

ODETTA

"If only one could be sure that every 50 years a voice and a soul like Odetta's would come along, the centuries would pass so quickly and painlessly we would hardly recognize time"

– Maya Angelou, Poet Laureate

Her name is Odetta, and she will turn 75 this New Year's Eve. Over the course of the last half-century, she has become one of the most celebrated figures in music. Odetta has sung for American Presidents, walked arm-in-arm with great leaders of the Civil Rights movement and served as an inspiration to several generations of musicians, most famously Bob Dylan. Now she is about to release one of her finest achievements, ***Gonna Let It Shine: A Concert for the Holidays***, on M.C. Records October 18.

Recorded before a worshipful audience at New York's Fordham University and carried live on public-supported WFUV radio, *Gonna Let It Shine: A Concert for the Holidays* offers the incomparable Odetta performing songs of inspiration and freedom, joined by her friends the Holmes Brothers and pianist Seth Farber. Bernice Johnson Reagon of Sweet Honey in the Rock provides the liner notes.

Odetta sings 15 songs on *Gonna Let It Shine*: "This Little Light of Mine" (with the Holmes Brothers), "Rise Up Shepherd," "Mary Had a Baby," "What Month Was Jesus Born In," "Shout for Joy," "Virgin Mary Had One Son," "Down by the Riverside" (with the Holmes Brothers), "Poor Little Jesus," "Freedom Trilogy," "Somebody Talking 'Bout Jesus," "Keep On Movin' It On," "Anyway You Can Make It," "O Jerusalem," "If Anybody Asks You," "Midnight Special" and a solo reprise of "This Little Light of Mine."

Why these songs at this time? Producer Mark Carpentieri believes that currently there is nothing available like this collection. "I suppose you could say it's a good record to release during a trying period for many people, especially in light of the recent events in the Gulf Coast. The music is uplifting, but one doesn't have to be religious to enjoy and appreciate it. It's just the beautiful spirituality that the holidays are really about."

Odetta says simply, "These songs come out of difficult times, and since the difficult times haven't been fixed, the songs are still here for us."

Also, she says, recording them in front of an audience has special meaning. "Doing a live album has more vitality. Human beings have language skills other than just verbal: we read each other. When performing, there is true communication. I get energy from the audience, and they get energy from me. We are really doing the concert together, which is very different from a dry studio where it's just you and a microphone."

Odetta loves the jubilation contained within these songs. "Christianity tends to be somber," she says. "There isn't very much 'jump for joy,' but these songs are fun. They speak to joy, and they are a way of teaching, of passing on information. If we look at a song such as 'What Month Was Jesus Born In,' it relates to the period of slavery when for two weeks in December slaves couldn't plow or plant, so it was time off. There was celebration of Christmas, and the song itself is a rhyme to teach children the months of the year."

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Odetta's version of Leadbelly's "Midnight Special," done originally on her early live album *Gate of Horn* nearly 50 years ago, is revisited on the new *Gonna Let It Shine*. The "Midnight Special," she notes, is not part of a traditional holiday repertoire. "It's about being locked up in prison and hearing a train whistle. It calls to us about going places and being other than where we are. The man in prison wishes the light to shine on him."

Also included as part of *Gonna Let It Shine* is her "Freedom Trilogy," comprised of "Oh Freedom," "Come and Go with Me" and "I'm On My Way," songs she has performed during the long battle for Civil Rights. Looking back over the years, she says, "Paul Robeson is a hero of mine. He taught me that it's not only possible but necessary to be responsible to our brothers and sisters throughout the world."

Odetta was born on New Year's Eve in 1930 as America entered the second year of the Great Depression, segregation and disfranchisement remained in place, and the droughts of the Dust Bowl forced poor families off the land. As a child in Alabama and then California, she knew difficult times and for a time cleaned houses. But her singing talent was spotted early on and led to formal voice lessons at 14. She joined an ensemble cast headed by Elsa Lancaster at Hollywood's Turnabout Theatre and then, at age 19, became a member of the chorus for West Coast productions of *Finian's Rainbow* and *Guys and Dolls*.

Odetta found her way into the folk music scene in the early 1950s, singing at the famed Hungry i and the Tin Angel in San Francisco and the Blue Angel in New York City, where her appearances caused Pete Seeger and Harry Belafonte to become champions of her remarkable talent. She recorded her first album, appropriately titled *Tin Angel*, in 1954 and subsequently cut two vastly influential live LPs in the 1960s, *Odetta at Carnegie Hall* and *Odetta at Town Hall*, followed by the studio album *Odetta Sings Dylan* – the first completely dedicated to his songs. The relationship between Odetta and Dylan dates back to 1960 when it is said she advised the young Minnesotan, even before he reached NYC, that if he stayed with music he would most likely succeed.

Odetta also found time for significant film work, appearing in an adaptation of William Faulkner's *Sanctuary* with Yves Montand and Lee Remick, the wide-screen spectacular *Cinerama Holiday* and the Emmy Award-winning television presentation of *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* with Cicely Tyson. She also appeared as a guest on the groundbreaking *Tonight with Belafonte* television special, acted in the prestigious Stratford stage production of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* and sang in the Gian Carlo Menotti opera *The Medium*.

Gonna Let It Shine is her third M.C. Records project, following the Grammy-nominated *Blues Everywhere I Go* (1999) and the follow-up *Looking for a Home* (2001), which received multiple W.C. Handy Award nominations. At White House ceremonies in 1999, President Clinton presented her with the National Medal of Arts & Humanities. In addition, Odetta was among the initial group of select artists to be honored with the first Duke Ellington Fellowship Award from Yale University, she's a recipient of the International Folk Alliance's Lifetime Achievement Award and a holder of honorary doctorates from Bennett College, Johnson C. Smith University and Colby College.

The New York Times once described this great American artist in the following terms: "Odetta's voice remains a remarkably flexible instrument; capable both of soft-spun timbres and one with a powerful cutting edge, equally convincing in resonant, low tones and scat-like passages way up high." She is a national treasure.

For more information on Odetta including a discography, acting credits and a detailed biography, please contact:

PUBLICITY:

NorthStar Entertainment
Sheryl Northrop
805-498-5880
sheryl@northstar-ent.com
<http://www.northstar-ent.com/>



RECORD LABEL:

M.C. Records
Mark Carpentieri
631-754-8725
mc@mc-records.com

MANAGEMENT:

Douglas A. Yeager Prod., Ltd.
Douglas Yeager
212-245-0240
yeagerprod@aol.com

BOOKING:

Concerted Efforts
Chris Colbourn
617-969-0810
chris@concertedefforts.com