

**MOSS
ARTS
CENTER**

Friday, September 25 7:30 PM EDT

LEYLA MCCALLA

Live from New Orleans

Moss Arts Center
HomeStage Series

**VT VIRGINIA
TECH**

LEYLA MCCALLA

Live from New Orleans

Moderated by Shawanda Marie, Christiansburg's
New Orleans-born Creole culture-bearer

Songs to be announced during the performance

Biographies

LEYLA MCCALLA



[Leyla McCalla](#) finds inspiration from her past and present, whether it is her Haitian heritage or her adopted home of New Orleans, she—a bilingual multi-instrumentalist, cellist, and singer—has risen to produce a distinctive sound that reflects the union of her roots and experience.

Born in New York City to Haitian human rights activist immigrant parents, McCalla was immersed in a meld of cultures and progressive ideas from an early age. As a teenager, she relocated to Accra, Ghana, for two years before returning to the U.S.

to study cello performance and chamber music at New York University. Armed with Bach's Cello Suites, McCalla left New York to play cello on the streets of the French Quarter in New Orleans. Singing in English, Haitian Creole, and French while playing cello, tenor banjo, and guitar, her move allowed her to connect more viscerally to Creole resilience and musical expression. She rose to fame during her two years as cellist of the Grammy award-winning African-American string band, the Carolina Chocolate Drops, alongside bandmates Rhiannon Giddens and Dom Flemons, before leaving the group in 2013 to pursue her solo career.

Deeply influenced by Creole music, as well as by American jazz and folk, McCalla's music is at once earthy, elegant, soulful, and witty—it vibrates with three centuries of history, yet also feels strikingly fresh, distinctive, and contemporary. "Her voice is disarmingly natural, and her settings are elegantly succinct...her magnificently transparent music holds tidings of family, memory, solitude and the inexorability of time: weighty thoughts handled with the lightest touch imaginable," wrote *The New York Times*. McCalla's debut album, *Vari-Colored Songs: A Tribute to Langston Hughes*, was named 2013's Album of the Year by the *London Sunday Times* and *Songlines* for its haunting mixture of music and message.

Her second album, *A Day for the Hunter, a Day for the Prey* (2016), continued to explore themes of social justice and included guests Rhiannon Giddens, Marc Ribot, and Louis Michot of Lost Bayou Ramblers. Through deeply felt originals and interpretations of traditional songs, the album explores the nuances and complexities of the immigrant-American experience.

Biographies (continued)

2019 saw the release of McCalla's third solo album, *The Capitalist Blues*. With this record, she processed the current political environment in her own way, by sonically blending New Orleans music and Haitian jazz, with lyrics sung in English, French, and Haitian Creole. The album "imaginatively maps her vision of the Afro-Caribbean diaspora while gently taking Anglocentricism (and capitalism) down a notch," said NPR. "She's partly in the moment and partly looking beyond it, and seeing truths that we've missed."

Following her solo release came widely-acclaimed collaborative project *Songs of Our Native Daughters* (Rhiannon Giddens, Amythyst Kiah, Leyla McCalla, and Allison Russell) via Smithsonian Folkways. The album pulled influence from slave narratives and the history of the banjo in order to confront sanitized views about America's history of slavery, racism, and misogyny from a powerful, modern Black female perspective.

McCalla's current project, *Breaking the Thermometer to Hide the Fever*, commissioned by Duke Performances, delves into the legacy of Radio Haiti, Haiti's first privately owned Creole-speaking radio station, through its archive housed at the Rubenstein Library at Duke University. The multidisciplinary performance incorporates dance, projections, and sound design set to McCalla's original compositions and arrangements of traditional Haitian songs. *Breaking the Thermometer* premiered in March 2020 at Duke University.

McCalla's music reflects her eclectic and diverse life experiences, projecting a respect for eloquent simplicity that is rarely achieved. Digging into her roots to unearth history and explore musical tradition, McCalla has an entirely unique voice and perspective that is urgently relevant to our times.



SHAWANDA MARIE, moderator

Culinary storyteller [Shawanda Marie](#) was born into a family of creative and talented folks. Some are visual artists, others amazing cooks or educators, and then there are the musicians; all artists in their own right. After years of self-exploration, Marie learned she was happiest leaning into multiple artistic expressions, bringing their flavors together like a good pot of gumbo. She is the owner and creative

mind behind New Orleans Creole Story Pot, where she infuses elements of theatre performance, storytelling, visual art, education, cultural exploration, music, and—of course—culinary art! Sharing her gifts and seeing people smile is her love language.

During public speaking events Marie often tells the story of New Orleans and South Louisiana through her own family's history. She believes the story of a people is found immersed in all the nuances of its food ways. She says, "My documented family history dates back to 1724 during the early settlement of the Louisiana Territory; six years after the founding of New Orleans. This is on my mother's paternal side. In South Louisiana, after talking with people long enough, you'll learn that almost everyone is related in some way, whether Black, white, or indigenous native. Our families are interwoven through time and rooted deeply in that rich Louisiana marsh. We have family of every shade, and everybody's called 'cousin.'"

By way of New Orleans Creole Story Pot, Marie has facilitated a number of experiential dining events throughout the New River Valley. She was a featured chef on *Daytime Blue Ridge* for four consecutive months and has been honored to cook for the esteemed Nikki Giovanni and her family. She has served as cultural consultant for the award-winning Dream Fury Comics series, *Crescent City Monsters*, a supernatural comic book story set in New Orleans written by Haitian-born author Newton Lilavois. She has worked for the past 15 years to educate the public about Louisiana Creole culture, language, history, and its many contributions to the tapestry of America through speaking engagements and online media.

Marie desires to explore work in voiceovers and to publish her children's book, *Bonswa Gros Dibwa*, a story about growing up in New Orleans' Ninth Ward community. She has been a resident of beautiful Southwest Virginia for the past 22 years. These mountains have become her serene home away from home, providing a sense of peace that nurtures her creative spirit. When Marie isn't making magic in the kitchen, she enjoys life as a clinical case manager, certified yoga instructor, and sound healing practitioner. Shawanda is the most grateful mommy of two sugary-sweet rescue pitbulls, Zingy and Prince Charming, and a house full of lush tropical plants that make her smile from the inside out. Follow New Orleans Creole Story Pot on [Instagram](#) or [Facebook](#).

Engagement Events

Thursday, September 24, 2020

VIRTUAL CLASS VISIT

INTRODUCTION TO AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDIES

RACE, GENDER, CLASS, AND SEXUALITIES

Leyla McCalla joined students and faculty virtually in two sociology classes for a joint discussion on identities and cultures explored in her music.

Thursday, September 24, 2020

VIRTUAL CLASS VISIT: WOMEN AND CREATIVITY

Virginia Tech students in this Women's and Gender Studies class engaged with McCalla about the role of gender in her work.

Special thanks to Andrea Baldwin, Shawanda Marie, Silas Moon Cassinelli, and Talitha Rose

Go Deeper

[Listen to this interview and performance](#) by Leyla McCalla on National Public Radio's *World Café*. How has family—including McCalla's role as a daughter and mother—influenced her social, political, and artistic work?

In the Galleries

We're so pleased to welcome you back for another season of exciting and evocative exhibitions in the Moss Arts Center galleries!

JASON MIDDLEBROOK: ANOTHER WORLD

Through Sat., Nov. 21

Ruth C. Horton Gallery

American visual artist Jason Middlebrook envisions, creates, and then digitally renders a new 15-by-28-foot site-specific commissioned work of art inspired by the soaring architecture of the Anne and Ellen Fife Theatre. This panoramic work invites viewers into another place—a place of inspiration, visual complexity, and delight.

ART AND SOCIAL CONSCIENCE

Calling attention to sociopolitical issues and the need for change

CAUSE COLLECTIVE:

IN SEARCH OF THE TRUTH

Through Sat., Oct. 10

Francis T. Eck Exhibition

Corridor

A video installation presenting concise thoughts and observations by individuals from across the globe, this exhibition grapples with one of the deepest social, political, and philosophical issues of our times: what the truth is and what it means.

22 STEPS

Through Sat., Nov. 21

Grand Lobby Staircase

Rendered in text on the Moss Arts Center's stairs is a pertinent statement by Congressman and civil rights leader John Lewis (1940-2020) paying attention to and reflecting our country's ongoing struggle for social justice.

For the most up to date gallery hours, please [visit our website](#).

Online Resources

Join us for a special series of events featuring notable artists live from their homes and studios. Not another livestream or pre-recorded performance that's widely available to everyone, our *HomeStage* series is exclusive to the Moss Arts Center and designed specifically to be presented online.

[For a full list of our online events and resources, please click here.](#)

Reopening Updates

The health and wellness of our community is our top priority, and you can be assured that we are doing everything we can to keep you and our staff safe and healthy. [Find more information about our re-opening plans here.](#)

Box Office Hours

Wednesday-Friday, 10 AM-5 PM

Saturday, 10 AM-4 PM

For more information, please call the box office at 540-231-5300 during these hours, or email us anytime at mossartscenter@vt.edu.

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The Moss Center acknowledges the Tutelo and Monacan people, who are the traditional custodians of the land on which we work and live, and recognizes their continuing connection to the land, water, and air that Virginia Tech consumes. We pay respect to the Tutelo and Monacan Nations, and to their elders past, present, and emerging.

We also acknowledge the university's historical ties to the indentured and enslaved whose labors built this institution. We pay respect to these people for their contributions to Virginia Tech.

As you engage with one another and the arts we present, we invite you to reflect on the history of this space and its possibilities for reconciliation, truth, and humanity. In the spirit of *Ut Prosim*, let this acknowledgment be but a single step in the Moss Arts Center's commitment to these values.

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[A Piano, A Song, and a Pink Martini](#)
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[And So We Walked](#)
[DeLanna Studi and the Trail of Tears](#)



Fri., Oct. 23, 7:30 PM EDT

[The Treasures of Fiddlers](#)
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Thurs., Oct. 29, 7:30 PM EDT

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[Choreographer Ephrat Asherie](#)



Fri., Nov. 6, 7 PM EST

[Javaad Alipoor](#)
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