

Who Shreds? She Shreds

Photo by Christopher Boudeawyns

INTERVIEW BY CYNTHIA SCHEMMER November 19th, 2017

Celisse Henderson—who will be bringing a high-energy, free show to the David Rubenstein Atrium on Thursday, December 7—is a performance maven. She's appeared on television shows *30 Rock* and *Rescue Me* and been featured on Broadway in both *Wicked* and the revival of *Godspell*. And while she's a multi-instrumentalist and singer who can play almost any instrument you throw her way, it was the guitar that truly took hold of her: "As a vocalist, with so many years of experience, it's really rare that I feel thrown by something, everything feels really controlled," she says. "Whereas on guitar, it's so guttural and in the moment."

As a rock 'n' roll singer-songwriter, Henderson is defined by her infectious hooks and her passionate and bluesy vocals. She has performed with artists ranging from Macy Gray to Melissa Etheridge and Mariah Carey. In early 2016, Henderson was featured in the article "**10 Black Emerging Guitarists You Need To Pay Attention To**" in the online edition of *She Shreds* magazine, where I am a managing editor. It was my pleasure to reconnect with her for *The Score* in advance of her Lincoln Center show. From her home in New York, she talked to me about her beginnings with music, her favorite guitar pedals, and how rock 'n' roll personified is a black woman.

Cynthia Schemmer: What's your earliest memory of music, either listening or playing?

Celisse Henderson: I love this question! I always tell people that I was literally born into a bed of music. I come from a super musical family. Both of my parents are music teachers, instrumentalists, and voice teachers. My father has a double bachelor's in vocal performance and piano, and a master's in choral conducting. My mom has a double bachelor's in vocal performance and violin, and a master's in choral conducting. I started taking violin lessons when I was two, and I can honestly tell you I don't remember a time without music in my life. It was always music, all the time.

CS: Was there a pivotal moment in which you knew you wanted to perform music professionally?

CH: I grew up as an instrumentalist and a singer, but I really fell in love with musical theater when I was young. I remember my mom bought the *West Side Story* VHS from the library, and my older sister and I would watch it over and over again. I just loved it so much. Around that same time, when I was nine or ten, my mom gave me *Barbra Jones Streisand*. It was so random for [my mom] to be like, "I think you'll like this." At that time, I wanted to be on Broadway, I wanted to do what Barbra was doing.

CS: How do you think your experience performing in musicals shaped your songwriting and guitar playing?

CH: I am the performer I am because I come from that background. Everything is storytelling based, and I feel like what makes a performer really engaging and really compelling is usually the arc in the music. Prince is who Prince is because every song is so dynamic and so compelling. Beyoncé! Think of that live show! It's musical, it's theatrical. I think the musical's appeal to so many people who end up doing music is that it taps into all the senses of the possibility of what something live can be. And as a young person, it's easier to engage with singing and dancing and having fun. It hits the childlike points in someone's system and heart easier than taking in the intricacies of Joni Mitchell, who is amazing. It takes a little more age to get that stuff.

Sister Rosetta Tharpe is...literally the reason we have rock 'n' roll music.

CS: I read in a previous interview that you had taught yourself guitar as a teenager, and part of that learning was with a tablature book of Jewel's music.

CH: Yes! I bought an acoustic guitar when I was 17 or 18, and the extent of my official training came from a beginning guitar course I took in community college. I learned five or six chords and, you know, you get three chords and you can play a thousand songs. Around that time I was into that Jewel record. All of her stuff is weird tuning and finger

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style stuff, and because I also play drums, I also always had, and have, a strong rhythmic approach.

CS: When did you start playing electric guitar?

CH: When I was doing *Godspell* in 2012, they knew I played [guitar], and they were like, “Okay, you’ll end your number playing electric guitar.” And I was like, “Oh, shit.” [laughs]

Every night I picked up this Fender Strat—a really cool purple sparkle custom—and I felt like, “Dang, I really want to learn how to play this thing!” So [I asked] a guitarist friend of mine, “What electric guitar should I buy?” He pulls out a bunch of different guitars, including a 1954 Silvertone. Not knowing anything, I just thought the guitar looked really cool. I found a similar model, which is now my main guitar, a Harmony Rocket. I tried to play it, it confused me, and I put it on the wall. A year passed from there, and in 2013 I watched a YouTube video and now I can play the 12-bar blues, and it just became another little thing and another little thing, and I fell in love so quickly and so hard.

Where I’m at now, in terms of how I play—and I don’t say this to talk myself down—I present like I’ve been doing this as long as I’ve been doing everything else professional. I’ve been working as a singer and an actress since I was 18. As a guitarist, I’ve really only been focused on it for five years or so. When I put a band together, I still wasn’t confident enough to play lead. I was going to get another “real” guitarist to play. But two and a half years ago, I was like, it’s only me that feels I’m not qualified enough. [Guitar has] forced me, in the most beautiful way, into a certain immediacy in the music and the experience that I’ve never had before. It’s so guttural and in the moment, it informs everything—the music, the vibe, the approach—in the best way. It’s like, we’re just going to go where this takes us today [laughs]. I don’t know what it’s going to be, but it’s going to be something and it’s going to be fucking great.

“I feel this charge for being some part of changing this idea of what a guitarist looks like, what rock ‘n’ roll looks like, and what that really means.”

CS: The landscape of the guitar has certainly shifted. The guitar hero of the past, generally portrayed as male in the media, who was formally trained to shred, is not who young guitarists are looking up to today. You did it your own way, and came up with new and nontraditional ways of playing, and to me, that’s what makes music so amazing, even if for a long time we were taught that wasn’t right.

CH: One thousand percent! All of these “heroes” we see are male, when, in fact...the amount of people who have no idea who Sister Rosetta Tharpe is, and [she] is literally the reason we have rock ‘n’ roll music. It came from this fabulous black woman! [groans] It really frustrates me to no end—and this is why *She Shreds* is so amazing—that when guitarists are talked about, talk about how few women’s names are on that list, right? But then when we go to women of color, it’s almost nonexistent, when rock ‘n’ roll music personified is a black woman. I feel this charge for being some part of changing this idea of what a guitarist looks like, what rock ‘n’ roll looks like, and what that really means. Just think how much more interesting and vibrant our musical landscape would be if we had more and more women, and more and more people of all backgrounds, who were willing to engage in the spaces where we’re traditionally told we’re not supposed to.

CS: I feel like we could talk about this forever, but let’s talk about gear. In your Instagram bio, you call yourself a “pedal enthusiast.” What are some of your favorite pedals?

CH: I love small businesses, and so I have a handful of companies I work with that I love. Menatone, [owned] by Brian Mena, makes my favorite overdrive—the Fish Factory. There’s two sides to it: the red side is a light, crunchy overdrive, and the blue side is a heavy, saturated, almost fuzz-like distortion. It sounds really organic. Keeley Electronics, I love those guys. They have a Monterey pedal that’s got three things: rotary, vibe, and wah. There’s an octave component for all three, and it’s a different enough sound than your average octave pedal. And Chase Bliss Audio. I currently have their Tonal Recall, which is a delay, the Wombtone phaser, and the Brothers overdrive. I’m absolutely a Chase Bliss believer.

CS: You have released a few EPs, including *Live at Rockwood Music Hall*. Do you have upcoming plans for a full-length?

CH: A thousand times, yes. I sell these personalized hard drives at my live shows for \$30 that have my records, videos from The Public Sessions at Joe’s Pub, sheet music, a bunch of demos, live shows—essentially everything up until this point. That is where all of my most recent content is available. On the album front, it’s such a tricky thing because it’s nothing to do with the content or the desire. It comes down to finances. So, yes, in the near future. I want nothing more than to hand someone a record of beautifully produced versions of the songs they just heard. It’s what I want.

CS: What’s planned for the Atrium show at Lincoln Center?

CH: The show will be with a full band, new songs, old favorites, and a few covers. High energy for sure!

Cynthia Schemmer is the managing editor of the print edition of *She Shreds* magazine.

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