

Concert review

Sweet Honey gives rousing show

By BARBARA STACK

It was a diverse and adoring audience of nearly a thousand which gathered at Smith College's John M. Greene Hall Sunday afternoon to celebrate the soaring and telling voices of Sweet Honey in the Rock. The a capella quartet featured Evelyn Harris, a researcher by day, Yasmeen Williams, a university student and teacher, and its most recent member, and Tulani Jordan, a hair sculptress who also provided the prototype of the quartet's flowing green and blue-green garments. Bernice Reagon, who founded the group in 1973, is a civil rights and anti-nuclear activist and mother, who works as a cultural historian at the Smithsonian Institute.

Sweet Honey was brought back for its third Valley appearance in four years by a new coalition of community arts groups: Variations, producers of women's cultural events; the Pioneer Valley Folklore Society; and five college black student alliances and women's centers. The audience was regional, with groups from Brattleboro and Worcester, and mostly white. Lesbian and feminist fans from UMass sat among male and female folkies. Small groups of black families and friends were scattered throughout the hall. Children were much about in laps and shared the aisles with the hardy people who came in wheelchairs and who knew they couldn't use a toilet until they got home.

Sweet Honey performed traditional gospel tunes and original material based on African, Caribbean, gospel, rhythm and blues, and jazz formations, but it was the delivery that made the honey flow. Each performer displayed a dazzling virtuosity over a range of octaves, textures and gestures and the breathtaking power and complexity

of the whole surpassed any vocal or instrumental quartet I have ever heard or imagined.

There were the many sounds of waters, of grasses, of things and beings delivered with "ahhhs" and "wooshes" and "dumbadumbas" in the tune, "So Listen." Bernice Reagon's voice, often doubled in silver by Evelyn Harns' electrifying soprano, might whisper, growl, or swoop up from the chorale into an urgent foreground.

Much traditional and modern black music is responsive, interactive among singers, between singers and well-wishers. Sunday's audience clapped in rhythm, joined in chorus, applauded heartily, and rose in dance or ovation, but when Yasmeen Williams sang, "Lord Keep Me Day by Day," it was a handful of black congregants who offered her their help, "yes, sister." She sang, "Won't you keep my body strong," and they responded, "Tell it sister" and "Yes, Lord." But their voices were few and did not spread and perhaps the singer never felt their support.

The members of Sweet Honey work as hard and as well as they do for reasons quite distinct from entertainment, the usual context for musical offering. Their lyrics testify to the beauty of life well lived, the power of strong belief, the sweetness of struggle and resistance, and the responsibility that goes with understanding: "You who believe in freedom cannot rest."

But Sweet Honey does not leave out the love, and we were healed and inspired and renewed on Sunday.

Sweet Honey in the Rock's third album, *Good News*, will be available in October on the Flying Fish label. Look for it in bins marked "women's music" or "gospel."



SWEET HONEY IN THE ROCK sang for about 1,000 people Sunday afternoon in John M. Greene Hall. From left are Evelyn Harris, Yasmeen Williams, Tulani Jordan and Bernice Reagon. (Photo by Richard Carpenter)