



Interview

REGINA CARTER

December, 2010

Jazz violinist Regina Carter ranks as one of Oakland University's most talented and justly famous alumni. Her *Reverse Thread* was chosen by NPR as one of the top 50 albums of 2010. Her touring schedule covers America, Europe and Japan. *TOJ* interviewed Regina in December of 2010, and we reconstructed the conversation. Ms. Carter kindly and thoroughly edited the result so



that it represents her thoughts and her voice. Among the benefits of interviewing her instead of researching her in the national media, is that we could ask about her experience as a student here. As a consequence, readers will find that Regina Carter did not merely attend OU, she found a rich and stimulating experience here. She is one of us.

TOJ: *Reverse Thread*, a great CD with wonderful new African sounds, also seems to offer things from all over the world. What influences led you to develop this sound?

RC: Detroit was such an ethnically diverse city. I was exposed to other cultures and their music at an early age without having to travel. Some of the sounds I heard were very “foreign” to my ear but were extremely beautiful and captivating. I bought albums with strings from different parts of the planet and started imitating the sounds I heard.

TOJ: You have made several successful major label CDs in your recording career, and they too are wonderful. But one can notice that they are in a different category. *Reverse Thread* is more distinctively world music. Why did you wait?

RC: *Reverse Thread* is the result of the path my music career has led me along. It’s the product of the places I’ve traveled, the people I’ve met and the sounds I heard. All those things influenced *Reverse Thread*. I think that each record I’ve released has been a reflection of a time in my life. There was a period earlier in my career that I wanted to make a world music record, but the label wasn’t receptive.

TOJ: But you managed it!

RC: When I received the MacArthur Fellows Grant, that allowed me the freedom to develop some projects—one being *Reverse Thread*.

TOJ: The album has been a big success in the music world, selected as one of the top albums of 2010, and you have had many invitations to perform. Can you tell us where you are scheduled to perform?

RC: I don’t have my calendar in front of me, but I know I’ll be in Poland and Japan. I can’t recall the U.S. cities off the top of my head, so I’d have to look them up.

TOJ: I admit that I looked it up. In addition to Japan, there is New York’s Carnegie Hall, Portland, OR, Oakland, CA, Chicago, San Antonio, Salt Lake City and the list goes on.

RC: I like Poland. The audiences there are great. They aren't shy about expressing themselves when they like the music. I met some nice people who took me to beautiful places of interest that I may not have found on my own.

TOJ: *Reverse Thread* in concert includes many unusual instruments—especially interesting is the 21 string Kora [see end-notes], but it also includes one of the most common of instruments, the accordion. Is the accordion commonly found in Africa?

RC: You could think of the accordion as a world music instrument. It's not just enjoyed in the United States and Europe, but yes, also in many parts of Africa. One of the pieces on *Reverse Thread* comes from Madagascar where there is a strong accordion tradition. In Madagascar there are several different kinds of accordion. You can tell the differences both by eye and ear, for instance the placement of the buttons. Sometimes the reeds are castrated to get a unique sound.

TOJ: The accordion and the Kora were outstanding in *Reverse Thread*. For me, another unusual sound to hear in the performance was a song that suggested a familiar hymn, but I couldn't place it.

RC: The hymn is one of my favorites "God Be with you Till We Meet Again." When checking out the song "Juru Nani" for the CD, I kept hearing the hymn in my head as well. I had a strong feeling that the two pieces would work well together.

TOJ: You move effortlessly on your violin between sounds that suggest one genre to sounds that suggest another. I don't think a listener can escape noticing classical traditions in your jazz.

RC: I surely hope so. Growing up in Detroit I trained in the Suzuki method from age 4 to age 9. As a high school student, I applied those classical skills in the Detroit Civic Orchestra. It was at Cass Tech where I was introduced to America's classical music, Jazz. I met Carla Cook (Grammy nominated Jazz

vocalist), and she gave me a recording of Jazz violinist Stephane Grappelli, and not long after I discovered Jean Luc Ponty. For my 16th birthday, Carla and I went see Grappelli live in Detroit, and that was a turning point for me.

I formed friendships with students whose families were from other parts of the world. When we'd get together to play music in each other's homes, we'd check out some of the classical and traditional recordings of their culture as well as our latest Jazz album purchases.

TOJ: I can tell you that often when I hear you play I am reminded of Stephane Grappelli.

RC: Oh! That's a great compliment. Thank you.

TOJ: The fact that you attained the B.A. in Music here at Oakland is closer to home for us. How do you see your Oakland University learning experience now from the perspective of a remarkably well established artist?

RC: It was a rich experience. I was placed in the saxophone section of the big band, and the director, Doc Marvin Holladay told me to transpose and play the horn parts. He told me to listen to and copy their phrasing, breathe when they breathe and to stop listening to violin players. His thinking was that listening to "the language" played on instruments other than violin would help me learn the language and develop my own voice. It was a real learning experience and fun.

In those days, trumpeter Marcus Belgrave would visit OU often, sitting in with the jazz band as well as giving master classes. In the summer, several of us students would go over to his house almost daily. We would try out new pieces we were developing, learn about playing in and leading an ensemble, soloing, etc. We were lucky to have an international musician of Marcus' stature willing to nurture us. Also, several graduates of the OU Jazz band would come back and rehearse, lead sectionals and perform concerts with us.

OU wasn't just a place to go to college; it was a rich environment for me to grow musically and personally. My years at OU helped lay a foundation and prepare me for my journey.

NOTES

Especially for people who didn't know about Regina Carter as well as for many who already enjoy her music, I have collected some notes from her career.

MacArthur Fellows Profile of Regina Carter:

“Regina Carter is a master of improvisational jazz violinist. Though her work draws upon a wide range of musical influences—including Motown, Afro-Cuban, swing, bebop, folk and world music—she has crafted a signature voice and style. In jazz, bowed string instruments such as the violin are not traditionally featured in the solo role; Carter’s performances highlight the often overlooked potential of the jazz violin for its lyric, melodic, and percussive potential. Her early training as a classical musician is reflected in the fluidity, grace, and balance of her performance. Carter’s repertoire retains a firm connection with the familiar while venturing in new, unexpected directions.”

The Paganini Violin: National Public Radio, May 14, 2003

“For Regina Carter, it was a chance of a lifetime. Carter, a classically trained jazz violinist, is one of the few people in the world who have been allowed to play a closely guarded violin handcrafted in Italy more than 260 years ago. “The Cannon?”—so called because of its huge, sonorous sound—was the beloved instrument of violinist and composer Niccolò Paganini.

Carter has been allowed to play the instrument on two occasions. In a show of solidarity after September 11 attacks, Genoa—the Italian city to whom Paganini willed the Cannon—invited her to play it in concert in December 2001. She also used it to record her new CD, *Paganini: After a Dream*.”

The Jazz Police, A Review: Nov 3, 2010

“Regina Carter proved long ago that she can do almost anything musical with a violin, be it blues, swing, Motown, or modern classical repertoire, but perhaps she has never been closer to the fiddler tradition as with *Reverse Thread*. During the late set, her violin issued an invitation to dance at every turn . . .”

The Kora: The Jazz Police Nov 3, 2010:

“The Kora alone, in the hands of the Mali magician Yacouba Sissoko, deserves its own review. At a pre-concert talk at Ted Mann, Sissoko had described the making of his instrument from a large gourd, ten strings on one side eleven on the other, yielding a sound much like the dulcimer but without the hammerstrike. Tonight I could see his hands stroking, sliding, gently tapping the strings, literally weaving sound.”

The Kora: For an excellent sample of the look and sound of this instrument, Google “Regina Carter Tiny Desk.”

***Reverse Thread* Sample:** A lively excerpt from the CD with video, Google “Regina Carter Four Minutes”.

Note: Sherm Folland interviewed for TOJ.