

All

Voice of her beautiful country

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One hundred and fifty years ago Friday, South Carolina passed a law calling for a secession convention to be held Dec. 17, 1860.

The Palmetto State's James H. Hammond and James Chestnut Jr. resigned their seats in the United States Senate.

A succession of other events, including six other states leaving the Union by Feb. 1, led to Confederate troops firing on Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor on April 12, 1861, igniting, literally, the Civil War.

Near at hand these days are a number of plans around the country to mark the sesquicentennial of that conflagration. It tore the country apart and set the tone after its conclusion in April 1865 for working out the grand political experiment, the one that began on July 4, 1776, that we're still trying to figure out.

As a program producer and a native of Charleston, I've been thinking about a project I could mount to acknowledge that Constitutional crisis, one of the most important, if not the most important, events in our country's history.

I've been mulling it for some time now but haven't come up with much except for some vague sketches of ideas around the music of that time vis a vis today's music.

Then on Thursday, I had an epiphany. The light bulb came on.

I was reflecting on having completed a difficult project, feeling very satisfied and gratified. I had finished the liner notes for vocalist Rene Marie's new record, "Voice of My Beautiful Country."

It's one of the most interesting CD's I've ever heard and I was pleased with my work on it, especially since the record company drastically moved up the deadline for my work from two weeks out back to Thursday.

Over the last five or six years, I've become friends with Marie. I've written about her, including the liner notes for her last album, "Experiment in Truth."

That disc, like this upcoming one, was recorded here in Charleston, the former at the College of Charleston and the later at Charleston Sound studios. Both were mixed at Quentin Baxter's West Ashley studio.

Take it from me, Marie's totally American. And she loves her country dearly.

That really has been brought home to her, she says, since her touring has taken her around the world, exposing her to Old World cultures and the way of life in other parts of the New World.

She's smart, sensitive and soulful, so she learns from her myriad experiences, of which there have been a variety.

She grew up in the segregated South so she knows the slings and arrows and trials and tribulations of the American experience, in general, and the African-American experience, in particular.

Like me, she was born and raised in the part of the country, the antagonist in the Civil War, that gained obscenely vast wealth on the backs of the free labor of our ancestors.

Having turned 55 last month, she's been rebuked and she's been scorned. Time and time again.

But jazz angel that she is, she soars above the lowlights of life by the way she lives and sings.

"Voice of My Beautiful Country" is evidence of that, expressed with an eloquence that elevates the spirit.

True to her musical roots, she has taken patriotic anthems, pop songs, traditional melodies and folk tunes and re-imagined them as jazz songs. She turns them inside out and upside down while leaving intact their original character.

It's gorgeous stuff.

Given her skills and her geographic origins, she is eminently qualified to undertake such a project. She was born and raised in the Shenandoah Valley, Warrenton and Roanoke, Va.

Her bandmates are also Southern. Pianist Kevin Bales is from Atlanta, bassist Rodney Jordan from Nashville and percussionist Quentin Baxter from Charleston, just across the harbor from Fort Sumter where the Civil War started.

With this record, the South has risen again.

That's what my eyes were opened to Thursday. At the same time, I'm wondering how I'm going to mark the Civil War with an event of some sort. I'm working on a project that has done just that, unintentionally, but very effectively.

Hello. I finally saw the forest and the trees.

The content of the record is pure Americana.

The form is jazz, America's greatest cultural contribution to the world.

It's also a marvel of American ingenuity.

The centerpiece of the record is a long-form work she wrote. It comprises "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing," "America the Beautiful," "My Country, 'Tis of Thee" and "The Star-Spangled

Banner."

She extracted words from the titles to come up with one for her magnum opus. Marie and her band performed it to great acclaim at the 2009 Spoleto Festival USA.

She told me at that time, "'Voice of My Beautiful Country' is the name of a suite I composed shortly after an interview in Russia several years ago during which the interviewer asked me a question about being American. Out of the interviewer's pointed questions came a strong need to understand and express how I feel about having grown up in this country as an American woman whose ancestors were slaves."

She went on, "My arrangement of these songs is a straight-up reflection of specific aspects of American music — jazz, gospel and blues — that still retains the same patriotic lyrics that I learned as a child in my segregated hometown of Warrenton, Va., 40 miles from our nation's capital. I composed the music for these songs over a period of four to five years.

"... The result has become a musical pastiche of rhythms, colloquial expressions, dialects and topics, which more accurately reflect the America I grew up in and live in now, the America with which I more honestly identify, that more accurately reflects the people I know, the America I love."

The CD is due to drop March 8 on the Motema label.

That's 150 years and four days after Abraham Lincoln said of the North and the South in his inaugural address:

"We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature."

He was right.

Marie is one of those angels.

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