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Lara Downes and Friends bring a vast musical portrait of America to Cal Performances

The May 9 performance is a celebration of the nation's 250th anniversary and includes Judy Collins, Tarriona "Tank" Ball, Invoke Quartet and the Oakland Interfaith Gospel Choir.



Sponsored by Cal Performances
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Lara Downes performs on May 9 in "This Land: Reflections on America," along with friends, presented by Cal Performances. Credit: Ebru Yildiz

By Shannon Cheng

Pianist and NPR and Classical California radio personality Lara Downes is coming to Cal Performances' Zellerbach Hall on Sat., May 9, and bringing an extraordinary circle of collaborators with her. Her performance of "This Land: Reflections on America" gathers a dynamic cast, from folk

legend **Judy Collins** and singer-poet **Tarriona “Tank” Ball** of Tank and the Bangas, to the genre-defying string players of **Invoke Quartet** and the soaring voices of the **Oakland Interfaith Gospel Choir**.

Tickets: Lara Downes & Friends at Cal Performances on May 9 are available at calperformances.org, or (510) 642-9988, or at the Ticket Office at Zellerbach Hall Tue.–Fri., 12–5:30 p.m.; Sat–Sun, 1–5 p.m.

“This Land: Reflections on America” showcases a uniquely American blend of performance, including vocal , and instrumental music, and spoken-word poetry. With music by Louis Armstrong, Leonard Bernstein, Margaret Bonds and Judy Collins the eclectic program reflects the wide range of narratives in America.

The performance’s varied nature, as Downes said, “explores the crossroads where our stories and journeys converge, and [reflects] on our capacity for empathy and community as we mark our nation’s 250th anniversary.”

The ambitious idea behind the evening’s program is an extension of Downes’ 2025 album, “This Land,” a project that took its inspiration from George Gershwin’s vision of a “musical kaleidoscope of America.” Downes and her collaborators continue to explore the rich tapestry of America, not through a single musical genre, but through the fusion of many.

Pre-Concert Artist Talk: Lara Downes joins NPR correspondent Chloe Veltman for a pre-concert talk about the power of music to voice resilience, resistance, progress, and protest, particularly in the face of displacement, throughout the nation’s 250-year history. 7–7:30 p.m., on the Zellerbach Hall stage. Free to ticket holders that evening.

Throughout her career, Downes’ music has consistently brought attention to overlooked composers within the classical music canon. By spotlighting the music of lesser-known Black American composers, such as Florence Price and Nora Holt, Downes has helped elevate their voices. She has spread the spirit of inclusion across many stages with several orchestras, including performances at Lincoln Center in New York City and Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles.



Judy Collins performs with Lara Downes and Friends on May 9, presented by Cal Performances. Credit: Shervin Lainez

Joining her is Judy Collins, whose long career weaves together music and activism. Perhaps best known for her chart-topping renditions of Joni Mitchell’s “Both Sides Now” and Stephen Sondheim’s “Send in the Clowns,” Collins has more than 50 albums to her name. Her most recent release, “Spellbound,” (2022), is her first album of entirely original work.



Tarriona “Tank” Ball performs in Lara Downes and Friends on May 9 presented by Cal Performances. Credit: Jeremy Tauriac

Where Collins brings the weight of American folk tradition, Tarriona “Tank” Ball arrives from a very different corner of the musical landscape — yet with equally deep roots in storytelling. The lead singer of the New Orleans-based Tank and the Bangas fuses spoken word with hip-hop and more, synthesizing slam-poetry and music into a singular artistic voice. The

band's boundary-crossing work earned them the 2025 Grammy Award for Best Spoken Word Poetry Album for "The Heart, The Mind, The Soul."



Invoke Quartet performs with Lara Downes and Friends on May 9, presented by Cal Performances. Credit: Nathan Russell

Bridging the sonic worlds of these vocalists is Invoke Quartet, whose music ranges from Appalachian fiddle tunes to jazz. In [this preview](#) of Willie Nelson's "Changing Skies," filmed for Downes' forthcoming album, their dreamy, layered musical interactions offer a glimpse of the collaborations that audiences will hear in "This Land: Reflections on America."



The Oakland Interfaith Gospel Choir performs with Lara Downes + Friends on May 9, presented by Cal Performances. Courtesy of OIGC

The Oakland Interfaith Gospel Choir brings a powerful sense of community and purpose, in the tradition of Black gospel and spirituals. A cornerstone of the Bay Area music scene, the choir has performed with groups as varied as the San Francisco Symphony and the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus, consistently offering music that uplifts and unites. As alto Sharon Hymes-Offord says, "If this choir is my way of demonstrating what this country should look like, then I'll stay in it as long as I have a voice to sing."

With the artists each contributing their own voice and tradition, "This Land: Reflections on America" emerges as more than a concert — it becomes a living portrait of the nation, capturing its complexity, contradictions and enduring promise.

"This Land: Reflections on America" is part of Cal Performances' Illuminations: "Exile & Sanctuary" series in the 2025–26 season, which brings artists and UC Berkeley scholars together to discuss how experiences of displacement and refuge shape narratives, identities, and communities. Learn more at calperformances.org/illuminations.