

## Rita Chiarelli - Music From The Big House (2011)

Written by bluesever

Thursday, 20 June 2013 14:17 -

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*01. Rita's Journey 02. These Four Walls 03. Mississippi Boy 04. Don't Let Him Catch You (With Your Work Undone) 05. Mercy Blues 06. Harvest 07. Rest my bones (Prison Yard Rehearsal) 08. Glory Glory 09. Rain On Me (Prison Yard Rehearsal) 10. Rain On Me 11. I Love You Still 12. Midnight Special 13. Convicted*

The music we call the blues was born of pain and suffering. The performance of this exquisite ache is intended for spiritual release, even if physical freedom is unavailable. Nowhere is this understood better than in Louisiana's Angola Prison, a maximum-security prison on a property the size of Manhattan that holds 5,000 inmates convicted of the worst of crimes and serving the longest of sentences.

It was once known as "the Bloodiest Prison in America" for its past history of violence. It's the grim place where two musically minded and celebrated Torontonians, blueswoman Rita Chiarelli and filmmaker Bruce McDonald, head for the social and sonic adventure that is Music from the Big House. Chiarelli lends her three-octave voice and deep compassion to a collection of murderers and rapists whose many years behind bars have made them sorrowful and eager for redemption. The liberating power of the blues — and also a little country and R&B — is seen in the smiles and swaying of the inmates, none of whom would make it past the first audition of American Idol.

This isn't about finding prodigies behind bars. It's also not about gawking at criminals as if they were zoo animals. Not until the credits roll do we find out what crimes these men have committed. Music from the Big House is about exploring the redemptive power of music. Chiarelli provides insights into her own hard life, growing up as the daughter of poor Italian immigrants struggling in steeltown Hamilton. Music was her liberation, as it is for these men, even though many of them will never see freedom: "Here, when they say life, they mean life,"

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one of them says.

In less sincere hands, the concept might seem exploitive or too reminiscent of Johnny Cash's famous prison concerts. This is utterly sincere, and there is lasting value in getting violent men to turn their energies to peaceful expression: "When you're singing, you're not angry," Chiarelli says. ---Peter Howell, thestar.com

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