

LA MAMA
EXPERIMENTAL THEATRE CLUB
PRESENTS

Coffeehouse Chronicles #180:
Abba Elethea



The Club
74a East 4th Street, NYC, 10003
May 31, 2025

Coffeehouse Chronicles #180: Abba Elethea

Moderated by Michal Gamily

**With Ching Valdes Aran, Sheila Dabney, Dana Manno,
Valois Mickens, Barbara Montgomery, Meredith Wright,
Abigail Ramsay, Michael Sirota (Musical Director)**

**Live Music by
Piano: Michael Sirota
Saxophone: Ben Golder-Novick
Guitar: Jason Green**

Media Design & Programming: Jane Cathy Shaw

**Photos from *Songs for My Sisters*
Photos by Jerry Vezusso courtesy of the La MaMa Archive**

***Sister Songs*
Directed by Ozzie Rodriguez
Composed by Sheila Dabney
All songs and poems by Abba Elethea**

“When Did You Leave Heaven” by Nancy Wilson

Many thanks to La MaMa archive

Detroit-born poet, performer, and cultural theorist Abba Elethea is a singular force in American arts and letters. Proudly gay and unapologetically himself from the start, Abba brings radical honesty and fierce love to every stage, page, and classroom.

A vital voice in the Black Arts Movement, his groundbreaking choreopoem *Songs For My Sisters* premiered at La MaMa, an explosive celebration of Black womanhood and queer liberation. Rooted in the fire and brilliance of his mentor James Baldwin, Abba’s work continues to spark dialogue, healing, and revolution—straight from the heart of Detroit.

Opening Clip: *Africa O Egypt*

Live: Abba reads *Watusi Tall*

With: The Company

Introduction: Michal introduces Abba

Segment: Childhood

Moving to NYC

Reading: *Aunt Louis* – Abba

Performance: Sheila's monologue as Aunt Louis

Conversation: Sheila joins Abba – early days at La MaMa

Clip :Rhodessa and Idris

Talk: *Songs for My Sisters*

Performance: Valois – *It's Hot*

Reading: Abigail – *I Am the Kind of Girl*

Talk: Ching and Valois join Abba and Sheila

Performance: Meredith – *When the Sun Goes Down*

Talk: *Sister Songs*

Reading: Abba – *What's Happenin'*

Performance: Sheila – *When Did You Leave Heaven*

Sing-Along: Led by Sheila

Clip: *Songs for My Sisters*

Sing-Along: Led by Sheila

Abba Elethea (James W. Thompson)

Detroit-born poet, performer, and cultural theorist Abba Elethea has long been a visionary voice in Black literary and performance arts. Proudly gay and unapologetically himself since birth, Elethea brought his whole truth to every stage, page, and classroom. A former columnist, dance critic, and editor with the influential UMBRA magazine in the late 1960s, he helped shape the Black Arts Movement's vibrant legacy through both scholarship and stage.

He is the originator of the Contrast-Cohesion-Continuum, an interdisciplinary teaching methodology developed during his work with the Thirteen College Consortium, an alliance of historically Black colleges and universities including Atlanta University, Morris Brown, Florida A&M, and Clark College. As poet-in-residence at Antioch College, Elethea pioneered the institution's first course in Aframerican Poetry, empowering students to explore Black expression through the lens of cultural identity and spiritual depth.

Abba's lifelong commitment to cultural education and community engagement is evident in his innovative programming. He created Detroit Creates on Wheels, an artist recognition and employment program that brought music, dance, poetry, and drama into six neighborhood recreation centers, placing artists directly into the communities where they lived and served. The program's culminating performance took place at the historic Rackham Memorial Building across from the Detroit Institute of Arts.

He also developed the Cheela Program Cultural Heritage Enrichment Education through the Literary Arts, a transformative initiative first offered to the Detroit Board of Education. Though later institutionalized with academic modifications, Elethea reclaimed it as a grassroots poetry seminar, teaching it across six Detroit libraries over six weeks and anchoring it in literary empowerment and heritage reclamation.

His written work has appeared in *Transatlantic Review*, *Présence Africaine*, *Antioch Review*, *Obsidian*, *Black World*, and *Essence*, and is featured in foundational anthologies such as *The Black Poets*, *The Poetry of Black America*, *You Better Believe It*, and *Black Spirits*. Through these works, Elethea has long championed the voices of the marginalized, the mystical, and the magnificent. In a groundbreaking moment of creative fusion, his, choreopoem, *Songs For My Sisters* premiered at New York's renowned La MaMa Experimental Theatre, marking his emergence into performance ritual. Blending poetry, music, movement, and ancestral invocation, the work honored Black womanhood and queer reverence. This evolution led to *Eye Ellipse / Ear Eternal: Soul So Sweet*, a performance art experience centering Black sensuality, memory, and spiritual power.

A summa cum laude graduate in Belles Lettres from the College of New Rochelle, Abba Elethea continues to reside in Detroit, where he reflects, writes, and lives out the liberatory wisdom gifted to him by his mentor, James Baldwin.

Dana McBroom Manno's life in the performing arts and education, encompasses the worlds of theatre, dance, music, fine arts and electronic media. As a senior faculty member of Adelphi University's Performing Arts and African American Studies departments, she developed the curriculum for and taught courses in History of Africans in America on Film, the Black Drama Workshop and Ethnic Dance. Her work with Adelphi's La Union Latino and the African Peoples Organization resulted in her appointment as Coordinator of Talent and Library Liaison for Adelphi University's Center for African American Studies Program. As founder and artistic director of the Adelphi Arts Ensemble, she created a community outreach program that recruited university students to perform theatre, dance and music programs for residents and students of Nassau and Suffolk counties in Long Island, N.Y.

Valois Marie Mickens, born in Washington, D.C., came to New York to study fashion illustration. She met Ellen Stewart and so, her acting journey began. A founding member of the Great Jones Repertory Company, she is noted for her creative work under the direction of Andrei Serban. As assistant director to Mr. Serban, she taught the ancient Greek and Latin texts to members of the National Theater of Bucharest, Romania and the Seoul Institute of Korea. She is a member of Screen Actors Guild. At present Ms. Mickens is hoping to get funding for her first play, "Herd Grievance", due in October under the LaMaMa "Creatures" project.

Abigail Ramsay is an actress, facilitator, and arts project manager. She is delighted to participate in her second Coffeehouse Chronicles (#177 Adrienne Kennedy). Recent roles: Andromache in the Theater Three / Persona Theatre (Greece) collaboration "Troy Too" (HERE); Cynthia Cooper's "I was a Stranger too" (St. Paul, MN), Baby Cakes Studios "St. Marks" (Pilot). She works weekly with amazing young women at Flanbwayan Haitian Literacy Project through her organization TurningWheel Collective and is the Director of Kids Creative Collective's (KCC) Saturday Conservatory. Training: RADA 3-year Actor Training abigailramsay.com

Meredith Wright is a vocalist that lives in New York City. Sister Songs was a wonderful introduction to La Mama Etc and she became a member of Yara Arts Group (dir. Virlana Tkacz) and The Great Jones Repertory Company (dir. Ellen Stewart). She continued to work with cast member, musician/poet/artist Janice Lowe, who OLIO: A Syncopated Citizenry of Sun-drenched Sable Soliloquies (Tyehiamba Jess/Lowe) and Leaving Cle (Lowe). She has been a featured vocalist with Oyu Oro Afro-Cuban Dance Ensemble. She is passionate about family audiences: she performs with One Love Cultured Kids (founder Kay Richards) and works on original adaptations/ songs of her own.

Michael Sirota has been a member of the La MaMa Great Jones Repertory Company for over 40 years. He's composed, directed and performed music for La MaMa's productions in New York and abroad, including *Danton's Death*, Twitas International Festival, *Jerusalem* (New York, Rome), *Mythos Oedipus* (New York, Delphi, Belgrade, Vienna), *Spirit Walk*, *Another Phaedra Via Hercules*, *The Monk And The Hangman's Daughter* (Arcidosso, Italy), *Dionysus Filius Dei* (New York & Taipei), *Fragments Of A Greek Triliogy* (New York & Toyama, Japan), *Seven Against Thebes* (New York, Belgrade, Dubrovnik, Vienna), *Carmilla*, *Pabo & Ruisa* (Belgrade), *Queen Setsu* (Tokyo), *Aeneas* (Torino), *Antigone Perseus*, *Herakles Via Phaedra*, *Aesclepius* (Butrinti, Albania and New York), *Il Corvo* (Venice's Biennale Festival & New York) and *Diana* (Pristina, Kosovo).

Coffeehouse Chronicles is an educational performance series exploring the history of Off-Off Broadway. Part artist-portrait, part history lesson, and part community forum, Coffeehouse Chronicles take an intimate look at the development of downtown theatre, from the 1960s' "Coffeehouse Theatres" through today. Events feature firsthand oral accounts from artists of the day, as well as conversations with contemporary artists who work in the same bold, daring manner today. Since 2005, La MaMa has presented more than 150 Coffeehouse Chronicles, building on our mission to provide a home for personal engagement with art.

Series Director: Michal Gamily

**A full program with information on this
production can be found on the
Coffeehouse Chronicles #180: Abba Elethea
page of the La MaMa website.**

**In addition you can scan the
QR code Poster located in the theatre
lobby for access to the digital program.**

LA MAMA



RESTORE A BUILDING REMAKE A WORLD



Rendering: 74 East 4th St.

La MaMa's historic, landmark building at 74 East 4th Street underwent an urgently needed complete renovation and restoration to preserve the historic façade, create building-wide ADA accessibility, and provide much needed performance, exhibition and community space for decades to come.

La MaMa, founded by Ellen Stewart in 1961, has been on east 4th Street since 1967. La MaMa embraces every person in its community and is legendary as the place where new artists of all nations, cultures, races, and identities are given opportunities. It is the place where art begins.

To learn more about the renovation, or to make a donation please visit www.lamama.org/remakeaworld

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