

## Carolina Chocolate Drops Bio

“Tradition is a guide, not a jailer. We play in an older tradition but we are modern musicians.”

—Justin Robinson

In the summer and fall of 2005, three young black musicians, Dom Flemons, Rhiannon Giddens, and Justin Robinson, made the commitment to travel to Mebane, N.C., every Thursday night to sit in the home of old-time fiddler Joe Thompson for a musical jam session. Joe was in his 80's, a black fiddler with a short bowing style that he inherited from generations of family musicians. He had learned to play a wide ranging set of tunes sitting on the back porch with other players after a day of field work. Now he was passing those same lessons on to a new generation.

When the three students decided to form a band, they didn't have big plans. It was mostly a tribute to Joe, a chance to bring his music back out of the house again and into dance halls and public places. They called themselves The Chocolate Drops as a tip of the hat to the Tennessee Chocolate Drops, three black brothers Howard, Martin and Bogan Armstrong, who lit up the music scene in the 1930's. Honing and experimenting with Joe's repertoire, the band often coaxed their teacher out of the house to join them on stage. Joe's charisma and charm regularly stole the show.

Being young and living in the 21st century, the Chocolate Drops first hooked up through a yahoo group, Black Banjo: Then and Now (BBT&N) hosted by Tom Thomas and Sule Greg Wilson. Dom was still living in Arizona, but in April 2005, when the web-chat spawned the Black Banjo Gathering in Asheville, N.C., he flew east and ended moving to the Piedmont where he could get at the music first hand. Joe Thompson's house was the proof in the pudding.

The Chocolate Drops started playing around, rolling out the tunes wherever anyone would listen. From town squares to farmer's markets, they perfected their playing and began to win an avid following of foot-tapping, sing-along, audiences. In 2006, they picked up a spot at the locally-based Shakori Hills Festival where they lit such a fire on the dance tent floor that Tim and Denise Duffy of the Music Maker Relief Foundation came over to see what was going on. Rhiannon remembers being skeptical when this local Hillsborough, N.C., guy with a goofy smile and a roster of old blues musicians offered to take them on and promote their music. The band was still figuring out who they were and Duffy was offering to house them with people like Algie Mae Hinton, musicians who were not pretenders to a tradition, but the real thing.

The connection turned out to be a great match. While the young “Drops” were upstarts in a stable of deep tradition, they were also the link between past and future. They began to

expand their repertoire, taking advantage of what Dom calls “the novelty factor” to get folks in the door and then teaching and thrilling them with traditional music that was evolving as they performed. They teased audiences with history on tunes like “Dixie”, the apparent Southern anthem that musicologists suggest was stolen by the black-face minstrel Dan Emmert from the Snowden family, black Ohio musicians who missed their warm, sunny home. The “Drops” gave new energy to old tunes like John Henry and Sally Ann, adding blues songs, Gaelic acappella, and flat-footing to the show.

The band moved up through the festival circuit, from the Mt. Airy Fiddler’s Convention to MerleFest. They shared the stage with their new fan, Taj Mahal, and traveled to Europe. In 2007 they appeared in Denzel Washington’s film, *The Great Debators* and joined Garrison Keiler on *Prairie Home Companion*. In 2008, they received an invitation to play on the Grand Ole Opry. “The Drops were the first black string band to play the Opry,” Duffy notes. “The Opry has a huge black following but you don’t see that on stage.” Opry host, Marty Stewart, pronounced the performance a healing moment for the Opry.

Off-stage, the connection to Music Maker Relief Foundation meant a place to record. In 2007, Music Maker issued *Dona Got a Ramblin’ Mind* and, in 2009, *Carolina Chocolate Drops & Joe Thompson*. In 2010, with the release of their Nonesuch recording, *Genuine Negro Jig*, the group confirms its place in the music pantheon. With its tongue in cheek, multiple-meaning title, the album ranges boldly from Joe Thompson’s *Cindy Gal* to Tom Waits’ *Trampled Rose* and Rhiannon’s acoustic hip hop version of R&B artist Blu Cantrell’s Hit ‘*Em Up Style*.

Rolling Stone Magazine described the Carolina Chocolate Drops’ style as “dirt-floor-dance electricity”. If you ask the band, that is what matters most. Yes, banjos and black string musicians first got here on slave ships, but now this is everyone’s music. It’s OK to mix it up and go where the spirit moves.