

Wiley Hausam, Director
Daniel Gurskis, Dean, College of the Arts



PRESENTS

MESHELL
NDEGEOCELLO
NO MORE WATER:
THE GOSPEL OF JAMES BALDWIN



THURSDAY, MAY 8, 2025 | 7:00 PM
ALEXANDER KASSER THEATER

Performers

Meshell Ndegeocello

Vocals, bass

Chris Bruce

Guitar

Justin Hicks

Vocals

Abe Rounds

Drums

Jake Sherman

Organ

Running Time: 75 minutes, no intermission.

Program Notes

The prescience of James Baldwin is alive nearly 40 years after his passing, a testament to his enduring impact. Baldwin was a prolific writer and activist. His essays, novels, plays, and poetry have assessed and often reproached the human condition. His oratory prowess in the 1960s was bar none, lending his outspoken views on Black oppression profundity and eloquence. Baldwin was born in New York City on August 2, 1924; 2024 marked the centennial of the eminent writer, a momentous occasion that was celebrated by the release of one of Meshell Ndegeocello's most intrepid efforts to date: *No More Water: The Gospel of James Baldwin*.

With *No More Water*, Ndegeocello embarks on a prophetic musical odyssey that transcends boundaries and genres, delving headfirst into race, sexuality, religion, and other recurring themes explored in the celebrated writer's canon. Following 2023's *The Omnichord Real Book*, her acclaimed debut for Blue Note Records, which won the inaugural GRAMMY Award for Best Alternative Jazz Album, the multi-instrumentalist, singer, songwriter, and producer renders an immersive and palpable document that is as sagacious, unabashed, and introspective as Baldwin was in life.

Co-produced by Ndegeocello and guitarist Chris Bruce, *No More Water* features some of the bassist's frequent collaborators including Bruce, vocalist Justin Hicks, saxophonist (and Omnichord producer) Josh Johnson, keyboardist Jebin Bruni, and drummer Abe Rounds. Also appearing on various songs is a stellar group that includes vocalist Kenita-Miller Hicks, keyboardists Jake Sherman and Julius Rodriguez, and executive director of the NYCPS Arts Office and trumpeter Paul Thompson. The album also showcases spoken word by venerated poet Staceyann Chin and Pulitzer Prize-winning author and critic Hilton Als.

Nearly a decade in the making, the album's origins began in 2016 during a performance at the Harlem Stage Gatehouse as part of their annual showcase honoring Baldwin. Ndegeocello had delved into Baldwin's work the year before, including the seminal nonfiction work *The Fire Next Time*, which she considers "life-changing" and carries with her as a "spiritual text."

"It was just a revelation to me, and it softened my heart in so many ways," says Ndegeocello. "I got a really quick education when I met Greg Tate, but nothing affected me like *The Fire Next Time*. It's as if they're speaking about my family, especially the first chapter: I grew up around Black men who didn't want to be seen as soft, which is how he opens 'A Letter to My Nephew.'"

Ndegeocello credits Baldwin's essays with giving her a deeper understanding of the fraught history of race and class struggle in this country, specifically its lasting impact on her and her family. "As a Black American, you are devoid of any historical grounding other than what your parents give you. This allowed me to really see what my parents went through."

"He talks about how the military ruined people. I think that's the beginning of alcoholism with my father, the beginning of understanding that he would never rise above a certain rank. My mother was a domestic with a fourth-grade education. It just made me see them trying to raise a family, have a marriage, and be individuals in a society that's been hard-wired for racism, bigotry, and classism."

No More Water is a fitting title for the album. A double entendre, it is borrowed from *The Fire Next Time*, comprising two essays examining racism in America circa 1963: "My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation" and "Down at the Cross: Letter from a Region of My Mind." It is also a nod to Baldwin's religious beginnings as the son of a Pentecostal preacher. You can also find the couplet in some versions of the spiritual "Mary Don't You Weep" and a biblical quote in the book of Genesis: "God gave Noah the rainbow sign/No more water, the fire next time."

No More Water marks a significant moment of self-discovery for Ndegeocello. She adds that Baldwin entered her life at precisely the right time. "It came when I was ready to look in the mirror. I've had to play *Plantation Lullabies* at a few shows. Looking back, I had an interesting perspective, but the dialogue was limited. It was more like a cathartic experience for a young person of color, whereas now I'm going, 'How can I get us all to love each other? How can I get us all to see this for what it is?'"

About the Artists

Meshell Ndegeocello (Vocals, bass) has been doing her best since 1968.

Ndegeocello has survived the best and worst of what a career in music has to offer. She eschewed genre for originality, celebrity for longevity, and musical trends for musical truths. Fans have come to expect the unexpected and follow her on sojourns into soul, R&B, jazz, hip-hop, rock, all bound by the search for love, justice, respect, and resolution. Those sonic investigations have defied and redefined the expectations for women, for queer artists, and for black music for over 30 years, and she remains one of the few women who write the music, sing the songs, and lead the band.

A bass player above all else, Ndegeocello brings her warm, fat, and melodic groove to everything she does. She has earned a Grammy award along with numerous nominations and has played alongside the Rolling Stones, Madonna, Alanis Morissette, James Blood Ulmer, the Blind Boys of Alabama, John Medeski, Billy Preston, and Chaka Khan. As for her own bass-playing influences, she credits Sting, Jaco Pastorius, Family Man Barrett, and Stevie Wonder. Ndegeocello is always grateful for the opportunity to share the stage and believes music is a fellowship. She looks to spread that gospel with every creation and collaboration.

Studio Albums by Meshell Ndegeocello

1993 *Plantation Lullabies*

1996 *Peace Beyond Passion*

1999 *Bitter*

2002 *Cookie: The Anthropological Mixtape*

2003 *Comfort Woman*

2005 *The Spirit Music Jamia: Dance of the Infidel*

2007 *The World Has Made Me the Man of My Dreams*

2009 *Devil's Halo*

2011 *Weather*

2012 *Pour une Âme Souveraine: A Dedication to Nina Simone*

2014 *Comet, Come to Me*

2018 *Ventriloquism*

2023 *The Omnichord Real Book*

2024 *No More Water: The Gospel of James Baldwin*

Grammy Awards: Wins & Nominations

2021 "Better Than I Imagined" (with Robert Glasper & H.E.R.) Best R&B Song

2024 *The Omnichord Real Book* Best Alternative Jazz Album

3 Grammy Wins and 12 Total Nominations

Chris Bruce (Guitar) began playing guitar at age 13 and has worked professionally since 1989 with artists such as Seal, Lizz Wright, and My Brightest Diamond. He has been guitarist and auxiliary player with Meshell Ndegeocello since 2007. He recently appeared on Lizz Wright's *Grace* and My Brightest Diamond's *A Million and One*.

Justin Hicks (Vocalist) has spent 2011–present recording, touring, and performing with Meshell Ndegeocello, Kaneza Schaal, Jennifer Newman, Courtney Bryan, Amp Fiddler, Chris Bruce, International Contemporary Ensemble, Voices 21c, Beth Morrison Projects, Nottingham Contemporary, SKD Dresden, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, MoMA, and the Public Theater.

Abe Rounds (Drums), hailing from Sydney, Australia, started playing drums at the tender age of one. A fan and player of an eclectic array of music Rounds moved to the US to study at Berklee College of Music, graduating in 2014. There he had a serendipitous meeting with Meshell Ndegeocello, a lifelong musical influence, and has been a member of her band and musical family ever since. Now living in Los Angeles, Rounds has been writing, recording, and performing as a multi-instrumentalist and a singer and has toured worldwide with artists such as Seal, Andrew Bird, Sara Bareilles, and Blake Mills. He has written and performed on numerous Grammy-nominated recordings and, as a motion picture composer, has contributed to score for multiple films and series, including *Queen Sugar*, *Madame CJ Walker*, and the upcoming *Black Mafia Family*. 2021 saw the release of his debut record, *The Confidence to Make Mistakes*, a snapshot of a performance based in improvisation. With a goal to find unselfconscious freedom, Rounds's first solo EP represents a moment of unapologetic self-expression through percussion, drums, and vocals. Asked what compels his courage in creativity, Rounds credits his family. He was raised by strong, supportive women, and his father is renowned Sydney musician/producer Victor Rounds. It is also impossible not to look back at his ancestry, with elders from many corners of the globe, including Fiji, Tonga, Hungary, and Iraq. The courage to go where his own heart led is what prompted Rounds to hit record and capture 22 minutes of musical truth.

Jake Sherman (Organ) Honing his sound by playing gospel organ at Baptist churches in Brooklyn, as well as performing and recording as a sideman with such artists as Bilal, Meshell Ndegeocello, Chance the Rapper, Nick Hakim, Gabriel Garzon-Montano, and Benny Sings, Jake Sherman has emerged into an artist with a truly unique vision. He has released four solo albums under his own name, on which he sings and plays all the instruments. He is one half of the duo Jake & Abe, which will soon be world famous.

Staff Credits:



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We respectfully acknowledge that Montclair State University occupies land in Lenapehoking, the traditional and expropriated territory of the Lenape. As a state institution, we recognize and support the sovereignty of New Jersey's three state-recognized tribes: the Ramapough Lenape, Nanticoke Lenni-Lenape, and Powhatan Renape nations. We recognize the sovereign nations of the Lenape diaspora elsewhere in North America, as well as other Indigenous individuals and communities now residing in New Jersey. By offering this land acknowledgement, we commit to addressing the historical legacies of Indigenous dispossession and dismantling practices of erasure that persist today. We recognize the resilience and persistence of contemporary Indigenous communities and their role in educating all of us about justice, equity, and the stewardship of the land throughout the generations.

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PEAK Performances develops, presents, and produces a broad range of world-class dance, film, master classes, music, opera and music theater, talks, and theater in the Alexander Kasser Theater on the campus of Montclair State University for students, faculty, staff, and the general public. We are building community through live performance. PEAK Performances is a program of the university's Arts + Cultural Programming Department.

The background of the entire poster is a dark, low-key photograph of an audience at a performance. In the foreground, the silhouettes of several audience members are visible. One person in the center has their arms raised, clapping. The background is dimly lit, showing the stage area with some warm, reddish-orange light reflecting off the walls and floor.

Connecting Communities Through the Arts

We're getting ready for another great season
and we can't wait to share it with you!

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