

# Meshell Ndegeocello



**Meshell Ndegeocello** (born *Michelle Lynn Johnson*, August 29, 1968) is an American singer-songwriter, rapper, bassist, and vocalist. Her music incorporates a wide variety of influences, including funk, soul, hip hop, reggae, R&B, rock, and jazz. She has received significant critical acclaim throughout her career, and has had ten career Grammy Award nominations. She has been credited for having "sparked the neo-soul movement."

Ndegeocello was born Michelle Lynn Johnson in Berlin, Germany, to army Sergeant Major and saxophonist father Jacques Johnson and health care worker mother Helen. She was raised in Washington, D.C. where she attended Duke Ellington School of the Arts and Oxon Hill High School. In early press releases from Maverick Records (*started in 1992 by Madonna & Frederick DeMann*) her birth year was erroneously listed as 1969. The 1968 birth date has been confirmed through a previous manager and lifelong friend.

Named Michelle Lynn Johnson at birth, Ndegeocello adopted her surname at the age of 17, which she says means "free like a bird" in Swahili. Meshell Ndegeocello is pronounced Mee-shell N-deh-gay-o-chel-o. Early pressings of *Plantation Lullabies* were stickered with the instructions. The spelling has changed in the hands of record labels a few times during her career; however, the correct spelling of her stage name is now Meshell Ndegeocello.

## Personal life

Ndegeocello is bisexual and previously had a relationship with feminist author Rebecca Walker. She suffers from photosensitive epilepsy and is susceptible to seizures induced by flash photography when she is performing live. Her son Solomon was born in 1989. She has gone by the name Meshell Suhaila Bashir-Shakur which is used as a writing credit on some of her later work.

## Career

Ndegeocello honed her skills on the D.C. in the late 1980s with the bands Prophecy, Little Bennie and the Masters, and Rare Essence. She unsuccessfully tried out for Living Colour's bassist position, vacated in 1992 by Muzz Skillings. Going solo, she was one of the first artists to sign with Maverick Records, where she released her debut album, *Plantation Lullabies*. This recording presented a distinctly androgynous persona.

Her biggest hit is a duet with John Mellencamp, a cover version of Van Morrison's "Wild Night", which reached #3 on the Billboard charts. Her only other Billboard Hot 100 hit besides "Wild Night" has been her self-penned "If That's Your Boyfriend (He Wasn't Last Night)", which

peaked at #73 in 1994. Also in 1994, Ndegeocello collaborated with Herbie Hancock on "Nocturnal Sunshine," a track for the Red Hot Organization's compilation album, *Stolen Moments: Red Hot + Cool*. The album, meant to raise awareness and funds in support of the AIDS epidemic in relation to the African American community, was heralded as "Album of the Year" by Time magazine.

She had a No. 1 Dance hit in 1996 with a Bill Withers cover song called "Who Is He (and What Is He To You?)" (briefly featured in the film *Jerry Maguire*) as well as Dance Top 20 hits with "Earth", "Leviticus: Faggot", "Stay" and the aforementioned "If That's Your Boyfriend.. Last Night)". Ndegeocello played bass on the song "I'd Rather be Your Lover" for Madonna on her album *Bedtime Stories*. Ndegeocello was also tapped, at the last minute, to perform a rap on the same song. This came after Madonna and producers decided to remove Tupac Shakur's rap (which he did while he and Madonna were dating in 1994), after he had criminal charges filed against him.

Her music has been featured in a number of film soundtracks including *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*, *Lost & Delirious*, *Batman & Robin*, *Love Jones*, *Love & Basketball*, *Talk To Me*, Tyler Perry's *Daddy's Little Girls*, *The Best Man*, *Higher Learning*, *Down in the Delta*, *The Hurricane*, *Noah's Arc: Jumping the Broom*, and *Soul Men*.

She has appeared on recordings by Basement Jaxx, Indigo Girls, and The Blind Boys of Alabama. On The Rolling Stones' 1997 album *Bridges to Babylon* she plays bass on the song "Saint Of Me". On Alanis Morissette's 2002 album *Under Rug Swept*, she plays bass on the songs "So Unsexy" and "You Owe Me Nothing in Return". On Zap Mama's album *ReCreation* (2009), she plays bass on the song "African Diamond".

She can also be seen in the documentary *Standing in the Shadows of Motown*, singing The Miracles' "You've Really Got a Hold on Me" and The Temptations' "Cloud Nine". In the late 1990s, she toured with Lilith Fair. She also did a remake of the song, "Two Doors Down" on the 2003 release, *Just Because I'm A Woman: The Songs of Dolly Parton*.

Ndegeocello was also a judge for the 2nd annual Independent Music Awards to support independent artists' careers. Her song "Tie One On" was chosen as the Starbucks iTunes Pick of the Week on February 23, 2010.

## Activism

In 2002, Ndegeocello collaborated with Yerba Buena on a track featuring Ron Black for the Red Hot Organization's tribute album to Fela Kuti, *Red Hot and Riot*. Proceeds from the album went to various AIDS charities, per the Red Hot Organization's mission.

In June 2010, she contributed a cover of U2's "40" to the Enough Project and Downtown Records' *Raise Hope for Congo* compilation. Proceeds from the compilation fund efforts to

make the protection and empowerment of Congo's women a priority, as well as inspire individuals around the world to raise their voice for peace in Congo.

In 2010, Ndegeocello contributed to the essay anthology *It Gets Better: Coming Out, Overcoming Bullying, and Creating a Life Worth Living*, edited by Dan Savage and Terry Miller in the vein of the It Gets Better Project.

## Discography

*(Studio albums)*

1993: *Plantation Lullabies* (Maverick)

1996: *Peace Beyond Passion* (Maverick)

1999: *Bitter* (Maverick)

2002: *Cookie: The Anthropological Mixtape* (Maverick)

2003: *Comfort Woman* (Maverick)

2005: *The Spirit Music Jamia: Dance of the Infidel* (Shanachie)

2007: *The World Has Made Me the Man of My Dreams* (EmArcy)

2009: *Devil's Halo* (Downtown)

2011: *Weather* (Naïve)

2012: *Pour une Âme Souveraine: A Dedication to Nina Simone* (Naïve)