

Kingdom Come

The Jefferson Center requests support for the creation, development and first performance of “Kingdom Come,” by poet Nikki Giovanni in collaboration with videographer Pam Payne, and the Paschall Brothers gospel ensemble.

Nikki Giovanni, among the most widely read and celebrated poets in the United States, was a seminal figure in the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and ‘70s. BAM was the militant literary corollary to the Black Power political and social movement, and it continues to resonate in the work of hundreds of writers-of-color. Black Arts was very much a product of its time, which was also characterized by a mass popular culture that lionized the work of white entertainers who had appropriated black genres. The careers of Elvis Presley, Bobby Darin, the Beatles and Rolling Stones (to name just a few), owed a debt of enormous proportions to African American artists whose work they often borrowed wholesale. While these artists were explicit in acknowledging their sources, many of their white fans remained ignorant of where all that cool music came from; and some African American listeners felt constrained to support upstart white performers when their black precursors continued to toil in relative obscurity.

In “Kingdom Come,” as in much of her work, Nikki Giovanni seeks to challenge the stereotypes and point to the synergies that link the Black Arts Movement and the popular rock ‘n’ roll that it grew up beside. “It’s time,” she says, “for black folks to reclaim Elvis.”

“Kingdom Come” will highlight Nikki Giovanni, performing excerpts of her poetry in interaction with video clips of Elvis Presley and other ‘60s musical icons and performances of their songs “reclaimed” by gospel greats the Paschall Brothers. The music of Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis and many other early rockabilly/rock ‘n’ roll stars drew explicitly on the black gospel canon, particularly the quartet style that reigned in the 1940s and ‘50s (Elvis’ backup group, the Jordanaires, continued to work as a gospel quartet long after they were drafted into singing on “Hound Dog”). The musical performances in “Kingdom Come” will reveal these linkages, dragging the material of Presley and others back across WEB DuBois’ famous “color line.” The poems, songs and archival video clips will combine to create a nuance-rich text, an imagined conversation across decades and racial lines.

In addition to assembling and sequencing the archival videotapes, videographer Pam Payne will both amplify and obscure the onstage action through real-time digital video manipulations of the performers’ images. Live-action projections of Giovanni and the Paschalls will “interact” with ‘60s musical, political and social icons onscreen, allowing for poetic, musical and political commentary between contemporary artists and historic figures. The video action will create a performance context in which J. Edgar Hoover might “recite” a poem like “The Great Pax Whitie” in Nikki Giovanni’s voice, or “comment” on the social dangers of the Paschall’s gospelized delivery of “All Shook Up.” Just as the media in the 1960s both amplified and distorted the images of artists like Elvis – as well as political figures like H. Rap Brown and BAM poets like Nikki

Giovanni – the video projections during “Kingdom Come” will play an ambiguous, but always larger-than-life role, creating a multimedia “mash-up.”

Payne will also document the final performance, which will be edited into a DVD.

It is significant that Jefferson Center should be the commissioner of this piece. During the years of Jim Crow, Jefferson was the segregated “white” high school for Roanoke. There is a complex layer of symbolism – that will not be lost on any of the locals – in the exploration of the dialectic between black nationalism and white American pop culture in this particular venue, which holds its own deep associations.

This project was conceptualized by Nikki Giovanni, who is the principal artist and primary aesthetic driving force behind this proposal. She will be working in partnership with the musicians and videographer, and with Jefferson Center Artistic Director Dylan Locke.