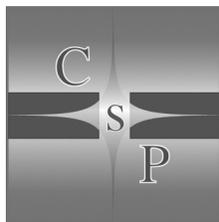


Singing for Themselves

Singing for Themselves
Essays on Women in Popular Music

Edited by

Patricia Spence Rudden



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Singing for Themselves: Essays on Women in Popular Music, edited by Patricia Spence Rudden

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PREFACE

Rock and roll, and all the various genres that have always rocked, rapped and crooned along with it, has always had its uses for women. We were the objects of desire, the false sirens, the temptresses in the garden, the ones to blame for everything that went wrong in the lives of rock's angry young men. We were Maybellene who couldn't be true, Miss Molly rockin' in the house of delight, the breakers of hearts and the purveyors of venereal disease in the House of the Rising Sun. When we weren't a topic of inspiration—or at least discussion—we were a literal source of material, singing original records that were covered with greater success by others. And that was just in the first two generations.

When women did contribute to rock and roll as writers, performers and producers, it was often only to support the status quo. The masochistic material sung by the early girl groups gave voice to the sirens and virgins the boys had always sung about. That some of this material was written by women was ironic but inconsequential—Carole King could cry until September over an absent boyfriend, the Chantels could apologize for unknown offenses upon finding he was gone, and the Angels could warn off a rival suitor by declaring that the boyfriend was back. Of course, as in any vital art form, there were also exceptions: Dionne Warwick could break into the mainstream singing a male-created song asking that she be accepted as she was, and Paul McCartney could worry about his own unknown offenses as he longed for yesterday.

Men singing about women, men singing to women, women singing about and to men, and to other women (often about men)—this all persisted even after the political scene contributed protest and social commentary in the mid to late '60s. But along with this came some men, and shortly thereafter some women, who told their own stories for themselves. From the vantage of the twenty-first century it seems no time at all from the advent of Bob Dylan to the emergence of Laura Nyro and Joni Mitchell, who divided the world between them in 1968, but for those of us who were teenagers at the time, it seemed like a very long time indeed between the emergence of the prophetic male and the female who was suddenly allowed to sing for herself. The sugary-sexy commercial disco singers coexisted with the self-determining Patti Smith and actual women-run bands performing female-centered material. African-American

women artists on the order of Etta James and Aretha Franklin, many of them heirs to the great traditions of gospel and the blues, established and maintained strong public presences of their own and continued to influence artists of other ethnic origins. And the sexual minorities who were not even a topic of conversation for the men of early rock were now able to speak for themselves and discover their audiences as well.

Rock and roll started out as a reaction to social barriers, and then ironically—and inevitably—erected barriers of its own, or imported unexamined (or at least unrejected) cultural habits of sexism. The ways women make their music are shaped by their resistance to the barriers they face in the culture from which the music springs, as well as in the business by which it is propagated. An independent woman, making her own music in her own way, will have problems (like Laura Nyro) or form her own company (like Joan Jett). And not infrequently, she will write songs that comment on this situation, both as it affects her own working situation and as it relates to larger issues of economic and social justice. Whatever the barriers in the music or the music business, the compelling vitality of the beat and the sound draws women as well as men into participation, and, as some of these contributors argue, provides a space where the barriers can be broken and the old social constructs demolished, fulfilling the rest of rock and roll's freedom-ringing mandate.

Most of these essays began as conference papers selected by members of the Women's Caucus for the Modern Languages/Midwest, an associated organization of the Midwest Modern Language Association. Since 2001 the Women's Caucus has hosted two sessions on women in popular music, and most of the essays in this volume are expanded and augmented versions of papers given at MMLA conventions from 2002-2006. Some came from other sources. David Jones contributed his essay on Etta James after attending an MMLA session in 2005. Monica Berger submitted her annotated bibliography of writing on women in rock and pop after a discussion with the editor at a poster session at New York City College of Technology. Deborah Kennedy contributed a new essay on Patti Smith, as did Kathleen Torrens, chair of our 2003 MMLA sessions, on the Indigo Girls. To keep this volume to a reasonable length and assure some logical structure, a number of otherwise interesting submissions were not included, but the number of proposals for the sessions each year and for this volume indicate the vitality of the subject.

The essays in this anthology, by scholars in a range of disciplines, approach the work of women in popular music from a wide variety of perspectives, and this collection indicates something of the range of approaches. We open with a group of essays that consider some major

single artists and singer-songwriters from unusual angles, by authors with long personal interests in their subjects. David Jones explores the career and influence of Etta James from the viewpoint of a scholar and avid fan. My own piece considers Laura Nyro as creator not just of songs but of song cycles, centered on the physical structure of the LP. Deborah Kennedy examines Patti Smith's uses of Christianity in her work, while Susan Booker Morris reads the work of Ferron through the lens of Eastern thought. The writers in this section have, in some cases, been following their subjects since the days before academic writing on women in music was a serious possibility; our decades of thinking and research have borne fruit here.

The next part is about groups, and takes a more theoretical turn. Kathleen Torrens looks at the ways the work of the Indigo Girls challenges heteronormativity. Samantha Thrift examines Destiny's Child's quest for identity and autonomy in a milieu of sexual objectification, and Kimberly P. Bowers discusses the politics and art of the Dixie Chicks.

The two essays that follow take up less-considered aspects of two other artists' work. H. Louise Davis discusses Bjork's videos and feminism, and Ellen Lansky considers Melissa Etheridge's cover versions of other writers' songs.

Three essays on various aspects of the Riot Grrrl phenomenon follow in the next section. A pioneer in the movement, Joan Jett, is the subject of Chloe Johnson's "Grrrls with Gibsons," and Michael Dwyer continues the discussion with a focus on Kathleen Hanna and Sadie Benning. Hilary Chute's discussion of Le Tigre completes the triptych.

Finally, Monica Berger's annotated bibliography points the interested reader toward some of the growing body of literature on women in pop and rock before this collection, and will be useful to students of the subject looking for further resources.

The Women's Caucus for the Modern Languages/Midwest plans to continue to offer sessions on women in popular music. We invite all interested scholars to participate, and we invite all interested readers to join us here in these pages.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks first of all to the Women's Caucus for the Modern Languages/Midwest for its ongoing support of new scholarship in the area of women in popular music. The multidisciplinary annual sessions at Midwest MLA conferences continue to showcase new work and stimulate further investigation.

When the Midwest MLA sessions had been sufficiently productive to suggest the possibility of a published collection, Cambridge Scholars Press was most receptive to our proposal and worked effectively with us to produce the finished work. Thanks to editors Amanda Millar and Andy Nercessian for helping this come into being.

An earlier version of "Stacking the Wax: The Structure of Laura Nyro's Studio Albums" was made possible in part by a PSC-CUNY Research award.

Finally, W. W. Norton has graciously granted permission for quotations from Patti Smith's *Early Work*.

PART I

LONG LOOKS FROM DIFFERENT ANGLES

CHAPTER ONE

ROCKIN' AND ROLLIN' WITH THE GREAT JAMESETTA

DAVID M. JONES

Etta James: The Matriarch of the Blues and Much More

The stylistic diversity and vocal power of Etta James is truly without peer in American popular music. Was she born to sing? On sheer talent, charisma, versatility, and range of vocal tools, Etta James clearly ranks with the best ever. Her exceptional talent was apparent by age 5 when she became a singing star at the St. Paul Baptist Church in Los Angeles, a church that also witnessed performances by Sister Rosetta Tharpe, one of the foremothers of gospel, blues, and rock and roll. When her father insisted that Etta change churches, she chose not to sing, not until a 1950s San Francisco vibe caught her attention as a teenager--but at 16, she was ready for her first national hit. It takes a savvy critic just to convey the magic of her great instrument, her voice: “She flirts, sobs, chuckles, taunts, growls; she moans with satisfaction and with pain.”ⁱ

Casual fans may know her best by the big hits: “The Wallflower/Roll With Me Henry” (1955), “All I Could Do Was Cry” (1960), “I’d Rather Go Blind” and “Tell Mama” (1967), or her performance of “When the Saints Go Marching In” for the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles.ⁱⁱ Beyond the hits and highlights, however, Etta James is blue blood when it comes to American rhythm and blues, straight out of the hottest cultural moment R & B ever saw; in fact, she was there in body and spirit when R & B was born. James built her early career on “both plaintive, string-laden ballads and up-tempo scorchers.”ⁱⁱⁱ Her best recordings were hot enough for high status on the R & B charts of the era but sweet enough to cross over to the pop market. The singer’s continuous artistic growth over the decades has helped her to identify songs that resonate best with her voice and feeling.

Her vast body of recorded work is not only a testament to her gifts and work ethic, but also a reminder that California coastal cities of the '40s and '50s deserve as much reverence as Memphis, Nashville, and New Orleans as crucial settings for the birth of rock and roll music.

This essay gives a fan's perspective on James's incomparable body of work across a career of five decades, including her distinctive place in the history of the blues. I comment as well on James's life experience as shaped by the unique cultural life and R & B circuit on Central Avenue in Los Angeles in the era of the world wars, and the personal sacrifices and moral ambiguity that stem from a high life led in public. The memorable living legacy of Etta James also has much to tell us about racial justice and injustice, our collective national uneasiness about the pleasures of sex and drug use, and the criminally minded, mob connected, gang related confluences of the entertainment industry and underground economies that have thrived in every American age. Most importantly, I try to guide readers through several high points in the amazing body of recorded work by Etta James, pointing out some places to start, at least. After all, there is no substitute for the joy of listening to her voice.

Remarkably, while Etta James is indisputably a living legend from the perspective of any serious fan of post-World War II black popular music, she remains as much cult hero as popular icon, for several reasons. James's ability to perform successfully within the genres of R & B, soul, blues, and jazz may make it more difficult for her to reach a mass market, black consumers having largely abandoned blues and traditional rhythm and blues,^{iv} and rock audiences mostly centered on young performers. Much of her career has been spent working small and mid-sized clubs across the country—some of which were stops on the legendary “chitlin’ circuit”: black music clubs that eventually fell onto hard times due to changes in mass music tastes and urban conditions. James has also starred in festival settings that since the 1960s have played a vital role in sustaining a committed audience for the blues without the support of breakout popular hits. Like the genre of blues itself, James resides at the edge of a cultural underground, graced at times with mainstream recognition (as her admission to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame illustrates) but little known to vast numbers of music consumers. After all, integrity, commitment, originality, and artistic independence are values that the popular music market often hesitates to affirm – and there is no better case of this resistance to the real deal than the career of Etta James.

How I Became a Fan and a Researcher

My interest in Etta James came to me from reading glowing reviews in the *Rolling Stone Record Guide* (first edition, 1979) and through an incomparable live show that I was fortunate enough to witness as a young adult. It was late fall 1990 in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and the living was easy. I accepted a date with a beautiful new girlfriend to see Etta James at the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis. I was somewhat familiar with her sound, having purchased a copy of *Peaches* (an anthology of her Chess recordings, on vinyl) for occasional listening, but I was not fully familiar with the record even though it had been in my collection for several years. As a result, my interest in the live show was due more to my date than seeing Etta James, a rather sad fact to admit in retrospect.

The show was something else, indeed. Her first number, “Feel like Breaking Up Somebody’s Home,” was punctuated by the most exuberant rump-shaking I have ever seen before or since from a live performer, James’s queen-size physical stature a fair match for the largeness of her soul.^v The show was masterful, ranging from blues to gospel to classic soul, with one song performed *a cappella* in the auditorium without the benefit of a microphone, a fine showcase of James’ vocal power. I became an avid fan of Etta James, listening to the entire Chess album for the first time and seeking out more recent recordings of her work. Her career continues in earnest into the 21st century, with CD releases that showcase her ability to perform songs in pop, country, R & B, and classic blues; original songs stand beside familiar covers in her recent material as well.

As an approach to research, I wanted to move beyond the cliché applied to blues performers that the music simply catalogues personal pain—or collective pain for that matter.^{vi} I should note that it is not only racist assumptions among rock music critics about the naturalness of black performance that reinforce this belief—artists, Etta James included, speak often of the ties between deep feeling and great music. The dramatic life stories of artists such as James, Ray Charles, or Howlin’ Wolf bear out the role of personal suffering and triumph as a part of artistic growth—as a blues musician myself, I have also experienced this. On the other hand, suffering is pervasive among all humanity, but outstanding musicians are rare gems—and it is a common habit to emphasize feeling over technique in understanding the roots of a great blues or soul performance. There is clearly more than suffering that leads to profound art, and I hope to highlight some of these additional influences over the art of Etta James, such as her upbringing in a crucial geographical setting for American rhythm and blues, her skill at collaborating with a large number of

musicians and producers while maintaining her distinct voice as a singer, and her own insightful observations about the music industry, race relations, and challenges of overcoming personal trauma. The voice of Etta James is a pathway to deep insights about the exhilarating human story of black popular music in the United States. Whether for cultural insight or deep listening pleasure, her voice simply must be heard. We are fortunate, too, that she has shared so much of her personal story in print, leaving a space for contextual research to proceed from there, starting with the special setting of the historic African American communities in Los Angeles.

Black Music Scene in Los Angeles: the Rise of Rhythm and Blues

The story of how Los Angeles, California developed a sizeable black community and a thriving rhythm and blues scene by the 1940s is not told often enough to be common knowledge, but it is a crucial starting point for understanding the life and remarkable singing talent of Etta James. The phrase “South Central” has become popular for referring to the region of Los Angeles that includes Watts, Compton, and Inglewood, often associated with images of gang violence and inner city poverty. However, there is a more specific cultural geography connected with Central Avenue, a major artery of 1940s L.A., as the Avenue proceeded south from downtown and offered housing, shopping, and entertainment opportunities for African Americans arriving from other parts of the country. Like other famous streets in African American cultural history—Vine Street in Kansas City, 125th Street in Harlem, Beale Street in Memphis—at its peak, Central Avenue provided unique opportunities for residents and visitors to experience a flourishing African American community.

Growth in several industries such as railroads and manufacturing drew large populations of African Americans to Los Angeles after the turn of the 20th century, emblematic of a national trend known as the Great Migration. The two world wars also contributed to the migration of black residents to California to fill opportunities in the military and in wartime industries. In the 1920s, black migrants were greeted by a local community that was largely but not entirely segregated, the years after World War I bringing both an increase in Klan activity and significant opportunities for work, housing, and recreation. By the end of the 1920s, housing restrictions and continuing migration led to a concentration of 70% of the town's black residents in housing along Central Avenue.^{vii}

In this climate of hostility and opportunity, black musicians and entrepreneurs of all ethnicities identified a potential audience and marketplace. Musicians such as Kid Ory, Jelly Roll Morton, and Louis Armstrong were among the early black performers to gain profitable engagements in Los Angeles, sometimes in segregated clubs. The presence of the film industry in Hollywood also provided occasional employment and a steady clientele for hot spots during and after Prohibition. Vice industries thrived as well, providing employment and entertainment for Etta James's mother and aunt, Dorothy and Cozetta, once they arrived in the city of angels.^{viii}

In the midst of this era of movie magic, good times, and grinding poverty, Etta James was born as Jamesetta Hawkins in South Central Los Angeles on January 25, 1938. Her birth name was formed by combining her uncle's first name and the ending of her Aunt Cozetta's first name. Her mother, Dorothy Leatherwood, was a glamorous good-timer, and her father was probably the young pool hustler, Minnesota Fats, who according to Etta's good friend, actor Willie Best, was a regular visitor to Central Avenue. Her Aunt Cozie practiced her trade as a working woman out of the mob-ruled Queen Elizabeth Apartments on Central Avenue, sharing the building with the renowned tap dancers, the Nicholas Brothers. Etta's adopted parents, Lula (Mama Lu) and Jessie Rogers, lived nearby on Central and 21st Street, in a respectable house where Dorothy had a rented room.^{ix}

The music and high life of Central Avenue were a significant presence in the life of young Jamesetta, an early source of pleasures and life lessons. Etta James considered herself fortunate when her mother Dorothy and Aunt Cozie let her accompany them as they made their rounds on Central. She describes the influence of the Avenue in detail in her autobiography, *Rage to Survive*: "I'd be fascinated—poking my head into the smoky clubs...where everyone was hanging, grinding, drinking..."^x The range of musicians who performed on the Avenue in those years is remarkable, with many musicians launching their careers with the help of the thriving California blues scene. The list includes Charles Brown, Amos Milburn, Nat King Cole, T-Bone Walker, Wynonie Harris, and Roy Milton. Several of the first women of jazz and R & B such as Dinah Washington and Billie Holiday were active in that era and made Los Angeles the site of touring, recovering, and sometimes recording. It was a time of stylistic transition as well. Pre-war swing jazz styles were becoming less common in favor of "cool" styles personified by the small tight ensembles, virtuoso piano, and smooth vocals in the work of Nat King Cole and Charles Brown.

Another common style of the era was played by “hot” jump blues bands, characterized by honking saxophones, spirited vocalizing, and a down-home feel, evident in recordings by Louis Jordan and Lowell Fulson.^{xi} The music of Big Joe Turner also exemplifies the accessible, down-home jump blues playing that could be heard on the Avenue and would soon be heard in the raw, countrified, and unruly sound of early rock and roll. Fans of purer jazz—such as Dorothy Leatherwood, Etta’s mother—would resist the new sounds that could be heard as early as the 1930s and as far north as West Oakland, according to the great bandleader Johnny Otis. Otis noted the “contrast between down-home stomp music and sophisticated jazz,” the jazz clubs having cultivated and well-dressed audiences, the down-home blues clubs being “storefront joints” for a broader and more restless audience.^{xii}

In this context, young Jamesetta stepped onto a winding road that would lead to a career in down-home black music, decades before she would cut her own acclaimed jazz CDs. Her mother brought her along on Sunday visits to the St. Paul Baptist Church, and Etta was inspired by the most fundamental source of down home music in traditional black culture. In her own words: “The music was thunder and joy...foot-stomping, dance-shouting, good-feeling singing from the soul.”^{xiii} With the help of musical director James Earle Hines, Etta soon found herself in front of the congregation, inspired by the expressive masculine tones of Hines’s voice more so than the voice of the choir. Hines’s gentle guidance helped young Etta grow as a singer, and word of her performances spread to the point where Orson Welles, Lana Turner, and Robert Mitchum may have made their way among the predominantly black worshippers at St. Paul to hear the child star. Her father’s intrusive attempts at management prematurely ended this first phase in a great singing career,^{xiv} but James’s mature voice reveals that the early training left an indelible stamp on her singing style—an ability to range between masculine and feminine vocal tones, and an ability to bring the gospel roots of soul and R & B to the forefront of a song.

Moving beyond her gospel roots, Etta James’s personal experiences of the 1940s and 1950s provide a sobering and inspirational look at the landscape of race in American culture, bearing in mind that the social conditions she faced were common in a nation still contending with legal and customary segregation. Her struggles included being born biracial at a time when many believed that skin color signified core biological differences that could be “mongrelized” by so-called miscegenation. As Etta puts it, “Skin color is always an issue. It’s a dumb issue, but you’re stuck with it.”^{xv} Etta also faced the challenges of an unstable home life and

violence in and out of the home, her life impacted directly by vice industries that had taken deep root in urban black communities. Her mother and aunt catered to men's sexual needs for a living—in the bigger picture, racial exploitation provided white and black men with access to black women's bodies through prostitution and the desperation fed by poverty and substance abuse. Of course, we know from the publicized examples of Storyville in New Orleans, Vine Street in Kansas City, and 125th Street in Harlem that great art and tawdry vice often coexist, even in the music scenes we revere most. We also know that the deep blues aestheticizes these contradictions of danger and excitement, blues being a musical form that can seek God and serve the flesh simultaneously. Deep blues endured under these conditions as both a collective voice and an individualized style of expression.

Fortunately for readers, Etta James's autobiography *Rage to Survive* and her interviews elsewhere reflect on all elements of her journey to musical transcendence in narratives that are far more compelling than fiction. They report illness and suffering in her deep background—her grandmother, Leddy Leatherwood, a long resident of my home town of Omaha (also a point of interest for musicians Wynonie Harris and Preston Love), struggled with mental disability. Facing the prospects of continuing poverty, James's mother Dorothy and Aunt Cozetta left Omaha in a family migration for better prospects in Los Angeles. As we have noted, this setting provided a background for James's early childhood—taking inspiration from the legendary artists who crossed paths with her mother and aunt (a chance encounter with dancer Josephine Baker was one of several such moments of inspiration), and struggling with her mother's unpredictable personal behavior, including abandonment at times in cheap rooms with her mother out pursuing her illegal trade and a good time. After the death of her gentle guardian, Mama Lu, James moved at age 12 to San Francisco, poverty and her mother's impulses taking her at times to skid row hotels in the seaport city.

Juvenile delinquency, unrelenting anger, and gang-related behavior mark her experiences during her last years of formal education in San Francisco. However, Etta managed to meet other young musicians interested in performing some of the great vocal styles of the era. Meeting Jean and Absinia (Abye) Mitchell, Etta formed a group called the Creolettes—at age 13. By age 14, Etta had written an answer song for the then-hot Hank Ballard and the Midnighters's hit, "Work With Me Annie," and on a chance encounter the Ballard group heard the girls perform. Jean and Abye were acquainted with Johnny Otis, an assistant to the producer at the L.A.-based Modern Records, and secured an audition for the group.

Otis was impressed, and Etta lied about her age in order to accept an offer to record for Modern. Otis also transposed the two parts of Jamesetta's first name as "Etta James." Richard Berry, James's high school friend, would join Etta James in the studio and add a compelling male voice on James's first hit record. A vocalist and staff writer for Modern, Berry is the composer of the enduring rock and roll anthem, "Louie Louie" (the best known version would be released by the Kingsmen in 1963 after Berry sold the rights to the song for \$750).^{xvi} A first salvo into a remarkable recording career was now to begin.

Early Recording Career on Modern Records

The collection *Etta James: the Best of the Modern Years*, released by Metro Blue (a division of Blue Note) in 2005, covers the earliest years of James's professional recording career. James's stylistic range and vocal maturity on her first set of singles is a surprise and a pleasure. Throughout the collection one can hear the echoes of classic vocal groups of the early rock and roll era along with the raucous beat of jump style blues and a bit of urban cool as well. In a recent *Billboard* article, Jim Bessman specifies some of these influences on the Creolettes (later the Peaches); in addition to West Coast jazz influences, Bessman recognizes "the doowop of the Moonglows, Spaniels, and Chords, and the slicker white vocal groups like the McGuire Sisters and the Four Freshmen."^{xvii}

The most familiar song, of course, is "The Wallflower (Dance with Me, Henry)," originally titled "Roll With Me, Henry," a title that radio censors found too risqué for a song by a 16-year old female singer. The song follows the arrangement of the Midnighters' "Work with Me, Annie" closely, but adds a proto-feminist stance by directing advice on love towards young men. The first voice on the song is that of Richard Berry. As "The Wallflower" opens, Berry heartily sings: "What I have to do/To make you love me too," and his voice continues to answer James's as the chorus of "Roll with me, Henry" picks up. Compared to the Midnighters' earlier song, "The Wallflower" offers smoother and jazzier vocals with less of a country feel. A tasteful horn chart punctuating the vocals and a honking sax solo signifies the influence of late 1940s R & B over the song. By the time of the song's release in 1955, in fact, these elements had become common within the emerging musical vocabulary of rock and roll. The sound quality of all the Modern sides is remarkable, a testament to stellar studio production and tight singing by the Peaches (Jean and Abye Mitchell), James's band mates from Oakland, who provided vocal support on several of the early sides.

“The Wallflower” was a smash hit on the R & B charts, but only a sanitized version by Georgia Gibbs would succeed in hitting #1 on the pop charts,^{xviii} following the vein of white artists covering originals by black artists while widening the song’s circulation beyond the R & B market (Pat Boone provides the best example of this practice with his tepid cover of Little Richard’s “Tutti Frutti”). A follow-up single also included on the collection, “Hey! Henry,” was not successful with its imitative sound. Another single from the collection, “Good Rockin’ Daddy,” found chart success, but several other singles did not chart despite their artistic quality.

Other highlights of the *Best of the Modern Years* include “Be Mine,” a song also co-written by Richard Berry, on which James’s vocals anticipate the sound of ‘60s Motown vocalists such as Martha Reeves and Mary Wells. The earthier sound of James’s vocals is distinctive, strong in confidence and authority, and edgy enough to distinguish her voice from the smoother vocabulary of cool jazz. “That’s All” provides another compelling look back towards the small swing bands and jump blues of the ‘40s with its brisk tempo and horn charts. The song also joins with the rock and roll era with its alternating sax and guitar solo and vocal assertion that “all you have to do is rock and roll and that’s all.” Innovative production and incomparable vocals give the song a feel of a church revival and a roots rock party, echoes of Ray Charles and Louis Jordan prominent among the influences. We’re on a jazzy march with Etta on this memorable track.

James’s songwriting is represented on this CD by two songs, “Tough Lover,” and “Strange Things Happening.” The first of these songs, “Tough Lover,” features screams and stops that are reminiscent of Little Richard, with a rhythm driven by handclaps and a relentless pace set by her vocals. Though the theme may be familiar—the remarkable power and sexiness of your man—the song is perhaps the briskest and freest on the recording and surely hearkens back to the original vocabulary of rock and roll. James brings her best tools to this tune: raw vocal power over a fast beat, the righteousness of a spiritual, the good time feeling of swing jazz and honky tonk, and a full complement of boogie chops. By comparison, “Strange Things Happening” is more restrained, but the chord progression comes straight from the gospel-turned-blues tradition of Sister Rosetta and Brother Ray, with the lines of the verse offering philosophical advice and a slight rebuke to a wayward love: “You never miss your water until your well runs dry/Strange things happening every day.”

A vocal chorus answers Etta as she works through the chorus, her own voice ranging smoothly between shouts and croons, always on the beat. The arrangement is reminiscent of the blues classic recorded by

Chuck Berry, “Thirty Days,” but James’s expressive range has no peer, as usual. She sounds tough, confident, and remarkably young, offering a forward-looking sound at the outset of a remarkable career in popular music. These compositions by James and the CD as a whole provide pleasure as well as insight into the confluence of gospel, blues, swing jazz, and R & B that would come to be known as soul music.

Etta James and Chess Records: Classic R & B at the House of the Blues

Moving to Chess/Argo Records in 1960, a period began in Etta James’s career that would solidify her high place among popular singers of any genre. Her performances during this period are well represented on *At Last* (indisputably her breakout record), and later by *Chess Box*, a recent CD reissue of all available material on Chess Records. Her live sound from these years can now be heard on *Etta James Rocks the House*, which captures a 1963 performance in Nashville, Tennessee, another of the first cities in American music history. In my judgment, however, *At Last* is the crucial record from these years. Documentation of session musicians cannot be found on the current re-issue of *At Last* on CD, but credit is given to the Riley Hampton Orchestra for their many famous flourishes on the recording and, of course, to Leonard and Phil Chess for their production.

Released on November 15, 1960, *At Last* widened and deepened critical and fan appreciation for Etta James, who was still in her early 20s and only a few years removed from her first hit record. Five years, though, can be a long time in show business to labor without a major hit, and fortunately the move from L.A.’s Modern Records to Chicago’s Chess Records helped James to find a new niche. James joined Chess Records at the label’s artistic and commercial peak, a time when historic recordings by Muddy Waters, Howlin’ Wolf, Little Walter, and Bo Diddley were charting often and inspiring a generation of British rock and rollers. The musical variety of *At Last* illustrates why the label blues singer is inadequate as a description of the style of Etta James. The album includes timeless, impeccably produced love ballads, particularly the hit “All I Could Do Was Cry,” “At Last,” and “My Dearest Darling,” all of them recalling a range of smooth singers from the era: Sam Cooke, Ben E. King, even Roy Orbison and late career Patsy Cline. Only momentarily in her high ranges on “Cry” and “My Dearest Darling” do we hear the down-home shouts reminiscent of hard R & B singers such as Ruth Brown and James Brown. Clearly, the emphasis on smoothness in pre-British Invasion

American pop music influenced the producers to aim for a sweet sound through much of the recording. The musical style ranges from torch songs to radio-friendly pop with a lively “Stormy Weather”—earthier than Lena Horne’s classic version but still tasteful—and the catchy “Tough Mary,” complete with background chorus and woodwinds in unison, a mix that, oddly enough, evokes Nancy Sinatra.

At least one blues standard popularized by Muddy Waters was included on the original recording, “I Just Want To Make Love To You.” James’s version of the classic is rewritten to insure, stereotypically, that in exchange for good loving the female persona is happy to take care of the domestic duties that Muddy Waters didn’t want to do in his version of the song: “All I wanna do is cook your bread/Just to make sure you’re well fed.”^{xix} The original LP recording ends with “Boy of My Dreams,” an amazing mix of musical styles of the era, favoring country in its chord changes and melody, R & B in the vocal inflections that James brings to the table. This recording even preceded the classic album by Ray Charles, *Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music*, by a couple of years, but one can clearly hear their vocal kinship.

I have to say that my favorite recording on the 14-song CD reissue of the album is one of the four added tracks, called “My Heart Cries,” a composition credited to the two singers, Etta James and Harvey Fuqua. The song provides a beautifully melodic mix of soul and pop, the blend of guitar, saxophone, and piano urgently but sweetly pushing vocal harmonies that recall 1950s street-corner stylistics. Like several others on this album, this recording could not be considered straightforward R & B, but it provides a prescient look at the period when soul was synonymous with vocal harmony. “My Heart Cries,” one of three songs on the CD reissue co-written by James, also helps to illustrate why songwriting is probably the least appreciated of James’s musical skills. It is the song from the CD I most often hum, repeat, and appreciate.

Etta James Rocks the House: A Live Show with Verve and More

The live CD *Rocks the House* provides indisputable audio evidence that Etta James has a way with a standard. She provides us with full-tilt blues and soulful boogie from a vintage year in her work as a touring musician. She leads the band with abandon, solidifying her credentials as a female bandleader in full charge when women’s liberation was still new. In a *Rolling Stone* interview with Katherine Dieckman, James provides provocative commentary on what Dieckman calls a “bally” vocal style in

these early years: “People think that tough thing I do is an act. No, that’s the way I am and the way I like to be.”^{xxx} James also describes in the interview her connection to the feminist movement, asserting that “women in this business have to take care of themselves, make their own living and be their own boss.”^{xxxi} Her kinship with the feminist movement reinforces her status as a woman who has struggled to define success on her own terms in the music industry—and has found spectacular results.

Any fan of houserockin’ blues has gotta love this CD. Every song is sung with great gusto before a raucous audience. This is evident from early on, including a stompin’ version of Ray Charles’ “What’d I Say”—at this point in the history of R & B, the song is clearly still current. The work of the drummer really stands out in this tune (either Freeman Brown or Richard Waters, according to the liner notes), and David Walker’s guitar work is indispensable too: check out the bright riffs on “Money (That’s What I Want)” for evidence of this. Every musician on the session came to play—they left no doubt of that.

Amazingly enough, the band finds time for a ballad or two on the recording. “Sweet Little Angel” is played with unrelenting intensity, and the use of guitar for horn fills works swimmingly. For the solo section, the band switches from ballad time to a brisk swing tempo, carrying us through to the closing vocal sections with heightening intensity. The beautiful ballad “All I Could Do Was Cry” is here to enjoy with an unaccredited, homespun-sounding piano sweetening the sound. The gospel quality of the melody comes forward—and the restraint of the band provides the proper spotlight for James’s vocal skills.

Rocks the House is an excellent marking point for the musical development of Etta James as she nears the end of the first decade of her career. Exuberance and energy are the hallmarks, but later recordings will highlight many additional moods that she can capture through her voice, a level of subtlety that is not fully on display during this live set. Listeners, though, should be encouraged to enjoy this postcard from the vintage years when blues numbers could still generate a top ten hit on the rhythm and blues charts. As the recording industry turned from blues towards soul as a primary genre for black consumers, Etta James would find a new producer and a new sound.

Tell Mama: the Sessions at Muscle Shoals

Etta James has said in interviews that she does not like being cast as an earth mother (as in the pop and R & B hit “Tell Mama,”), but this song ranks with “All I Could Do Was Cry” and “The Wallflower” as one of the

biggest chart successes of her career. A series of recordings released on MCA Records was made possible by a special arrangement between Leonard Chess and Jerry Wexler, veteran Atlantic Records producer who worked magic with a fine roster of all-time soul greats: Wilson Pickett, Ray Charles, and Aretha Franklin, to name three. Wexler is described by James herself as a hands-on producer—a “tyrant,” by her testimony, though also brilliant.^{xxiii} Fame Studios in Muscle Shoals, Alabama proved to be an apt setting for the minds and talents of James and Wexler to produce a sound for the times.

I have to say, though, I’m a bit of a dissenter from the critical consensus on *Tell Mama*, and perhaps I feel emboldened to say so because of James’s own skepticism about the title track. Jerry Wexler’s production influence is evident in the studio band’s impeccable performance and the crystal clean sound of the recording. (Engineer Tom Dowd also deserves credit for the sound quality on a remarkable number of recordings from this era.) A similar quality of sound marks some of the best soul recordings of Ray Charles and Aretha Franklin; I think that Wexler allowed these artists a sufficiently wide berth and found a way to let their vocal skills, instrumental skills, and artistic vision emerge on the records. For my taste, I cannot say the same thing about Etta James on the *Tell Mama* sessions—especially for the initially released LP songs (rather than the CD reissue with bonus tracks). The production at times is so cluttered with organ fills, horn charts, and background singers that Etta’s vocal personality struggles to emerge. For evidence of this, check out “The Same Rope,” where the dense background accompaniment is overwhelming. For all of Wexler’s reputedly encyclopedic knowledge of black music and remarkable previous successes, he seems to struggle here with allowing the down-home qualities of Etta James to be reflected in the recording. Instead, we hear the defined sound of soul as we have come to know it now, and clearly the intent was to make sure the artist was recorded in this vein.

Those observations noted, the CD reissue of *Tell Mama* is still full of highlights for both casual listeners and committed fans. The CD as a whole provides a musical tribute to the soul greats of the era, many of whom were stars of Atlantic/Stax—Otis Redding, Wilson Pickett, and Aretha Franklin. In addition to the funky hit, “Tell Mama,” the CD presents the first incarnation of “I’d Rather Go Blind,” a genuine classic and one of Etta’s signature songs. I also find great pleasures in the bonus tracks that were added to the CD, though they were not present on the original LP. The James Brown feel on “Just a Little Bit” and “You Got It” are irresistible, allowing Etta’s emotive voice to shine over the solid but

restrained playing of the rhythm section. “You Took It” and “I’ve Gone Too Far” are wonderful ballads; other standards on the reissue, Johnny Mathis’s “Misty” and Aretha Franklin’s “Do Right Woman, Do Right Man” (two versions), receive innovative and compelling treatment. “Misty” is astounding with its jazzy break and Etta’s improvised scattling, rescuing the song from its usual loungelike feel. The gospel influenced “Almost Persuaded” was released as a single, but not included on the original LP.

Perhaps my reaction to *Tell Mama* is affected by my weariness at hearing about the importance of the producer’s role, particularly white producers of African American music. The debate has raged on for years about who is most responsible for the many great sounds of blues, soul, jazz, funk and hip hop that you can now hear, and it’s a long and messy argument that I am bound to oversimplify, but I tend to favor the role of the artist over that of the producer. After all, would you rather have a world with no artists or no producers? Moreover, the racism of the industry is not acknowledged widely enough as an influence over the producer’s craft—through much of the first twenty years of rock and roll, black musicians could not even perform in public on an equal basis, let alone have an equal chance of overseeing their business operations—or being employed as producers. Or let me put it this way: if you believe that Jerry Wexler is as crucial to the history of soul as are any of the artists he produced, you will probably have no problem believing that disc jockey Alan Freed co-wrote “Maybellene” with Chuck Berry—just like it says on the song credits.

Etta James and Private Music: Artistic Growth and Classic Collaborations

I’ll leave it to readers to hear and enjoy some of the highlights of James’s career in the long period between *Tell Mama* (1968) and the fine recordings she has made on the Private Music label in recent years. One recording I believe is essential is *Deep in the Night*, a 1978 recording produced tastefully by the aforementioned Jerry Wexler. If James’s deep soul versions of Alice Cooper’s “Only Women Bleed” and The Eagles’ “Take It To the Limit” do not move you to tears, nothing will. *Seven Year Itch* (1989) is considered by some to be a standout recording as well, though it’s not among my personal favorites. I am taken, however, with a third Wexler production, *The Right Time* (1992), which includes versions of “Love and Happiness” and “Down Home Blues” that are well worth hearing. Among the recent releases from Private Music, *Love’s Been*

Rough on Me (1997) is a sleeper, a recording with a country feel and a great closing song that James co-wrote, “Done In the Dark,” though she regrets the lack of control she had over the final production.^{xxiii} It bears keeping in mind that with an artist of this stature, your own ears and sensibility will have to make final judgments on what recordings are essential.

Etta James moved to the Private Music label in 1994, hooking up with a new producer, “John Snyder—who is a jazzman to the bone.”^{xxiv} Her work since then has not been exclusively jazz, however; several CDs since then reveal her continuous interests and skills in singing blues, R & B, pop, and even country. The move toward jazz is perhaps the most significant result of the new collaboration between James and Snyder, especially the fine CDs *Mystery Lady* (1994) and *Blue Gardenia* (2001).

There are several biographical back stories one could consider to place these forays into jazz in a richer context. First, perhaps, is the brief chance meeting between Etta James and Billie Holiday; seeing the young Etta staring at her swollen hands and feet, Holiday warns her not to let the same thing happen to her.^{xxv} Secondly, there is the mystique represented by her mother’s status as mystery lady, coming and going without forewarning to pursue pleasures of the night, dressed to the hilt but prone to abandon her young daughter to lonely rages in cheap rooms until her Mama Lu or Dorothy herself reappeared.^{xxvi} Temptation, longing, passing rapture, and impeccable artistry—such are the qualities left to us by the incomparable work of Billie Holiday, and Etta James picks up the story with her own distinct voice and insights.

Given James’s comfort with so many vocal styles and her early and thorough immersion in the sounds of swing jazz, it may be surprising that these jazz recordings were so long in coming. As James herself admits, though, her musical interests turned from jazz to “gutbucket” blues during a period of adolescent rebellion. The targets of that rebellion included the black bourgeois atmosphere of her early churchgoing years and her mother, always a devotee of refined vocal jazz. David Ritz’s liner notes for *Mystery Lady* capture this sensibility, in Etta’s words: “In Dorothy’s view, jazz was class. The ultimate in sophistication. But by now it was the Fifties, and I was one of those ‘rebels without a cause.’”^{xxvii} In a celebration of James’s embracing of the disciplined stylistics of jazz, Dorothy receives a dedication in *Mystery Lady* and a vocal spotlight in the closing track (and in the title song of *Blue Gardenia*). Clearly, both *Mystery Lady* and *Blue Gardenia* represent a move to the roots in an essential way for James.

In her first full foray into a purely jazz landscape, *Mystery Lady* is a triumph of restrained but passionate singing and playing. Each of the musicians deserves a special mention, but the work of Josh Sklair on guitar, Cedar Walton on piano, and Red Holloway on saxophone are among my favorites on this recording. One has to say that this is a reverent CD that does not try to overwhelm its primary source, but for my taste I expect and welcome such an approach on a tribute album to a musician as monumental as Billie Holiday.

I suspect that individual listeners will eagerly choose their own favorite tracks from *Mystery Lady*; after all, classic ballads by writers such as Irving Berlin (“How Deep is the Ocean”) and Ira and George Gershwin (“Embraceable You”) are represented here by fine performances. My first and last favorite, though, has to be “Lover Man (Oh Where Can You Be).” From the first elegant chords by Josh Sklair and the finely textured vocal by James, the instrumental performances show remarkable restraint and elegance, including a fine solo by Ronnie Buttacavoli on trumpet. As much panache as I find in the big sound of *At Last* and the fine ensemble playing on the *Tell Mama* sessions, it is a revelation to hear this great voice nearly naked. Listeners can find a bouncier swing feel on “Don’t Explain,” which features some of the strongest ensemble playing on the recording. The contrast between the wider voice of James and the compressed, vulnerable, and unforgettable tone of her predecessor is fascinating to consider. I have to say that in my view, the recording as a whole connotes triumph, maturity, and reverence—it is certainly not painful in the way that Holiday’s best work is, and I doubt if Etta James sought to reproduce that pain. But the songs are a reminder of how distinctive and beautiful the music of Billie Holiday was, James making audible some of the aesthetic beauty that was overshadowed at times by a life and persona marked by sadness.

By comparison, *Blue Gardenia* is a more varied recording, albeit with most of the musicians from *Mystery Lady* returning for support. In the words of Jim Bessman, this CD “consolidates her switch from the ‘soul screaming Earth-Mama’ that she described in her book to the mature jazz singer of her mother’s dreams.”^{xxviii} A wider range of standards allows more flexibility in the arrangements as well as the vocal tools James can use, even when she performs material popularized by Holiday. The special contributions of Cedar Walton as arranger must be noted, in that even when James sings the Holiday standard “He’s Funny That Way,” a chorus of horns, piano, and guitar drives the vocals away from imitation and into improvisation. Virtuoso playing and singing mark other tracks such as Duke Ellington’s “In My Solitude,” where crack ensemble playing adds

warmth to the solos by saxophonist Red Holloway and the aforementioned Cedar Walton. What pianist with skills could resist a substantial break in this Ellington tune?

Other highlights include Joe Greene's "Don't Let the Sun Catch You Crying," a song I identify with Ray Charles and a down-home feel. "Come Rain or Come Shine" is also a favorite of mine by many artists, delivered with sincerity and a bit of bluesy edginess by James. As a closing track, "Blue Gardenia" is also well worth waiting for—a mother and daughter reunion on the CD that was a long time in coming. Dorothy's phrasing commands close listening, leaving us wondering about sources. The song builds a case for both Dinah Washington and Dorothy Leatherwood as vocal foremothers for Etta, though it is not necessarily a song to write home about (unless you are Etta James, of course!).

Criminally Minded: Paying the Cost in Good and Bad Times

I have discussed in detail the decades of Etta James's emergence as a musical superstar, but the personal cost of her long journey to superstardom also bears commentary, especially in view of how vast, well funded, and influential the music industry has become. James's talent as a singer was well established by her teens, but the struggle to bring that music to the public included encounters with racist cops, pimps and kingpins, and a music industry determined to press its advantage, extra legally as necessary. What sense should we make of the criminally minded, gang related, mob connected elements of the entertainment industry in the United States, the corruption, racketeering, and violence against humanity that helps determine whose star rises and who gets paid? How does a music lover weigh and consider the sordid escapades that our icons enjoy and endure, their lives shaped by public adoration, forbidden pleasures, the demand to perform that creates great art, great wealth, and great suffering? As a musician and music fan myself, I can understand the common impulse to judge a musician solely by the quality of music, but as a cultural critic I also understand that the music is only a part of the human story of any musician. A critic never really knows how much of a personal story to cover, how much is genuinely relevant to understanding the music. Does it bear reporting that the Ace bandage on James's wrist for the cover illustration on *Etta James Rocks the House* conceals needle tracks?^{xxix} Or that some of the episodes in James's life that resulted in incarceration involved crimes that had victims? I'll take some critical license here to share some thoughts and observations.

As a critic, I highlight difficult personal incidents if such incidents may help a reader appreciate the human interest story behind the music, enriching our collective understanding of expressive music in popular culture. Even successful artists must deal effectively with the pressure that the public imposes on them through an obsessive gaze. More pointedly, fans and critics alike often think of successful musicians as mythic figures rather than human figures. Such reverence makes it harder for audiences to recognize the full humanity of superstar musicians and to consider how much one should invest their emotions and construct their dream lives around the images and sounds of popular music. Thus, I remain a reader (as well as a writer) of music biography to gain an appreciation of the musician's core humanity, to help me examine my own motivations for identifying emotionally with particular musicians, and to consider a range of social issues that the biography and performances of successful musicians bring to the surface.

With these points in mind, I read with interest James's early experiences as a member of a street gang in San Francisco in her teens—in one incident, she and others assaulted a young woman because her prettiness was attracting too much attention. I focus on the incident because of what it says about alienation, the sociological results of an unstable home life in a racially charged atmosphere, and for what it adds to the challenges faced by Etta James. In this incident, an attractive young woman from Spain was gaining the attention of local men who observed her. Out of jealousy and anger, the woman was attacked by James and several others, who “pulled out her hair in chunks, pushed her down a flight of stairs,” and caused significant injury. Ironically, at trial James learned that the young woman “came from Spain, but we were too ignorant to know the difference between Mexicans and Spaniards.”^{xxx}

Etta James was jailed for thirty days as a result of the incident, recalling, in her words, “I went to class with mongoloids and a variety of hard-core criminals.” She escaped further punishment by lying in court, maintaining that the girl had called them niggers.^{xxxi} Recollections of troubling episodes such as this one in the life of successful artists are now virtually stock in trade within popular culture, in every segment of *Behind the Music*, biopic, and mockumentary you can identify. There is much to weigh and consider, though, in this particular example from Etta James. For instance, we learn something about the social setting that produced rhythm and blues music; many artists were not people of privilege, and victimizing others was as likely at times as being a victim of physical assault. Furthermore, we may be shaken out of the placidity that celebrity can generate, having to consider whether or not we as listeners are

implicated in the uglier side of a superstar's personal story. It becomes harder simply to bask in the glamorous fantasies of superstardom; we must recognize the essential humanity of a revered icon, and perhaps that is part of the beauty and bravery of James's authorship of *Rage to Survive*. Most importantly perhaps, we must consider the humanity of the victim, who may still be alive today, but this assault surely extracted a painful cost from her young life. Ethically, can we ignore such an incident in order to indulge in idle fantasies or to create a mythology about a celebrity icon?

The cycle of graft and protection is a part of the music industry that James highlights as well. She was familiar with this cycle from her own family connections to the world of vice, through her mother, her Aunt Cozetta, and others who lived through the underground economy. James's first single demonstrated that a similar logic of privilege and exploitation pervaded the "straight" economy, with a white cover artist, Georgia Gibbs, living large on *Ed Sullivan*, and Etta James singing the same song "in some funky dive in Watts."^{xxxii} James had a godfather who could help protect her on the streets of Los Angeles,^{xxxiii} and one might even trace the origins of L.A. street gangs to anti-Klan protection in the 1920s, but James had no such protector to see to it that her profits were secured fairly in the music industry, and exploitation was sure to come under these conditions.

Perhaps the saddest episode in James's autobiography surrounds the death of Sam Cooke, an incident that also relates to these issues of racketeering, state power, and the career of a musical icon. Because of visual evidence and her long friendship with Cooke, James argues that his death was mob-related for business reasons, not due to an attempted rape and drunken rage, as is the official story. Discussion of these topics is virtually absent from the recent authoritative biography of Cooke by Peter Guralnick, *Dream Boogie*, even though the brief case that Etta James builds for a retaliatory murder demands, at minimum, more commentary. Of course, there are lots of tales of conspiracy on the internet and elsewhere, and skeptics love to accuse committed fans of being unable to accept the deaths of their icons. My passion, though, is for sound research and intellectual honesty in our work as critics and biographers. Whether the facts add up to certainty or ambiguity, solid truth or mystery, it is our obligation to follow them, even when the facts point to sobering conclusions about patterns of violence within the industry we love. In any case Etta James is our living witness, and we are fortunate for her candor in helping us come to terms with the seamier sides of the music industry, including the personal cost that all artists pay for their celebrity.