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World Premiere Presentation at Duke Performances: Piedmont Blues, A Live Concert Event Inspired by a Distinctively North Carolina Musical Style, Starring Gerald Clayton & The Assembly featuring Lizz Wright

July 26, 2016, Durham, NC — Duke Performances presents the world premiere of the newly commissioned Piedmont Blues, a live concert project inspired by the musical style that grew up around the tobacco factories and warehouses of Durham, North Carolina in the 1920s and ’30s, when the Bull City was the largest cigarette manufacturer in the world. Piedmont Blues is a collaboration between celebrated jazz pianist, composer, and bandleader Gerald Clayton and award-winning theater director Christopher McElroen. The show features original Piedmont blues-inspired compositions written by Clayton for The Assembly, a top-tier nine-piece jazz ensemble, with singer Lizz Wright and tap dancer Maurice Chestnut. Entwined with the music is an assemblage of film, new and archival photography, and Southern folklore celebrating the rich cultural landscape of the Piedmont region.

Piedmont Blues premieres Friday, December 2 & Saturday, December 3, 2016, at 8 PM at Reynolds Industries Theater. Initiated by lead commissioner Duke Performances, Piedmont Blues was co-commissioned by the Modlin Center for the Arts at University of Richmond (presenting Piedmont Blues on Thursday, April 13, 2017), the Savannah Music Festival (presenting Piedmont Blues on Friday, April 7, 2017), and Strathmore (presenting the D.C.-area premiere on Saturday, December 10, 2016).

Taking its name from the Piedmont plateau region — at the center of which lie the Carolinas — Durham’s indigenous art form is defined by syncopated ragtime rhythms, fingerpicking guitar, and understated vocals twinned with searing lyrics. Though the most famous exponents of the Piedmont blues — Elizabeth “Libba” Cotten, Blind Boy Fuller, Reverend Gary Davis, Etta Baker, and Sonny Terry — have passed, a few musicians keep the tradition alive. Gerald Clayton and his creative collaborator, theater director Christopher McElroen, have made repeated research visits to Durham to learn from and work alongside these elders in preparation for this major new show. With help from partner organization Music Maker Relief Foundation of Hillsborough, NC, Clayton and McElroen have been able to spend time — trading songs and stories — with the last of the Piedmont blues musicians: NEA National Heritage Fellow John Dee Holeman, Boo Hanks (who passed away in April 2016), and Algia Mae Hinton.

“My first connection to the Piedmont tradition came when I heard Elizabeth Cotten's Freight Train,” says Clayton. “What struck me was the humility in her expression. There was no interest in showing off. Not trying to wow the listener, or even herself. It was the most honest delivery of the melody and its lyrics I could imagine. On the surface her sound described elements of ragtime, folk, and even country music, but at its core it sounded like a proper blues song. There’s a tone of sadness throughout — the lyrics speak of a yearning towards death as a long-awaited escape from life’s woes. The desire to transcend pain and suffering described through song is the essence of blues expression. My aim with this project is to describe the singularly African-American path from pain to triumph through the expression of the Piedmont blues.”
GERALD CLAYTON

Four-time GRAMMY-nominated pianist, composer, and bandleader Gerald Clayton formally began his musical journey at the prestigious Los Angeles County High School for the Arts, where he received the 2002 Presidential Scholar of the Arts Award. He earned a B.A. in Piano Performance at USC’s Thornton School of Music under the instruction of piano icon Billy Childs, after a year of intensive study with NEA Jazz Master Kenny Barron at the Manhattan School of Music. Clayton won second place in the 2006 Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz Piano Competition.

Clayton has performed and recorded with such distinctive artists as Diana Krall, Roy Hargrove, Dianne Reeves, Ambrose Akinmusire, and his family’s Clayton Brothers Quintet. Since 2013, he has also toured and recorded with saxophone legend Charles Lloyd. 2016 marks his second year as musical director of the Monterey Jazz Festival On Tour, a project that features his trio along with Ravi Coltrane, Nicholas Payton, and Raul Midón. His most recent GRAMMY nominations are for his releases on Concord, Bond: The Paris Sessions and Life Forum.

CHRISTOPHER McELROEN

A Brooklyn-based theater artist and artistic director of the american vicarious, Christopher McElroen received a 2013 Helen Hayes Award for his direction of the world premiere stage adaptation of Ralph Ellison’s iconic novel Invisible Man. With visual artist Paul Chan and Creative Time he co-produced and directed Waiting for Godot in New Orleans, a community development through the arts initiative named one of the top ten national art events of 2007 by The New York Times. The archives of this production were exhibited and acquired by the Museum of Modern Art. McElroen also directed Sekou Sundiata’s 51st (dream) state, which premiered at the BAM Next Wave Festival before touring internationally.

McElroen co-founded the acclaimed Classical Theatre of Harlem, where from 1999 to 2009 he produced 41 productions yielding 18 AUDELCO Awards, 6 OBIE Awards, 2 Lucille Lortel Awards, and a Drama Desk Award. McElroen’s work has been recognized with an American Theatre Wing Award (Outstanding Artistic Achievement), a Drama Desk Award (Artistic Achievement), an Edwin Booth Award (Outstanding Contribution to NYC Theater), a Lucille Lortel Award (Outstanding Body of Work), two Obie Awards (Sustained Achievement and Excellence in Theatre), and a Helen Hayes Award (Outstanding Direction).

LIZZ WRIGHT

A preacher’s daughter from the small town of Hahira, Georgia, singer-songwriter Lizz Wright got her start singing in church. Wright made her recording debut in 2002 on composer Joe Sample’s The Pecan Tree (Verve), and released her own debut recording the following year, the critically acclaimed Salt (Verve). Her album Dreaming Wide Awake reached Number 1 on Billboard’s Top Contemporary Jazz chart, and her recording Fellowship explores the gospel music of her childhood. A versatile artist, Wright incorporates hand percussion into her live performances. She has sung on releases from Meshell Ndegeocello (Pour Une Âme Souveraine: A Dedication to Nina Simone) and GRAMMY-winning drummer and bandleader Terri Lyne Carrington (Mosaic Project: LOVE and SOUL). After four acclaimed recordings for Verve, Wright moved to Concord Records for her fifth and most recent album, Freedom & Surrender, produced by GRAMMY winner Larry Klein.
PIEDMONT BLUES

Conceived & composed by Gerald Clayton
Directed by Christopher McElroen
Script by Jaymes Jorsling

PIEDMONT BLUES PERSONNEL

Gerald Clayton, piano
Lizz Wright, vocals
Logan Richardson, alto sax
Tivon Pennicott, tenor sax
Dayna Stephens, baritone sax
Alan Hampton, guitar
Joe Sanders, bass
Kendrick Scott, drums
Maurice Chestnut, tap dancer

Union Baptist Gospel Choir | Ray Watkins, musical director (Durham, NC)

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. Other artists and ensembles from whom Duke Performances has commissioned new work are Jason Moran (In My Mind: Monk at Town Hall, 1959), The Bad Plus (On Sacred Ground: Stravinsky’s Rite of Spring), Brian Blade & Daniel Lanois (The Hallelujah Train), The Campbell Brothers (performing John Coltrane’s A Love Supreme), Jenny Scheinman (Kannapolis: A Moving Portrait), and the Billy Childs Chamber Ensemble featuring Dianne Reeves (Enlightened Souls).

Duke Performances | Duke University is the lead commissioner of Piedmont Blues; co-commissioners include the Modlin Center for the Arts at University of Richmond, the Savannah Music Festival, and Strathmore.

More information about each of the commissioning partners for Piedmont Blues can be found at http://geraldclaytonblues.org/partners/

Critical support for Piedmont Blues has been provided by Music Maker Relief Foundation, a nonprofit based in Hillsborough, NC, founded to preserve the musical traditions of the South by directly supporting musicians, ensuring that their voices will not be silenced by poverty and time.

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Piedmont Blues website (http://geraldclaytonblues.org)
Duke Performances’ website (http://dukeperformances.org)

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