



RHYTHM & ROOTS: A BENEFIT OF SONG AND DANCE

By M.R. Hunter

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“Music takes us out of the actual and whispers to us dim secrets that startle our wonder as to who we are, and for what, whence, and whereto.” – Ralph Waldo Emerson



Keshet Chaim Dance Ensemble

Photo by Laura Mingo

This past Sunday night, a concert of song and dance converged at the Ford Amphitheater to celebrate unity in diversity. If words separate cultures, then the universal language of music and dance brings them together. Artists need a purpose and this special one-night performance of Rhythm & Roots not only exemplified cross-cultural collaboration but also all proceeds from the evening went to support Children Uniting Nations and Keshet Chaim’s youth education programs.

Rhythm & Roots brought together a spectacular array of headlining singers like Macy Gray, Abraham McDonald, MC Lyte and Israeli pop icon Harel Skaat onstage. Accompanied by world-renowned dance companies Israeli-American Keshet Chaim’s Dance Ensemble and the Lula Washington Dance Theatre, the Agape International Choir Ensemble opened and closed the show in an uplifting refrain of peace and unity, bringing the audience to its feet at the finale with Michael Jackson’s “Heal the World.”

Under the direction of the wildly energetic Tim McAfee-Lewis, accompanied by the Agape Band, the Agape International Choir set an inspiring tone for the evening with its 25 members dressed in Israel’s national colors of blue and white performing dynamic, jazzy numbers. The night really began hopping when McAfee-Lewis pounded on the keys in the crowd-pleasing “I Turn Around” and never missed a key as he swiftly jerked in time to the chorus. Watching him at the piano was an awesome sight of solo choreography and infectious energy.



Agape International Choir Ensemble in Rhythm & Roots

Photo by Laura Mingo



Macy Gray in Rhythm & Roots

Photo by Laura Mingo

Joining the concert was none other than Ms. Macy Gray – a late addition to an already fantastic lineup, Gray was nothing short of sensational as she delivered her rousing “I Try” to a number of her loyal fans. Unlike other current singers, Gray sounds almost better live than on the radio. Swaying from underneath her mauve feather boa as she strikes a girlish balance in her stiletto heels, Gray channels a sweet vulnerability with a mesmerizing fearlessness and coy delivery. Gray’s tireless humanitarian efforts brought another level of awareness to the concert after she humbly received an award from the Children Uniting Nations for the attention she has brought to the youth caught in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Between numbers, Keshet Chaim and Lula Washington performed dance pieces that were

simply riveting. To compare one against the other misses the point of this evening's event, so I will not do that here. Both companies brought their own signature style with conviction, artistry and meaning.

Keshet Chaim's haunting white-clad "Adon Olam" (Master of the Universe) physically illustrated a 10-verse poetic Jewish liturgy with modern movement and graceful juxtaposition. Their Bollywood inspired "Sababa Ba Midbar – Celebration in the Desert" struck scarf strewn poses and later utilized this prop in "L'ean Shelo Telchi – Strength Within" as pairs unraveled each other and twisted together to create a fantastic theme about power through connections.



Lulu Washington Dance Theatre in Rhythm & Roots

Photo by Laura Mingo

It's difficult however to top Lula Washington's awesome and colorful "Global Village – A Cultural Celebration" with its creative use of costumes and sheer boundlessness across the stage. High-flying and acrobatic, the women's upraised arms sent reams of satin into the air like unfurled flags lofting high above their heads. An incredibly challenging piece physically, the number lasted a surprising ten minutes and showed no sign of slowing down as they pounded the stage. Later, Keisha L. Clarke-Gray performed an exquisite solo piece to "Angelitos Negros" part of the suite "Songs of the Disinherited" – a four-part ballet that was breathtaking and soulful. Choreographed by Donald McKayle, this performance stood out as one of the most beautiful of the evening and Keisha L. Clarke-Gray was nothing short of pure magic.

Harel Skaat is obviously acclimating to his newfound fame after being discovered on Israel's version of "American Idol" – "A Star is Born." Singing in both Hebrew and English in Stevie Wonder's "Lately." Speaking Hebrew is not a prerequisite though for understanding Skaat as he soulfully tells a story through communicative body language and enraptured facial expressions. It's easy to see why he's a teen heartthrob as he flirts with the audience, but his talent is no joke with his intuitive ability to phrase and emphasize both languages clearly and accurately. If you don't know of Harel Skaat yet, don't worry, this is just the start of what will be a long international relationship with this budding superstar.

Abraham McDonald was one of Oprah's latest discoveries when he won her Karaoke Challenge. Karaoke is a misnomer when one hears McDonald's falsetto blending in with his soft tenor until he unleashes his powerful double-barrel shotgun baritone that can plunge down to the depths of a bass. He's a one-man operatic shift skatting between those mind-boggling high notes and spontaneous bursts of emotion. But his rendition of Louis Armstrong's "What a Wonderful World" maintained more control and purity that really shined.



MC Lyte in Rhythm & Roots

Photo by Laura Mingo

There's nothing like seeing MC Lyte to brighten up any concert. This pioneering woman proves that hip-hop and rap is not exclusive to men, violence, bigotry or hatemongering. Retro and revved up, she is still delighting fans with her buoyant spirit and memorable lyrics, encouraging the audience to sing along as she commanded the stage from behind her tinted shades.

This jam-packed night of music and dance brought the house down. That it shared a singular purpose to help children everywhere only added to the fulfillment in seeing these artists come together to create, to collaborate for a cause in an attempt to heal the world in a positive expression of "Rhythm & Roots."