

While Mighty Thunders Roll: Popular Artists Sing the Shakers *The Artists*

Little Nora Brown, traditional folk singer, performs “The Saviour’s Watchword” (written in 1849 by Shakers at Canterbury, New Hampshire) and “Little Children” (1857, Pleasant Hill, Kentucky). Says the artist: “There’s ballads and old-time music, and I do that a lot, but I think, singing *a cappella*, it’s more pure, just to hear the sound coming from the body. And with the Shaker songs the words are deep. Sort of like poetry.” Brown, of Brooklyn, New York, plays banjo, ukulele, and accordion. She started learning ukulele at age six from the late Shlomo Pestcoe. Now thirteen, Brown is mentored by many of her favorite old-time musicians, including Alice Gerrard, John Cohen, Clifton Hicks, KC Groves, Courtney Hartman, Anna Roberts-Gevalt, Mac Traynham, John Haywood, Ali Dineen, and Brett Ratliff. She won first place in youth banjo in 2017 and 2018 at the Clifftop Appalachian String Band Music Festival in West Virginia. She has a heavy focus and interest in eastern Kentucky overhand picking and unaccompanied ballads. “Little Nora Brown has a host of roots music legends pouring out of her fingertips and through her lips.” — *The Bluegrass Situation*

Tim Eriksen, folk and punk rock singer, performs “Farewell Earthly Joys” (1855, Canterbury, New Hampshire) and “Father James’ Song” (1783, Harvard, Massachusetts). Says the artist: “The tune of ‘Farewell Earthly Joys,’ that sense of longing, and everything about it makes it one of my favorites. That feeling of looking for something deeper, something more lasting, is certainly not out of step with contemporary thought.” Eriksen, of Amherst, Massachusetts is an American musician, musicologist, and professor. He is the leader of the band Cordelia’s Dad, a solo artist, and was a performer and consultant for the award-winning soundtrack of the film *Cold Mountain*. He also performed on the soundtrack, singing with Riley Baugus, and was part of *The Great High Mountain Tour*, which celebrated the traditional music of *Cold Mountain* and *O Brother, Where Art Thou*. Eriksen has been a guest on *A Prairie Home Companion* and his composition “I Wish the Wars Were All Over” concludes Joan Baez’s 2018 farewell album. “Among the world’s finest folk practitioners.” — *Toronto Star*

Rayna Gellert, bluegrass and folk singer, performs “I Never Did Believe” (1829, written by Eldress Betsy Bates, New Lebanon, New York). “Spiritual music is good. It’s just good music. And I feel that you can respond to it on a spiritual level no matter what your spirituality might be. It makes me feel something. I never get tired of that.” Gellert, of Nashville, Tennessee, has spent most of her life immersed in the sounds of rural stringband music, heartfelt gospel songs, and old ballads. After honing her fiddle skills at jam sessions and square dances, Gellert fell into a life of traveling and performing. Her fiddle albums are widely celebrated in the old-time music community, and she has recorded with a host of musicians — including Robyn Hitchcock, Tyler Ramsey, Sara Watkins, Loudon Wainwright III, John Paul Jones, and Abigail Washburn. “She’s a prodigious talent, equally adept on fiddle and guitar, as well as a superb singer to boot.” — *Elmore Magazine*

Alice Gerrard, country and bluegrass singer, performs “Lay Me Low” (1838, Sister Addah Z. Potter, New Lebanon, New York). “I became obsessed with this song. I spent about four days researching it, and it was fascinating. The Shakers are fascinating. There is so much to be said about their beliefs and way of life.” Gerrard, of Durham, North Carolina, an important figure in American folk music, has a particular skill for harmonies and is known for her groundbreaking collaboration with Appalachian singer Hazel Dickens that influenced scores of young women singers, including the Judds and Rosanne Cash. She is a Grammy-nominated bluegrass Hall of Fame musician who has won numerous honors, including an

International Bluegrass Music Association Distinguished Achievement Award, a Virginia Arts Commission Award, the North Carolina Folklore Society's Tommy Jarrell Award, and an Indy Award. "One of the best voices in contemporary old-time music." — *No Depression*

Hiss Golden Messenger, indie folk and blues band, performs "Fall on the Rock" (1845, Watervliet, New York). Michael Taylor of Hiss Golden Messenger says: "I was drawn to 'Fall on the Rock' because the melody to me is compelling. Like any song, the thing that gets my soul first is the melody. That's often the thing I feel first." Hiss Golden Messenger, of Durham, North Carolina, a vehicle for singer-songwriter Michael (M. C.) Taylor, calls up a wide spectrum of American vernacular music — from Archie Brownlee to the Staple Singers, and from singer-songwriters Van Morrison to Townes Van Zandt. HGM was technically born in California, where a young Taylor dabbled in hardcore punk, indie rock, folk, and country rock while a student at UC-Santa Barbara. After relocating to North Carolina, Taylor began to record material under the alias of Hiss Golden Messenger, but performs entirely solo with just an acoustic guitar for accompaniment when playing live. "His songs are smart and complex enough to betray a bigger and more insane question: What makes a person happy?" — *The New Yorker*

Katell Keineg, modern jazz singer, performs "Willow Tree" (1840s, Sister Mary Hazard, New Lebanon, New York). "The first Shaker song I heard was 'Simple Gifts' sung by Judy Collins," Keineg said. "What I love most about Shaker songs are the simplicity and poignancy of some of the melodies and lyrics. I'm glad to contribute to anything that helps to preserve the songs." Keineg, of Cardiff, Wales, is an alt-pop singer/songwriter known for her eclectic style. One of the finest singer-songwriters of her generation, she is the daughter of Breton poet and playwright Paol Keineg. In 1993, Iggy Pop passed a copy of her single "Hestia" on to Elektra Records, which led to the 1994 release of her acclaimed debut album *Ô Seasons Ô Castles*. Keineg has toured Europe and North America, playing to sold-out shows. She has appeared at Carnegie Hall with Allen Ginsberg, Philip Glass, and David Byrne, and at the Royal Albert Hall with Natalie Merchant. An early champion of Keineg's music, Merchant included a cover of Keineg's "The Gulf of Araby" on her 1999 live album. "It's damn near impossible to listen to her earthy and ethereal voice without feeling the spirit move you." — *Rolling Stone*

Yo-Yo Ma, classical cellist, performs "All is Summer" (1875, Groveland, New York), "Who Will Bow and Bend Like a Willow" (1843, Canterbury, New Hampshire), and "Step Tune" (1858, New Lebanon, New York). Says Ma: "The Shakers loved music and they loved to dance. And, so much of the music is a joyful celebration of community. The Shaker community and philosophy is part of an original American tradition." Ma was born in Paris, France, a child cellist prodigy of Chinese descent who started performing when he was just four and years old. He rose to prominence playing with renowned orchestras like the Marlboro Festival Orchestra. In the late '90s, Ma was featured on John Williams' soundtrack to the Hollywood war drama *Seven Years in Tibet*. He went on to appear on prolific film soundtracks such as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *Memoirs of a Geisha*. In 2001, Ma was awarded the National Medal of Arts, and in 2006, the UN Secretary General named him Peace Ambassador. In 2010, he was named a recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom. "One of the best-known cellists of his generation and of the recording era overall, Yo-Yo Ma is recognized not only for his technical virtuosity but for his engaging interpretative ability." — *AllMusic Guide*

Natalie Merchant, folk and pop singer, performs "Watch Ye" (1841, Sister Nancy Wells, Watervliet, New York). "I guess you find whatever you can in your own experience that will be meaningful to other people" (from *Utne Reader*). Merchant is a legendary folk-pop singer who has been performing for more than two decades. She began her career as the lead singer for the band 10,000 Maniacs, which released

eight albums. She later went solo, writing and producing the album *Tigerlily* in 1995. The album, highlighted by Merchant's beautiful vocals and piano playing, sold more than five million copies worldwide. Her music, with its blend of social consciousness and spirituality, encompasses folk-pop and moody ballads. She has said that the inspiration for her songs come from her personal experiences, memories, and observations. "Rarely is an artist so honest and revealing as Natalie Merchant." — NPR Music

Mountain Man, indie and folk band, performing "Simple Gifts" (1848, Elder Joseph Brackett, Alfred, Maine). Notes Alexandra Sauser-Monnig of Mountain Man: " 'Simple Gifts' is a very beautiful song that's such a part of the popular music culture, I feel like I've heard it everywhere my whole life. I really love the sentiment of the song." Mountain Man, of Durham, North Carolina, is composed of Molly Erin Sarle, Alexandra Sauser-Monnig, and Amelia Randall Meath, who met in 2009 in Vermont as students at Bennington College. Today, the configuration remains the same, except for the strong solo identities all three band members have developed. Sauser-Monnig records folk-pop songs under the name Daughter of Sword; NPR calls her single "Gem" "one of the year's most dreamily approachable mood-lifters." Sarle released the solo single "Human" earlier this year ("rings with redemption... Sarle's voice is a beacon" — *The 402*). Meath is "the singing, dancing half of the transcendent synth-pop powerhouse Sylvan Esso" (NPR). *Pitchfork* says of Mountain Man: "They sound as old as the hills and as current as some micro-genre that doesn't have a stupid name yet."

Allison Russell, folk and Americana artist, performs "Pretty Home" (1849, Sister Patsy Williamson, Pleasant Hill, Kentucky) "There are so many layers to this song. It's very powerful to have a document, for posterity, of a black woman in the time of slavery — writing, free and emancipated, this powerful music. It's stood the test of time and resonates now." Russell, of Montreal, Quebec, Canada, is half of husband-and-wife team Birds of Chicago, which makes soulful, heartfelt music that they refer to as secular gospel. Formerly a member of the Canadian roots act Po' Girl, Russell is a talented multi-instrumentalist, singer, and songwriter. *Paste Magazine* called the Birds of Chicago an "Americana gospel dream team" and NPR's Folk Alley included their album *Real Midnight* in their top ten favorite albums of the year. As a member of folk supergroup Our Native Daughters, Russell recently collaborated with Rhiannon Giddens, Amythyst Kiah, and Leyla McCalla on the critically acclaimed and celebrated Smithsonian release *Songs of Our Native Daughters*. "Singer Allison Russell conveys her conviction with a religious-like reverence." — *Elmore Magazine*