

**“ ‘It’s Supposed to Be Love’ – A Tribute to Singer, Songwriter and Civil Rights Activist, Abbey Lincoln, on the One Year Anniversary of Her Death”
by Toni Lester (originally written in June of 2011)**

Jazz singer, songwriter, actress and civil rights activist, Abbey Lincoln died at the age of 80 last summer. Lincoln often used her work as a vehicle for social change. She was the ultimate socially engaged creative artist, combining quality and meaning in potent proportions.

“Body slam you to the ground
Messaging a chill
Curses make the head go round
Brings a certain thrill ...”

(From “It’s Supposed to Be Love”, by Abbey Lincoln, on *Abbey Sings Abbey*, Verve Records)

Since the instrumental music accompanying them is so pleasing to the ear, the words – harsh and violent – come at you unexpectedly. The piano slowly plays a melancholy one note motif over a lilting steel drum vamp. The overall groove is smooth, even soothing. But the words are not, and neither is that voice. Husky, plaintive, anguished – that voice belongs to Abbey Lincoln, and she is singing about domestic violence, a topic rarely broached in mainstream jazz circles.

For anyone who knows Lincoln’s tremendous body of work spanning over six decades, it should come as no surprise that she made one of the tracks on her critically acclaimed 2007 CD, *Abbey Sings Abbey*, a song about the terror and confusion that domestic violence conjures in the minds and souls of its victims. That she did this when she was well into her 70s, at a time when few other popular jazz artists dared to touch this or similarly weighty topics, is astounding. Equally so is the fact that she is confident enough in her own powers to share the spotlight in this performance with her mentee, Maggie Brown. As the two women trade singing verses about the sting and humiliation of surviving this most heinous form of degradation, the overall effect is at once powerful and disturbing.

No stranger to bringing politics to a musical genre often populated by crooners singing about surface understandings of love and its foibles, Lincoln, along with her then husband, acclaimed drummer, Max Roach, collaborated on the groundbreaking 1960 Civil Rights album, *We Insist – Freedom Now Suite*. Lincoln was pivotal in ensuring that Roach’s songs took their rightful place in the artistic history of the civil rights movement. As one New York Times writer put it, “One movement had her moaning in sorrow, and then hollering and shrieking in anguish — a stark evocation of struggle.”¹

Born the 10th of 12 children in 1930 in Chicago, Lincoln was often compared to her idol, Billie Holiday, who made equally tumultuous waves on the jazz scene with songs like the 1939 Lewis Allen work, “Strange Fruit”, which decried lynchings that were taking place in the South at the time. A frequent supporter of civil rights causes during the 60s, Lincoln could often be found headlining fundraising concerts to support them. She had a keen sense of how the plight of African Americans since the days of slavery connected to her own life path. As noted contemporary jazz singer, Diane Reeves, has said: “[Lincoln] got in touch with her ancestors,” ... “And when she got in touch with them, she responded and never stopped.”²

Lincoln also had a quieter, more introspective side, found in song after song she wrote about the life of the spirit and her wonder at the magnitude of the universe. One of her most deeply loved songs, “*Throw It Away*”, exemplifies her belief in something similar to agape, the Christian concept of selfless love. “Leave your hands wide open,” she writes, “Let the sun shine through/’Cause you can never lose a thing if it belongs to you.” That message, simple in concept, but hard to emulate, is also part of Lincoln’s legacy. Her exemplary life both in service to others and to her own muse belong to all of us now. Let’s try to honor it by keeping our own hands wide open, doing our best to create art that both serves and stirs the soul.

1. Nate Chen, "Abbey Lincoln, Bold and Introspective Jazz Singer, Dies at 80," Aug. 14, 2010, at www.nytimes.com/2010/08/15/arts/music/15lincoln.html.
2. NPR Staff, "Abbey Lincoln, Remembered By Her Proteges," May 20, 2011 at <http://www.npr.org/2011/05/20/136497648/j>

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