

RHIANNON GIDDENS: MUSICAL EXPLORER

Rhiannon (pronounced ree-Ann-un) Giddens is a trained opera singer who plays the banjo and fiddle and has performed music ranging from gospel and folk to bluegrass and the blues. Giddens has spent much of her career bringing to light the contributions of early Black artists to American music, especially country.

Born in 1977 in Greensboro, North Carolina, Giddens is the daughter of a white father and a mother who is Native American and Black. Her parents introduced her to folk, rock, and classical music, and her grandparents listened to jazz, blues, and country. “So,” she says, “it was kind of like I had bits and pieces from lots of different places.”

Giddens attended the Oberlin Conservatory of Music in Oberlin, Ohio, where she studied opera singing, but after college, she became drawn to Black and white “roots” music, the old-time songs that form the foundation of today’s music. She began teaching herself to play an early form of the banjo that dates back to the mid-1800s and traces its ancestry to West Africa.

At a 2005 banjo festival in Boone, North Carolina, she met an elderly Black fiddler named Joe Thompson, who had spent his life performing old folk and blues songs that had been passed down to him. Thompson taught Giddens, as well as musicians Justin Robinson and Dom Flemons, the old-time music method of playing. Giddens, Robinson, and Flemons formed a Black stringband called the Carolina Chocolate Drops, similar in style to bands from the early 1900s.



Giddens started writing new songs in the old-time tradition for the band to perform, and in 2011, the group won a Grammy award for Best Traditional Folk Album for its 2010 album, *Genuine Negro Jig*. Four years later, Giddens began exploring other music as a solo artist, and her albums include sounds from the American tradition as well as music from African, European, Latin American, and Arab cultures.

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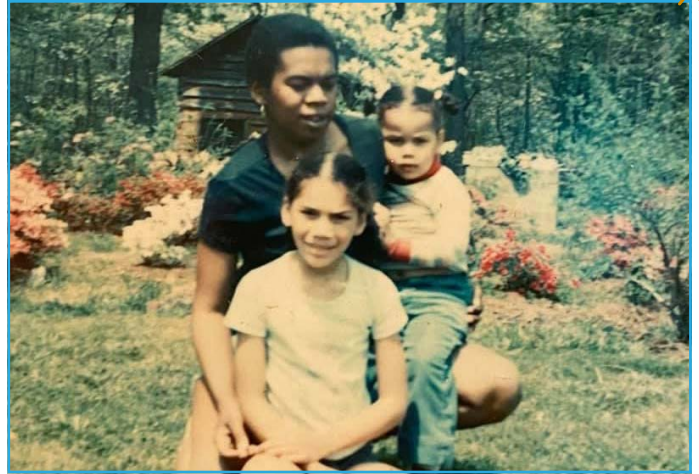
LISTEN

“Julie,” “Amazing Grace” (with Francesco Turrisi), “Moon Meets the Sun” (with Our Native Daughters)

RHIANNON GIDDENS: MUSICAL EXPLORER (CONTINUED)

In 2019, Giddens joined Amythyst Kiah, Leyla McCalla, and Allison Russell, three other Black singer-songwriters who all play banjo, to form the quartet Our Native Daughters. The group created an album inspired by the struggles and courage of Black women.

Giddens recently wrote a children’s book, *Build a House*, which is based on a song she wrote in 2020 about the strength of an enslaved family. Giddens says, “I’m so excited to get to explore a different way to tell the stories I’ve been trying to highlight with my songs and my music.”



CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. What types of music did Giddens listen to when she was growing up?

2. Circle the phrase “bringing to light” in the first paragraph and define it in your own words. Underline the clue words and phrases that help you understand its meaning.

3. Why do you think it is important for Giddens to learn about “roots” music and how to play it?

