In 1973, four women from the Black Repertory Theater Company in Washington, D.C., including voice teacher and group founder Bernice Johnson Reagon, formed an all-female a cappella vocal ensemble they named for their first song, Sweet Honey in the Rock, from Psalm 81. Since then, the group has toured the world, garnered awards and a Grammy nomination, cut two dozen albums, sung at Nelson Mandela’s memorial service, Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center and Kennedy Center and has been the subject of a PBS American Masters documentary.

“They have a long history of making powerful, beautiful music,” filmmaker Stanley Nelson, producer/director of the documentary Sweet Honey in the Rock: Raise Your Voice, has said. "Sweet Honey in the Rock is a group of very potent, talented, outspoken women who give their all at every concert. While they call on the broad traditions of African-American music, they're constantly evolving, developing new music that speaks to today's issues. It's a powerful mix.”

Sweet Honey in the Rock will bring its unique mixture of a cappella four-part harmony, African-American cultural roots and American Sign Language interpretation to ETSU’s Martha Street Culp Auditorium Thursday, Oct. 30 at 7:30 p.m.

“I have wanted to book Sweet Honey for a long time,” says Anita DeAngelis, director of Mary B. Martin School of the Arts. “They combine a cappella music from many genres, including African-American, spirituals and gospel, with social justice issues and sign language. It is exciting to bring an organization of their caliber to our community. They put on a rich and riveting show.”

Sweet Honey weaves a “complex journey of celebration and struggle rooted in the history of the African-American legacy,” says Allmusic.com. Their performances have been called “transforming,” “magnificent,” “awe-inspiring” and “breathtaking” by reviewers, transporting audiences on an adventure in blues, African, jazz, gospel and R&B music and a very interpersonal type of “community” singing. Longtime ensemble member Ysaye Barnwell, who retired from the group in 2013, describes Sweet Honey’s concerts “like we're sitting on a front porch. It's a musical conversation."
Indeed, “The sound is that of sisters sitting around the fireplace singing songs of social commentary, a female choir in rehearsal, a congregation of Wednesday evening Prayer Services singers, or a village that has come together to sing through happiness, trials or death,” says *American Masters*. “Even as the melodies, harmonies and rhythms soar, one is immediately struck by the message of the songs, for the message is what Sweet Honey is all about …

“Sweet Honey has become the surrogate conscience of the United States in that her songs will not let us rest while there is still work to be done.”

The “women join their powerful voices, along with hand percussion instruments, to create a blend of lyrics, movement and narrative that relate history, point a finger at injustice, and sing the praises of love,” the documentary says.

Creating this concoction of music and story, in the ensemble’s 40th year, are Carol Maillard and Louise Robinson – both founding members who have returned to the fold – Aisha Kahlil and Nitanju Bolade Casel. Shirley Childress has provided Sweet Honey’s ASL interpretation for the hearing impaired since 1981.

Sweet Honey’s songs tell of maternal love, femmes fatale, third-world debt, disarmament, freedom, determination and faith in God. Musical textures – melody, accompaniment, lead singers – change with each song.

"Everyone comes away from a Sweet Honey concert with something different,” says Susan Lacy, creator and executive producer of *American Masters*. “Some people are swayed by the beauty of the music, others get charged by the way the songs make them feel like conquering the world.”

For more about Sweet Honey in the Rock, visit [http://sweethoney.com](http://sweethoney.com).

Tickets for the ETSU performance will be $5 students of all ages, $20 senior 60 and over and $25 general.

*For information about the ETSU Mary B. Martin School of the Arts, call 423-439-TKTS (8587) or visit [www.etsu.edu/martin](http://www.etsu.edu/martin). Please “Like” ETSU Mary B. Martin School of the Arts on Facebook and follow it on Twitter and Instagram @ArtsAtETSU.*