

Bernice Johnson Reagon to be regents' lecturer

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Afro-American history and culture come alive when presented by Bernice Johnson Reagon, a singer, songwriter, historian and leader of the vocal group, Sweet Honey in the Rock.

Reagon will be a regents' lecturer at the University of California, San Diego from November 24 to 26. During her stay, she will lecture on black American music and the development of Afro-American literature.

Sweet Honey in the Rock, a quartet of women who sing a capella the songs of black America, will present a "song shop" at 7 p.m. Tuesday, November 25, in the Humanities-Library Building Auditorium on Revelle campus. Admission to the performance is free.

Bernice Reagon earned her Ph.D. in American history at Howard University in Washington, D.C. She has been program director and culture historian in the Program in Black American Culture at the Smithsonian Institution since 1974.

As the daughter of a Baptist minister, Reagon began singing as a youngster in her father's church. She was moved by the power and beauty of the gospels sung by the congregation.

She entered college in 1959 as a music major. Though she was the highest-ranking student at Albany State College, she was suspended for her activities in the then burgeoning civil rights movement. She was also arrested for participating in the Albany March, and she recalls that the main activity of the protesters being held in jail was singing.

"The major thing that held me together in jail was music, and it was not the music I'd been doing in school," says Reagon. "It was the songs I had sung in church, the songs people had learned in traditional settings."

After her suspension from school, Reagon began touring with the Freedom Singers of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Her involvement with the civil rights movement took her all over the South as a singer and an organizer. She recorded a number of albums, including a solo album with Folkways records.

Eventually, Reagon moved to Washington, D.C. and became vocal director of the D.C. Black Repertory Theater. From this affiliation grew Sweet Honey in the Rock, a name taken from a black spiritual about a land so sweet that honey flows from the rocks. The group has recorded two highly acclaimed albums, the second one consisting of songs written by Reagon. Sweet Honey's repertoire ranges from traditional jazz, blues and gospel songs to modern protest ballads.

Reagon's scholarly activities for the Smithsonian Institution have taken her to Benin, Ghana, Haiti, Liberia, Nigeria, Senegal, Zaire and Egypt on research and diplomatic tours. She has written books and articles on black American culture and its relationship to African and Caribbean experiences, on the black civil rights movement and on black history through music. She has profiled women who have been prominent in the civil rights movement.

"My identity is black, woman, singer, historian, mother--all these things," says Reagon. "I get lots of questions about 'are you a singer or a historian? How can you be a mother and be all of these things.'"

"A major part of my struggle is that human beings ought to be invited to try out their complexities and not be forced to give into narrow concepts of themselves," she says.

Reagon's visit to UC San Diego is being sponsored by the Black Performing Arts Group and the Council of Provosts.

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