Lara Downes

This Land

THIS LAND

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2	George Gershwin/Edmar Colón: Rhapsody in Blue Reimagined*	27. 23
3	Paul Simon: America (arr. Noah Luna)	3. 09
4	Michael Begay: Adéihozhdílzin / Know Who You Are*	5. 07
5	Kian Ravaei: Variations on This Land is Your Land	7. 26
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** world premiere recording*

Total playing time: 75. 13

Lara Downes, piano

GUEST ARTISTS

Rhapsody in Blue Reimagined
Edmar Colón, soprano saxophone
Edwin Outwater, conductor
SFCM Orchestra
Jeriel Sanjurjo, Afro-Caribbean Percussion
John Santos, Batá and Afro-Caribbean Percussion
Great Wall Chinese Orchestra

900 Miles
Dave McKeon, banjo

ARCHIVAL RECORDINGS
There'll Be Some Changes Made: Ethel Waters; The Jazz Masters - Black Swan Records, 1921
Rhapsody in Blue: George Gershwin, piano; Paul Whiteman Orchestra - Victor, 1924
Bird calls collected in Arizona by Michael Begay

Western
MOTEL
RV
VACANCY
RV

SELECTED PLANTING
COTTON-SEED
GROWN FROM
WATSON PEDIGREED SEED

THIS LAND

This land. It's vast, around 3000 miles from sea to shining sea. A crazy quilt of irregular squares — dense cities, sprawling suburbs, and tiny towns. Mountains and canyons, deserts, forests and prairies, all stitched together along their seams by the rivers, the railroads and highways that move us around this land. It seems that we're always on the move here in America, restless and roaming, following adventure and opportunity, and maybe just the urge to know what else is out there in this big, wide country.

THERE'LL BE SOME CHANGES MADE

William Benton Overstreet traveled all around America in the 1910s and '20s, following the Black vaudeville circuit from Kansas City to Galveston, Mobile, Hot Springs AK (where he ended up in jail for a spell) then up to Chicago, Philadelphia, and Harlem. Langston Hughes called him "one of the better poets of jazz". His song *There'll Be Some Changes Made* became a jazz standard, but Ethel Waters recorded it first, for the Black Swan label in 1921. It's a song about the unpredictability of love, but it could just as well be about the changeability of this American life.

RHAPSODY IN BLUE REIMAGINED

George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* was first performed in NYC on Lincoln's birthday in 1924. From the first notes of that now-iconic clarinet glissando, it was as if a gust of fresh air had blown through the theater, bringing with it the sound of the American future. With the 24 year old composer at the piano, the Rhapsody's mix of percussive rhythms, swoonworthy tunes, and jazz age exuberance brought the audience to its feet as the piece came to its crash-bang ending. Gershwin, the son of Russian Jewish immigrants, wrote this music fueled by a vision of what he called "a sort of musical kaleidoscope of America — of our vast melting pot." This new version, by the Puerto Rican composer Edmar Colón,

honors and extends that vision with an embrace of the countless cultures that make up our melting pot today, thanks to the transformations of the past 100 years. Streams of movement and metamorphosis - millions of people following the promise of the American Dream from every corner of the globe. We are, in fact, a kaleidoscope.

AMERICA

In 1964, the young singer-songwriter Paul Simon took a cross-country road trip with his girlfriend, and he wrote a song about the journey. It's a portrait of youth - the finding of self that comes with first love and first adventures, and the loss of innocence, the disappointments that follow, all too soon. In that mid-century moment, Americans were searching for the soul of a nation that was facing trial by fire, collective loss, crisis of identity, an uncertain future. It's captured in the words of this song: *"I'm empty and aching and I don't know why"*

I'm a parent now, watching my kids as they navigate their way through our own landscape of national crisis and unrest - the dead ends and detours, the interchanges of idealism and disillusionment. This song stays so true, such a timeless soundtrack for this long journey, looking for America.

ADÉIHOZHDÍLZIN / KNOW WHO YOU ARE

The first humans probably arrived on this continent about 20,000 years ago, migrating over land that's now deep under the ocean. Over thousands of years, the ancestors of the Diné people migrated down to what's now the American Southwest, and that's where the composer Michael Begay was born. He grew up in the '90s on the Navajo Nation in Northern Arizona, land that was designated as the home of his people after centuries of occupation and displacement. In the Navajo language, the word Adéihozhdílzin means knowing yourself, feeling the strength of your roots and honoring your origins, and Michael's music is shaped by that knowledge, and by the sounds of the land - the winds, the thunder, and the birds that fly through the desert skies. I think this music is a really powerful reminder of our physical relationship to this land, our responsibility to love, respect and protect it, and to live in harmony with all the creatures who are our fellow inhabitants here

VARIATIONS ON THIS LAND IS YOUR LAND

Woody Guthrie criss-crossed this country during the Great Depression, hopping trains and hitchhiking, sharing the road with so many Americans who were down on their luck: displaced former farmers, laid-off factory workers, and migrants chasing hopes of work. Their adventures, dreams, and sorrows inspired his song *This Land is Your Land*, a protest against the inequity and injustice at the heart of American life, and a reminder that the beauty and bounty of this country should be equally shared by all of us. In 2019, the first generation Iranian-American composer Kian Ravaei wrote this set of variations on Guthrie's iconic folk anthem, reflecting on the increasingly dark and menacing realities of our own American era. Each variation grows more abstract and violent in character, until at the end, the piece resolves in a gentle plea for unity, and we're left wondering, "Whose land is this land?"

900 MILES

We Americans seem to carry a kind of insatiable nostalgia for home. It's in our bones, this longing for connection with our ancestral roots, for the places we come from. I feel it myself - the missing pieces of family and history that were left behind in the old country, or the old days.

My father felt it too, and one night, as he was dancing me, his newborn baby, off to sleep, he reflected on the distance, physical and emotional, between our San Francisco living room and his Harlem roots. He wrote a few lines, in his beautiful penmanship: *"Here by the Pacific Ocean, it's a long way from home."* My dad died many years ago, but I keep those lines traced on my

Santa Fe

SIMON ACKERMAN Clothes
ENTRANCE ENTRANCE ENTRANCE
NEW YORK NEW YORK
TISSUES
FOUNTAIN

The Redwood Highway

arm, reminding me always of his American journey. The old traditional railroad song 900 Miles originated in Appalachia in the late 1800's, and it's about that universal longing for a way to get back home: *"I've got tears in my eyes / Tryin' to read this letter from my home / Now if this train run me right / I'll be home tomorrow night / 'Cause I'm nine hundred miles from my home"*

NEVER HAS BEEN YET

This land. No denying that the roots beneath it go down to some dark, twisted places we'd rather leave buried. This land holds the blood and tears of the displaced and the enslaved, the futures lost to the tilling of this soil, the raising of its crops, the construction of palaces and the laying down of railroad tracks. There are cracks in the foundations of what we've built on this land. After all, what we've built on is a promise, and promises are fragile things, so easily broken. But in his poem *Let America Be America Again*, Langston Hughes argued for repair rather than despair: *The land that never has been yet / And yet must be / The land where every man is free / Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed / Let it be that great strong land of love.*

KALEIDOSCOPE

Gershwin called it the "musical kaleidoscope of America" — that hybrid mix of sounds and traditions that he poured into his Rhapsody in Blue. 100 years later, that blend defines our American music — music that finds the emotional center of different stories and journeys, that succeeds in communicating where words can fail. Musicians' ears are attuned to the common tones that travel among different harmonies, the rhythmic pulses that carry us across bar lines. Arturo O'Farrill listens intently, and has dedicated his life not only to crossing imaginary borders, but to erasing them in his wake. An artist of blended origins - born in Mexico, raised in New York City, bilingual and bicoastal - his music comes from a global kaleidoscopic of cultures.

FACING FORWARD

In every generation, we grapple with our relationship to the past and the future. Jake Heggie's song *Facing Forward* is a reflection on the passing of legacy, of strength — knowing that although life can be very lonely, those who came before are walking beside us along the way. Our history is here to guide us — looking backward, we see the path that's brought us to where we stand now, and then we turn and face forward, and walk on.

When the sun come shining, then I was strolling
And the wheat fields waving, and the dust clouds rolling
The voice was chanting as the fog was lifting
This land was made for you and me

-**Lara Downes**, May 2024

For Lyle and Simon, facing forward.

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Sit back and enjoy