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By Jesse Hamlin

## Marcus Shelby's musical suite on prison industry



**Marcus Shelby**, the jazz bassist and composer whose swinging music is often fueled by his passion for history and social justice, just finished a monthlong run at **Berkeley Rep** accompanying **Anna Deavere Smith** in her new multi-voiced solo work, "**Notes From the Field: Doing Time in Education.**" It deals with the so-called school-to-prison pipeline that funnels mostly poor young people of color into the unforgiving criminal justice system, a subject even more relevant now, in this post-Ferguson moment, than when Smith wrote the piece.

Shelby, who wrote the music and plays off the actress in call-and-response-like phrases that suggest blues shouts and field hollers, got so absorbed in the subject while developing the piece with Smith over the last few years that he wrote a musical suite about mass incarceration and the so-called prison industrial complex, "**Beyond the Blues: A Prison Oratorio.**" Commissioned by the Yerba Buena Gardens

Festival, where it premieres Sept. 27, the piece was written for Shelby's big band and a vocal quartet featuring **Tiffany Austin, Joe Bagale, Mujahid Abdul-Rashid** and **Kennedy Shelby**, the composer's 12-year-old daughter (Kennedy was **Duke Ellington's** middle name).

"The people I've always admired — **Louis Armstrong, Nina Simone**, Duke Ellington — used their music to make social change. For me, that's been a personal calling, to try to understand the world around me, particularly as it relates to social justice," says Shelby, whose previous works include "**Bound for the Promised Land: Harriet Tubman**," and "**Soul of the Movement: Meditations on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.**"

Shelby, as always, did copious research for this two-year project, reading about mass incarceration and the history of U.S. prisons, visiting California jails and doing monthly programs at San Francisco's Juvenile Justice Center, where he brings in musicians to play, encourages and helps the kids to make their own music and exposes them to "art, culture and critical thinking."

He's also been attending conferences and restorative-justice workshops, and putting on monthly meetings on incarceration-related issues at the Red Poppy Art House, where he performs prison songs by everyone from **Ma Rainey** ("**Chain Gang Blues**") and **Bessie Smith** to **Johnny Cash** and **B.B. King**. In addition to composing new songs, he has rearranged some of those classic numbers orchestrally for "**Beyond the Blues: A Prison Oratorio**." He'll play some of them with his quartet next Thursday, Sept. 10, at the **Museum of the African Diaspora** on a program called "**Beyond the Blues: Ending the Prison Industrial Complex**."

Kennedy Shelby — who plays piano in the **San Francisco Community Music Center's Teen Jazz Orchestra**, led by her father for the last three years — will also perform at MoAD, along with a few other ringers from the CMC band.

"I've been able to work with these young people at CMC consistently, and it's a great project for me," says Shelby, whose 5-year-old daughter, **Billie**, named for **Holiday**, plays percussion in the band. For more information, go to [www.moadsf.org](http://www.moadsf.org) or [www.ybgfestival.org](http://www.ybgfestival.org).

<http://www.sfgate.com/entertainment/article/Marcus-Shelby-s-musical-suite-on-prison-industry-6480858.php>