



MESHELL NDEGEOCELLO

Meshell Ndegeocello's first two Blue Note albums – *The Omnichord Real Book* (2023) and *No More Water: The Gospel Of James Baldwin* (2024) – have persuasively reasserted her status as an unparalleled force in modern music, earning her the first two GRAMMY Awards to honor her own albums in her three-decade long recording career, exploding any remaining notions of genre boundaries, and coalescing a tight-knit creative circle that operates collectively in the spirit of their motto: MESHELL NDEGEOCELLO IS A BAND.

With her third, ***Synonym***, Ndegeocello reaches even higher to deliver one of the most ambitious projects in her impressive discography by expanding her cast of collaborators to include an astounding rollcall of featured guests. At its core, the album captures her ingenuity at reimagining and reconceptualizing songs written and performed by other musicians. Exploring expressions of desire, care, heartbreak, friendship, disappointment, and love in all forms, the thoughtfully curated collection of covers ranges from 1960's folk and '70s soul, country, and pop to '80s R&B and electro-boogie, early-'90s alternative rock, and early-aughts hip-hop.

"This project is about classic songs that are known and loved," Ndegeocello explains. "The songs have diverse tones, representing various genres and intentional grooves. But the album is also about joy, selfhood, individual representation, and universal experience."

When asked about the album's intriguing title, Ndegeocello first suggests that the word "just feels good on the mouth," before expounding upon its true definition: a word or phrase that means the same thing as another word in the same language. "That's how humans are," Ndegeocello theorizes, "Regardless of our differences, deep down we essentially want the same things: healthy food and a safe place to live. We are all different. But at the core of the human condition, we are the same."

"This project is an expression of queer liberation as a synonym for liberation of all kinds," she continues. "The queer community claimed me when others didn't and for a long time that felt too far away from other communities to which I belong but now I recognize the ways in which it all overlaps. Once again, I went back to my elders: Audre Lorde told us that there is no single issue struggle. Similarly, these arrangements are synonyms for their originals – these different sounds still mean the same thing."

A significant aspect of *Synonym* is that the songs are delivered as duets by people who identify as the same gender. "Or hover around the same continuum of feeling," clarifies Ndegeocello, acknowledging that gender expression is often fluid. "Hopefully, that's what stands out – that everyone is well matched musically and complement each other. That said: I'm not defining anything, because the absence of definition is where I feel most free."

As a multi-instrumentalist – bass being her primary instrument – songwriter, singer, producer, and conceptualist, Ndegeocello emits enough star power to light up the entire solar system. Nevertheless, on *Synonym* she surrounds herself with an array of guest artists that compose a whole new galaxy of gleaming talent including **Cynthia Erivo, Cat Power, Chaka Khan, Brandi Carlile, WILLOW, Lianne La Havas, Laura Lee, Moses Sumney, Destin Conrad, Nick Hakim, Robert Glasper, Lizz Wright, Emily King, Madison Cunningham, Bill Callahan, Chris Thile, ANOHNI, Evann McIntosh, and Ink.**

The album notably marks a reunion with **David Gamson**, the producer of Ndegeocello's first two classic albums – *Plantation Lullabies* (1993) and *Peace Beyond Passion* (1996) – who co-produced *Synonym* with Ndegeocello and **Abe Rounds**. A rotating cast of instrumentalists also anchors the music on the album, many of whom are Ndegeocello's close artistic conspirators, including drummers Rounds and **Deantoni Parks**; guitarists **Chris Bruce, Ella Feingold, Wendy Melvoin, Oliver Leiber**, and **Doyle Bramhall**; keyboardists **Jake Sherman, Jebin Bruni, Benny Bock**, and **Larry Goldings**; bassists **Gabe Noel** and **Alan Hampton**; saxophonists **Josh Johnson** and **Levon Henry**; banjoist **Bela Fleck**; and flutist **Elena Pinderhughes**.

Synonym opens with an arresting take on the George Michael and Aretha Franklin duet “**I Knew You Were Waiting (For Me)**” sung by Ndegeocello and Cynthia Erivo who Meshell reveals was the first guest artist to agree to participate on *Synonym*. “I have to admit that I’ve watched *Wicked* about 10 times,” gushes Ndegeocello about her admiration for Erivo. “It’s a piece of work that truly speaks to me,” explaining that she relates deeply to Erivo’s character, Elphaba.” Ndegeocello praises Erivo’s singing for containing “so much grace and beauty.”

The album’s second cut is a deep reggae refurbishing of the Human League’s “**Don’t You Want Me**,” featuring Cat Power. “She taught me song styling,” Ndegeocello says. “She showed how to use my own voice to interpret the song without mimicking the original.”

Chaka Khan joins Ndegeocello on a dreamy, uplifting makeover of “**Islands In the Stream**,” a Bee Gees song made famous by Dolly Parton and Kenny Rogers. Ndegeocello explains that the song blends her love for both Aussie soul – via the Bee Gees – and Roxy Music. “I wanted Chaka to be Brian Eno; and I wanted to be Bryan Ferry. I wanted to do something fun with Chaka. And metaphorically, Chaka and I are like islands in the steam. She came into my life as an elder who saw me going through the music business during my early career. Chaka means so much to my community, which includes the queer community, where she’s such a huge icon.”

Other highlights include the laidback Southern-flavored reading of George Jones and Tammy Wynette’s “**Golden Ring**” featuring Brandi Carlile; a haunting exploration of Yarborough and Peoples’ roller-skate boogie classic, “**Don’t Stop the Music**,” featuring Nick Hakim and Robert Glasper; and a sunny, twangy take on Roberta Flack and Donny Hathaway’s “**Be Real Black For Me**,” featuring Lizz Wright singing alongside Emily King.

Another Flack/Hathaway classic appears by way of the sexy, electronica-tinged rendering of “**The Closer I Get To You**,” featuring Destin Conrad singing with Moses Sumney. Madison Cunningham features on a mesmerizing retooling of Bob Dylan’s “**It Ain’t Me Babe**.” Ndegeocello again shares her love for the Bee Gees by pairing with Ink for a celestial interpretation of “**Guilty**,” which was originally recorded as a duet by Barbra Streisand and Barry Gibb.

The album’s other brilliant reinventions are the modern funk take of Dennis Edwards and Siedah Garrett’s R&B classic, “**Don’t Look Any Further**,” featuring Lianne Le Havas; a whimsical, an impressionistic jazz deconstruction of Sonny and Cher’s “**I Got You Babe**,” featuring ANOHNI; a sultry, late-night version of Ja Rule and Ashanti’s 2001 hip-hop classic, “**Always On Time**,” featuring Laura Lee of Khruangbin; and spellbinding reading of the Temple of the Dog’s early-’90s socially conscious rock ballad, “**Hunger Strike**,” featuring WILLOW.

Bill Callahan and Chris Thile sing duet on the album’s unforgettable closer – a riveting rendition of Bob Dylan’s folk classic “**With God On Our Side**.” While she loves the energy of Dylan’s original version, “the lyrics just have a lot more aggression in it than its arrangement,” Ndegeocello explains. “So, I was challenged to take this folk song and make it feel like I hear it. It’s like putting together a puzzle with all these little pieces. Rearranging allows me to give more respect to the song.”

“Bill Callahan’s voice to me is enchanting and just draws you in,” Ndegeocello says. “And then my other angel is Chris Thile. He’s a very grounded human being; I just love the earthiness of his voice.”

“Interpreting other people’s music goes back to my D.C. days, playing in go-go bands where you had to take somebody else’s song and put in a different voice or different character,” Ndegeocello says. “Also, my father played in an army big band. So, he and I would talk a lot about the arrangements of different songs, like the quintessential arrangements of Count Basie or Duke Ellington. The song is just the framework.”

Throughout the album, it’s evident that even though Ndegeocello has long been associated with alternative R&B, her love for all kinds of music weighs more than the importance of genre. She also says that *Synonym* represents the stage of her career in which her albums don’t need to narrowly center on herself as the main artist. “I want to do more collective music,” she explains. “On this album, I wanted to show off as a producer. I love being on Blue Note Records, because with that, I still get to be a musician.”

For more information contact Cem Kurosman at Blue Note Records
(p) 212.786.8634 (e) cem.kurosman@umusic.com