

REFLECTING AMERICAN DREAMS

A curatorial project for Lucerne Festival 2026 by guerillaclassics

The presence of Dr. Doreen Ketchens, a living legend of the clarinet and a major figure of the Afro-Creole tradition, in Lucerne opens a rare window in the European context: a window in which music does not “illustrate” the American Dream, but instead reveals its raw material – breath, rhythm, the march, the street.

New Orleans is not only the cradle of jazz; it is a world in which spirituals, gospels and folk songs mingle with the memory of slavery, with brass bands, with dancing funerals, and with joy as a form of survival. Through Dr. Doreen Ketchens, the street becomes a concert hall, and the concert hall becomes a place where the ear learns to “free itself” – as she herself puts it.

I. An encounter between generations and continents

REFLECTING THE STREETS OF NEW ORLEANS (working title)

At the heart of this project are three figures in constant dialogue: Doreen Ketchens, Jessie Cox and Simone Keller.¹

Three bodies, three histories, three ways of asking: Whose dream is this?

1. Dr. Doreen Ketchens: the streets of New Orleans leading into the hall

Doreen J. Ketchens, born in 1966 and known by the nicknames “Lady Louis,” “The Clarinet Queen” and “Ms. New Orleans,” is one of the great musicians of New Orleans.

In *Reflecting the Streets of New Orleans*, Doreen Ketchens is more than a guest: she is the centre. The project starts from her, from her practice, her breath. It is the streets of New Orleans that are reflected in Lucerne – not the other way around.

2. Jessie Cox: the American Dream from the perspective of the margins, from the perspective of the planets

Opposite to Dr. Doreen Ketchens, on a different path but along the same axis, stands Jessie Cox: composer, drummer and Assistant Professor of Music at Harvard University.

In *Reflecting the Streets of New Orleans*, Jessie Cox is the second pillar: he names fractures, gives a language to tensions, transforms Ketchens’ practice into a field of thought, and links the American Dream to the questions *Whose America? Whose*

¹ The three musicians have not all been invited yet, but are part of our artistic concept

Dream? – the very same questions that run through the work of Jalalu-Kalvert Nelson, which features in the final concert of the Lucerne Festival Academy on 30th August.

3. Simone Keller: building bridges between Lucerne and New Orleans

The third artist shaping the project is Simone Keller, a Swiss pianist born in 1980 in Weinfelden, who has been honoured with a Swiss Music Prize and numerous other awards for her work at the intersection of contemporary music, music theatre, improvisation and participatory formats.

In *Reflecting the Streets of New Orleans*, Simone Keller becomes the mediator between the Lucerne institution and the energy of the street. She understands the codes of the KKL, of the Lucerne Festival Academy – and at the same time she knows how to shift these codes towards improvisation, participation and collective performance. She is the third point of this triangle:

Doreen Ketchens – Jessie Cox – Simone Keller:
street – theory – mediation.

This constellation connects Africa, the Caribbean, the United States and Switzerland, jazz with contemporary music: a musical geography in which an American Dream emerges that is not mythical, but polyphonic, contested and diverse.

II. The workshop: learning to walk differently

The project unfolds over five days with about ten musicians of the Lucerne Festival Academy – mainly string players – who will work with Doreen Ketchens on emblematic pieces like:

When the Saints Go Marching In, Mary Had a Little Lamb, Summertime as well as other spirituals and gospels selected and arranged for ensemble.

The goal is not imitation but transformation: learning to improvise, to breathe together, to listen to one another in a register that goes beyond the “classical” frame. In an institution accustomed to scores, the aim is to introduce the possibility of risk, of displacement, of the unexpected.

The students are not merely playing music: they are learning how to walk, how to inhabit urban space, how to feel the pulse of a heritage transmitted through the body as much as through the score.

The result of the workshop will be a piece performed at the week’s final concert in the KKL.

III. Urban interventions: the street as stage

The public interventions take place at several locations throughout the city of Lucerne. Small groups peel off from the ensemble, play, improvise, move through the city. The audience does not attend a “concert”; it experiences a musical procession, a joyful parade that connects New Orleans with Lucerne and lets American history resonate within the everyday life of a European city.

IV. Integration into the final concert

The project finds its echo in the concert on 30th August, which includes *Endangered Dreams* by Jalalu-Kalvert Nelson – a work that explicitly questions the memory struggles surrounding the American Dream. The approach developed by Ketchens and the students in the street meets here a symphonic reflection on America’s contested narratives: *Whose America? Whose Dream?*

The audience thus traverses several Americas: that of the streets of New Orleans, that of contemporary music (Carter), that of endangered dreams (Nelson).

V. Conclusion: a dream with many voices

Reflecting the Streets of New Orleans places Lucerne Festival within a profoundly transatlantic process: not a folkloristic celebration of America, but a collective production of knowledge, listening and memory.

The American Dream no longer appears as a unified promise, but as a multiplicity of dreams, often conflicting and always in tension – carried by voices that have been marginalized for far too long within European musical institutions.

With this project, Lucerne Festival affirms that the American Dream can only be understood by listening to those who, from the streets of New Orleans to stages across the world, have transformed pain into art and history into rhythm. Doreen Ketchens, Jessie Cox, Simone Keller and the musicians of the Lucerne Festival Academy become co-authors of a narrative in which America is no longer a myth, but a living, complex and necessary conversation, resonating in the heart of the Swiss lakes and mountains and throughout the KKL.

Written collectively by guerillaclassics, end of November 2025

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