Rhiannon Giddens and Dirk Powell

American music has at its core an affirmative language that unites all of us as brothers and sisters. Rhiannon Giddens and Dirk Powell are masters of this language.

With roots in North Carolina and Kentucky, their musical heritage springs from places where the mix is particularly potent. Rhiannon brought African-American stringband traditions a new and beautiful vitality through The Carolina Chocolate Drops, and has launched a versatile solo career that confirms her status as a major American artist for this day and age. Dirk has championed the Appalachian music of his grandfather and the Cajun/Creole sounds of his Louisiana family since his teenage years, becoming a central figure in the revitalization of both traditions, while recording and performing with artists like Eric Clapton and Joan Baez.

To quote producer T Bone Burnett, with whom both have worked closely, Rhiannon is “next in a long line of singers that include Odetta, Mahalia Jackson, and Rosetta Tharpe.” And about Dirk, Burnett enthuses, “He’s got great subtlety, tremendous feel, and is modern in the best sense of the word.” Both artists have Grammy wins in several contexts, in categories ranging from Folk to Alternative Rock to Blues to Country. But, these aren’t the things that equate to success for them.

Rhiannon and Dirk create with the intent to reach the hearts of those listening. Whether with banjos and fiddles, grand pianos framing deeply soulful vocals, or Creole accordions laying down bayou grooves beneath melodies sung in French, the duo’s music may in moments take a path through the mind, or perhaps through dancing feet…. but in the end, they are out to reach hearts, and in each other have found a unique partnership in which to do so. Their musical range touches on all of what makes American music the resonant force that it is, including fearless original songs written with the conviction to open and heal the wounds of racism and other forms of prejudice that continue to haunt us. They could be seen as possessing a rare multilingualism, but are, in the end, speaking one highly evolved American language; in their performances, audiences are included in a conversation that is spirited, emotional, masterful, and, in the end, transformational.