

## LIKE A REVIVAL MEETING

# Redbone's Roots Project at The Kate Jan. 5

By Lisa Reisman

OLD SAYBROOK — Talk about Americana.

Martha Redbone, of the Martha Redbone Roots Project, which is bringing its stirring sounds to The Kate on Jan. 5, may just be its very essence.

Her mother, with family rooted for generations in the mountains of Kentucky and Virginia, was a mix of Cherokee, Shawnee and Choctaw. Her father was a gospel-singing African-American from North Carolina.

That meant the musician dubbed "Americana's next superstar" by the Village Voice was raised on "everything from church hymns to Dolly Parton to Sister Rosetta Tharpe to the Jackson Five," she said in a recent phone interview from her studio in Brooklyn, N.Y.

That's not counting the melodies, drones and rhythms of Appalachian string-band music absorbed from her grandparents as a child growing up in Kentucky coal-mining country. And the eclectic imprints from pregentrified Park Slope, Brooklyn, where she moved when she was 11.

Her most recent album, "The Garden of Love — Songs of William Blake," setting the words of the 18th century English poet to the high, lonesome sound of mountain music, is an eloquent expression of those wide-ranging influences.

Produced by Nitty Gritty Dirt Band fixture John McEuen, the lyrics and



Will Maupin / Contributed photo

melodies bring the timeless themes of Blake's poems into the present day.

"I remember reading the lines from Blake's 'A Poison Tree,' — 'I was angry with my friend: I told my wrath, my wrath did end' — and that was such a contemporary idea, of not letting anger build inside to a point that it eats you up. I could imagine a preacher saying that in a sermon," said Redbone, whose Roots Project appeared on the stage of Carnegie Hall in April.

"And the title and verse are so simple and spare, it just sounded so naturally Appalachian."

Reviewers swooned. The New Yorker lauded the release as "a brilliant collision of cultures." It was "a major find," according to eminent rock critic Robert Christgau.

"The overall effect," music writer Jonathan Widran said, "is that listeners who were not English majors will experience some of the most enchanting and emotionally



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Martha Redbone Roots Project will appear at the Katharine Hepburn Cultural Arts Center, 300 Main St., Old Saybrook, on Jan. 5 at 8 p.m. For tickets and information, visit [thekate.org](http://thekate.org) or call 877-503-1286.

**"We want to take you all the way to church and back home again. Our job is to feed you some good soul food, to forget anything that was bothering you, and to send you home feeling good and inspired and uplifted."**

Martha Redbone, of her music concerts

rich poetry ever penned, while also having the opportunity to get to know all of (her) folk and gospel-driven influences."

No more so than in the call and response of the title track. "That's the way it works, not just in church, but in the hollows," said Redbone, who's known to "close her eyes, raise her hands, and deliver a spine-tingling belt," as PopMatters described an outdoor concert in Man-

hattan.

"You call out for whatever it is, to whomever it is, like my grandpa coming back from hunting — and other people holler back. You're testifying."

Which might explain her mission in any performance.

"We want to take you all the way to church and back home again," said Redbone, who's bringing top-tier musicians Aaron Whitby on piano and Char-

lie Burnham on violin and blues harp.

"Our job is to feed you some good soul food," she said, "to forget anything that was bothering you, and to send you home feeling good and inspired and uplifted."

For Redbone, the reason is simple.

"All we can do as a grassroots band is give it our all. Doesn't matter if it's four people or 40,000," she said.

"Gotta get those rafters shaking."

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