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Meshell Ndegeocello

Beyond Artist of the Year
Electric Bassist of the Year

Multi-instrumentalist, composer, bandleader and vocalist Meshell Ndegeocello has been a musical force to be reckoned with ever since she dropped her debut album *Plantation Lullabies* in 1993. She sang about the plural state of the world and the personal inventions and dimensions of her identity. Ndegeocello has also recorded the music of Prince, Sade and TLC, but her 2024 release, *No More Water: The Gospel Of James Baldwin*, is her towering tribute to the legendary essayist and novelist who celebrated his centenary last year.

Ndegeocello performed a concert in 2016 dedicated to Baldwin at The Harlem Stage Gatehouse as part of its annual showcase honoring him. She read his seminal book, *The Fire Next Time*, which changed her life and her music. *No More Water* finds Ndegeocello as part of an ensemble that includes younger musicians who grew up listening to her. These talented young Turks include guitarist and co-producer Chris Bruce, vocalist Justin Hicks, saxophonist Josh Johnson, keyboardist Jebin Bruni, drummer-vocalist Kenita Miller-Hicks, keyboardists Jake Sherman and Julius Rodriguez, trumpeter Paul Thompson, spoken word poet Staceyann Chin and Pulitzer Prize-winning author and critic Hilton Als.

Baldwin was a child preacher, which is why the spirit of the Black church permeates *No More Water's* 17 tracks. They range from the mellow dramatic backbeat of "Trouble," the insurgent, spoken-word urgency of "Raise The Roof" and Ndegeocello's guitar-driven "The Price Of The Ticket" to the Global South-grooved "Travel" and the Afro-anthem "Pride I" and "Pride II." Baldwin's writings on race and love have been illuminated by Ndegeocello's evocative musical parallel.

—Eugene Holley Jr.

Ingrid Laubrock

Rising Star Composer of the Year
Rising Star Large Ensemble of the Year

Purposing The Air is a triumph of modern chamber music, refined, cerebral and emotionally resonant. Though traces of jazz surface in the phrasing, the experience is more akin to attending a contemporary recital at a modern art museum: demanding, intimate and unapologetically artistic. Every performer involved seeks not just technical precision, but also theatrical nuance and expressive depth. It stands, without question, among the most compelling musical releases in recent memory. To fully engage with this record, one must enter Laubrock's world shaped by a lifelong love of literature and language.

Raised in a home where the sound and meaning of words were revered, Laubrock composes with a poet's ear and a philosopher's restraint. Her music invites introspection and resists easy interpretation, resulting in a body of work that feels both timeless and uncompromisingly modern.

She recalls learning Portuguese while performing with Brazilian singer Mônica Vasconcelos, who emphasized the emotional weight of lyrics. That melding of linguistic sensitivity and musical experimentation informs her compositional voice. Many of the pieces were composed in solitude during the 2021 COVID lockdown, often while in residence in the U.S. and Europe or in rare moments of domestic quiet. The poems that inspired the duets were matched to instruments intuitively, less by logic than by sonic intuition. The result is an album of rare coherence, driven by emotion and executed with grace. My vote reflects this artistry, and a desire to spotlight a singular female voice in contemporary music.

—Thierry De Clemensat

