



# Show Stopper

**FirstWorks 2010 goes out on a high note with a legendary vocal group**

By Jennifer Liedke

**This year's FirstWorks** Festival is already in full swing and the excitement of the performances continues to escalate. No matter what event you choose to attend, you will not be disappointed by the collection of talented people that gather to celebrate and share their passion for cutting edge art. The festival closes out this month with Sweet Honey In the Rock at the VMA Arts and Cultural Center, November 13 at 7:30. This highly renowned musical spectacle is a must-see and was even declared a "National Treasure" by First Lady Michelle Obama.

Founded in 1973 by Bernice Johnson Reagon at the D.C. Black Repertory Theater Company, the a cappella vocal ensemble was committed to conveying African-American traditions through music. Sweet Honey had their first public appearance that year at Howard University's W.C. Handy Blues Festival. They aspire to inspire, to instill peace, hope and love and to show the world how life should be – not just simply how it is. Harry Belafonte summed them up quite nicely when he said of Sweet Honey, "Her songs lead us to the well of truth that nourishes the will and courage to stand strong. She is the keeper of the flame."

Comprised of six African-American women whose voices join beautifully together to produce a sound like no other, the Grammy Award-winning act is a combination of blues, jazz, gospel, hip-hop and reggae. Their name was derived from a song that was based on a section of Psalm 81:16. In this piece, the people were promised to be fed with honey that would flow from the rocks if they were cracked open. The group uses this image to represent African-American women who have stood strong and been devoted to their faith and sacred music during their pursuit for freedom and justice.

More than 20 individuals have been members of Sweet Honey over the years. It started as a quartet, but the current lineup boasts six members with one, Shirley Saxton, translating the music using her sign language ability. The other five gifted ladies include Aisha Kahlil, Carol Maillard, Louise Robinson, Nitanju Casel and Ysaye Barnwell.

For those who have never experienced FirstWorks, this finale is a great opportunity to check it out. The festival is not just about entertainment; it's about bringing people together and connecting with the kids and the community. Sweet Honey rep-

resents this spirit well, according to Kathleen Pletcher, Executive Artistic Director at FirstWorks. "They have been celebrating life and have been using original music that draws on tradition to make their own sound," she explains. "In the best and hardest of times they have traveled to communities across the US and the world singing about hope, love, justice and resistance, and we felt that ending the festival with them would be inspirational, uplifting and joyous."

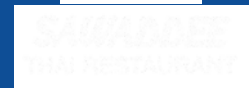
Performing and celebrating on stage with Sweet Honey will be the Junior Providence Singers and students from the Rhode Island School for the Deaf and Trinity Academy for Performing Arts. The highlight of the performance will feature Sweet Honey and the Junior Providence Singers presenting a musical dialogue known as "Indaba," which appropriately means "bringing together the right people, at the right time, to ask the right questions in order to arrive at the right answers." The experience will be another example of what makes FirstWorks such a vital part of the local arts scene.

For more information on the FirstWorks Festival, call 421-4278 or visit [www.first-works.org](http://www.first-works.org). 

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