

Rhiannon Giddens has made a singular, iconic career out of stretching her brand of folk music, with its miles-deep historical roots and contemporary sensibilities, into just about every field imaginable. A two-time GRAMMY Award-winning singer and instrumentalist, MacArthur “Genius” grant recipient, and composer of opera, ballet, and film, Giddens has centered her work around the mission of lifting up people whose contributions to American musical history have previously been overlooked or erased, and advocating for a more accurate understanding of the country’s musical origins through art.

As *Pitchfork* once said, “few artists are so fearless and so ravenous in their exploration”—a journey that has led to NPR naming her one of its 25 Most Influential Women Musicians of the 21st Century and to *American Songwriter* calling her “one of the most important musical minds currently walking the planet.”

For her highly anticipated third solo studio album, *You’re The One*, out August 18 on Nonesuch Records, she recruited producer Jack Splash (Kendrick Lamar, Solange, Alicia Keys, Valerie June, Tank and the Bangas) to help her bring this collection of songs that she’d written over the course of her career—her first album of all originals—to life at Criteria Recording Studios in Miami last November. Together with a band composed of Giddens’s closest musical collaborators from the past decade alongside Miami-based musicians from Splash’s own Rolodex, and topped off with a horn section making an impressive ~~ten~~ twelve-person ensemble, they drew from the folk music that Giddens knows so deeply and its pop descendants.

*You’re the One* features electric and upright bass, conga, Cajun and piano accordions, guitars, a Western string section, and Miami horns, among other instruments. “I hope that people just hear *American* music,” Giddens says. “Blues, jazz, Cajun, country, gospel, and rock—it’s all there. I like to be where it meets organically.”

The album is in line with her previous work, as she explains, because it’s yet another kind of project she’s never done before. “I just wanted to expand my sound palette,” Giddens says. “I feel like I’ve done lots in the acoustic realm, and I certainly will again. But these songs really needed a larger field.”

Her song-writing range is audible on *You’re The One*, from the groovy funk of “Hen In The Foxhouse” to the vintage AM radio-ready ballad “Who Are You Dreaming Of” and the string-band dance music of “Way Over Yonder”—likely the most familiar sound to Giddens’ fans. Her voice, though, is instantly recognizable throughout, even as the sounds around Giddens shift; she owns all of it with ease.

The album opens with “Too Little, Too Late, Too Bad,” an R&B blast (complete with background “shoops” and a horn section) that takes a titan for inspiration. “I listened to a bunch of Aretha Franklin, and then turned to fellow Aretha-nut Dirk Powell and said, ‘Let’s write a song she might have sung!’” Giddens recalls. Her danceable, vivacious tribute to Franklin’s sound is a vocal showcase, spotlighting her soaring high notes and nearly-growling low ones. Another of the album’s highlights, “If You Don’t Know How Sweet It Is,” intentionally puts an edgier spin on the sass of Dolly Parton’s early work, which Giddens channeled in the midst of some real life

frustration. "I was like, 'I'm giving you everything, why are you leaving?'" she recalls of writing the song, which started as a poem.

Jason Isbell joins Giddens on "Yet To Be" as her duet partner and the album's only featured artist. "He's been such an ally in the industry to black women," Giddens says. "He's a great singer, and he's uncompromisingly himself—also just a really good person." "Yet To Be," the story of a black woman and an Irish man falling in love in America, is meant to channel some of the optimistic flip side of the brutal, real, and undertold history that Giddens has so effectively brought to the forefront with her work. "Here's a place, with all its warts, where you and I could meet from different parts of the world and start a family, which is the true future," Giddens explains. "I think so much about all of the terrible things in our past and present—but things are better than they have been in a lot of ways, and this is a song thinking about that."

One of the album's more sentimental songs, "You're The One," was inspired by a moment Giddens had with her son not long after he was born (he's now ten years old, and she has a fourteen-year-old daughter as well). "Your life has changed forever, and you don't know it until you're in the middle of it and it hits you," Giddens says. "I held his little cheek up to my face, and was just reminded, 'Oh my God, my children—they have every bit of my heart.'"

"You Louisiana Man" blends Giddens' banjo acumen with accordion, organ, and fiddle to create a Zydeco-funk classic. About a feeling that Giddens "turned up to eleven" during the songwriting process, the song shows the power of framing a record around banjo instead of guitar: "It just gives you a bit of a different vibe," as she puts it.

Perhaps most potent is the song "Another Wasted Life," Giddens' composition inspired by Kalief Browder, the New York man who was incarcerated without trial on Rikers Island for three years. "People are making so much money off prison systems," Giddens, who has performed for incarcerated people, says. "They just don't want anyone to remember that that's happening." Inspired sonically by another musical icon—Nina Simone—the forceful, anthemic song channels Giddens' rage at the broken system. "Doesn't matter what the crime, if indeed there was this time," she sings. "It's a torture of the soul."

The album teems with Giddens' breadth of knowledge of, curiosity about, and experience with American vernacular musics. Though it might be filtered through a slightly more familiar blend of sounds, *You're The One* never forsakes depth and groundedness for its listenability.

"They're fun songs, and I wanted them to have as much of a chance as they could to reach people who might dig them but don't know anything about, you know, what I do," Giddens says. "If they're introduced to me through this record, they might go listen to other music I've made with a different set of ears."

Giddens also is exploring other mediums and creative possibilities just as actively as she has American musical history. With 1858 replica minstrel banjo in hand, she wrote the opera *Omar* with film composer Michael Abels (*Get Out*, *Us*, *Nope*) and, with her partner Francesco Turrisi, she wrote and performed the music for *Black Lucy and the Bard*, which was recorded for PBS' *Great Performances*; she has appeared on the ABC hit drama *Nashville* and throughout Ken Burns' *Country Music* series, also on PBS. Giddens has published children's books and written

and performed music for the soundtrack of *Red Dead Redemption II*, one of the best-selling video games of all time. She sang for the Obamas at the White House; is a three-time NPR *Tiny Desk Concert* alum; and hosts her own show on PBS, *My Music with Rhiannon Giddens*, as well as the *Aria Code* podcast, which is produced by New York City's NPR affiliate station WQXR.

"I've been able to create a lot of different things around stories that are difficult to tell, and managed to get them done in a way that's gotten noticed," as Giddens puts it. "I know who to collaborate with, and it has gotten me into all sorts of corners that I would have never expected when I started doing this."