

July 2012

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Recommended Citation

Osha, Olusanya (2012). Chess Queen, Etta James (1938-2012). *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 13(3), 211-214.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol13/iss3/19>

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Chess Queen, Etta James (1938-2012)

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Every now and then we find a truly great artist whose voice seems to speak directly to us in an uncanny way. In such circumstances, we feel we have finally found an artist who specifically speaks to us and who we can therefore claim as our own. I would imagine that for most people this does not often occur. This isn't to say great artists whose work fail to resonate as deeply with us are not deserving of our gratitude and appreciation. It only means we are not able to claim them as our own private inspirational beacons.

Etta James is an artist I have come to claim as a personal guiding light in the same way Billie Holiday, John Coltrane, Nina Simone and Charlie Parker resonate with me. But she is even more special to me because I stumbled upon her greatness fortuitously, that is, through the agency of another great artist: Sly Stone.

Sly Stone as we know is one of the more significant forces behind the brand of music known as funk alongside the inimitable James Brown and the intergalactic Georges Clinton. I had been in the trail of Sly Stone for many years trying to fathom the workings of the mind that produced such flamboyant and evanescent creativity. Sly Stone was indeed a pathfinder whose influence can be discerned in wide range of music styles from psychedelia and rock to funk and hip hop and also in the work of musicians such as Prince. He was more than merely a gifted musician. Sly Stone was also a transgressive cultural figure who interrogated the uses and limits of androgyny thereby hoisting rock iconography to another level after the genre-bursting contributions of Little Richard.

Stone was truly touched by the stars and freely shared his brilliance. And then the downward spiral began. He fell victim to the all too familiar rock and roll cliché: drugs. Stone former wife, Kath Silva put it simply, "he never outgrew drugs" which eventually hampered his talent and also his health. But I never cease to be amazed by wondrous songs such as "If you want me to stay" which he wrote at the height of his powers and shortly after the beginning of his drug addiction.

"If you want me to stay" is like an immense door that leads to bottomless pools of creativity. Stone's performance in the song is both elegant and wasted. It is as if he is mocking the magnificence of the song itself and also our possible appreciation of it. In a way, his performance seems tongue-in-cheek. "If you want me to stay" lends itself to many kinds of interpretation. Stone appears to be fading out of the song (and perhaps also out the limelight) while the song garners other spurts of momentum in a contrary direction. Stone sings, 'count the days am gone/ forger reaching me by phone/ 'cause I promise I'll be gone for a while". Some critics have noted that Stone is alluding to his withdrawal from the forefront of creativity. In other words, the song is a statement of farewell, a love letter foretelling psychic and spiritual dereliction. Yet within the song, Stone offers numerous tracks for other artists to accomplish creative fulfillment.

James's performance is not only a supreme feat of re-interpretation but a noteworthy instance of one great artist consummating the work of another. In the performance in question, the interplay between singer and backing musicians recalls the kind of chemistry that existed between Billie Holiday, Lester Young and Coleman

Hawkins in their heyday. James in fact paid Holiday the ultimate compliment in her 1994 Grammy-winning Lady Day tribute album.

Just as Sly Stone is literally vanishing within the magnificence of the song, James re-emerges fully invigorated, snatching threads of immortality, as it were, from the abyss of abjection. The contrast between the sad disappearance of a seminal creative force and the phoenix-like re-emergence of another couldn't be more startling; you weep for one and then you are simultaneously nourished by another. A song, at one level, announces a hurtful severance and then on another level ushers in the plenitude of arrival.

Due to this realization I started to search for other versions of the song by other artists and was amazed by what I found. I discovered many budding artists probing the outer reaches of the song, cascading through mirage-like doors to which the song led. Again, I felt Stone's performance shortchanged the song and I discovered a slight incompleteness in his manner of execution. And then I stumbled upon Etta James's impeccable rendering which can be found in her 1998 album "Love and the Blues".

Of course James was already a legend as a result of songs such as "At last" and "I'd rather go blind". But her rendition of Stone's "If you want me to stay" is nothing short of phenomenal. As I have mentioned, there is an open-endedness to the song where artists both budding and established lurch into unexpected vistas and discover depths that would have been hitherto unreachable.

Within the seemingly limitless expanse of Stone's song, the magnificence of Etta James unfurls in all its grandeur. James's version which was released when she was sixty shows her to be the force of nature that really was. Indeed she had always been a force of nature right from when she was in her teens back in L.A. hustling for a recording break. Even in those heady days it was possible to glimpse the rich baritone her voice would acquire with the passing of years.

James was never one meant for half measures. She was a tornado of a personality who displayed her powers through the earthiness and searing quality of her voice. This was a voice that bore with grace, strength and astonishing intensity the weighty traditions of blues, gospel, jazz, soul and rock. Within each of these different genres, her dazzling gift is evident, her vocal girth and confidence never in question.

Jerry Wexler, the late legendary producer and mogul at Atlantic Records likened James's vocal instrument to a church, a trait he mentioned she shared with Aretha Franklin. I think this is a most appropriate description, finding intimate similarities between a single voice and a church choir or better still, an orchestra. When one travels through the vast labyrinths of James voice, one discovers continents, ocean depths and dark looming mountains. Through the long, winding mountain passes of her voice, one discovers the entire cultural history of a race. To be gifted with such an enormous endowment requires stupendous personal strengths which James obviously had in abundance. Not surprisingly, Marshall Chess – son of the co-founder of Chess Records and a successful music industry executive in his own right – rates James higher than Aretha.

During the early seventies, James fell victim to a debilitating heroin habit which almost truncated her career. She was in and out of rehab centers and endured stints in jail. Those who have experienced heroin addiction say it is a diabolical entrapment that is stronger than any living being. The broken lives of Billie Holiday and Charlie Parker are

proof of this belief. Yes James pulled through with and added surprise: the integrity of her glorious voice remained largely intact; at least for a while.

After a lengthy period without a recording contract she returned in 1988 with an album of music, “The Seven Year Itch” which refers to her protracted spell in the wilderness. The hell of addiction couldn’t ultimately destroy her voice. In other words, the responsibilities and histories enshrined in that singular were in the long run preserved.

James emerged within the bowels of a music industry that valued the independence and sanctity of a genuine artistic vision. From 1960 to 1978, she recorded with the iconic Chess label founded by a couple of brothers which was also the home of the great Muddy Waters, Howlin’ Wolf, Chuck Berry, Fontella Bass, John Lee Hooker and Bo Diddley. Chess is every bit as iconic as Atlantic Records or Motown in shaping the course of global culture. After World War II, African-Americans left the plantations of the south in their hundreds for cities like Chicago where Chess was based. Chicago had steel factories which provided employment and a degree of disposable income and this meant people could drink and party. Clubs such as the legendary Macamba Lounge were favored hang-outs for jazz musicians in the early 1940s. The Chess brothers frequented such clubs looking for fresh black talent thereby discovering forms of life and creativity that were not generally known to White America. Muddy Waters’s “Hoochie Coochie Man” and “I Just Wanna Make Love to You” are songs that reflect the sexual and creative energy flowing out of Chicago of that era.

James rightly belonged in such illustrious company. Within such a powerful melting-pot of diverse visions, the blues migrated to other climes and birthed new creative tributaries. Rock and roll mutated in more cosmic as well as sometimes more diluted variants but the DNA of these various music forms can be found in Chess Records. So it is understandable when James dissed Beyonce over what she saw as her sub par rendering of her signature song, “At last” before a gathering that included Barack Obama at his inauguration. James was an artist in the old fashioned sense of the word. She clearly wasn’t a manufactured mannequin of a record industry that churned out stars like assembly line products. She had been forged instead in a relentless crucible that extracted blood, sweat and tears. She needed true grit to become the kind of person she eventually become. So when an industry-manufactured pop star tries to understand her depth, it seems not only superficial but perhaps also somewhat insulting. Those two antecedents- industrial commodity and warrior of blood and fire- obviously have very little in common.

Those of us that are fortunate to be alive during the time of Etta James know we are blessed be showered by her radiance. The durability of James’s talent is again evident in her final studio album, “The Dreamer” (2011) which after a career spanning six decades addresses virtually all the music traditions she worked her way through. In this work, there are versions of Ray Charles’s “In the Evening”, Otis Redding’s “Cigarettes and Coffee” and a stunning interpretation of Guns ‘n’ Roses’s “Welcome to the Jungle”.

James operated beyond the vagaries of the commercial record industry in that she held on to her uniqueness and managed to reach the core of each genre she made her own: blues, jazz, soul and rock. These different genres never subsumed her singularity as oftentimes artists lose their way in the bid to uphold the commercial imperatives of a particular genre. But in the futile attempt to maintain commercial relevance two things usually occur; they lose the connection to their creative fount and also they alienate the

bases that had nurtured and sustained them in the first instance. Etta James avoided this seemingly predictable fate.

The emotive re-interpretation of songs is an art James excelled just as Holiday. James was often able to do better than the original singer-songwriter. Some songs need to be imbued with a certain independent slant to reach maturation. The nexus between songwriter-song-cover artist can be just as intriguing as the creative process itself.

Bobby Hebb penned "Sunny" in memory of his brother who was slain at a night club. Hebb's tune was covered by countless artists ranging from Frank Sinatra, James Brown, Marvin Gaye and Stevie Wonder to Dusty Springfield and Eugene Cicero. Quite a number of those covered Hebb's memorable song were technically better singers than he ever was but his fervent rendering of a truly heartfelt song made his version quite distinctive and unrepeatable. Similarly, James's re-interpretations (cover version doesn't quite do it in this case) were usually definitive and also ventured into realms unforeseen by the original songwriter. This meant she was often able to lift even an average song into subliminal spheres.

After her remarkable re-emergence in the 1980s, James's output invariably attracted plaudits from the highest echelons of the record industry. So it provides some consolation that her significance as an artist was appreciated during her lifetime with the conferment of a Grammy lifetime achievement award on her in 2003. With re-issues of her previous work steadily on the way, we can be sure Etta James is here to stay.