

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Pianist Lara Downes and friends explore American music history at Cal Performances

by James Ambroff-Tahan, Bay City News May 4, 2026



*Cal Performances presents pianist Lara Downes in
“This Land: Reflections on America” on May 9 in Zellerbach Hall.
(Ebru Yildiz/Cal Performances via Bay City News)*

Celebrated pianist and radio personality Lara Downes was inspired to explore more after completing her 2025 album “This Land” featuring George Gershwin’s music and vision of America’s musical kaleidoscope.

“It opened up my eyes to the cycle of American history, and I’ve been investigating the ways that music fits into that story very intensely over the last few years. Every project I do takes on a life of its own and

seasons the next thing,” says Downes, host of NPR Music’s “Amplify with Lara Downes” and resident artist and host on Classical California radio.



*Judy Collins appears with Lara Downes in
“This Land: Reflections on America” in Berkeley.
(Shervin Lainez/Cal Performances via Bay City News)*

On Saturday in Berkeley, Cal Performances presents Lara Downes & Friends in “This Land: Reflections on America,” a program featuring Downes, singer Judy Collins, poet Terriona “Tank” Ball, the quartet Invoke, and Oakland Interfaith Gospel Choir performing music by Paul Simon, Willie Nelson, Margaret Bonds, Stephen Foster, Sam Cooke, Leonard Bernstein, Louis Armstrong, Collins and others.

“Friends” is an appropriate name for the show. Downes, a San Francisco native, has built friendships with most of her guests, starting with Collins, a collaborator on the 2019 album “Holes in the Sky,” a survey of music by women composers across generations.

Downes says of Collins: “She’s such an important figure in American music, we discovered deep musical connections, and so it’s been really nice to work with her since then.”

Noting that Collins’ career spans every decade from the 1950s onward, Downes points to the impact of seeing Collins’ albums in her parents’ record collection. She says, “I think that in my very early awareness of living in music she was very present, and I remember being aware of the importance of her music to my parents’ generation. In this survey of American history, that period of time is so

important as a reference point of what art has done and music has done, so that's why Judy is part of this concert."

Downes met Ball shortly after the New Orleans artist's soul, hip-hop, R&B and jazz group Tank and the Bangas won the 2025 Grammy Award for Spoken Word Poetry Album for "The Heart, The Mind, The Soul" and Ball appeared on her NPR show.



*Tarriona "Tank" Ball appears with Lara Downes in a program of American music.
(Jeremy Tauriac/Cal Performances via Bay City News)*

"We really bonded and had some nice conversations about words and music and how they could be very much the same thing, which is something that I play around with a lot," Downes says.

Downes met Invoke — Nick Montopoli (violin, banjo, vocals), Zach Matteson (cello, vocals), Karl Mitze (viola, mandolin, vocals) and Geoff Manyin (cello, vocals) — last year in Austin while on tour.

"I love the way they treat American music without genre boundaries," she says of the quartet, which blends bluegrass, Appalachian fiddle tunes, jazz and minimalism into a contemporary repertoire. "It's a really beautiful approach so I wanted to invite them."



*Invoke, an eclectic string ensemble, is in the lineup of
“This Land: Reflections on America.”
(Nathan Russell via Bay City News)*

The Oakland Interfaith Gospel Choir’s local connections and generational diversity drew Downes to include the 40-year-old ensemble led by founding director Terrance Kelly and known for uplifting performances.

“I love their local perspective and the way they’re treating gospel, which is a foundational American musical family. I most respect authenticity, but coming to it from different spaces, perspectives and voices; and I love that it’s multigenerational,” Downes says.



*The Oakland Interfaith Gospel Choir joins Lara Downes at Cal Performances.
(Oakland Interfaith Gospel Choir via Bay City News)*

The upcoming concert, part of Cal Performances' "Illuminations: "Exile & Sanctuary" series, is preceded by a talk in which Downes and NPR correspondent Chloe Veltman will discuss how experiences of displacement and refuge shape narratives, identities and communities, and how those experiences relate to American music.

As the U.S. celebrates its 250th anniversary, Downes would like the concert to remind audiences that history is a living thing that determines so much about humanity, and that music is evidence for that reality. She says, "History is like the foundation that we build on, and the 250th anniversary is just a moment to reflect and know and understand our history and then think about what comes next. It's really about building the next chapter, and music shows us how to do that. It's constantly evolving, changing and moving forward."

Cal Performances presents Lara Downes & Friends "This Land: Reflections on America" at 8 p.m. May 9 in Zellerbach Hall on the University of California, Berkeley campus. (An artist's talk is at 7 p.m.) Tickets are \$33-\$135 at calperformances.org.