

American Songbook In Alice Tully Hall

Sutton Foster and Rhiannon Giddens
Conclude 2017 Season

By Barry Singer



Sutton Foster

Laura Marie Duncan

Sutton Foster and Rhiannon Giddens, two of American song's most restlessly inquisitive artists—albeit singing in entirely different realms—will each headline concerts at Alice Tully Hall for Lincoln Center's American Songbook this spring: on April 14 and May 13, respectively. Neither evening should be missed.

Both artists have been applauded by Songbook audiences for many years. Foster, a beloved two-time Tony winner on Broadway, made her

solo New York concert debut with American Songbook at the intimate Stanley H. Kaplan Penthouse in 2004, then returned in 2009 for a grand evening in The Appel Room (then called The Allen Room) high atop the Jazz at Lincoln Center complex overlooking Columbus Circle.

Giddens, a transcendent figure on the indie music scene, made her Songbook debut in 2011 in the then-Allen Room with her extraordinary band, the Carolina Chocolate Drops,

then returned last year to perform *Swimming in Dark Waters—Other Voices of the American Experience*, with Leyla McCalla and Bhi Bhiman, a meditative exploration of American protest music by musicians of color.

“The very first American Songbook concerts in 1999 were at Alice Tully Hall,” recalls Charles Cermele, producer of Contemporary Programming for Lincoln Center, who programs the series with Jon Nakagawa and Jane Moss.

“Songbook then changed into a more intimate series, moving first to the Kaplan Penthouse, and then to The Allen Room. It’s very exciting to be coming back to Alice Tully Hall: such a big, beautiful space.

“We have a long narrative with these two artists,” Cermele adds proudly. “Sutton made her solo debut up in the Kaplan Penthouse. And Rhiannon’s Carolina Chocolate Drops concert in The Appel Room was an especially momentous occasion. She, Dom Lemons, and

Omnivorous in their embrace of American popular music, both women love to try something new and different, and to take chances.

Justin Robinson—the original Chocolate Drops trio—unexpectedly announced at the outset of the show that it would be Justin’s farewell appearance with the band.



Kevin Yatarola

Rhiannon Giddens performs at last season's American Songbook

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His replacement, Hubbie Jenkins, later joined the Drops on stage. The transition took place right before our eyes and ears. It was a very emotional evening.”

In the annals of American popular song, brilliant female singers have long sung out in abundance. Their names are legion and we all have our favorites, from pop to jazz to Broadway. Consummate individualists, they were predictable in the best sense. Whether it was Mary Martin or Billie Holiday, Judy Garland or Ella Fitzgerald, audiences generally knew what they were going to get. And these women always delivered.

Rhiannon Giddens and Sutton Foster are well on their way to becoming defining artists of their generation. What distinguishes these two present-day lionesses of the American Songbook from their predecessors is a creative venturesomeness of spirit that makes them thrillingly unpredictable. Omnivorous in their embrace of American popular music, both women love to try something new and different, and to take chances.

Foster is the quintessential Broadway Baby, best known for her Tony-winning Broadway breakout in 2002 as the bubbly title character in *Thoroughly Modern Millie* and her thunderous Reno Sweeney in the revival of *Anything Goes*, which brought her a second Tony in 2011. She also stars in the hit TV series *Younger*.

Yet, as her recent Off-Broadway triumph in *Sweet Charity* reaffirmed, Foster is always rethinking and revamping. Her take on Charity Hope Valentine as an ineffably awkward, ever flailing loser was a gutsy tightrope walk of a performance that paid off because of her audacity as well as her talent. She will be bringing both of those gifts to her April Songbook appearance.



Kevin Mazur/Getty Images for Lincoln Center

Sutton Foster at Lincoln Center's 2015 Gala



Dan Winters

Rhiannon Giddens

Giddens is both a conservatory-trained operatic vocalist and a virtuoso multi-instrumentalist from the hills of North Carolina, deeply versed in an all-but-forgotten black string and jug band tradition that reaches back to the dawn of slavery in America. Her band the Carolina Chocolate Drops exhumes this music as a joyous, righteous, bone-deep exorcism. Their debut album, *Genuine Negro Jig*, won a Grammy award in 2011. Lately, as a solo artist, celebrity on an even grander scale has touched Giddens, landing her in lush magazine photo spreads, and even an upcoming appearance on TV's *Nashville*. Her recent EP, *Factory Girl*, on Nonesuch Records, has been nominated for two 2016 Grammys, and her new album, *Freedom Highway*, expands upon her exploration of protest music from last season's American Songbook.

We are living in a time of monumental change, when the essential spirit of inclusiveness that has defined Lincoln Center's American Songbook is being challenged and redefined. Rhiannon Giddens and Sutton Foster embody that open, All-American spirit in very different ways. Their presence this season at Alice Tully Hall therefore feels especially reassuring.

"The arts play a very important role during moments of transition, both as a place for stability and a place for change," maintains Cermele. "One of the exciting things about the American Songbook series is that we are always striving to reflect the changing definition of the word 'American' and the changing stories that are being told in America through popular music. We've been on that path and we're going forward on that ever-evolving path."

Barry Singer currently writes about the arts, literature, and Winston Churchill for the Huffington Post.

American Songbook Lead Support provided by PGIM

Major support for Lincoln Center's American Songbook is provided by Amy & Joseph Perella.

The American Songbook presentation of Sutton Foster is made possible through generous support from Meg and Bennett Goodman.

For information and tickets, visit AmericanSongbook.org.