

Cellist Maya Beiser Uncovers a Connection at the Aztec

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on 21 January, 2015 at 05:06



Summoning the voices of rock legends, spiritual avatars, and classical musicians through a bow and four strings, instrumentalist [Maya Beiser](#) is heralded by The Boston Globe as the “post-modern diva of the cello.”

[Arts San Antonio](#) is bringing her newest production “All Vows“ to the Aztec Theatre on Thursday, Jan. 22 at 7:30 p.m. Featuring Wilco drummer [Glen Kotche](#) and bassist [Gyan Riley](#), the evening promises a multi-faceted approach to honoring the “collective consciousness forged by our shared, popular culture.”

The performance will begin with what Beiser said is an excavation of musical masterpieces from blues and rock ‘n’ roll legends such as Howlin’ Wolf and Led Zeppelin, re-contextualized in the classical setting for her album “[Uncovered](#),” crafted by Evan Ziporyn. The first half will also

feature contributions from drummer Kotche and composer David T. Little, whose work, “Hellhound,” is based on [Robert Johnson’s 1937 song “Hellhound On My Trail.”](#)



Cellist Maya Beiser. Courtesy photo.

Delving into our desire for “ritual and meaning,” the second half of the performance will begin with Arab-American composer Mohaammed Fairouz’s “Kol Nidrei” sung in Aramaic, and also features original film by acclaimed artist [Bill Morrison](#) who has meticulously crafted a visual tapestry to illustrate the unique relationship between an unforeseeable future and a slowly fading history.

Beiser’s approach to the cello is unconventional as the lay person may see the instrument, the dimensions she extends to and thoughts she provokes are anything but limited to a particular audience or understanding of classical music and its roots. As such, it is essential to get a deeper look into the mind of the artist, a personal reflection about where she sees herself within her music, and how she connects to the audience.

After playing phone tag between New York and San Antonio for a few days, I was able to catch Beiser over the phone and dig into the soul of her sound and how she aims to reveal that to San Antonio this Thursday at the Aztec:

RR: *As a saxophonist, I have a special connection to my horn, understanding the spirits that have played upon it before. Tell me about the relationship between you and your cello? Is it playful, is it intimate?*

MB: Closest thing I could think of is that I often think of instruments as an extension of myself, my soul. I feel like I speak through the instrument. I think that it's just so much a part of my identity, I started playing when I was six. I think about music as a communicating tool, the ultimate human expression, a way of speaking, a form of language. The cello for me is an inseparable part of myself.

Ultimately, at its highest level its when you get to the point that you master the technique, it's a lifelong thing. The beautiful thing is just imagining something and it comes out of my fingers and my instrument, and that's really an incredible thing. There is something that really just happens when it is a lifelong thing, growing up with the instrument, at this point it's a part of me.

RR: *When did you first really connect to the idea of the collective in music? Is there a particular spirituality or community that has inspired you to this belief that you now express through your work?*

MB: It's always been a form of ritual, I really see this kind of as a religion in and of itself. Music is my religion. I'm most successful when I go into this place of ecstatic trance, a way of digging into our own lives, personal issues. [As the audience] you are there for two hours as a part of an amazing journey, it can really take you places. A visceral emotional power, to me that is the thing about performing communicating with people, creating these moments in life where we get away from ourselves. That's the fun thing about music.

RR: *What do you do in the midst of performing to really harness that connection, to tap into that divine energy?*

MB: I do close my eyes, but its not like I imagine going back to the 70s, its about feeling the moment, it's really hard to describe (*she trails off imagining the feeling*) there is this energy that happens, connecting to the moment. Being there in the moment. I'm joining two other musicians, it's all about the energy, the energy that comes out of the stage. This sense of connection and the energy that comes from all the people there. You go into that zone, and it's an amazing thing.



Cellist Maya Beiser. Courtesy photo.

I love being on stage, I love playing music for people, there is something really really powerful about that. I think it is connecting to the energy, always something new happening. Combination of ancient and new at the same time. Creation and recreation. If you create something new every time, it is music that has existed but you're bringing it back to life. In that way it's really interesting, it's never quite the same.

So much of it is really the energy of the moment. I want people to have a good time, but for me a good time means they are affected, moved in some way. I don't think you can be impartial to music, I think music needs to touch you.



RR: How did you decide to work with Evan Ziporyn, Glen Kotche, and Gyan Riley, and what have they done to impact the power of your message with music?

MB: Evan and I are both founders of the avant-garde revolutionary band, [Bang On a Can All Stars](#), started as a festival in NYC, and was a movement to redefine classical music, the context of classical music, to make it something that young people can relate to. We kind of rejected the whole idea that you just go to concerts and sit there. We took it into different places, different venues, let people have a good time. We opened it up to collaboration with jazz musicians, world, rock musicians, it was a much more local and inclusive concept of what concert music is.

I brought Glen Koche, also a composer in his own right, into the project and he played on some of the tracks on the album and will be playing on tour with me, and will be there in San Antonio with Gyan Riley. It's a lot of fun, a power trio. There is something so cool about cello, drum and bass. The cello is so versatile in terms of what it can do. There is a range of this instrument is just astounding. Putting drum and bass into it, great and very unusual. I'm not familiar with anyone else that has done that, creating a rock trio with the cellist as a lead guitarist and vocalist, I alternate between being those two roles. It's great and it's fun and different.

RR: *What would you say is your overarching message to those absorbing the vibrations? Is there a particular mission that you have (personally and otherwise) when you get up on that stage?*

MB: The one thing I always think about, is that the most personal is also the most universal. Which means that when you go deep inside, we're very close to each other. These outer layers separate us – gender, race, color, ethnicity. Really deep down I believe we're all human and connected on a deep level. I think that's what music can do, create that connection. It's not about a particular religion, it's about the concept of spirituality, whatever it is that you choose it to be.

I think rock n roll does that as well, there is this really strong visceral thing that happens. Music is a form of ritual, religion. Even when we go to this concert, that's why we do it, because it has that power. I think that is what we're seeking, is to be connected.

The Aztec Theatre is located at 104 N. St. Mary's Street and tickets can be bought by calling 210.226.2891 or going to www.artssa.org. You can check out more from Maya at www.mayabeiser.com and follow her on Twitter at [@cellogoddess](https://twitter.com/cellogoddess).

**Featured/top image: Cellist Maya Beiser. Courtesy photo.*