Pre-concert conversation with
Ulysses Owens, Jr.
7:15 PM
Cullen Performance Hall, University of Houston
Friday, December 1, 2017; 8:00 PM

Songs of Freedom
Ulysses Owens, Jr., Music Director
Featuring René Marie, Theo Bleckmann and Alicia Olatuja

Ulysses Owens, Jr., drums and music director; René Marie, Alicia Olatuja and Theo Bleckmann, vocals; Allyn Johnson, piano/Fender Rhodes; David Rosenthal, guitar; Reuben Rogers, bass

This program is sponsored by Nina and Michael Zilkha.
Over the past three decades, Jazz at Lincoln Center has presented dozens of carefully curated special programs celebrating legendary figures from the history of jazz. The problem for most of us, however, is that while these programs are interesting to read about, you have to go to New York to actually see and hear them.

**Songs of Freedom: A Tribute to Abbey Lincoln, Joni Mitchell and Nina Simone**, which originated at Lincoln Center last year, is among the rare exceptions. The Houston Da Camera Jazz performance is the first stop on a national tour carrying over into the spring of 2018. The touring group includes drummer Ulysses Owens, who directed the first performance at Lincoln Center in the fall of 2016, with vocalists Theo Bleckmann, Alicia Olatuja and René Marie. They are backed by Owens’ group consisting of pianist Allyn Johnson, bassist Reuben Rodgers (who previously performed in the Da Camera Jazz Series with Charles Lloyd’s New Quartet) and guitarist David Rosenthal.

Although the final program was still coming together at the time of publication, each singer will be featured on three songs apiece written by Lincoln, Mitchell or Simone. Bleckmann, who worked with Owens in Kurt Elling’s band, has previously handled Simone’s Balm in Gilead and Mitchell’s Borderline, written in 1994 but uncannily relevant to the current political climate: “You snipe so steady/You snub so snide/So ripe and ready/to diminish and deride/You’re so quick to condescend/My opinionated friend/All you deface, all you defend/is just a borderline...”

Olatuja, an opera-trained singer who performed as a featured soloist with the Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir at President Barack Obama’s second inauguration, is out front on Mitchell’s Both Sides Now and Simone’s Everything Must Change, originally recorded by Randy Crawford and covered by Simone on her album Baltimore. As Nate Chinen wrote in *The New York Times*, “Olatuja brings an earnest intensity to the song, bringing it into implicit dialogue with A Change Is Gonna Come, the indelible Sam Cooke tune. ‘No one and nothing stays unchanged,’ she sings, and as she slowly builds a crescendo, she hints at both a formidable obstacle and the will to overcome.”

Marie, who inherits the role originated by Dee Dee Bridgewater at the Jazz at Lincoln Center premiere and subsequently filled by Joanna Majoko at New York’s Winter Jazz Fest in January of this year, will be featured on Simone’s epic Four Women and Lincoln’s Freedom Day, from Max Roach’s classic 1960 LP We Insist: Freedom Now Suite. The lyrics pointedly echo the promise and betrayal that African Americans have been living with since the end of the Civil War: “Whisper, listen. Whisper, listen. Whisper, say we are free/Rumors flyin’, must be lyin’, can it really be?/Can’t conceive it, can’t believe it, but that’s what they say/Slave no longer, slave no longer, this is Freedom Day...”

**Songs of Freedom** began as the second night of a weekend celebration at Lincoln Center called Songs We Love, starring Bridgewater. The first night focused on songs from the 1920s through the Fifties. The second night picked up the torch in the 1960s.

“They came to me the year before and said they wanted a program focusing on the 1960s to today,” says Owens, an in-demand drummer (he most recently performed in Houston with the gifted teenaged pianist Joey Alexander) who has worked frequently with Jazz at Lincoln Center under the direction of Wynton Marsalis. “I said, ‘I’m only 33 years old. I don’t know that I can speak to 50 years of songs...’

“The 1960s was so important to music. Everything we’re doing now – rock and roll, singer-songwriters – emerged in form in that decade. I knew I wanted to work with Nina Simone and Abbey Lincoln. I had them in mind from the start. And then I thought we gotta have a flower child; Joni Mitchell.”

Assuming the set list follows the outline of previous performances, the program opens with an instrumental, and then the singers will take turns before coming together on Baltimore, a haunting Randy Newman song immortalized by Simone on a 1970s album of the same name produced by Creed Taylor for the CTI/Kudu label. Interestingly, at the time of its release Simone essentially disavowed the album as Taylor’s conception, not hers. It received mixed reviews and did not sell particularly well. It is now considered one of her classic works; three of the Simone selections in Songs of Freedom come from the Baltimore album.

Marie recalls the impact the album had on her when she first heard it. “I was a rebellious teenager in the 1970s, singing with an R&B band. My mother brought a Nina Simone album home. If Mom recommended it, I was not going to listen to it. It sat on the coffee table. It was the one where she has a white turban on her head.

“When I finally put it on, I thought ‘Oh my God!’ I learned for the first time, you can put your anger and emotion into your songs. That was the beginning of my love for Nina Simone. Once I sank my hooks in, I started writing my own songs, demanding the strength that she did in the face of injustice.”

Still, it was another three decades – she has an interesting life story that perhaps can be told in another Da Camera program note – before Marie launched her professional singing career. In recent years, she has been making up for lost time. This spring, she was voted best female vocalist by the Jazz Journalists Association.

Olatuja graduated from Manhattan School of Music with a master’s degree in classical voice. She could have had a career as an opera singer or in musical theater, but jazz has become her primary focus. Her next album will include a version of Mitch-
Ell’s *Both Sides Now*, written when she was 19 years old.

“One of the things I love about Joni Mitchell is that the way she writes, at least one of her songs at some point will be the soundtrack of your life. Her songs are timeless. She writes about the basic human experiences of love. For me, I can relate to a lot of her experiences. The more you live life, the more you realize how little you know.”

Mitchell began her career in the 1960s as an acoustic folk singer. In the 1970s, she gravitated toward jazz, recording with Tom Scott, Jaco Pastorius, Pat Metheny, Wayne Shorter and Herbie Hancock, and collaborating with Charles Mingus on his final album. In 2008, Hancock’s *River: The Joni Letters*, featuring guest vocalists and a cameo by Mitchell herself, won a Grammy Award for Album of the Year, the first time a jazz album had won the award in more than 40 years.

The widespread resistance to the presidency of Donald Trump, as well as street protest movements such as Black Lives Matter, have drawn comparisons to the anti-war and Black Pride movements of the 1960s and the reactions they engendered among older white Americans. Olatuja says she feels hopeful that the current divisions in our society will lead to positive transformations once the majority of Americans comes to terms with the underlying truth that has been revealed.

“It’s like surgery,” she says. “You just have to cut it all open to see it for what it is and get it all out. It’s painful, and dangerous, and messy. But it’s necessary. It can not stay the same.”

Marie, who is old enough to remember the Sixties, says this time around feels different to her. “I have never felt so hopeless and helpless, if you want to know the truth. I am saturated with despair. As a musician, I am in the bubble. I don’t have time to get out and protest. The songs I write and perform feel very inadequate… This may be the last stand in a losing battle, but it’s a strong one. Our country has suffered a setback.”

In an attempt to fortify herself for the struggle, Marie recalls the words of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., who was in turn quoting a 19th-century abolitionist minister: “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” She says, “I believe that.”

Owens obviously can relate to these sentiments, but he promises that he will not be making any political diatribes from the stage.

“The music says everything. Let’s sing and play and let the music speak. This music is about justice, and freedom of mind, and sexuality; that we can all come together and coexist. Joni sang about the freedom of love, Nina had the sound of freedom in her voice, and Abbey wrote about it. I’m very honored to be performing their music in this show.”

Rick Mitchell