MeToo movement. In the scene, one of the enslaved women on the plantation is forced to make herself available for a rape by the plantation owner's friend; afterwards, she leaves his room, in shame, while the others look on. The gaze of the camera, however, does not rest on her, the victim's face. It rests on her husband, the man who was "wronged" as an impetus for him to rebel against his white oppressors—and as I sat in the little theater in New York City, I found myself furious. Furious at the moment in a long history of moments of the pain and suffering of black women being used to justify a



In the recording studio with Dirk Powell

man's actions; at her own emotion and reaction being literally written out of the frame. The idea of taking historical words and notions and observations about slavery and making art with them then came to me.

A series of subsequent reflections, connections, and conversations with Dirk led to this project—gathering a group of fellow black female artists who had and have a lot to say, which made it both highly collaborative and deeply personal to me.

There is surely racism in this country—it's baked into our oldest institutions—just as there is sexism, millennia old. At the intersection of the two stands the African American woman. Used, abused, ignored, and scorned, she has in the face of these things been unbelievably brave, groundbreaking, and insistent. Black women have historically had the most to lose, and have therefore been the fiercest fighters for justice—in large, public ways that are only beginning to be highlighted, and in countless domestic ways that will most likely never be acknowledged.

Silenced and displaced by her own gender, and disregarded and belittled by her own race (in the grand tradition of Victorian morality) she has, nevertheless, persisted. The three greatest social movements of recent memory—#MeToo, the 2017 women’s march, and #BlackLivesMatter—have been started by or helmed by women of color, and in the case of #BlackLivesMatter, queer women of color. But often, when these movements reach a critical mass and a plurality of white women and men get on board, the originators get nudged aside, told to put their intersectionality on hold for the good of the movement. This has unfortunately been going on for a long time; there were legions of black women active in the abolitionist movement and in the early women’s suffrage movement, but they are rarely mentioned. I see this album as a part of a larger movement to reclaim the black female history of this country.

This project also centers around that most American (and often white male-identified) of instruments, the banjo; every woman on the record is a banjo player of either the 5-string, tenor, or minstrel varieties. The banjo has been used to tell the story of America in so many different ways, from the widespread and insanely popular minstrel shows of the 1800s to the country and bluegrass worlds of the working class in the early 1900s and the counter-culture folk revolution of decades later.

But the roots of the banjo lie in West Africa, in the lands of the *akonting*, the *ngoni*, the *buchundu*, and many other spike-lute instruments that existed and have been played for many years by the regular folk and griots alike. When people from this area were captured and sold into the international slave trade, they brought the memories of these instruments (and, occasionally, the actual instruments) with them, along with the attendant music and modes and rhythms. People often forget that there was no monolithic “slave,” there were only countless numbers of “enslaved persons” brought from all over the enormous continent of Africa. These souls found themselves yoked together with no common language, religion, or culture—but music is universal.

The creation of a Creole culture in the Americas began with the earliest shipment of enslaved Africans in the 1500s to the Caribbean (see *Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database* for more information; <http://slavevoyages.org/>), and over the next two centuries the instrument observed as the “banjer” and the “banza” became the “banjo”



Rhiannon Giddens

in North America where, by the 1800s, the instrument was signified as the first “truly American” instrument. For generations, the banjo was known as a purely black instrument until it became the centerpiece of American popular music by the second third of the 19th century in the hands of the white players such as Joel Walker Sweeney, Billy Whitlock, Daniel Decatur Emmett, Thomas F. Briggs, Frank B. Converse, and others. From this time on, the banjo was incorporated into the international sensation that was blackface minstrelsy (Winans 2018).

The roots of American blackface minstrelsy, like those of the banjo, stretch far across the ocean to another land, where a fair number of English blackface plays like *Othello* and *Oroonoko* feature one or more characters who is “African” or a “black-a-moor” and is played by a white man in a boot-black facial mask. American minstrelsy became its own unique and wildly popular phenomenon with the addition of the banjo, humor, and the broad parody of enslaved Americans of African descent by largely working-class white men. For them, it was a way to address issues of the day in the “safe” mask of the most downtrodden persona it was possible to adopt—a “plantation darcy” (see Cockrell 1997 and Mahar 1999). The *Briggs’ Banjo Instructor* of 1855 is the earliest known minstrel banjo tutor—it has always fascinated me as a portal to the past—and the use of a few minstrel-era tunes in this project was deliberate. It’s impossible to say exactly which notes, rhythms, and lines are from the legions of black banjo players that inspired that first generation of white players, but in these early tunes I hear my brethren and I like to think that they hear me too, as we transform these pieces through a contemporary African American lens.

The recording sessions themselves were revelatory. From the beginning, my intention was to produce this project with my co-writer and collaborator Dirk Powell; after he co-produced my civil rights record *Freedom Highway*, I knew he would be the perfect partner for this. He leads a session in a way that invites nothing but inspiration and openness. He has also created a remarkable studio down in Louisiana, right outside of Lafayette, situated next to a bayou and crafted from a pre-war building that was once owned by a local Creole family. It’s a special space and is a player in any recording that takes place there.

All three ladies were ones I was thrilled to get into one room. Amythyst Kiah I first saw and heard on a YouTube video—she was singing “Trouble So Hard” at the Cambridge

Folk Festival—and I was captivated by her incredible voice and intense vibe. A daughter of the South but not trapped by it, she is forging her own path. She brought some of the most unflinching, razor-sharp, and honest words to the table, with “Black Myself” and “Blood and Bones.” I have known Allison Russell of Birds of Chicago for a long time; I have always been in awe of her beautiful spirit and her free and generous voice. These sessions were a wonderful songwriting explosion for her. In “Quasheba, Quasheba” and “You Are Not Alone” she brings the vulnerability yet steely strength of so many who have come before. Leyla McCalla and I have been through a lot together—two years of full-time touring in the Carolina Chocolate Drops certainly forged strong ties, but I also have so much admiration for her cultural excavation of Haitian music and her sense of humor. With “Lavi Difisil” and “I Knew I Could Fly” she brought us to the front porch, where so much of our important music has been made.

We certainly felt as if we were calling on the spirits the whole time we were working on the record; moments like “Mama’s Cryin’ Long” or “Moon Meets the Sun” or “Lavi Difisil” or “Slave Driver,” where we all piled into the main recording room and made the air stir, remain etched in my memory. Also the sense of safe space was strong; Leyla, Allison, Amythyst, and I quickly fell into a collaborative, generous, and loving songwriting mode—creating with other women of color around these historical topics was powerful. It felt like there were things we had been waiting to say our whole lives in our art, and to be able to say them in the presence of our sisters-in-song was sweet indeed. Bassist Jason Sypher and drummer Jamie Dick, longtime musical partners of mine, came in wide of spirit and open of mind. Their broad and varied influences made it very easy for our songs to live the way we wanted them to.



Amythyst Kiah

Allison Russell



Leyla McCalla

Producer's Note

Dirk Powell

I'm writing these words from one stop in the middle of a long tour. We were somewhere else yesterday, and will be somewhere else again tomorrow. Traveling this way, with an eagerness to understand the places we visit, I find myself seeking what is culturally timeless at every stop. I wonder sometimes if I am seeking the old, but then realize it is not the age that matters to me—it is the timelessness of ways of being that have endured. What is old may be valued for its age in some contexts, but what resonates with me is its continual newness and presence.

This project represents this feeling, on multiple levels. I have never felt more timeless presence, mutual support, and celebration of the spirits of fellow artists than I did during the creation of it. An energy of love and delight in the discovery of the souls of others pervaded the sessions. It seems a cliché to talk about laughter and tears, and yet I don't know that I've ever felt more genuine laughter or seen more openly flowing tears in the studio. It felt like the artists were actively building a tower, on one another's backs, to reach a higher goal—continually seeing and then moving into needed positions, stepping in as weight-bearing support when required, or climbing to the top to stretch as far as possible towards the prize.

If I had to describe the goal to which the four artists on this record so naturally and generously aspired, I would say it was simply to ring a bell that proclaimed, in strong and pure voice, we're here! Loud and clear. All of us, from our foremothers to the current generation to future generations. Telling our stories without compromise or hesitation. Sending them ringing out into the world with a bell-like truth. Not listening for echoes. Sending them forth.

The banjo itself embodies this timelessness. More than any other instrument, it reflects the balance of musical priorities that form the core of American music, if taken as a whole. No other single instrument combines percussion, melody, harmony, rooted chordal structure, repetition, and drone like the banjo does. It is the original sampler, grabbing bits and pieces of phrases. The original musical recycler. The flexible traveler that was so adept at adapting to its cultural environs that it eventually became a stereotype of them, and was then rescued, much more recently, from those stereotypes. It has always been a source of beauty—

the best dance instrument, and the best to accompany a plaintive ballad; the best for a back porch, and the best for a raucous party; the best for a soft lullaby, and the best for bright morning reveille.

Sometimes, I think we human beings see our lives through a microscope when it comes to time. Perhaps it's not surprising that the species that invented time tends to ignore the enormity of it and focus on the short blocks and windows of our lives. We define ourselves, at our worst, by what we are not, and get caught up in definitions and declarations of difference that will be irrelevant, if not imperceptible, to future generations. In this project, I find many tangents coming to a point. And yet, it is the point of arrival that matters most to me. Humans coming together to honor what they love, to find connection, to enable communication of things that run deep. To me, that's the essence of this project and, I believe, the essence of who we all are. I'm proud to have sat at that table, laughed those laughs, shed those tears, and sought that love.



Track Notes

1. Black Myself

Amythyst Kiah, vocals and guitar; Rhiannon Giddens, backing vocals and minstrel banjo; Leyla McCalla, backing vocals; Allison Russell, backing vocals; Jamie Dick, drums and percussion; Dirk Powell, electric guitar and accordion; Jason Sypher, bass

This song was inspired by a line from north Mississippi hill country musician Sid Hemphill's "John Henry:"

*I don't like no red-black woman
Black myself, black myself*

This sentiment is linked to the history of intraracial discrimination, the idea that being a lighter shade of black is more desirable because it means that you look closer to being white than black. And from that I thought about how this negative connotation of blackness was integral to slavery, segregation, and then the "white flight" to suburban neighborhoods after desegregation. I thought of my experience as a black girl in a white suburban neighborhood in the 1990s, and how, once puberty hit, the doors of my neighbors would soon be suddenly closed to me. And thus the refrain and title of this song are intended to be an

anthem for those who have been alienated and othered because of the color of their skin. — AK

I want to jump the fence and wash my face
in the creek

But I'm black myself

I want to sweep that gal right off her feet

But I'm black myself

Tired of walking round with no shoes on

But I'm black myself

Your precious God ain't gonna bless me

'Cause I'm black myself

Is you warshed in the blood of your chattel?

'Cause the lamb's rotted away

When they stopped shipping workhorses

You bred your own anyway

I don't pass the test of the paper bag

'Cause I'm black myself

I pick the banjo up, and they sneer at me

'Cause I'm black myself

You better lock your doors when I walk by

'Cause I'm black myself

You look in my eyes, but you don't see me

'Cause I'm black myself

They warshed in the blood of their chattel
'Cause the lamb's rotted away
When they stopped shipping workhorses
They bred their own anyway

I don't creep around, I stand proud and free
'Cause I'm black myself
I can go anywhere that I want to go
'Cause I'm black myself
I'm surrounded by many loving arms
'Cause I'm black myself
I'll stand my ground and smile your face
'Cause I'm black myself

I've washed away my blood and tears
I've been born brand new
There's no more workhorses
But still some work to do

2. Moon Meets the Sun

Rhiannon Giddens, vocals and minstrel banjo; Amythyst Kiah, vocals and guitar; Allison Russell, vocals and banjo; Jamie Dick, drums and percussion; Dirk Powell, electric guitar; Jason Sypher, bass

This was the very first song written during the sessions; Allison, Amythyst, and I had just settled into a nearby Airbnb and immediately got down to the business of figuring out what we wanted to say on this record. As

happened during the entire time, the words started pouring out, and all we had to do was to corral them into a song. — *RG*

Rhiannon, Allison, and Amythyst:

when the day is done /
the moon meets the sun /
we'll be dancing (x2)

Rhiannon:

ah you put the shackles on our feet
but we're dancing
ah you steal our very tongue
but we're dancing

Allison:

brown girl in the ring
raise your voice and sing
sing us solace
sing us freedom
hold us steady
keep us breathing
we'll endure this
you can't stop us
and we're dancing

Rhiannon:

ah you steal our children
but we're dancing
ah you make us hate our very skin
but we're dancing

Allison:

we're your sons
we're your daughters
but you sell us
down the river
may the God
that you gave us
forgive you
your trespasses
we'll survive this
you can't stop us
and we're dancing

Rhiannon, Allison, and Amythyst:

when the day is done /
the moon meets the sun /
we'll be dancing (x2)

Amythyst:

like the rabbit
we won't bend to your will
like the spider
the smallest will still prevail

the stories of our elders
we find comfort and peace
we smile to the sky
we move to stay alive
and we're dancing

Rhiannon:

ah you sell our work for your profit
but we're dancing
ah you think our home we have forgotten
but we're dancing

Allison:

step into the circle
step into the ring
raise your voice and sing
sing freedom
sing freedom
you can't stop us now
you can't keep us down
we'll be dancing

Rhiannon, Allison, and Amythyst:

when the day is done
the moon meets the sun
we'll be dancing (x2)

you can't stop us now
you can't keep us down

3. Barbados

Rhiannon Giddens, vocals; Dirk Powell, banjo and guitar; Jamie Dick, percussion

This haunting tune is a direct reading of a line of music written down many years ago; said to be the first western notation of New World enslaved music, it was put down by D. W. Dickson in Barbados in the 18th century. This scrap of melody has of course been through a lens—the man who wrote it down would have had a firm western sense of melody and rhythm, and most likely would have corralled any kind of partial tone to fit the western scale; and if he didn't write it down on the spot, he was then relying on the imperfect human memory. I also interpret it through my own lens. All that being said, it is still a portal, however imperfect, to a time long ago, and to a people whose lives often passed unmarked and unmourned by the society around them.

The first poem—a bit of which is posted prominently in the National Museum of African American History and Culture—was the one that ignited this project. William Cowper was a well-respected English poet and wrote a number of anti-slavery pieces, including one quoted by Martin Luther King Jr. This particular poem works so well because it might as well be now—in that

spirit, co-producer Dirk Powell wrote the modern response. — *RG*

I own I am shocked at the purchase of slaves
And fear those who buy them and sell them
are knaves

What I hear of their hardships, their tor-
tures and groans

It's almost enough to draw pity from stones

I pity them greatly but I must be mum
For how could we do without sugar and
rum?

Especially sugar, so needful, we see
What—give up our desserts, our coffee
and tea?

Besides—if we do, the French, Dutch, and
Danes

Will heartily thank us, no doubt, for our
pains

If we do not buy the poor creatures, they
will

And tortures and groans will be multiplied
still.

— *from "Pity for Poor Africans," William
Cowper, 1788*

I own I am shocked at prisoners in the
mines,
And kids sewing clothes for our most
famous lines
What I hear of their wages seems slavery
indeed
It's enough that I fear it's all rooted in greed

I pity them greatly, but I must be mum
For what about nickel, cobalt, lithium
The garments we wear, the electronics we
own
What—give up our tablets, our laptops and
phones?

Besides, if we do, the prices will soar
And who could afford to pay one dollar
more?
Sitting here typing, it seems well worth the
price
And you there, listening on your favorite
device

This bargain we're in—well it's not quite
illicit
So relax, my friend—we're not all complicit.
— *Dirk Powell, 2018*

4. Quasheba, Quasheba

Allison Russell, vocals and 5-string banjo;
Rhiannon Giddens, backing vocals and min-
strel banjo; Leyla McCalla, cello; Jamie Dick,
drums and percussion; Dirk Powell, baritone
electric guitar; Jason Sypher, bass

I met my biological father, Michael George,
and my paternal family when I was 30 years
old. I learned that I am a first-generation
Canadian on my father's side. He was born
and raised in Grenada, one of 13 children.
I found out that ours is a family that values
education deeply. I found out that we have
a historian in the family who has traced
our line back to an enslaved woman named
Quasheba, who was sold off the coast of
Ghana. Such was her strength and resilience
that she somehow survived the transatlantic
crossing in the hold of a slave ship, and was
eventually sold to a large sugar cane plan-
tation in Grenada. She survived multiple
rapes and sales. She survived backbreaking
labor in the cane fields. She survived her
children being taken and sold. She sur-
vived, and she founded generations. I wept
to learn her name. I am honored to be her
many-times-removed daughter and am
eternally grateful for the gift of her strength
and resilience. Though we can never know
if Quasheba was actually from Ghana, in
this song I imagine that she is. When I was

in Cameroon in 2007 with my other band, Po'Girl, I was especially struck by three things: not being a visible minority for the first time in my life (though I was called *la petite métisse* pretty frequently, since I'm "pale" compared to most Cameroonians); how many Cameroonians felt the need either to apologize for or disclaim their forebears' involvement in the slave trade—"My village, they never sold any slaves!"—and how many people there told me that I looked Cameroonian. Ghana is just a little ways up the west coast of Africa from Cameroon. —AR

Chorus

Quasheba, Quasheba
You're free now
You're free now
How does your spirit fly
Blood of your blood
Bone of your bone
By the grace of your strength
We have life

From the golden coast of Ghana
To the bondage of Grenada
You kept the dream of hope alive

They burned your body
They cursed your blackness
But they could not take your light

Chorus

Raped and beaten
Every baby taken
Starved and sold and sold again

But ain't you a woman
Of love deservin'
Ain't it somethin' you survived

Chorus

You dreamt of home
You dreamt of freedom
You died a slave, you died alone

You came from warriors
They once built empires
Ashanti's kingdom carries on

Chorus

You were forgotten
Almost forsaken
Your children founded generations
Your strength sustained them
They won their freedom
Traced their roots to find you waiting

Quasheba, Quasheba
You're free now
You're free now
How far your spirit's flown
Blood of your blood
Bone of your bone
By the grace of your strength
We are home

Blood of your blood
Bone of your bone
By the grace of your strength
We are home

5. I Knew I Could Fly

Leyla McCalla, vocals and guitar; Rhiannon Giddens, minstrel banjo; Allison Russell, backing vocals; Dirk Powell, mandolin

Alli and I co-wrote the lyrics to this song, thinking of discrimination and how it has shaped our American experience; as we were writing the words, we realized that they could equally apply to the life and legacy of Etta Baker.

I used to practice guitar to Etta Baker's album *Railroad Bill*. Etta was a Piedmont blues guitarist. She gave up much of her public performing after her marriage in 1936 and the subsequent birth of her nine children. She later told the National Endowment for the Arts that her husband didn't want her "to be gone away from home, but he loved my music." A few years after her husband's death in 1967 she began to concentrate more on playing the blues. In 1991, she was awarded a National Heritage Fellowship, the nation's highest honor in the folk and traditional arts. — *LM*

I didn't know why
I knew I could fly (x2)

You see what you see
You think you see me (x2)

I follow the stars
I carry my scars (x2)

I know what I hear
I won't live in fear (x3)

I sit by the stream
I'm counting my dreams (x2)

My face to the sun
My battle half-won (x4)

6. Polly Ann's Hammer

Amythyst Kiah, vocals and 5-string banjo;
Rhiannon Giddens, backing vocals and fiddle;
Jamie Dick, drums; Dirk Powell, guitar; Jason
Sypher, bass

Before rushing off to the studio with Dirk, Rhiannon told me and Alli to tell Polly Ann's story. Once again, drawing from Sid Hemphill's "John Henry," we wrote lyrics about Polly Ann, about her strength, and about her wish to be free from the grip of the physically unforgiving and often thankless job of steel driving. — *AK*

Polly Ann—the real hero of the John Henry legend—was hiding in plain sight all along. John Henry's woman, Polly Ann wields his hammer for him when he falls ill and

“drives steel just like a man.” The supposedly weaker sex survives the work that kills John Henry, raises the babies, and perhaps lives long enough to see their children campaign for civil rights and true freedom. — *AR*

John Henry had a woman /
Polly Ann, Polly Ann (x2)
When John was sick / Polly drove steel like
a man, like a man (x2)

Polly, can you lift that hammer
Yes I can, yes I can
I can swing it
I can strike it
Harder than any man can

When Polly had a small baby
On her knee, on her knee
Grabbed a hammer
In her left hand
Ain't no one as strong as me

This is the hammer killed John Henry
Won't kill me, won't kill me
This is the hammer killed your daddy
Throw it down and we'll be free

7. Mama's Cryin' Long

Rhiannon Giddens, vocals and handclaps;
Amythyst Kiah, vocals; Allison Russell,
vocals; Leyla McCalla, vocals; Jamie Dick,
percussion

This song was inspired by a collection of slave narratives; in the story, a woman, after being repeatedly abused by the overseer, kills him. Nobody knows who has done it until her son is overheard singing a little song about the blood on her dress. It's very much written from the child's viewpoint.

— *RG*

Chorus

mama's cryin' long
and she can't get up
mama's hands are shakin'
and she can't get up

mama's runnin' hard
from the boss's man
caught her anyway
the boss's man

they lie on the ground
again and again
i can hear her screamin'
again and again

Chorus

it was late at night
when she got the knife
she went to his room
when she got the knife
mama's dress is red
it was white before
lift it up and see
it was white before

Chorus

all the men have come
and they brought the rope
they came here for mama
and they brought the rope

Chorus

mama's in a tree
and she can't come down
mama's in a tree
and she won't come down
mama's flyin' free
and she can't come down
mama's flyin' free
and she won't come down
mama's flyin' free
and she can't come down

mama's flyin' free
and she won't come down

mama's flyin' free

8. Slave Driver

Rhiannon Giddens, vocals and minstrel banjo; Amythyst Kiah, vocals; Allison Russell, vocals; Leyla McCalla, vocals; Dirk Powell, guitar and electric guitar; Jason Sypher, bass

Here we honor a man who used music as his weapon in the battle for human rights. Bob Marley sang about spirituality and sensuality, but also about militant resistance to oppression. His message, in total, was unified—he was, in the words of his wife Rita, “a revolutionary.” Like Martin Luther King, his militancy has been whitewashed in the years since his death. But this song is more relevant than ever, not only for stating the truth that taking away education from the poor is a way to keep money in the hands of the rich, but for rejecting the idea of turning the other cheek. And in the harmonious voices of strong black women, it takes on an even greater meaning. — *Dirk Powell*

Oooh
Oooh
Oooh, oooh

Slave driver
The table is turned (Catch a fire)
Catch a fire
You gonna get burned (Catch a fire)

Slave driver
The table is turned (Catch a fire)
Catch a fire
You gonna get burned (Catch a fire)

Every time I hear the crack of a whip
My blood runs cold
I remember on the slave ship
How they brutalized our very souls

Today they say we are free
Only to be chained in poverty
Good God I think it's illiteracy
It's only a machine to make money

Slave driver
The table is turned (Catch a fire)
Catch a fire
You gonna get burned (Catch a fire)

Slave driver
The table is turned (Catch a fire)
Catch a fire
You gonna get burned (Catch a fire)

Every time I hear the crack of a whip
My blood runs cold
I remember on the slave ship
How they brutalized our very souls

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Slave driver
The table is turned (Catch a fire)
Catch a fire
You gonna get burned (Catch a fire)

Slave driver
The table is turned (Catch a fire)
Catch a fire
You gonna get burned (Catch a fire)

Oooh
Oooh
Oooh, oooh (x2)

9. Better Git Yer Learnin'

Rhiannon Giddens, vocals and minstrel banjo;
Jamie Dick, percussion; Dirk Powell, fiddle;
Jason Sypher, bass

The tune for this song is attributed to the banjo performer Thomas F. Briggs, found in a banjo method book published in 1855 entitled *Briggs' Banjo Instructor*. It provides an early glimpse into that first truly American cultural sensation, the minstrel show. These tunes were published with no words, which gave me the opportunity to engage with them as pieces of music with no baggage. After learning quite a few, I braced myself to read the original lyrics, and was faced with a mountain of offensive sentiments and the degraded characters of the “minstrel nigger” and “plantation dinky.” I thought about what an actual emancipated ex-enlaved person might have to say in a song like this, and “Better Git Yer Learnin'” was born. Each verse refers to well-known difficulties in the African American world of the mid-1800s, and all around education. Education was what the enslaved person wanted above all else, yet even trying to learn to read was often a punishable offense.

After the Emancipation Proclamation freed slaves in 1863 (many in Texas and other territories didn't find out until the June of two years later—a date celebrated by the

holiday Juneteenth), young teachers (white and black) who graduated from schools like Oberlin went to teach at newly formed schools for black children all over the South, but the conditions were so bad many of them took sick and died, or gave up. Where all-black schools were established, sometimes white supremacists would blow them up. Opportunities for education were hard to come by but, to a newly freed person, worth fighting for. — *RG*

When I was just a little pick*
I almost learnt from cousin Nick
Ol' Massa found out sure enough
And poor ol' Nick he got strung up

Chorus

Better git yer learnin'(x3)
Before it goes away

The year was 1863,
A paper said that I was free
But no one read it to my ears
And so I slaved for two more years

Chorus

A teacher came from Ohio
To learn us what we'd need to know
Before she told us what was what
She up and died of whooping cough

Chorus

I heard about a school was free
Way out east in Tennessee
Before I got to go to town
The damned ol' Rebs had burned it down

Chorus

So now that I am old and gray
Listen close to what I say
The white folks they will write the show
If you can't read
You'll never know

Chorus (x2)

**short for "pickaninny," a common term for a young black child*

10. Lavi Difisil

Leyla McCalla, vocals and tenor banjo;
Rhiannon Giddens, fiddle; Amythyst Kiah,
guitar; Allison Russell, clarinet; Jamie Dick,
percussion; Jason Sypher, bass and bowed
bass

This song is inspired by the legendary
Haitian troubadour Althierry Dorval,
whose voice and banjo playing resonate joy
and power. Though troubadours are
traditionally male, I have been interpreting
these songs for years and reveling in the
cultural education I receive in exchange.
The challenge of writing a song in Kreyol,
the language of my ancestors, is invigorating,
and this song had been stewing in my
mind long before I entered Dirk's studio. I
presented it to the group, and it was such a
natural fit for this record. — *LM*

m pa gen kob /
m pa gen job (x2)

mè m gen amour
e m gen souri

m pa gen anyen,
m pa gen anyen,
pou fè mwen parti

m pa gen anpil
mè m vle pataje mon âme
lavi divisil, lavi difisil

m pa gen anpil
mè 'm vle partaje vi mwen
m pa gen anyen (x2)
pou fè mwen parti
Ain't got no money /
Ain't got no job (x2)

But I have your love
And I have your heart

Ain't nothing in this world
Ain't nothing in this world
Gonna keep us apart

I don't have much
But I wanna give you the world
This life can be hard, this life can be cruel

I don't have much
But I wanna give you my heart
Nothing in this world, nothing in this world
Gonna keep us apart

11. Blood and Bones

Amythyst Kiah, vocals, 5-string banjo, and percussion; Rhiannon Giddens, backing vocals, minstrel banjo, and percussion; Allison Russell, percussion; Jamie Dick, drums and percussion; Dirk Powell, electric guitar and percussion; Jason Sypher, bass and percussion

The chorus to this song had been floating around in my head, given life by my voice and banjo, but it didn't really have a home in a song. I wrote it not long after reading reports and watching videos of white nationalists feeling more confident about asserting their views after the election of Donald Trump in 2016. There's "not enough steel to reconcile" our humanity and our sense of selves. The verses were inspired by both a photo I saw of a black slave child holding a white baby and slave narratives. In them, Alli and I were describing the way the binding of black slave and white master created a sickness that was terrifying for both parties, but especially exacted a price from the slave. My chorus, written in response to today's issues, ended up bridging the past. — *AK*

The institution of slavery twisted and distorted and dehumanized the slaver as well as the enslaved. Rampant rape meant that many slave owners were in fact

keeping their own biological children in slavery—they were selling their own flesh and blood, selling and abusing their white children's half-siblings. Only recently has Sally Hemings—Thomas Jefferson's slave "mistress" (if one can be called a mistress where there is no possibility of consent) for four decades and mother of six of his children (whom Jefferson eventually emancipated)—been acknowledged as a deeply significant figure in American history. It is impossible to understand the full story behind the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the founding of the land of the "free"; impossible to decipher the character, contradictions, dichotomies, and challenges of this brave, young, imperfect Republic without reclaiming these glaring omissions in the narrative. The tangled, toxic webs of broken family dysfunction and abuse reverberate still and have repercussions that impact our society and culture today. — *AR*

Chorus

Blood and bones are what we're made of
Not enough steel to reconcile
Crying out to the darkness
One sure way to feel alive
Demon mouths lined with halos

Thinly veiled, but no surprise
Rest assured, a welcomed surplus
of systematic lies

This child ain't mine, but my hands are tied
She's a life of bounty, and her skin is white
Under my care, she'll play and thrive
In a few years, I'll be cast aside
I was once a noble daughter
Our kingdom spanned the breadth of
Ghana
But I was captured for the silver
Sent across the sea to a land unknown
Our rivals sold me to some white men
Skin as though it came from heaven
When they bound us to their will
They trapped themselves in Hell as well

Chorus

One brother white, the other black
One brother loved, the other strapped
One brother kept, the other sold
Kinship denied is kinship still
Bred in bone and bathed in blood
Two brothers begged for light and love
White Father twisting his own soul
To deny what all must know

Chorus (x2)

12. Music and Joy

Rhiannon Giddens, vocals and minstrel
banjo; Jamie Dick, drums; Dirk Powell,
acoustic guitar; Jason Sypher, bass

This is a take on the core of the American
minstrel banjo tradition carried into the here
and now, inspired by the African sounds we
know and love. As with the rest of the proj-
ect, though, it's not the concept but the heart
of the matter that counts. And at the heart of
it all is music and joy. — *Dirk Powell*

Call them down
Call them down
Call them down,
The ones who came before
Call them down
Call them down

Ah with music
Ah with music
Music and joy

Ah, call them down
Ah, the ones who came before
Ah, call them down
Ah, with music and joy

Ah with music
Ah with music
Music and joy

13. You're Not Alone

Allison Russell, vocals and 5-string banjo;
Rhiannon Giddens, backing vocals and
minstrel banjo; Leyla McCalla, cello;
Jamie Dick, drums and percussion; Dirk
Powell, accordion, piano, keys, electric guitar,
and bass

I became a mother to my daughter Ida Maeve almost five years ago. She's been on the road with her dad and me since she was four weeks old. Nobody warned us about the unending fear and worry that attached to the deepest, truest love known to humankind—and yet never had I felt more powerful and more connected to the ancestors than I did in giving birth to my girl. Coming to the bayou to work on this inspiring project with Rhiannon, Amythyst, and Leyla also marked my longest separation from my child, 12 days. I would be lying if I said that it was easy for me. As we got deeper into the project, into the source material, slave narratives, and minstrel history, I kept feeling the parallels to my own life and experience. I survived 10 years of sexual, physical, psychological abuse and dehumanizing treatment as a child at the hands of my white American adopted father. I came close to suicide, but something kept me here. A whisper of hope. A hidden light. I felt the presence of my grandmothers,

great-grandmothers, and back—and I began to understand that the other side of the coin to the horror, inhumanity, abuse, pain, and fear of slavery is resilience, endurance, survival, hope, and strength. That strength and resilience, Quasheba's strength and resilience distilled through so many generations of unimaginable suffering, sustains and protects me, sustain and protect my daughter. The strength and resilience of all our ancestors sustain us. In this time when schools need to practice active shooter drills and places of worship become targets and houses of death, we are not alone. Our ancestors survived worse. For their sake and our children's sake, we can do better. We can be better. We are one family, blood and bones, one race—human—and so many beautiful colors. We have love. We can take better care of each other. Music helps. Music heals. —AR

Hey, my little evening star
How bright you are
Anywhere you go
You're not alone

Rocks and bugs and angel wings
Every little shiny thing
Anywhere you go

You're not alone
You're the North Star and the compass
Always finding something wondrous
Anywhere you go
You're not alone

Hey, my little evening star
How bright you are
Anywhere you go
You're not alone

Wish that I could keep you from
Sorrow and harm
None of us is here for long
But you're not alone

In the cradle of the circle
All the ones who came before you
Their strength is yours now
You're not alone

Sparrows in the morning
Crows at dusk
Singing with your Daddy
We have love
We have love
We have love
We have love
We have love (x2)

De l'Afrique à l'Acadie
De l'Europe aux Amériques
La musique nous réunis
Une Famille

La musique nous réunis
De la Louisiane à Sans Souci
Tigallum Tigalli on arrive
Une Famille

Hey, my little evening star
How bright you are
We have Love
You're not alone



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Back cover, from top left:

Rhiannon Giddens, Allison Russell, Leyla McCalla, and Amythyst Kiah



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A graphic logo for African American Legacy Recordings. It consists of a grid of colored squares (red, yellow, blue, green) above the text. The text is arranged in four lines: "AFRICAN" in yellow, "AMERICAN" in orange, "LEGACY" in large blue letters, and "RECORDINGS" in smaller black letters.

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