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World Premiere Presentation:
Duke Performances Commissions Heart Like a Levee,
New Song Cycle from Hiss Golden Messenger
Based on William Gedney’s Kentucky Photographs

October 28, 2015, Durham, NC — Duke Performances presents the world premiere of Heart Like a Levee, a new song cycle commissioned by Duke Performances from Durham’s acclaimed Hiss Golden Messenger, inspired by William Gedney’s poignant 1972 photographs of the Cornett family in Leatherwood, Kentucky. At Duke Performances, Hiss Golden Messenger — the alias of songwriter and guitarist M.C. Taylor — collaborates with OBIE-winning stage director and designer Jim Findlay, bringing to life Gedney’s iconic Kentucky images. Heart Like a Levee plays for two performances only, Friday, November 13 & Saturday, November 14 at 8 PM at Reynolds Industries Theater.

Joining Taylor for Heart Like a Levee are musicians Phil Cook (Megafaun), Brad Cook (Megafaun), Ryan Gustafson, Matt McCaughan (Bon Iver), Mike Lewis (Bon Iver), Mark Paulson (Bowerbirds), plus actor and playwright Mike Wiley, and special guest Tift Merritt.

“At once firmly steeped in tradition and immediately accessible” (NPR), Hiss Golden Messenger spans the spectrum of American vernacular music, drawing on the various traditions of gospel, country & western, blues, old-time music, and unaccompanied ballads. Led by musical omnivore M.C. Taylor — an M.A. graduate from the Folklore Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill — Hiss Golden Messenger is signed to Durham-based independent label Merge Records. Taylor explains that he wrote many of the songs for Heart Like a Levee “in vans, motels, and backstages,” during a tumultuous year of touring. The songs “deal with the constant coming and going, the confusion of love within my head, the ecstasy and agony of work, the loneliness of crowded places. I can’t help but think that Gedney’s subjects were familiar with these feelings, too. These songs are my proudest accomplishments. I feel they’re the best I’ve written.”

Stage director and designer Jim Findlay works across boundaries as a director, designer, visual artist, and performer. His work has been seen at Lincoln Center, Carnegie Hall, BAM, Arena Stage, A.R.T., and in over fifty cities worldwide. A frequent collaborator with Bang on a Can, Ralph Lemon, and Ridge Theater, he worked with the Wooster Group as a company member and designer for nine years, and is the winner of two Obie awards, two Bessie awards, a Lucille Lortel award, and a Henry Hewes award. The Whisper Opera, which Findlay designed and directed, was presented by Duke Performances in 2014/2015.

Documentarian William Gedney (1932-1989) is known for his uncanny ability to “catch fleeting moments of grace, joy, melancholy, and humor” (The New York Times). Prodigiously talented but little known in his lifetime — in spite of recognition in the form of Guggenheim and Fulbright fellowships and a 1968 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York — the importance of Gedney’s work became more widely acknowledged in the years following his untimely death. His
archive is housed in the Archive of Documentary Arts at Duke’s David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

Duke Performances is at the forefront of university performing arts presenters nationwide, attracting artists of the highest caliber and commissioning, developing, and producing a growing number of new works for the world stage. Over the past two seasons, Duke Performances has presented world premiere commissions from composer Frederic Rzewski for Imani Winds, Jenny Scheinman, the Campbell Brothers, The Bad Plus, William Tyler, and Ari Picker of Lost in the Trees, as well as the world premiere with live music of The Subtle One, with Ron K. Brown/Evidence Dance Company & Jason Moran and the Bandwagon.

Hiss Golden Messenger’s Heart Like a Levee is part of Duke Performances’ From the Archives initiative, a collaboration with the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library and the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University, pairing artists with archival resources from the Rubenstein Library to develop bold and ambitious new work. From the Archives is made possible, in part, with an award from the National Endowment for the Arts, and support from the Archive of Documentary Arts at the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Duke University.

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