

## RHIANNON GIDDENS: MUSICAL EXPLORER

Rhiannon (pronounced ree-Ann-un) Giddens has spent her entire life traveling through musical and racial crossroads. A trained opera singer who plays the banjo and fiddle, she has used her gifts to perform and record in genres ranging from gospel and folk to bluegrass and the blues. As a multi-racial artist, she has devoted much of her career to bringing to light the often-forgotten contributions of early Black musicians to American music, especially country music.

Born February 21, 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. Her mother’s parents listened to jazz, blues, and country. “So,” Giddens says, “it was kind of like I had bits and pieces from lots of different places.”

A standout member of a local youth choir, she pursued a degree in vocal performance at the renowned Oberlin Conservatory of Music in Oberlin, Ohio. After college, she lost interest in opera and 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. She, along with fellow musicians Justin Robinson and Dom Flemons, spent long hours playing with Thompson to learn the songs that had served as building blocks for modern country, as well as soul, R&B, folk, and bluegrass. To revive this history, Giddens, Robinson, and Flemons formed the Carolina Chocolate Drops, a Black stringband similar to bands in the early 1900s. Giddens also started writing new songs in the Black tradition for the band to perform. “I feel like what I do



as an artist is bridge things,” she says. “I bridge Black to white. I bridge country to blues. Even though that stuff doesn’t really need bridges, that is something I do.”

In 2011, the group won a Grammy for Best Traditional Folk Album for its 2010 album, *Genuine Negro Jig*. Four years later, Giddens began exploring other musical intersections as a solo artist, and she became known for making albums that draw not only from the American songbook but also from music that has grown out of African, European, Latin American, and Arab cultures.

“The reason that things can combine is because there’s a core of similarity,” she says. “If different cultures couldn’t talk to each other, we wouldn’t have rock & roll or bluegrass or the blues. The more we can expose cross-cultural collaboration, the better.”

*Continued on back*

### LISTEN

“Julie,” “Waterboy,” “Amazing Grace” (with Francesco Turrisi), “Hit ‘Em Up Style” (with Carolina Chocolate Drops), “Moon Meets the Sun” (with Our Native Daughters)

## RHIANNON GIDDENS: MUSICAL EXPLORER (CONTINUED)

Over the years, Giddens’s boundless passion and creativity has attracted significant opportunities. In 2017, she received a MacArthur Foundation “genius” grant, a no-strings-attached gift of \$625,000 that rewarded her for “bringing to light new connections between music from the past and the present.”

She has co-written the score for *Lucy Negro Redux*, a ballet about a Black woman who some scholars believe inspired a character in Shakespeare’s sonnets; it debuted in Nashville in 2019.

That same year, she enlisted Amythyst Kiah, Leyla McCalla, and Allison Russell, three fellow 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. In 2022, she premiered *Omar*, a Pulitzer-Prize winning opera she co-wrote that is based on the life of Omar Ibn Said, a nineteenth-century South Carolina enslaved man.



Also in 2022, she became the artistic director of Silkroad, a cross-cultural instrumental ensemble founded by famed classical cellist Yo-Yo Ma.

Giddens recently has added children’s book author to her list of accomplishments. The first of four planned picture books, *Build a House* is based on a song she wrote in 2020 about the strength of an enslaved family. “I’m so excited,” she says of this latest achievement, “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. Name four genres of music that Giddens has performed over the years.

---

---

---

2. Circle the phrase “cross-cultural collaboration” in paragraph six. How does this phrase relate to Giddens’s music?

---

---

---

3. Describe Giddens’s connection to “roots” music.

---

---

---