

“She Was Too Black for Rock and Too Hard for Soul”: (Re)discovering the Musical Career of Betty Mabry Davis

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Betty Mabry Davis is an artist whose name has gone unheralded as a pioneer in the annals of funk and rock. Most writing on these musical genres has traditionally placed male artists like Jimi Hendrix, George Clinton (of Parliament-Funkadelic), and bassist Larry Graham as trendsetters in the shaping of a funk rock music sensibility. During the heyday of these artists, it was Betty Mabry Davis who meshed both musical styles equally well. However, her contribution as a pioneer of funk rock was eclipsed by her contemporaries. I was first made aware of Betty Mabry Davis via Miles Davis’s autobiographical sketch (M. Davis 1990). Here, he describes his second wife, Betty Mabry, who was then twenty-three-years old, nearly half his age. Upon seeing her, Miles Davis was initially captivated by Mabry’s beauty, and he chose her as the face to grace his album *Filles de Kilimanjaro* (1968). Among the five tracks on the album was “Mademoiselle Mabry,” composed by Miles as a salute to his soon-to-be wife. In September with *Filles de Kilimanjaro* was released, Betty Mabry and Miles Davis were married and she became his second wife, thus acquiring his last name, Davis. However, Miles Davis would soon realize that his wife was more than a pretty face. She was a gifted musician who became his muse:

I had met a beautiful young singer and songwriter named Betty Mabry, whose picture is on the cover of *Filles de Kili-manjaro* (1968). . . . Betty was a big influence on my personal life as well as my musical life. She introduced me to the music of Jimi Hendrix—and to Jimi Hendrix himself—and other black rock music and musicians. She knew Sly Stone and all those guys, and she was great herself. If Betty were singing today she'd be something like Madonna; something like Prince, only as a woman. She was the beginning of all that when she was singing as Betty Davis. She was just ahead of her time. (M. Davis 1990, 290)

Although their marriage was short lived, Betty Davis stepped beyond the shadows of her well-known ex-husband and became a reigning funk rock diva during the 1970s. Her voice resembled a belter, a style that fitted neatly into the rhythmic grooves or “pockets” of any hard-driving funk rock band of the time. Capitalizing on her successful career as a fashion model, Betty Davis’s signature outfits included fishnet stockings, thigh-high leather boots or high-heeled shoes, hot pants or teddylike wear, a quasi-cosmic-like or Amazon-woman-warrior look, and she donned a big Afro hairdo, as seen on her first three albums: *Betty Davis*, *They Say I’m Different*, and *Nasty Gal*.¹ While there is no stage performance footage of Davis to date, just by her album covers and musical performance alone she undoubtedly exploited the erotic. However, Betty Davis was by no means just a physical presence. Unlike funk rock women performers during her time, she also succeeded in songwriting, composing, and arranging, and she owned her music publishing company. Between 1973 and 1979, Betty Davis recorded five studio albums: *Betty Davis* (Just Sunshine, 1973), *They Say I’m Different* (Just Sunshine, 1974), *Nasty Gal* (Island Records, 1975), *Is It Love or Desire* (Island Records, 1976), and *Crashin’ from Passion* (ZYX Music, 1979). Disillusioned by the politics of the music industry and her refusal to compromise, Betty Davis then retreated from public view, but on her own terms.

Within the last few years, there has been a growing interest in the music of Betty Davis. In spring 2007, she appeared on the cover of the music vintage trade magazine *Wax Poetics*. The Seattle-based independent label of vintage classics, Light in the Attic, rereleased her first three albums and, for the first time, released her fourth album, *Is It Love or Desire* (B. Davis 2009b). Some of her music from her early years is sampled by hip-hop artists from Ice Cube and Method Man to Redman and the drum ‘n bass duo the Underwolves,² and her classic bad-girl anthem “Anti Love Song” (1973) has been covered by black British rocker Skin of Skunk Anansie and Lenny Kravitz (Ballon 2007, 120). But even with the second coming of Betty Davis onto the music scene, she continues to be viewed by critics as an enigmatic presence in the history of American popular music. She is deified by her peers and exulted by loyal fans.

Following a host of artists who have sampled her music, she acquired a host of new admirers. Moreover, this renewed interest in one of those obscured artists from the 1970s has summoned a reassessment of her musical career.

In examining the musical odyssey of Betty Davis, this essay provides an overview of her musical career, explores her use of the erotic as an emerging trope in her performances, and touches upon her impact on other artists. While there was an attempt to interview Betty Davis, most of the sources that comprise primary data for this essay stemmed from scattered writing on the artist ranging from music critics and album liner notes. In unraveling the complexities of this woman artist, the following discussion sheds light on the musical influences that became the springboard for her overall sound palette.

Background and Musical Influences

Betty Mabry was born on July 26, 1944, to a working-class family in Durham, North Carolina. As a child growing up in the southeastern part of the United States, she was exposed to the blues tradition by way of her grandparents. As she stated in interviews, her musical sensibility was shaped by her exposure to her grandmother’s and mother’s recordings of blues icons such as “Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker, Lightnin’ Hopkins, Jimmy Reed, Waters, Big Mama Thornton, and Koko Taylor”—all contributing to her throaty vocal style (Mahon 2011, 152). With a knack for “humming out parts to different instruments as if she were already composing and arranging,” which she says “was just a gift at the age of twelve,” Mabry wrote her first song, “[I’m Gonna] Bake That Cake of Love” (Chang 2007, 1; Ballon 2007, 117). Her family eventually migrated to Homestead, Pennsylvania, near Pittsburgh, where her father worked in the steel mills.

After graduating from high school at the age of sixteen, Mabry left home to pursue a career in the fashion world. She moved to New York City and enrolled at the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT). Her foray into the fashion world landed her a job as a model for the reputable Wilhelmina Agency, where she was among the few African-American models under contract. Mabry appeared in the fashion features of magazines including *Ebony* and *Glamour*. With FIT located in the Chelsea area of Manhattan, it was also near Greenwich Village (“the Village”), then home to the Beat Generation and a burgeoning folk and rock music scene. This context was an ideal cultural hot spot in which to nurture her musical talent.

Mabry’s initial professional recording as a solo singer was on a 45 single, “The Cellar,” produced by soul singer Lou Courtney circa the early 1960s. This recording is lesser known than her later material. Her follow-up single was one of her original songs, “Get Ready for Betty,” on the Don Costa Productions label DCP International in 1964. Strikingly similar to the girl-group sound of her contemporaries Betty Everett or Dolores Brooks of the Crystals, this single showcased Mabry’s vocal capacity (Sibello 2011). Although “Get Ready for

Betty” was a flop, this moment would soon be overshadowed by a string of subsequent recordings, which are discussed later.

Mabry was also a clubber who frequented various music hot spots in the Village. Attracted to the trendy art scene there, Mabry worked part-time as waitress, deejay, and master of ceremonies at the famed beat poet venue Café Figaro (or Le Figaro Café). She soon formed a unique clique with a host of friends, a group of African American women dubbed the Cosmic Ladies, who basically frequented local clubs throughout the Village. The leader of this crew was Devon Wilson, the girlfriend of rock guitarist and pioneer Hendrix. Hanging out in the Village, Mabry began hosting parties at a club known as the Cellar. According to her former roommate, Denise Oliver-Velez, in an interview with journalist John Ballon:

[The Cellar] was a Mecca for young people on the cutting edge of dance and music. Betty not only ran the place, she was the trendsetter and maestro of the scene. We hung out at other clubs, like Leviticus, the Cheetah, and the Electric Circus, where the Chambers Brothers played a lot. (quoted in Ballon 2007, 118)

Originally from Mississippi, the Chambers Brothers, a folk/gospel–blues/rock hybrid group, served as the house band for the Electric Circus. Upon hearing them perform, Mabry was so enthralled by their mixture of blues and rock that she wrote a song for them titled “Uptown,” which appeared on the Chambers Brothers’ CBS debut album, *The Time Has Come* (1967).³ In an interview in 2000, one of the Chambers Brothers, Lester Chambers, recalled his initial meeting of Mabry: “She wouldn’t shut up about the fact that she had a tune that was perfect for us to record, so she started singing it. She was not at all shy. We liked what we heard from her. So the next day we brought in a piano player and recorded her song [Uptown]” (cited in Ballon 2007, 118).

Capitalizing on her success with the Chambers Brothers, Mabry secured a recording contract from CBS Records. While visiting Los Angeles, she met South African musician Hugh Masekela at a party. From this brief relationship, Mabry recorded the single “Live, Love, Learn” and the single’s flipside “It’s My Life,” which were produced by Masekela. But like “Get Ready for Betty,” these singles were both flops.

Following a string of unsuccessful recordings, Mabry returned to New York to continue modeling in an effort to support herself. She was also able to resume clubbing in the Village. Through various networks, Wilson introduced Mabry to her then-beau Hendrix. A major juncture in Mabry’s musical career occurred when she met Miles Davis in 1967 at the famed jazz club the Village Gate. As she recalled:

I had to make a phone call. His trainer at the time, a guy named Bobby, tapped me on my shoulder while I was on the phone and said, “I’d like to speak to you when you get off the phone.” So when I got off the phone he said, “Mr. Davis would like to know if you’d have a drink with him upstairs.” I said, “Sure, why not.” (quoted in Chang 2007)

The Mabry–Davis combination produced creative peaks that not only yielded a musical transformation but a total fashion makeover critical to Miles Davis’s image. Some critics assert that when Miles Davis met Mabry, she discarded all of his tailored suits by replacing them with a wardrobe of leather pants, loose-fitting shirts, and neckerchiefs. Being a fashionista in her own right, Mabry shopped occasionally for clothes at Hernando’s, a leather boutique shop in the Village, and Miles Davis accompanied her to this store. As Betty Davis commented, “I loved Miles’s suits, but he grew fond of clothes from a place I used to shop at, Hernandos [sic], which had Mexican designs and would custom-make items for him” (quoted in Spencer 2010). He soon replaced his conservative suit attire with leather clothing.

Betty Davis also introduced Miles Davis to a core of artists who ranged from rock to soul: “I know that the music I played in the house influenced him a lot. I was listening to Jimi Hendrix and Sly Stone and Otis Redding” (ibid.). But upon meeting Hendrix in person via Betty Davis, Miles Davis’s musical style was forever transformed from a 1950s cool jazz acoustic sound to a more 1970s electrified rock-based style facilitated by echo, reverb, multitracking in-studio recordings and electric keyboards (e.g. Fender Rhodes), strong drum backbeats, and the use of his trumpet playing through a Cry Baby wah-wah pedal with amplification.⁴ Further evidence of Betty Davis’s influence on her husband’s music is on *Filles de Kilimanjaro* (1968), in which Miles Davis and arranger Gil Evans collaborated with Hendrix, producing “Mademoiselle Mabry (Miss Mabry),” a single from this album. “Miles and Gil met with Hendrix several times, trading ideas for different projects, and Jimi’s influence turned up later in Miles’s work when Gil reworked ‘The Wind Cries Mary’ [from Hendrix’s debut album, *Are You Experienced* (1967)] into ‘Mademoiselle Mabry’” (Szwed 2002, 271). What clearly stands out with Miles Davis’s adaptation of Hendrix’s “The Wind Cries Mary” is the three-note triplet pattern melodic tag, which is distinct to both songs. Furthermore, the trumpet player’s experimentation with jazz and rock, called jazz fusion, led to a groundbreaking recording called *Bitches Brew* (1970).⁵ As Miles Davis’s indisputable “muse” for *Bitches Brew*, Betty Davis remembered that “he wanted to call it *Witches Brew*, [but] I told him to call it *Bitches Brew*. . . . He always took my advice” (cited in Ballon 2007, 114). Ultimately, Hendrix’s and Stone’s styles, dubbed acid rock and acid soul, respectively, had a major impact on the musical direction of Betty Davis as well.

Although Betty Davis's earlier attempts at a solo performance career met with limited success, she would make the attempt again under the production supervision of her then-husband. Miles Davis produced an album on Columbia or CBS Records for Betty with an "all-star lineup of Wayne Shorter, Billy Cox, John McLaughlin, Mike Shrieve, and Tony Williams and produced by Teo Macero," with Betty recording the long version of Cream's "Politician" (Chang 2007, 3). While it is still uncertain whether "Columbia decided to pass on it or if Miles deliberately canned it," the release of Betty Davis's subsequent recordings on Columbia could have been, noted one critic, "the missing link between [Miles Davis's] *In a Silent Way* and *Bitches Brew*" (Wang 2007a; Chang 2007, 3). Betty Davis stated that if the CBS recording project was released and turned out to be successful, "Miles was afraid that . . . I'd leave him. He thought I'd become a star. He wanted to hold me back in a way. He was very old-fashioned" (cited in Ballon 2008, 114). Remaining undiscouraged with Miles Davis for not supporting the release of her recording project, Betty Davis, in hindsight, perceived this "failed opportunity" as a benefit of being taken seriously after her departure from her marriage and of not being perceived as "coasting on [her] husband's name" or "being humored because [she] was Miles's wife" (Wang 2007a). Miles Davis's insecurity about his wife was based on accusations that she was having an affair with Hendrix, which resulted in Miles Davis finding grounds for divorce. To date, Betty Davis adamantly denies having an affair with Hendrix. "Jimi Hendrix and I never had an affair: We were very, very, very good friends although he gave me clothes and jewelry" (quoted in B. Davis, 2005).

After her divorce from Miles Davis, Betty Davis remained strongly connected to the music industry. She continued her career as an avid songwriter with moderate success. Though not formally trained in music, she secured the assistance of Sam Hermann to write out her lead sheets. With this affiliation, Hermann introduced Betty Davis to Benjamin "Benny" Ashburn, who then was the manager for the Commodores. Ashburn approached Betty Davis to write songs for the Commodores' demo recording project for a contract with Motown Records. Upon Motown's signing of the Commodores, Betty Davis was offered a songwriter's contract. However, she declined the company's offer to come on board because Motown would control all of the publishing rights of her songs, generating less revenue for her as a songwriter.

Among the songs that Betty Davis wrote for the Commodores, and were of moderate success, were "Walking Up the Road" and "Game is My Middle Name." These two songs were recorded on her self-titled solo album, *Betty Davis* (B. Davis 2007a, originally released in 1973).

Following her songwriting venture for the Commodores, Betty Davis continued modeling professionally, which brought her to London, England, in 1971. While in London, she fostered musical associations with British rock artists like Eric Clapton, whom she met via Wilson, and Marc Bolan, lead guitarist for the group T. Rex. Betty Davis also remained prolific as a songwriter, even to

the point where she almost inked a songwriting deal with Essex Music. As she recalled, “I loved Marc! I sang my songs for him, and he loved it. He told me to do my own songs and stop giving them to people. I listened to him... [and] decided to do my own songs. He set me up an appointment with Essex Publishing [sic], but I didn’t get to work out a deal with them, because I left London right after that” (Ballon 2007, 118).

There are two versions of why Betty Davis soon left England. The first version is that she received a visit from percussionist Michael Carabello of Santana, with whom she was romantically linked, and decided to return to the United States—but to San Francisco, where Santana was based. The second version is that Betty Davis met Carabello via Wilson at a Santana concert in New York City and went to San Francisco at his invitation. Whichever version is true, Carabello invited her for a visit to San Francisco, which proved fruitful for her musical career.

The Making of the High Priestess of Funk: The Just Sunshine Years

Betty Davis relocated to the San Francisco Bay Area circa 1972. In the Bay Area, she found her musical niche among the likes of Sly and the Family Stone, Santana, and gospel-inspired singers including the Pointer Sisters and Sylvester James (also known in the dance and disco world as Sylvester). Her immersion in the Bay Area’s rock community soon affected her musical development by fueling her free-spirited energy and creative impetus in the most provocative manner. With the aid of Paul Ford, the artist and repertoire staff for the newly formed independent record label (“indie”) Just Sunshine Records, Betty Davis’s musical career quickly came to fruition.

Just Sunshine was founded by Michael Lang in the early 1970s. Previously, Lang worked as a concert promoter and cocreated the Woodstock Music and Art Fair in 1969. Upon meeting Betty Davis, he initially wanted to hire her as a songwriter for his newly formed indie label. But she pitched Lang a demo recording of her musical performance with a few musicians she recorded with in San Francisco. Lang recalled being captivated by her looks and candidness: “She was beautiful and outspoken and different from anyone I had ever met. I obviously had input into [the album] but she had great ideas and she was very, very clear about the approach she wanted to take” (Ballon 2007, 118). Lang’s meeting with Betty Davis resulted in a signed contract to Just Sunshine, with complete artistic control. Because of her network with the contemporary music community in the Bay Area, she solicited the aid of Sly and the Family Stone’s drummer, Greg Errico, who produced her first studio album for Just Sunshine, self-titled *Betty Davis* (B. Davis 2007a, originally released in 1973). Errico assembled an all-star lineup of artists including Stone’s bassist Graham, Hershall Kennedy on organ and clavinet, guitarists Neal Schon and Doug Rodrigues (affiliates of the group Santana), and horns with Skip Mesquit on saxophone,

Greg Adams on trumpet, Michael Gillette of the Oakland-based group Tower of Power on trombone, and session man Jules Broussard on baritone saxophone. Among the background singers were the Pointer Sisters and disco artist Sylvester.

In conceiving the musical arrangements for her debut album, Betty Davis employed a concept known as head arrangements—singing the various instrumental parts to her musicians. As Errico noted, she was “wide open musically. She came with definite ideas of what she wanted to achieve [by simply having] . . . a line and humming it out” (cited in Ballon, 2007:120). She also incorporated a corporeal approach to creating musical arrangement via kinetic orality (West 1989; Gaunt 2006). Graham further describes her corporeal approach to arranging:

[Betty] didn't play, but her mind, her body, her spirit would become an instrument that she used to get across to us what she was feeling, how she was flowing, and we'd catch that and roll with that. And then we'd tell from her reaction if we were on the right track or not. If something hit her and she was feeling it, you would immediately see it. So our job was to try to move her. We were feeding off each other in that sense. (cited in Ballon, 2007, 120)

Her debut album, *Betty Davis*, launched her as a woman pioneer of rock music. With a funky, driving rhythm section featuring the string-popping, bass-slapping playing style of Graham and hard-driving “in-the-pocket” beats from drummer Errico—both veterans of Sly and the Family Stone—the quasi-Hendrix/Santana guitar influences captured by Schon and Rodrigues; and the churchy, sanctified sounds imbued by Kennedy on the Hammond B-3 organ, along with the gospel-tinged background vocals composed by the likes of Sylvester (James) and the Pointer Sisters, the punching horn section dominated by members of Tower of Power, and lead vocals with a quality ranging from a raspy, purrlike, growl to shouting, Betty Davis crafted a sound that neatly blended rock and funk.

Not only did her music continue to shape a sound out of which funk and rock comfortably meshed, she also complemented her stage persona with a bold fashion statement. She was described by one observer as wearing a costume that “consisted of a halter, shorter-than-short denim hot pants with silver thigh high boots. . . ; [while] another was a metallic Bowie-esque space outfit that would make Sun Ra and George Clinton blush” (cited in Ballon 2009). The male members of her band, the Funk House, often performed without shirts and showcased their muscular physique by rubbing oil over their torsos.⁶

Betty Davis and the Funk House often were opening acts for an array of artists, from Graham Central Station and Bobby “Blue” Bland to the Mahavishnu Orchestra (Ballon 2009). Although she might not have been invited as a

headliner to “fill Madison Square Garden or be invited to perform on prime-time television,” she nevertheless had an underground following (Ledbetter 1974, 21). She and her band secured gigs at prominent venues like the Bottom Line in New York City, the Roxy Theatre in Los Angeles, and even abroad at the famous high-profile jazz club Ronnie Scott’s in London. There was an instance in which one of her shows almost caused a riot at Loyola University near Baltimore when 7,000 fans attempted to fill an auditorium with only a 5,000-seat capacity.

Even with a strong underground following, the music industry was slow to notice her commercial potential on par with other underground acts that soon become major figures in the aboveground or popular music mainstream. Rather, some scholar-critics attribute to the marginalization of Betty Davis “sounding ‘too black’ for the new FM radio format, Album-Oriented-Rock (AOR) . . . [and] ‘too rock’ for black stations,” or, as funk scholar Rickey Vincent noted, she was “too Black for rock and too hard for soul” (Mahon 2011, 155; Vincent quoted in Chang 2007). In further elaborating on the politics of defining funk as rock, or vice versa, music anthropologist Maureen Mahon interviewed several rock artists who challenged the rock-creation myth. Among those interviewed was guitarist Kelvyn Bell, who has performed with Arthur Blythe and Joseph Bowie’s Defunkt and defines rock in terms of its black aesthetic rooted in a funk sensibility:

It’s all based on the power of the electric guitar and the overdrive and the distortion. . . . So black rock to me is funk because funk is an easier way of talking about the whole spectrum of our music. Which is what we mean when we say black rock. It means heavy rhythm, it means heavy volume, heavy physicality to the music. . . . Funk really means an emphasis on the rhythms that are African-based, heavily African-based. And funk is a better term than black rock—personally, I find it. . . . White artists were free to take jazz and blues and whatever and use it in their music and to exploit and make money off of it whereas we were not. But when we do, that music that we come up with is the black rock art form. Like George Clinton. [Or] Earth, Wind & Fire. . . . James Brown [led] the ultimate funk band, a lot of heavy rhythm and it’s rock ‘n’ roll without being diluted by the white standards, so to speak. James Brown is black rock. [He] is the classic example of where rock ‘n’ roll went when it stayed all black. It turned into funk. (Mahon 2004, 138)

Similar to Bell’s preceding definition of rock, Betty Davis does not make the distinction between funk and rock but views the two as part of a continuum of African-American musical practice. For instance, in the song “F.U.N.K.”

from her third album, *Nasty Gal* (B. Davis 2009a, originally released in 1975), she views funk as culturally inherent, as something “I . . . [and] they were born with.” She calls out the names of black popular artists like Tina Turner, Hendrix, Graham, Chaka Khan, Stevie Wonder, Aretha Franklin, Al Green, Barry White, the O’Jays, Stone, and Ann Peebles, a confluence of black artists often categorized as soul, disco, rock, or funk.

Who gets to own and define rock further complicates gender and race, making it more challenging for a black female rocker like Betty Davis to penetrate a white male rock patriarchy on her own terms. Semmie “Nicky” Neal, Jr., drummer of the Funk House band, recalled when Betty Davis and the band were supposed to open for the rock group Kiss. After Kiss caught their show in New York City, they felt “we would steal the show from them, so they wouldn’t use us” (quoted in Wang 2007b). Betty Davis appeared on stage in makeup, partially clad or wearing short outfits, donning fishnet stockings, high-heeled platform shoes, and with a huge Afro hairdo. While there are no taped performances of Davis’s stage performance, she “relished being kinky, shocking, and downright outrageous from gyrating her hips, transforming her microphone into a twirling penis to sticking her tongue out lecherously when she perform[ed],” observed music critic Les Ledbetter (1974, 24). On stage, Betty Davis worked the typical female rocker’s “bad girl” appeal, emerging as a bad-girl archetype of rock who predated the likes of Madonna and Courtney Love. With an emphasis on physicality as a performative trope among a cadre of male rock stars in which the stage became a site to act out sexual virility, not everyone could handle such sexuality and confidence coming from a black woman rocker who could “perform her own music so aggressively, outdoing the likes of Mick Jagger and Sly Stone at their game” (ibid.). In an interview with music critics Bob Weinstein and Sue Richards, Betty Davis candidly discussed resistance she had encountered as a performer and found gender and race politics as central to her demise:

There are many reasons why I turn audiences off. Number one, I’m a woman. And a black woman. . . . I look one way and people think I should be sounding another way. I work like a man. I don’t really work like a woman. . . . I’ve had guys get up and walk out while I’m performing. I get more hostility from white males than I do from black males. . . . You put me in New York with a predominantly white male audience and I get a weird reaction. (Richards and Weinstein 1976, 93)

More importantly, a female rock figure such as Betty Davis defied concepts about black women’s silence (or the “politics of silence”), about their sexuality, and the quieting of their sexualized selves (Hammonds 1994, 1999). She also can be seen as exuding a sense of freedom by letting go of complexes others had

with her black female body and presence while regarding her body as a site of power (McDowell 2001; Peterson 2001).

Although it is apparent that Betty Davis exploited the erotic in the sense that she sexualized her physical performances, her bad-girl rock persona was even more evidenced in the vocal rendering of her songs. Drawing from Audre Lorde’s thesis of the erotic as power, Angela Davis examines the use of the erotic as a “potentially transformative force” in describing how, similar to her blues predecessors, song-stylist Billie Holiday could recast songs about love relationships. Holiday employed “with prophetic conviction . . . the transformative power of love [by] representing love and sexuality as both concrete daily experience and as coded yearning for social liberation via her vocal performances” (A. Davis 1998, 172). Similar to Holiday, as well as a host of other black female vocalists pre-1970s, Betty Davis conflated love and sexual desire via both vocal interpretation and physical performances indicative of an emerging post-1960s feminism, in which young black women reclaimed their bodies and celebrated their innermost sexual desires. As Betty Davis explained in an interview, “The music is physical and it’s about sex. In the Sixties everyone was into dope and staying high. Now [in the 1970s] it’s sex. Man and woman. My lyrics go right to it. I don’t beat around the bush. It’s hip to eat pussy these days” (quoted in Ballon 2009).

Although Betty Davis’s bad-girl persona was the tenor of music critics, her off-stage personality belied her extroverted self. Funk House band member Fred Mills remembered that “at the end of the night, there’d be so many drugs on stage and Betty [did] nothing but drink mineral water and eat rice cakes” (cited in Wang 2007b). In an interview, Betty Davis offered the following:

I’m more of an introvert [but on stage] I am more outgoing, bit of noisy, lots of movement on stage. My connection with the 60s was really a musical connection I guess. . . . Because I didn’t feel that I needed [to get high]. When everybody started to get high, I’d leave. . . . I didn’t want to be a drag or a party pooper or someone there to be observing. So I would just leave. (Thorn 2009)

Another aspect of Betty Davis, which goes unheralded in the media, is her business acumen at launching her music publishing company. When I visited her music catalog at the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers Web site, I searched under “Betty Davis,” which did not show results. When I entered “Betty Mabry,” almost fifty songs written by her were displayed. Some of these songs do not appear on her five albums, for her songwriting career preceded her performance career. Considering the five albums to her credit for the purpose of this essay, Betty Davis’s song repertoire ranges in topic and can be categorized under four broad headings: songs of passion, tribute songs, musical autobiography, and songs of protest. Among the eight tracks on

her debut album *Betty Davis*, two songs in particular, “If I’m in Luck I Might Get Picked Up” and “Anti-Love Song,” tracks 1 and 3, respectively, comprise a legion of songs of passion that she wrote (B. Davis 2007a, originally released in 1973). In the first track, she begins with an electric guitar line, reminiscent of a Hendrix “lick” reinforced by the electric bass, played over funk-styled drums with a strong backbeat, congas, and the glissando entry of the Hammond B-3 organ, a signature sound of black gospel music. Betty Davis enters with a belting, raspy vocal quality in a style that is a cross between KoKo Taylor and Tina Turner, singing lyrics that epitomize a liberated sexuality of 1970s-style feminism, from “if I’m in luck I just might get picked up tonight” to “I’m wigglin’ my fanny, I’m crazy, I’m nasty.” In “Anti Love Song,” Betty Davis delivers in a more sensuous manner—purrlike, quasi-raspy or breathy timbre—over the accompaniment of electric piano and drums punctuated with the signature funk bass style of Graham. Here Betty Davis plays the role of a temptress enticing a prospective lover: “I know you could possess my body, make me scrawl, have me shaking and climbing the walls.” In both songs, she subverts gendered arrangements of social power from a heteronormative perspective by unabashedly dictating her sexual desires with seemingly little to no emotional attachment.⁷

Betty Davis’s debut album also pays tribute to “fallen stars” and “fallen queens” such as Hendrix and Wilson. She renders a moving tribute to her close friend Wilson, who some said died at the Chelsea Hotel in New York under mysterious circumstances. On side B, track 2, Betty Davis sings in “Steppin in Her I. Miller Shoes” that when they told her Wilson had died, she exclaimed “I knew,” as though Wilson’s end was imminent. In an interview with Jesse Thorn, Betty Davis fondly remembered Wilson, with whom she formed a bond that lasted from their Cosmic Ladies years until Wilson’s tragic demise:

[Wilson] use to date Jimi and she also used to date Mick Jagger. She was on the music scene. She was on the music scene, she was really on the English music [scene] with the Stones, the Beatles, the Who, the British music scene, which I really wasn’t. The song was written about her life and she had a really tragic ending to her life. It was very sad because we were very close and it made me very sad. Jimi just died and she died right after him. It was death right on top of death. It was a very sad time for me. Whenever some dies you have to grieve. And I did a lot of grieving because they were dying and they were very young, you see. (Thorn 2009)

Signifying Wilson’s fondness for wearing the stylish I. Miller high-heeled pump, Betty Davis recounts the life of Wilson as living in the fast lane, “used [sexually] and abused by many men” and alluding to her fatal drug overdose.

Despite it all, Betty Davis eulogizes Wilson as the titled “Black Diamond Queen.”⁸

On Betty Davis’s second and final album, *They Say I’m Different* (B. Davis 2007b, originally released in 1974), on Just Sunshine, she stepped into another role as a producer. Still maintaining a friendship with her ex-husband Miles Davis, she credits him for encouraging her to produce her music. According to Betty Davis, Miles Davis “contacted her after he heard *Betty Davis* and ‘he told me that I should produce myself because I had an excellent ear and didn’t need anybody to produce for me’” (quoted in Wang 2007b). With *They Say I’m Different*, Betty Davis’s growing reputation helped her to secure the musicianship of Santana-affiliated member Pete Escovedo, Mike Clark on drums, and even Buddy Miles of Hendrix’s Band of Gypsys performing on lead guitar (rather than drums) on the record. Of the eight tracks on this album, among the songs of passion is track 1, “Shoo-B-Doop and Cop Him.” Similar to her vocal style on “Anti Love Song,” Betty Davis’s lyrics narrate her methodological seduction of her soon-to-be lover. Peppered with erotic desire, she sings “I’m gonna . . . do it until the cows come home . . . move it slow like a mule, shoo-b-doop all night long and [even] try him out until the sunrise.” With track 2, “He was a Big Freak,” many listeners assume she is referring to Miles Davis. But she confirmed the song as a tribute to her dear friend Hendrix. Blending both passion and sadomasochistic fantasy, Betty Davis hints at Hendrix’s fixation for turquoise chains from the first line of the verse, “beating him with a turquoise chain,” to fantasizing about getting him off “with a turquoise chain.”

On track 4, “Don’t Call Her No Tramp,” Betty Davis pays tribute to hustling world of prostitutes and pimps as implied with the lyrics “an elegant hustler.” This song stirred up controversy with conservative organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), so much as to accuse Betty Davis of condoning prostitution. In defense, she supported her right to do so and in turn chided the NAACP for a limited understanding about human existence particular to certain stratum in the black community:

What people need to realize is that there are all levels of blacks. We are not all doctors, lawyers, nurses, and social workers. That man standing on 116th in Harlem selling cocaine is a real man, a pusher, and you can’t put that under the rug. Those girls standing in the doorways on Broadway and 46th Street are valid; they are out there existing—they are also black. Regardless of what they stand for or what they are doing, they are valid. (quoted in Wang 2007b)

Finally, an example of the autobiographical voice in Betty Davis’s song-writing style is track 6, “They Say I’m Different,” in which she recollects growing up in the rural South eating chitlins, watching her grandmother “spit snuff”

and her grandfather drinking moonshine while listening to the blues. As such, she summons the names of blues legends whose music she heard in her household and grew fond of as a young girl. Hence, she justifies living with the blues as something that contributed to her becoming a “different, strange, and funky” chick: the mystique of Betty Davis’s persona.

By 1975, Lang had sold Betty Davis’s contract to Chris Blackwell, co-founder of Island Records. One of Lang’s reasons for doing so was Island’s success with artists in genres outside of the popular music mainstream. According to Lang, “Chris had a much bigger machine and had done things before, introducing the public to something new with Bob Marley and reggae” (quoted in Ballon 2007, 122). However, Betty Davis’s years on Island became artistically problematic.

Island Records Years

During her years on Island, Betty Davis produced and recorded two studio albums, *Nasty Gal* (1975) and *Is It Love or Desire* (1976). While Lang’s intention in letting go of one of his most popular artists was a selfless effort, Blackwell had another creative vision for Betty Davis that apparently conflicted with her artistic vision. Of the ten tracks on *Nasty Gal*, one of many disagreements between Betty Davis and Island was Blackwell’s decision to release the funky track “Talking Trash” from *Nasty Gal* as a single even though he didn’t “want me to get involved,” recalled Davis (cited in Wang 2009). “She had her own ideas about the business, who she was and how she wanted to be dealt with. And she was very, very, strong about her musical ideas” recalled Lang (cited in Ballon 2007, 124).

In contrast, one of the ten tracks from *Nasty Gal*, “You and I,” is a love ballad, cowritten by Betty and Miles Davis. As track 4 on side A, this song is a departure from the typical Betty Davis song of passion. Here, her rendering of “You and I” is more subdued. The manner in which she approaches “You and I,” as with the first line of the song, “I’m just a child trying to be a woman,” captures a sense of innocence, as though she is transitioning from the childlike feelings of a girl to that of a woman in love with someone for the first time. Miles Davis, who performs on trumpet with his distinct Harmon mute sound, is heard at times improvising on top and in front of the horn arrangement written by legendary arranger Evans with whom he has had a long and important musical affiliation. The two musical titans—Miles and Betty Davis—share an intimate musical moment in “You and I,” which is a love song, pregnant with emotions that express their undying love for each other beyond marriage or divorce. Maintaining Betty Davis’s signature purrlike, semibreathy vocal quality by which she can gently caresses each word in the song, “You and I” was released around the time disco diva Donna Summer introduced a similar approach with “Love Hangover” (1976) and was imitated by a bevy of black female artists who followed suit, such as Sylvia (Robinson) and even Diana Ross.

Regardless of whether to record “You and I” on *Nasty Gal* was an executive decision on the part of Island, capitalizing on the initial disco sound of Summer, it nonetheless highlights another side of Betty Davis, her gentle side, and maybe was an indication to Island that she could morph into the pop sound of the time—disco.

But despite Island’s efforts at marketing Betty Davis, *Nasty Gal* plummeted in sales and was a commercial disaster compared to the label’s other acts like Marley. Simultaneously, her live performances started to receive lukewarm to negative reception, as with the following from a music critic: “The Davis spectacle is intriguing but does update the music. Somehow Betty has got to make her songs shake with the same maddening intensity as her pelvis” (cited in Ballon 2009). Island tried to counter such mixed reviews by remaking Betty Davis’s image. Compared to her appearance on the album cover of *Nasty Gal*, where she is an open-legged-fishnet- and teddy-wearing black woman with an Afro hairdo, and its back cover, for which she posed holding a microphone between her legs, Betty Davis on *Is It Love or Desire* is presented wearing a off-white dress with an upper laced bodice, thigh-high black stockings, dark green high-heeled oxfords, and a beige sunhat with flowers worn tightly as to obscure her large Afro. One interviewer commented that “Island was attempting to make her look like a black version of Pollyanna” (Crouther 2012). With a bit of her original style, she poses seductively by slightly clutching her right finger between her teeth while using her left hand to hold her dress above the left knee to show off her long legs and inner upper thigh. This was certainly a different Betty Davis lookwise. Moreover, the music on *Is It Love or Desire* ranks the collection as one of her cutting-edge albums.

Unlike with her other studio albums, Betty Davis and her band created an unusual musical synergy. The production quality of *Is It Love or Desire* was superb, particularly because of the unique studio capabilities of Studio in the Country (SITC), located in Bogalusa, Louisiana. SITC was designed by Tom Hidley, the acclaimed studio designer. “Given its unique properties, musicians of all stripes flocked to SITC, from crooner Perry Como and county star Willie Nelson to the rock band Kansas and local New Orleans’ legends such as the Neville Brothers and Professor Longhair” (Wang 2009). Betty Davis would become what Island hoped would be a major success. The music of *Is It Love or Desire* is a sonic hodgepodge of her contemporaries such as Hendrix, Sly and the Family Stone, and Graham Central Station or Parliament-Funkadelic. Most of its tracks celebrate her known repertoire, songs of passion. But two of the ten tracks from the album specifically address Betty Davis’s growing disillusionment with Island and fall into the category of songs of protest.

In discussing the former, songs of passion, Betty Davis performs with a confidence, taking chances vocally. For example, on the first title track, “Is It Love or Desire,” she uses special production effects with a touch of reverb, overdubbing her vocals to create the roaring quality that she does so well in her middle vocal register. The Funk House kicks in with an up-tempo, repeti-

tive, funky vamp that adds the right energy for her to manipulate vocally, flipping comfortably from her middle to high register. Such timbral contrast from midrange to high, reinforced by the use of reverb, produces the final climatic episode of this track. Following in the high energy of “Is It Love or Desire” is track 3, “It’s So Good,” in an up-tempo song in the style of Sly and the Family Stone’s “I Want to Take You Higher.” The song ends with a guitar solo by Carlos Morales similar in style to Hendrix.

The album includes additional lead vocals, with keyboardist Fred Mills in duet with Betty Davis on “Whorey Angel” as track 2, along with a guest-vocal appearance by Hoyt on track 4 on “Crashin from Passion,” with the line “last night” much in the spirit of Sly and the Family Stone’s style. Track 8, “Let’s Get Personal,” is in contrast with the previous songs. It strongly resembles a blues shuffle in the style of “Down Home Blues” of Z.Z. Hill. Betty Davis delivers her vocals in a singsong fashion, occasionally punctuating the text with whispering purrs. On track 9, “Bar Hoppin,” she throws in live conversational chatter to capture a real bar or club context as her lyrics rattle off various spirits from wine to mixed drinks. This song uses ensemble shouts from her band over a Parliament-Funkadelic vamp in the style of “Dr. Funkenstein” or “Mothership Connection,” with a more laidback, slower groove. Instrumental interludes shift from a slower groove to a double-time feel created by a walking bass line à la jazz fusion—rock and funk—with a Hendrix-sounding guitar solo. Other diverse moments in *Is It Love or Desire* include a ballad on track 5, “When Romance Says Goodbye.” Betty Davis uses a similar vocal style to that employed on “You and I” to the accompaniment of her rhythm section, substituting the electric guitar for an acoustic guitar interspersing staccato lines with strumming. Finally, a point of departure from her usual instrumentation is Louisiana blues violinist Clarence “Gatemouth” Blues on the final moderate-tempo song “For My Man.”

The remaining tracks 6 and 7, “Bottom of the Barrel” and “Stars Starve, You Know,” deserve special attention because they represent Betty Davis’s protest song repertoire in that they signify her growing discontentment with the music industry, its accompanying politics, and Island in particular. Maintaining a funky feel produced by a slapping-style bass-line melody, the conversational rap of Morales and Mills introduces the song with lyrics that reference modest black Southern lifestyle, synonymous to “bottom of the barrel”: The title song “Bottom of the Barrel” moves from black Southern-style culinary “little fish sandwich chitlins” and “blackeyed peas” to the black vernacular humor of Richard Pryor who “can take you to the bottom of the barrel.” Aware of the overshadowing of funk rock by the European-produced disco of Summer, the Bee Gees, the Village People, and others, Betty Davis sings throughout “Bottom of the Barrel” with the lyrics “take off that disco music and put on some real music,” meaning down-home blues-based music—in this case, funk. After all, in an interview by Vernon Reid with Clinton, the king of 1970s funk defines funk as a sped-up version of the blues (Reid 1993, 45).

With the song “Stars Starve, You Know,” Betty Davis takes lyrical jabs at Island, evidence of the growing differences between her and Blackwell. In addition to her forced makeover on the cover of *Is It Love or Desire*, she believed that Blackwell wanted to replace her as producer, altering her musical direction and her self-image. Speaking of the latter, she forthrightly expressed in an interview that “I fight for what’s honest. Take Island Records. . . . They wanted to cover up my legs and my hair. They said that on the next album I do, no legs” (Richards and Weinstein 1976; also refer to Ballon 2009). As a site of resistance, she perceived her body as a complement to the music she created, thus a body she chose to control, maintain, own, and script in a manner few African American women artists of her time could do. “Davis’s creative vision carried her outside the boundaries of proper black and proper female self-presentation and beyond mainstream comfort zones” (Mahon 2011, 158).

She eschewed becoming “too commercial,” which is the direction she believed that Island wanted to take her. Even before her days with Island, she stated the following: “What I’m doing is really me and it’s honest. If I wanted to be commercial and get a Top 40 hit, I could. But I think there are enough commercial people out there already. I want to do something different and being creative is a bit challenge whereas being commercial isn’t” (cited in Wang, 2007b). Betty Davis was not willing to sacrifice her artistic integrity at any cost, which is why she intimates in the lyrics of “Stars Starve, You Know” that she stakes her claim as an original by not being willing to “let em [the industry] win” and in her refusal to not “change [her] style . . . sing soft and wear tight fitting gowns” just to “make some money.”

As her years with Island drew nigh as a result of ensuing creative differences, Blackwell decided not to release *Is It Love or Desire*. Had there been a different decision, according to guitarist Morales, “it would have been hit material. . . . We knew when we heard it. It was very contemporary even with her avant-garde style” (Wang 2009). Drummer Neal believed that *Is It Love or Desire* “was the best she ever put together. We were so strong about it. If you put it on there and play it, it could hit the charts, to 10, that’s the way I feel about it. We all believe in what we was doing ‘cause this was our ticket out and we just got a raw deal on it” (ibid.).

Following her disappointment with Island, Betty Davis attempted to record another studio album on an indie label, called *Crashin’ from Passion*, in 1979. The title of the album described her continued disillusionment with making music as “going down from passion” (Ballon 2007, 124). During the making of this album, her peers noted a more subdued or settled Betty Davis. This album reflected her change from rock and funk to a more pop-oriented sound. She solicited the help of Martha Reeves on the vocal arrangements and the assistance of Keni Burke and the Pointer Sisters (Wang 2007b). However, it is believed that *Crashin’ from Passion* ended up in the hands of a shady manager, who pirated the album, releasing it in 1995 under two names: *Hangin’ Out in Hollywood* and *Crashin from Passion* (B. Davis 1995/1996). While rumors cir-

culated around the mysterious exit of Betty Davis from the music scene, ranging from she died to she succumbed to drugs, they were all far from the truth. Following the death of her father in the early 1980s, which was an emotional blow to her, Betty Davis puts it simply this way:

I lost interest [in the music business]. Jimi Hendrix was a good friend of mine and I knew what had happened to him. I mean, the music business I'm in killed one of my friends. . . . The rock era is dead now. The people who didn't die physically have died emotionally. You see, it's hard enough to keep it together personally. Then you have to give a piece of yourself to the public, and a piece to this one and that one. By the time you're finished giving pieces away, you don't even know who are. (cited in Wang 2007b)

Final Remarks

Although far too many critics and fans alike view Betty Mabry Davis as being simply “raunchy,” “nasty,” “lusty, shocking, outrageous,” or a “she’s got to have it type,” they often overlook her complexity. Breaking taboos yet struggling to remain true to herself, Betty Davis refused to submit to the standards of a music industry patriarchy that gained control of the physical appearances and creative rights of black women artists. She realized the risks of being her own boss but accepted the challenge with confidence, making some people feel intimidated by her tenacity. Considering that Betty Davis could sing on an even scale with her contemporaries, such as Turner, or appear as galactic in style as Patti LaBelle and the Bluebelles, she remained in full control of her body image, which became her site of resistance and power. As Carlos Santana reflected, Betty Davis could make Madonna look “more like Marie Osmond,” while funk rocker Rick James remembered her originality as “the only girl, the only woman, who was totally cutting edge. . . . She was funk! Rock ‘n’ rolling [and] she was black!” (cited in Wang 2007a; quoted in Ballon 2009). Although as a consequence of seeming too sexually candid for mainstream musical consumption to becoming a casualty of race and gender politics in a male-dominated rock music game, Betty Davis celebrated the power of the erotic far beyond the stage but did so within her own sense of self-respect. She knew the right time to leave, be it an abusive marriage or a raw record deal. Lorde stated that by being in touch with the erotic, “we begin to recognize our deepest feelings, we begin to give up, of necessity, being satisfied with suffering and self-negation, and with the numbness which so often seems like their only alternative in our society. Our acts against oppression become integral with self, motivated and empowered from within” (1984, 58). For these reasons, we celebrate Betty Davis as one of a kind, a woman who rocked our world on her own terms and with no regrets.

Notes

1. In the special issue, Nikki A. Greene examines the funk aesthetic with the stage attire of Betty Davis (Greene 2013).
2. Davis’s “If I’m in Luck I Might Get Picked Up” (1973) was sampled in “Rodeo” (2004) by Method Man featuring Ludacris; “Anti Love Song” (1973) was sampled in “Revitalize” (2000) by the Nextmen featuring Soulson; “Shoo-B-Doop and Cop Him” (1974) was sampled in “Once Upon a Time in the Projects” (1990) by Ice Cube, “Jersey Yo!” (1998) was sampled by Redman, and “So Blue It’s Black” (2001) was sampled by the Underwolves, just to name a few.
3. *The Time Has Come Today* included the most popular of songs from the album, causing the Chambers Brothers’ album to peak on the Billboard album chart at number 11 and the single, “Time Has Come Today,” to peak on the Billboard singles chart at number 6. “Uptown” is also known as “Uptown in Harlem.”
4. Charles E. Moore, in discussion with the author, October 4, 2013. I spoke with ethnomusicologist and jazz trumpeter Moore about the various electronic devices used by Miles Davis and on the album *Bitches Brew* (1970), credited as ushering in jazz fusion.
5. See also Fellezs (2011) as he discusses jazz fusion as neither rock nor jazz but suspended between genres, liminal, and what is referred to as the “broken middle.”
6. The Funk House consisted of electric bassist Larry Johnson and drummer Semmie “Nicky” Neal, Jr.; keyboardist Fred Mills; and guitarist Carlos Morales.
7. See Lee (2010) for further discussion about black women, sexuality, and popular culture.
8. I. Miller shoes are named after their creator, Israel Miller, a Polish immigrant, who began making a signature line of high-heeled pumps as early as 1892, earning the trade name, I. Miller. For further information, see Friedland (2013).

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