In honor of the 50th anniversary year of the March on Washington and the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, the Clarice Smith Center’s 2013–2014 Creative Dialogues explore the issues of civil rights in a modern-day context. The right to pursue freedom of all kinds is a founding principle of our nation, but in today’s complex and changing society, freedom can be elusive. The 2013–2014 Creative Dialogues series will address a range of ideas on liberty and justice in the United States — the imbalance of hunger and nutrition, gay rights and marriage, war and pacifism — all with an emphasis on the artists’ experience and interpretation. Sparking discussion and new thinking around all civil liberties, the series will explore such questions as “Are we really free and equal?” and “How far have we come?”

**FAST FOOD, SLOW FOOD AND FOOD JUSTICE: GLOBAL POLICIES CREATING GLOBAL HUNGER**

Monday, April 21, 2014 . 7:30PM . Gildenhorn Recital Hall . FREE
Luka Arsenjuk, School of Languages, Literatures and Cultures, University of Maryland
Perla M. Guerrero, Department of American Studies, University of Maryland
Orlando R. Serrano Jr., Department of American Studies & Ethnicity, University of Southern California
Psyche Williams-Fson, Department of American Studies, University of Maryland
Join UMD professors Perla M. Guerrero, Luka Arsenjuk, and Psyche Williams-Fson, along with USC’s Orlando R. Serrano Jr., as they discuss how food is at the heart of major policy flaws and societal disparities in the United States and around the world.

**HOMER’S ILIAD: AN ANTI-WAR MANIFESTO?**

Thursday, May 1, 2014 . 7:30PM . Dance Theatre . FREE
Sudip Bose, Emergency Medicine Physician and Founder, The Battle Continues
Drew Cameron, Director, Combat Paper Project
Lillian Doberty, Department of Classics, University of Maryland
Denis O’Hare, actor
This discussion of Homer’s epic will feature perspectives from actor Denis O’Hare, Iraq veteran and artist Drew Cameron, UMD Classicist and Homerist Lillian Doberty, and emergency medicine physician and combat veteran Sudip Bose, who founded the organization The Battle Continues after his 15-month deployment to the front lines during the Iraq War.

*From top to bottom: istockphoto; istockphoto*
Born in Illinois to immigrants from Rwanda and Uganda, the African and jazz legacies are always crucial to SOMI’s sound. Often referred to as a modern-day Miriam Makeba, JazzTimes magazine describes her live performance as “the earthy gutsiness of Nina Simone blended with the vocal beauty of Dianne Reeves,” Billboard calls it “all elegance and awe … utterly captivating” and Vogue simply calls her voice “superb.”

As her career has taken off, Somi’s talents have been called upon for collaborations and live performances alongside a diverse cast of artists including Angelique Kidjo, Mos Def, Baaba Maal, John Legend, Billy Childs, Common, Paul Simon, Danilo Perez, Idan Raichel, Jennifer Hudson and many more. In 2011 Somi released her first live album of performances at the venerable Jazz Standard in New York City, the result of which JazzTimes hailed as “stunning … natural fervor and naked magnificence.” Most recently, Somi was the recipient of the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation’s French-American Jazz Exchange Composers’ Grant; she has since begun an exploration of African and Arab jazz traditions alongside acclaimed French-Lebanese trumpeter Ibrahim Maalouf while investigating the role of the female voice during the Arab Spring protests. That body of work will be premiered at The Kennedy Center’s 2014 Mary Lou Williams Jazz Festival.

Widely acknowledged as an arts scholar, Somi is a TED Fellow, an inaugural Association of Performing Arts Presenters Fellow, a 2013 Park Avenue Armory Artist-in-Residence and the founder of New Africa Live, a non-profit organization dedicated to celebrating the very best of contemporary African artists working in the performance, visual and literary arts. In 2013, Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon invited Somi to perform at the United Nations’ General Assembly in commemoration of the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Somi and her band continue to perform at international venues and stages around the world. In her heart of hearts, she is an East African girl who loves family, poetry and freedom.
Few contemporary albums bare as particular a narrative as The Lagos Music Salon. The new album by the superb chanteuse Somi finds her breaking new ground with a hybrid style of music that organically integrates the essence of jazz and soul with the musical depth of her African heritage. “It’s the first time ever that I put all other pursuits on hold to focus solely on the creative process,” says Somi, who decided to move to Lagos, Nigeria from her New York home base without a game plan but with a passionate desire to find a new direction for her vision and voice.

The Lagos Music Salon marks Somi’s major label debut for Sony’s Okeh Records and features a range of originals that are sublimey melodic, percussively textured. A socially informed and adventurous vocalist, Somi sings with a soulful beauty about her experiences in Lagos. While there, she kept a journal of her observations and collaborated with a community of musicians, writers and artists who helped her to envision what would become The Lagos Music Salon.

The album covers a broad swatch of styles and features a number of carefully matched guest performances. These include a fast-paced groove with Afro-pop sensibilities on the Fela Kuti-inspired “Lady Revisited” with Angeline Kidjo, and a rap-inflected cinematic reflection on Africa’s pollution, “When Rivers Cry,” that features Common.

Also in the mix are field recording snippets, including an exchange at the Lagos airport with an immigration officer, heated rally cries from the Occupy Nigeria protests and a parabolic story of an over-skilled monkey.

“I’m excited about this album," Somi says. “I allowed myself to abandon the boundaries of my comfort zone, but that gave me the room to explore and play with new ideas and inspirations. Some people see me as an African artist and not jazz, while others see me as a jazz artist influenced by Africa. But I’m not focused on genre. My intent is to be honest with the songs and where they take me.”

Somi’s dramatic Salon story started ironically and sadly on the release date of her 2009 album, If the Rain Come First, when her beloved father passed away. “I had to weather the storm of his passing,” Somi says. “The loss was so sobering that I began to question my own life’s legacy and path. My dearest mentor Hugh Masekela knew about my personal storm of his passing,” Somi says. “The loss was so sobering that I began to question my closer to my father’s spirit and my own heart. It was Uncle Hugh that reminded me that to be a musician is to be a global citizen and that I should always listen to my heart should it long to travel. ‘Stop thinking about it as a move,’ he said, ‘Think of it as an opportunity to spend time with another part of your global audience.’ That’s when I decided to make the bold choice of moving to Lagos. A true Africanist, I believe my father is proud of that choice.”

While she spent part of her youth in Africa with her parents, Somi hadn’t lived there since her first year out of college when she landed a medical anthropology research fellowship in Kenya and Tanzania. After frequent holiday visits and touring extensively on the continent (visiting more than 12 countries with her band), Somi fell in love with Lagos, “where there’s a huge volume of cultural production, including literature, film and fashion — let alone music,” she says. “For an artist, it is a very exciting place. There’s an energy there that reminds me of New York. Twenty million people live there — it’s cosmopolitan, fast, hard and yet so inspiring.”

While Somi’s goal was to live in Lagos for 15 months, she ended up being there for 18 months. She began her journey with an international teaching artist residency at a university in Ilorin, Nigeria while also doing occasional European shows to keep her career visible. After six months, Somi began to realize the impact of her choice to be in Lagos. “Initially I was a little panicked,” she says. “Was I going to disappear? Would people forget about me? But after months of writing in my journal, I discovered a body of work was emerging.”

Somi set out to work on her new material, but Lagos doesn’t have the cultural infrastructure of small clubs like New York. “I needed to develop my work and test it on Nigerian audiences,” says Somi. “So I started producing intimate salons at art galleries and other nontraditional venues in Lagos where I would perform my new music. It grew into a series where I’d invite local artists to perform as well. That work greatly enriched my experience, challenged me to think more about African notions of cultural intimacy, and gave birth to The Lagos Music Salon concept.”

Somi accumulated a collection of music steeped in the culture of Lagos and collaborated with two colleagues who share co-producer credit with her on The Lagos Music Salon: Lagos musician Cobham Asuquo (who happens to be blind and is impressively self-taught) and New York’s Keith Witty. “Cobham has a deep understanding of traditional African music as well as strong pop sensibilities,” Somi says. “And Keith, the modern jazz head on the project, made sure the artful sense of the music was always privileged amidst the African pop influences.”

In New York, they assembled Somi’s core band: drummer Otis Brown III, pianist Toru Dodo, guitarist Elliot Ellman, background vocalist Alicia Olatuja and bassist Michael Olatuja. Guests to the ensemble include acclaimed Nigerian-American trumpeter Ambrose Akinmusire who blows a moving melancholic solo through “Brown Round Things,” an original lamenting the prostitutes Somi observed in Lagos; and rising-star trumpeter, Etienne Charles, who arranged the horn section for the celebratory, pop-tinged “Akobi: First Born S(u)n.”

Somi weaves through the collection of captivating songs with a socio-cultural poignancy. The R&B-ribbed “Two Dollar Day” tells the story of a domestic worker, who earns two dollars a day, and couldn’t afford to go home because of the oil-rich Nigerian government’s decision to hike fuel prices 200 percent. While the provocative “Four. One. Nine.” takes its name from the police criminal code for the Nigerian email swindles, Somi likens the scam to fraudulent love affairs, while a friend offers her a tongue-in-cheek reprimand about unsavory men. The most dynamic piece is the bass line-driven “Four African Women,” inspired by a Nina Simone original. It’s a sketch of four African women who each experienced a different hardship — genocide, skin bleaching, circumcision and prostitution.

Other highlights include the percussive, string quartet-colored tune “Ankara Sundays,” the sobering “Last Song” and the gently swinging love song “Ginger Me Slowly” about playfully telling forthright men how to romantically treat their woman. There are also two versions of the upbeat original “Love Juju.”

“Juju is African magic,” Somi explains. “Throughout the album, I’m singing about the magic of Lagos and the spell it cast on my heart.”

Somi has for the last decade carved out a career of singing and being an activist. On The Lagos Music Salon, the best album of her young career, she magically combines the two facets of her life. As for her adopted city, she says, “It was a euphoric new place for me, an important journey. I wanted to tell honest stories in the spirit of gratitude.”
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