

Mountain High

Calvin Levels Ascends James Baldwin's Heights

By KEVIN McAITEER

"The truth about the past is not that it is too brief, or too superficial, but only that we, having turned our faces so resolutely away from it, have never demanded from it what it has to give." — James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*.

James Baldwin: *Down from the Mountaintop*, a one-man play performed by Tony Award nominee Calvin Levels, tells the rich and complex story of James Baldwin's life. Baldwin, one of America's greatest 20th century writers, was an out gay African American whose collected works range from charged political essays to engaging fiction.

Baldwin addressed the intersections of race, sexuality, and class at a time when few others took such risks. *Giovanni's Room* — published in 1956 by a British company after being refused by several American publishers — is central to the gay canon and often featured on the syllabi of lesbian and gay literature courses.

Down from the Mountaintop, performed last month in the Billings Center at the University of Vermont, was one of the many highlights of the University of Vermont's National Coming Out Week 2004 programming. As did Baldwin's own writing, Levels' dramatic adaptation and passionate performance demanded from the audi-

ence a serious consideration of all that the life of Baldwin has to offer — both for its historical truth and its applicability to the current political and social climate.

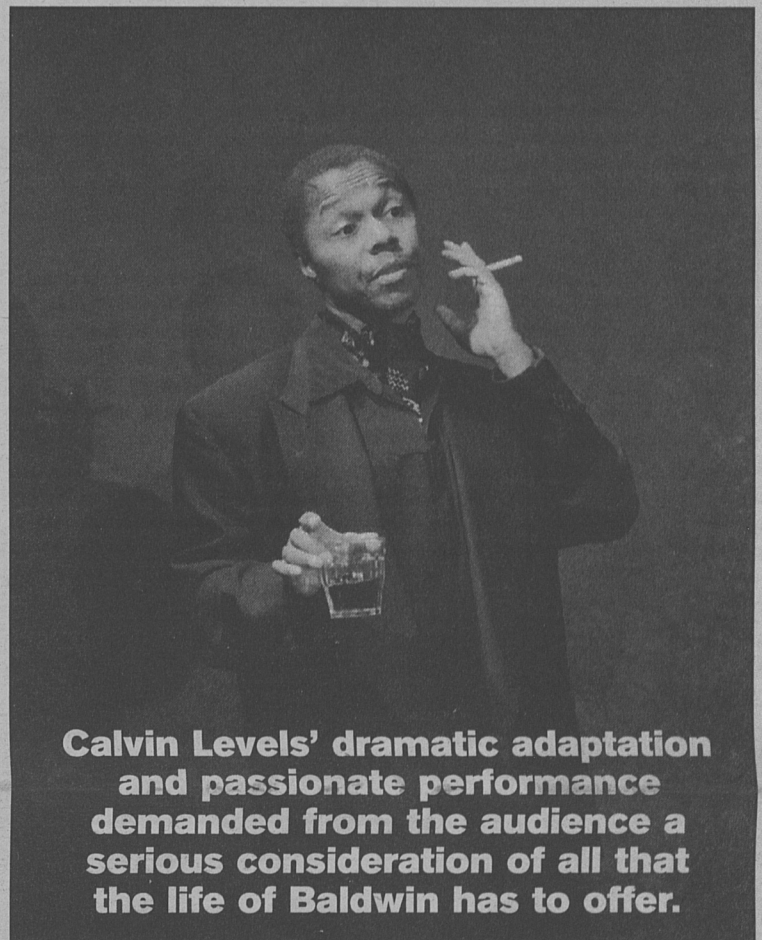
The play offers an ethereal representation of Baldwin as he visits the Broadway stage where a performance about his life is about to take place. As the actor who will portray him waits backstage, Baldwin tells us he would like us to hear the truth about his life directly from the source. As the story of Baldwin's life unravels, Levels' production makes use of an accompanying slide show and framed photographs as part of an otherwise simple living-room set design. The slides and photos serve as visual introductions of individuals who influenced Baldwin: Baldwin's father, writer Richard Wright, artist Beauford Delaney, and Lucien Happersberger, Baldwin's closest friend and lover.

One of the earliest influences on Baldwin was the church. He became a preacher at age 14. Growing up in Harlem in the 1930s, Baldwin took what the church offered: an alternative to a working life — subject to rampant prejudice — or a life of crime. In *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin admits that it was his "good luck" that he found himself in "the church racket instead of some other," for "being in the pulpit was like being in the theatre; I was behind the scenes and knew how the illusion was worked."

In *Down from the*

Mountaintop 'Baldwin' proclaims that as a preacher, "I was the greatest actor in the world!" I realized I was watching an actor playing a historical figure who was anticipating an actor to follow him to portray the story of his life. This staging of Baldwin's story raises questions about how Baldwin may have used the methods of acting during other times in his life both to survive the discrimination he faced and to point out the shortcomings of the societies and classes in which he traveled.

Levels' Baldwin continues his story by reading highlights from selected works including *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (his first novel), *Giovanni's Room*, *Blues for Mister Charlie* (a play written in response to the murder of Emmitt Till), and his last work of fiction, *Just Above My Head*. He also shares gossip about his tenacious relationships with other writers such as Norman Mailer and Lorraine Hansberry, and activists Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. The writer's network could be exhausting, not so much because of the impressiveness of the list, but by the high level of emotional investment Baldwin made with each of these individuals. Levels captures this emotional intensity not only in his onstage impersonation of Baldwin but also in the thoughtful writing of *Down from the Mountaintop*, which reflects the stylistic integrity of Baldwin: clean writing done with an unquestionable passion.



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Levels used creative license to insert contemporary political commentary into the play noting the war in Iraq. His inclusion of a contemporary issue illustrates the timelessness of Baldwin's writing and its relevance to our own ability to address some of the problems Baldwin had attempted to resolve during his lifetime. *Down from the Mountaintop* ends with a hopeful plea from Baldwin expressing his desire that "somewhere they will use something I left behind. And if they

do that, I've accomplished something." There remains a tremendous amount for all of us to learn from what Baldwin has left behind. Levels' production is a creative approach to capturing the heart and essence of all Baldwin desired as a writer, which was not just to write, "but to disturb the peace." ▼

Kevin McAteer works for Middlebury College, is a graduate student, and in his "spare" time, writes for OITM from Bristol.

OUT Standing Indie Rock-Folk

By LLUVIA MULVANEY-STANAK

In an age with so many singer-songwriters and hip folksy gals with guitars, it is rare to find a musician who stands out from the crowd. With her new album *Single Bullet Theory*, Pamela Means steps out from her indie peers with a sound

that is so original you would think she invented indie rock-folk. It's fresh. It's mellow. And it's even got that political punch that makes it truly folksy, with songs ranging from covers of the jazz classic "Strange Fruit" to original pieces like "O.D." that lyrically chronicle Dick Cheney's oily-capitalistic past.

The true essence of Pamela Means is her intense guitar

Single Bullet Theory
Pamela Means
www.pamelameans.com

playing. If you have caught her live in the typical little coffee joint in some metro-college-coffee shop New England town, you know how hard this woman plays — there is a hole in her guitar from how hard she

strums! You get treated to an instrumental track halfway through this album with "Mother's Day" which clearly displays her true gift for the guitar.

Despite its heavy title, *Single Bullet Theory* displays her mellow side. Each track flows to the next to create that rare, true album experience. The tracks will teach you history and current events and how to respect the crazy ways of the heart.

Pamela Means is every bit

an independent musician. She has the passion, the guts and the dedication to do it on her own. Just skimming the linear notes reveals she has some of the best company in the indie artist world: Alix Olson, Doria Roberts, and Ember Swift — just to name a few.

Constantly on tour, constantly "playing it" how it is, and constantly addressing topics ranging from racism to heterosexism, Pamela Means and her new record are well worth your pennies. ▼