

“Sound Projector”:

Reissuing, Representing, and Reclaiming the Music of Betty Davis

by

Danielle Maggio

Bachelor of Arts, Columbia College Chicago, 2011

Master of Arts, The University of Pittsburgh, 2017

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

University of Pittsburgh

2020

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH
DIETRICH SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

This dissertation was presented

by

Danielle Maggio

It was defended on

November 23, 2020

and approved by

Shalini Ayyagari, Assistant Professor, Department of Music

Aaron Johnson, Assistant Professor, Department of Music

Stephanie Shonekan, Professor, School of Music, University of Missouri

Dissertation Director: Andrew Weintraub, Professor, Department of Music

Copyright © by Danielle Maggio

2020

“Sound Projector”:

Reissuing, Representing, and Reclaiming the Music of Betty Davis

Danielle Maggio, PhD

University of Pittsburgh, 2020

In 2007, the music of Betty Davis was reissued on Light In The Attic Records to a wave of critical acclaim. The reemergence of Betty’s first two studio albums (*Betty Davis* 1973; *They Say I’m Different* 1974) cemented the pioneer status of the singer, songwriter, and producer who was once ridiculed and boycotted for her sexually dominant lyrics and physically suggestive live performances. Due to marked shifts in Black expressive culture, mainstream feminism, and the socio-political context within the music industry, Betty Davis is now celebrated as an artistic innovator and progressive social figure whose musical ideas and aesthetics resonate loudly in mainstream popular music. This study offers a dialectical analysis between the cultural and industrial forces that largely suppressed Davis during her heyday (1968-1979) and the curatorial and performance practices that attempt to re-package Davis in the present day. This study identifies two different interpretive communities that are crucial to Davis’ reemergence: the relatively cloistered community of record collecting, and the dynamic alliance of Black Women Rock. Furthermore, this study examines the 2017 documentary film *Betty – They Say I’m Different* in which I was partly involved, and the live pre- and post-film events that I helped to organize. Finally, this study turns toward participatory observation and documents my subjective experience making music with Betty Davis. Through a combination of historical analysis and four years of ethnographic research conducted with Davis, this study analyzes Davis’ life in music in order to interrogate the cultural work of reissuing, representing, and reclaiming a previously marginalized artist for modern day consumption. By analyzing the pleasure-centered poetics of artistic power that Davis projected through an embrace of the erotic, this study locates the music of Betty Davis as a dynamic site of Black women’s intellectual production, in the same tradition as the classic blues women. Thus, through a comparative analysis of reissued records, documentary film, and Black feminist performance, this study claims that Betty Davis’ career provides a framework

through which different interpretive communities can access the past and, in the process, create newly informed meaning and value in the present.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	xv
Preface.....	xvi
1.0 “Hangin’ Out”: Introduction.....	1
1.1 Scope	5
1.2 Research Questions	6
1.3 Aims	7
1.4 Collaborative Methodologies	11
1.4.1 Positionality	11
1.4.2 Ethnographic Approach	13
1.4.3 Source Materials	14
1.4.4 Collaboration	17
1.5 Musical Analysis	18
1.6 Theoretical Frameworks.....	20
1.6.1 Music and Practice Theory	23
1.6.2 Music and Black Feminist Theory	24
1.6.3 Music and Media and Cultural Studies	28
1.7 Notes on Terminology	30
1.8 Summaries of Chapters.....	31
2.0 “Bake That Cake Of Love”: Afro-Modern Formations, Blues Women, and Black Feminism	36
2.1 Afro-Modern Formations	37
2.2 Buella Blackwell’s Record Collection	42
2.2.1 “Race Records”	44
2.2.2 Blues Women and Black Feminism	49
3.0 “Get Ready for Betty”: Fashion, Fusion, and Dismantling the Muse.....	58
3.1 The New York Scene	59
3.1.1 The Cosmic Ladies	63
3.1.2 “Uptown to Harlem”	66

3.2 Marriage to Miles	70
3.2.1 Fusion	73
3.2.2 Dismantling the Muse	74
3.3 The Columbia Sessions.....	76
4.0 “They Say I’m Different”: Vocality, Textuality, and Physicality	83
4.1 Artistic Freedom and Musical Transmission.....	84
4.1.1 The Artist as Producer	92
4.2 Vocality	94
4.2.1 Timbral Contrast	97
4.2.2 Vocal Demeanor	102
4.2.3 Audible Pleasure	105
4.2.4 Rapping.....	107
4.3 Textuality.....	109
4.3.1 Desire.....	112
4.3.2 Vulnerability.....	117
4.3.3 Celebration	119
4.3.4 Warning	122
4.3.5 Respect	125
4.4 Physicality	128
4.4.1 Album Covers.....	129
4.4.2 Erotic Labor	134
4.4.3 Betty Davis’ Live Show.....	137
4.4.4 Reaction from Press	141
4.5 A World Without Contemporaries	144
5.0 “Your Mama Wants Ya Back”: Reissuing Betty Davis	147
5.1 In Search of an Interactive Network	148
5.1.1 Retreat From the Industry	151
5.2 Light In The Attic Records.....	152
5.2.1 The Case for Reissue.....	163
5.3 The Interpretive Community of Record Collectors	165
5.3.1 The Numero Group.....	172

5.3.2 Power Dynamics	177
5.3.3 Women in Collecting	179
5.4 The Story of Betty Davis' Reissues	183
5.4.1 Recoding the Past	193
5.4.2 Envisioning the Future	196
6.0 "Dedicated to the Press": Representing Betty Davis	199
6.1 Making Betty - They Say I'm Different.....	204
6.2 Joining the Team of Betty – They Say I'm Different	213
6.3 Analysis of Betty – They Say I'm Different.....	216
6.4 Observations as Associate Producer	227
6.4.1 The U.S. Premier of Betty – They Say I'm Different.....	234
6.4.2 Funk House Reunion Concert.....	242
6.4.3 The "Lifeworld" of Betty Davis	253
7.0 "Don't Call Her No Tramp": Reclaiming Betty Davis.....	255
7.1 The Interpretive Community of Black Women Rock	256
7.1.1 Daughters of Betty	258
7.1.2 Black Women Rock Concert	264
7.1.3 "Spreading the Gospel of Betty"	268
7.2 The Blues Women Legacy.....	270
7.2.1 Anti-Erotic Binary	273
7.2.2 "Just the Blues, Sped Up"	276
7.2.3 Ahead of Her Time.....	280
7.3 Safe Spaces and Shared Stages.....	283
7.3.1 Daughters of Betty Speak!.....	288
8.0 "Live, Love, Learn": Making Music with Betty Davis.....	294
8.1 "Live with the Song"	295
8.1.1 Rehearsing with Betty Davis	302
8.1.2 Recording with Betty Davis.....	305
8.1.3 Betty Davis as Producer	310
8.2 Releasing Music with Betty Davis	313
8.2.1 The Betty Davis Scholarship	316

8.2.2 “A Little Bit Hot Tonight”	318
9.0 “It’s My Life”: Conclusion.....	323
9.1 Advocacy and Purpose in Ethnomusicology	324
9.2 Reflections	325
Selected Interviews and Communication.....	329
References Cited.....	333
Selected Discography	361

List of Figures

<i>Figure 1. Song lyrics to Gertrude "Ma" Rainey's "Trust No Man" (1926).</i>	53
<i>Figure 2. Song lyrics to Bessie Smith's "Young Woman's Blues" (1926).</i>	53
<i>Figure 3. Song lyrics to Bessie Smith's "Lock and Key" (1927).</i>	54
<i>Figure 4. Song lyrics to Gertrude "Ma" Rainey's "Prove It On Me" (1928).</i>	54
<i>Figure 5. Betty Mabry in the May 9, 1968 issue of Jet magazine. The caption reads that Betty is wearing her "own design." Photo reproduced from Jet's online archive.</i>	60
<i>Figure 6. Some of The Cosmic Ladies, East Village, New York City, 1968. From left to right: Stella Douglas, Devon Wilson (standing), Colette Harron, John Edward Heys, and Betty Mabry.</i>	64
<i>Figure 7. Song lyrics to Betty Mabry's "It's My Life" (1968).</i>	69
<i>Figure 8. Betty Davis singing live. Location unknown. Year unknown (circa 1974). Photographer unknown.</i>	99
<i>Figure 9. Song lyrics to Betty Davis' "Stars Starve, You Know" (1976).</i>	104
<i>Figure 10. Song lyrics to Betty Davis' "Stars Starve, You Know" (1976).</i>	108
<i>Figure 11. Betty Davis – Thematic Song Chart. Created by author.</i>	111
<i>Figure 12. Song lyrics to Betty Davis' "He Was a Big Freak" (1974).</i>	116
<i>Figure 13. Song lyrics to Betty Davis' "70's Blues" (1974).</i>	119
<i>Figure 14. Song lyrics to Gertrude "Ma" Rainey's "Walking Blues" (1923).</i>	121
<i>Figure 15. Song lyrics to Betty Davis' "Walkin Up the Road" (1973).</i>	122
<i>Figure 16. Song lyrics to Betty Davis' "Your Man My Man" (1973).</i>	123
<i>Figure 17. Song lyrics to Betty Davis' "F.U.N.K." (1975).</i>	125
<i>Figure 18. Song lyrics to Betty Davis' "Steppin In Her. I Miller Shoes" (1973).</i>	127
<i>Figure 19. Album cover for Betty Davis (Just Sunshine Records, 1973). Reproduced with permission from Light In The Attic Records.</i>	130
<i>Figure 20. Album cover for They Say I'm Different (Just Sunshine Records, 1974).</i>	131
<i>Figure 21. Album cover for Nasty Gal (Island Records, 1975). Reproduced with permission from Light In The Attic Records.</i>	132

<i>Figure 22. Betty Davis singing live with The Ladies (Debbie Burnell and Elaine Clark). Location unknown. Date unknown (circa 1974). Photographer unknown.....</i>	<i>135</i>
<i>Figure 23. Betty Davis singing live. Location unknown. Date unknown (circa 1974). Photographer unknown.....</i>	<i>136</i>
<i>Figure 24. Betty Davis and The Ladies (Elaine Clark seen to the left of Betty and Debbie Burrell seen to the right of Betty) performing at Howard University's Homecoming in 1974. Washington, D.C. Photographer unknown.....</i>	<i>140</i>
<i>Figure 25. Framed Betty Davis photo, Light In The Attic office, Los Angeles, CA, November 2, 2018.....</i>	<i>154</i>
<i>Figure 26. Wall display, Light In The Attic office, Los Angeles, CA, November 2, 2018.</i>	<i>155</i>
<i>Figure 27. Stacks of records, Light In The Attic office, Los Angeles, CA, November 2, 2018.</i>	<i>156</i>
<i>Figure 28. Stacks of records, Light In The Attic office, Los Angeles, CA, November 2, 2018.</i>	<i>157</i>
<i>Figure 29. Betty Davis' Nasty Gal album displayed at Light In The Attic office, Los Angeles, CA, November 2, 2018.</i>	<i>158</i>
<i>Figure 30. Framed photo of Barbara Lynn, Light In The Attic office, Los Angeles, CA, November 2, 2018.....</i>	<i>158</i>
<i>Figure 31. Framed photo of Wendy Rene, Light In The Attic office, Los Angeles, CA, November 2, 2018.....</i>	<i>159</i>
<i>Figure 32. Framed film poster for Searching For Sugarman, Light In The Attic office, Los Angeles, CA, November 2, 2018.</i>	<i>159</i>
<i>Figure 33. Patrick McCarthy points to framed album of L'Amour (1983), Light In The Attic office, Los Angeles, CA, November 2, 2018.....</i>	<i>160</i>
<i>Figure 34. Framed, autographed photo of Sly Stone, Light In The Attic office, Los Angeles, CA, November 2, 2018.....</i>	<i>161</i>
<i>Figure 35. The Numero Group record store, Chicago, IL, August 25, 2018.</i>	<i>173</i>
<i>Figure 36. The Numero Group record store, Chicago, IL, August 25, 2018.</i>	<i>174</i>
<i>Figure 37. Dr. Margaret Rose Vendryes, Kwele Betty – African Diva, 2010. Oil and cold wax on canvas and paper, 30 x 30 inches. Reproduced by permission of the artist.....</i>	<i>200</i>

<i>Figure 38. Nucommme (right) performing in her multimedia musical tribute to Betty Davis, Brooklyn Museum, New York, NY, 2012. Reproduced by permission of the artist.....</i>	<i>201</i>
<i>Figure 39. Harold Offeh re-enacts Betty Davis’ album cover for his performance project entitled Covers. Reproduced by permission of the artist.....</i>	<i>202</i>
<i>Figure 40. Photographer Numa Perrier and model N’dambi recreate Betty Davis’ image for photography exhibit entitled AUDACIOUS. Reproduced by permission of the artist.</i>	<i>202</i>
<i>Figure 41. UK singer Lydia Lutudi emulates Betty Davis as she prepares for her tribute show. Photographer: MaryAnn Ezech. Reproduced with permission from the artist.....</i>	<i>203</i>
<i>Figure 42. Official poster for the documentary film entitled Betty - They Say I'm Different (Cox 2017).</i>	<i>203</i>
<i>Figure 43. Cover of Wax Poetics magazine featuring Betty Davis and John Ballon's article "Liberated Funk," April/March issue, 2007.</i>	<i>208</i>
<i>Figure 44. Koert Sauer playing Betty Davis records before the international premier of Betty - They Say I'm Different (Cox 2017), International Documentary Film Association Festival, Amsterdam, Netherlands, November 18, 2017.</i>	<i>215</i>
<i>Figure 45. Flyer for author's public lecture, Don’t You Call Her No Tramp: Reclaiming The Erotic Innovations of Betty Davis, New Orleans, LA, 2019. Created by Shana M. Griffin.</i>	<i>231</i>
<i>Figure 46. Melissa Webber (DJ Soul Sister), author, and Shana M. Griffin, Neighborhood Story Project, New Orleans, LA, March 23, 2019.</i>	<i>231</i>
<i>Figure 47. Kim El at the US Premier of Betty - They Say I'm Different (Cox 2017), Pittsburgh, PA, February 25, 2018.....</i>	<i>235</i>
<i>Figure 48. Audience member holds up his original copy of Betty Davis’ debut album (1973) after the US premier of the documentary film, The Black Bottom Film Festival, August Wilson African American Cultural Center, Pittsburgh, PA, February 25, 2018.....</i>	<i>237</i>
<i>Figure 49. Marquis of Row House Cinema, in collaboration with The Black Bottom Film Festival, Pittsburgh, PA, March 1, 2018.....</i>	<i>237</i>
<i>Figure 50. Flyer for post-film event, created by author, Pittsburgh, PA, 2018.....</i>	<i>238</i>
<i>Figure 51. Flyer for pre- and post-film events, created by Lauren Goshinski, Pittsburgh, PA, 2018.....</i>	<i>239</i>

<i>Figure 52. “Industry Women – Empowering Future Voices & Visions” panel, presented by Pittsburgh Filmmakers in collaboration with Afropunk and Red Bull Music Academy, Pittsburgh, PA, March 3, 2018. From left to right: Maggie Negrete, Kahmeela Adams, Sarah Huny Young, Black Rapp M.A.D.U.S.A., author, and Lauren Goshinski.</i>	<i>240</i>
<i>Figure 53. Shayontani Banerjee performs live with Funk House, Regent Square Theatre, Pittsburgh, PA, March 3, 2018.</i>	<i>245</i>
<i>Figure 54. Shayontani Banerjee performs live with Funk House, Regent Square Theatre, Pittsburgh, PA, March 3, 2018.</i>	<i>246</i>
<i>Figure 55. Morgan Hawkins performs live with Funk House, Regent Square Theatre, Pittsburgh, PA, March 3, 2018.</i>	<i>247</i>
<i>Figure 56. Morgan Hawkins performs live with Funk House, Regent Square Theatre, Pittsburgh, PA, March 3, 2018.</i>	<i>248</i>
<i>Figure 57. Shanyse Strickland performs live with Funk House, Regent Square Theatre, Pittsburgh, PA, March 3, 2018. Funk House members from left to right: Fred Mills, Nicky Neal, Larry Johnson, and Carlos Morales.</i>	<i>248</i>
<i>Figure 58. Jacquea Mae Olday performs live with Funk House, Regent Square Theatre, Pittsburgh, PA, March 3, 2018.</i>	<i>250</i>
<i>Figure 59. The audience during the Funk House Reunion Concert, Regent Square Theatre, March 3, 2018.</i>	<i>251</i>
<i>Figure 60. Encore performance of Funk House Reunion Concert, Regent Square Theatre, Pittsburgh, PA, March 3, 2018. From left to right: Shanyse Strickland, Morgan Hawkins, Shayontani Banerjee, Jacquea Mae Olday, and Larry Johnson.</i>	<i>252</i>
<i>Figure 61. Jessica Care Moore's poem "They Say She's Different" (2004).</i>	<i>262</i>
<i>Figure 62. Flyer for Black Women Rock's 15th Anniversary Concert, Detroit, MI, 2019.</i>	<i>264</i>
<i>Figure 63. Jessica Care Moore on stage reading her poem, "They Say She's Different" (2004), The Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History, Detroit, MI, March 16, 2019.</i>	<i>266</i>
<i>Figure 64. Song lyrics to Jamila Wood's "BETTY" (2019).</i>	<i>275</i>
<i>Figure 65. Black Women Rock flyer for the Detroit premier of the documentary film in collaboration with Daughters of Betty Speak! panel, featuring Liza Colby (bottom right), March 17, 2018.</i>	<i>282</i>

<i>Figure 66. Black Women Rock musicians on stage after their encore, August Wilson African American Cultural Center, Pittsburgh, PA, June 22, 2019. Jessica Care Moore is seen center standing, Nona Hendryx is seen center kneeling, and Jacquea Mae Olday and Morgan Hawkins are seen far right standing.....</i>	<i>291</i>
<i>Figure 67. Black Women Rock panelists during the "Daughters of Betty Speak!" panel, August Wilson African American Cultural Center, Pittsburgh, PA, June 23, 2019. From left to right: Steffanie Christi'an, SATE, Kat Dyson, Jessica Care Moore, Militia Vox, Ideeyah, Kimberly Nichole, Nona Hendryx, Stacey Hotwaxx Hale, and Lessie Vonner (seated).</i>	<i>292</i>
<i>Figure 68. Lyrics to "A Little Bit Hot Tonight" written by Betty Davis, Pittsburgh, PA, 2019.</i>	<i>297</i>
<i>Figure 69. Lyrics to "A Little Bit Hot Tonight" written by Betty Davis, Pittsburgh, PA, 2019.</i>	<i>298</i>
<i>Figure 70. Artwork for "A Little Bit Hot Tonight" featuring the author. Photography by Sarah Huny Young. Collage artwork by Sean Smith (@pariahinthesky), 2019.</i>	<i>315</i>
<i>Figure 71. Flyer for Betty's 75th Birthday film screening in collaboration with The Battle of Homestead Foundation, Pittsburgh, PA, created by author, 2019.</i>	<i>317</i>
<i>Figure 72. Painting of Betty Davis by Jennifer Rempel, AMC Lowes Waterfront Theatre, Homestead, PA, July 26, 2019.....</i>	<i>321</i>

Acknowledgments

Throughout the research and writing process of this dissertation I have received a great deal of support. I would first like to thank my advisor, Dr. Andrew Weintraub, whose expertise and guidance was crucial in formulating this dissertation. Your feedback has made me a better writer and scholar. I would like to thank Dr. Shalini Ayyagari for giving me my first opportunity to lecture on my dissertation topic, and for alerting me about the documentary film which led, in large part, to this dissertation. I would like to thank Dr. Aaron Johnson for sharing his deep insight into the world of soul and funk with me. I would like to thank Dr. Stephanie Shonekan for providing me with a masterful example of what an unconventional dissertation based on a musical biography looks like.

I would like to acknowledge my colleagues from The University of Pittsburgh's Department of Music, including Ben Barson and the Afro Yaqui Music Collective, Brian Riordan, Samuel Okoh-Boateng, Dr. Matt Aelmore, and Dr. John Bagnato. I would also like to acknowledge my former colleagues and professors from Columbia College Chicago, including Dr. Carmelo Esterrich, Dr. Ann Gunkel, Prexy Nesbitt, Terri Hemmert, Ayondela McDole, Nicole Erhardt, Janine Shoots and Colleen King. I would not be the scholar I am today without your pedagogical camaraderie.

I am especially grateful to Damon Smith, John Ballon, Matt Sullivan, Joost Berger, Dr. Oliver Wang, Saori Kappus, Rudy Calvo, Mark Fallon, and Phil Cox for sharing their experiences, memories, interviews and research materials with me so that we could further this (and future) projects.

To Dr. Zack Furness, my partner, friend, and colleague. I could not have completed this dissertation without your love, patience, and assistance. You truly amaze me and I am forever grateful to have you by my side.

Finally, I would like to thank Betty Davis, without whom none of this would be possible.

Preface

In 2005, at age seventeen, I started collecting vinyl records. The impetus for my material shift in music consumption was the death of my grandmother that same year. After she passed away, my grandfather started the arduous process of clearing out the many objects she acquired in her eighty years of life. When I noticed three weathered boxes full of records in the garbage pile, I was suddenly struck by a feeling of sentimentality. My grandmother was a singer; the first singer I remember hearing, in fact. I had heard the stories since I was a child—that she grew up with Frank Sinatra in Hoboken; was sponsored by Wonder Bread on the radio; and that she changed her last name from Castellucci to Castel to sound less ethnic. She often sang to me in her deep mezzo soprano voice, bending notes and closing vowels to accent her trembling vibrato, imparting vocal wisdom and technique in me at an early age. She is undoubtedly the reason why I sing today, and why my voice sounds the way it does. Although I had never seen a vinyl record before (they were never in my home growing up, nor do I ever remember seeing them in my grandmother's home while she was alive), I was struck by an incredible sense of duty to preserve these aging records. And just like that, I inherited her dusty vinyl collection.

I bought a record player out of sheer necessity, so I could listen to the records she had left behind—Judy Garland, Sarah Vaughan, Frank Sinatra, Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Prima, Dinah Washington, and other LPs from the great jazz and crooner vocalists of that era. Transitioning from highly compressed CDs and MP3s to used vinyl records was a transformative experience for me both sonically and socially. I trained my ears to listen through the scratchy analog timbre of vinyl impurities, so I could put the vocal lines and instrumentation in the forefront of the experience. I trained my eyes to identify the grooves in the wax by catching the light in the room. I trained my fingers to delicately operate a needle, so I could accurately drop it in the groove at the beginning of a track. I trained my body to sit and listen to an entire album without the option of fast-forwarding and skipping ahead. My entire understanding of listening to music changed when that record player came into my life. I was no longer satisfied with simply hearing whatever curated pop music was presented to me on the radio or on television programs with which I had been enthralled (only a few months earlier). I was intrigued by both the records and the record player as

a historical technology, and I was motivated by the pursuit to find more music. Once I made my way through my grandmother's records, I began to build my own collection.

In my early days of record shopping, I was selecting records from the one and three dollar bins at local used record stores and thrift stores in my Western Pennsylvania suburban region. Eventually, I started paying seven, ten, or even twelve dollars for a record I found. While I admittedly was swept up in the pop idol/boy group craze of the late 1990s and early 2000s, I had developed a distinctly “old school” taste in music ever since I was a young child. I was primarily drawn to soul music, especially women vocalists, from the 1960s and 1970s—iconic women artists who have been canonized as legends. I would flip through an endless twelve-inch sea of Gladys Knight, The Supremes, Aretha Franklin, Dionne Warwick and other glamorous women from the heyday of soul. These records were not rare or obscure; they filled record stores and thrift stores across America. Most of the stores that I went to only sold used records—Half Priced Books, Record Rama (which no longer exists), Goodwill, and Red, White and Blue Thrift were my most frequented record shopping spots. Occasionally, when I went to bigger record stores in the city of Pittsburgh—including Attic Records in Millvale and Jerry's Records in Squirrel Hill, I would see reissued records perched up on the top display shelf above the used bins, freshly packaged in plastic and feeling much thicker than the used LPs I was perusing.

Most record stores did not have a listening station where you could test out the records before purchase, so I would often bring home a record only to find that I did not like it as much as I anticipated, or that it sounded different than I expected. Not being able to test out records before purchase trained me to read production credits on the back of the record and check for liner notes inside the sleeve in order to find out what a record might sound like—what year was it recorded, what instruments were used, who were the session musicians, who produced it? Embracing vinyl LPs as my preferred audio format invited me into a deeply intentional world of listening. It reconfigured my understanding of curated musical encounters and created the space necessary for me to reassess the notion of instant gratification that my adolescent consciousness was previously submerged in. Beyond that, it provided me an embodied sense of cultural memory that was connected to my grandmother and those original records that acted as the foundation for my collection. I felt pride in adopting a listening format that she herself grew up with, and not long after I began to feel a sense of stewardship for appreciating and supporting a form of outdated media. However, it was not until I sought out specific artists and labels on vinyl that I felt a sense

of camaraderie within a larger culture of collecting. And Betty Davis was the artist who brought me into that world.

By the time I was born in 1988, Betty Davis had already been in seclusion for several years. Unbeknownst to me, she was living just forty-five minutes away in Homestead, Pennsylvania. I was not introduced to Betty's music until 2007 at the time of her initial reissues from Light In The Attic Records (LITA). My dearest friend and record shopping companion called me on the phone and insisted I come over right away to hear something. When I arrived, my friend played a short teaser clip of Betty's song, "If I'm In Luck I Might Get Picked Up" (1973), on his computer through LITA's website. I was gripped by her vocal attack and her unique blend of blues, funk, and rock. "What *is* this?" I asked. Like many others, my friend was summoned solely by Betty's audacious image while exploring LITA's online catalogue of reissued records. Once he heard the label's teaser clip of the first track on her debut album, he then summoned me. Without the LP in our possession, and without any tracks existing on the two-year-old YouTube video sharing website, all we had was the record label's online blurb:

One can hardly imagine the genre-busting, culture-crossing musical magic of Outkast, Prince, Erykah Badu, Rick James, The Roots, or even the early Red Hot Chili Peppers without the influence of R&B pioneer Betty Davis. Her style of raw and revelatory punk-funk defies any notions that women can't be visionaries in the worlds of rock and pop. ("Betty Davis" 2007)

I was a huge fan of quite literally every artist LITA mentioned in their blurb on Betty, and yet I had never heard of her. I had spent almost every day buying records for the past two years, and yet never came across her albums. I became intrigued by the practice of reissue and the *idea* of an obscure artist. The thought of buying a newly reissued record never ran across my mind before. For one thing, they were too expensive, and most of the stores I shopped at strictly sold used records. But more importantly, I became enthralled with the hunt for discovering new material on my own—"digging," as the culture refers to it. I was content—grateful even—to find what I could in my local brick and mortar stores. I had never bought a record online or explored the digital world of record collecting until I was made aware of more rare and obscure music from reissue labels like LITA. When I got back home after being summoned by my friend, I purchased my first record online—my first reissued record—*Betty Davis*.

When I received the record in the mail, I was surprised to learn from Oliver Wang's extensive liner notes that Betty was living in Homestead, Pennsylvania, right outside of Pittsburgh, for quite some time. I quickly bought Betty's second album from LITA, *They Say I'm Different* (1974), which only deepened my appreciation and fascination for the reissued artist. Like many Pittsburghers, I attempted to confirm Betty's local presence online but found nothing. Betty remained an enigma to me as I moved away from Pittsburgh in 2008. Her music was a crucial component to my city soundtrack when I briefly lived in New York City and then moved to Chicago. I wrote my first academic paper on Betty Davis in 2009 as an undergraduate majoring in Cultural Studies at Columbia College, fascinated by what seemed to be her totally unique style that refuted comparisons or contemporaries: "Betty's music was an act of solidarity against the traditional notions of femininity and blackness. People have labeled her as Afro Glam or as early punk, but the idea of labeling Betty Davis as one singular entity is much too restrictive for an artist like herself." Little did I know how true my initial waxing's on Betty Davis actually were, or that I would soon begin a close, personal relationship with her that would go on to change both of our lives.

When I entered the Department of Music's PhD program in ethnomusicology at The University of Pittsburgh in 2014, I used Betty Davis' music as a case study to talk about gender, race, and sexuality politics in the music industry the first chance I got. In fall of 2015, as a Teaching Assistant for Dr. Shalini Ayyagari's Introduction to World Music course, I gave my first scholarly lecture on Betty Davis titled "Betty Davis: A Case Study on Genre, Gender, Race and Sexuality." Through this lecture, I introduced Betty to a host of college students, drawing connections from our previous classes on the Delta Blues, the Great Migration, and genre formation, as well as drawing new conclusions about musical hybridity and the performing of erotics.

During my time as a Teaching Assistant (2015-2017), I quickly realized that my millennial students tended to understand and identify the notion of modern feminism in popular music as something that was invented by Beyoncé.¹ Through music streaming services and social media, their relationship to musical performers was more personal and curated than ever before and was undeniably saturated with explicit and unapologetic sexual content. These students came of age

¹ In 2014, Beyoncé performed in front of a screen emblazoned with 'FEMINIST' in giant wording during her *Mrs. Carter* world tour and to a bigger audience at the MTV VMAs.

during the time of mega mainstream women pop stars, many of whom are women of color and/or queer/non-binary identified individuals (e.g. Beyoncé, Nicki Minaj, Lady Gaga, Miley Cyrus, and Rhianna). These mega pop stars have normalized a type of unapologetic, aggressive and often androgynous performance style that continues to reconfigure prevailing ideas about femininity, Blackness, and erotics (Lee 2010; Wong 2015). My students were hard to shock, to say the very least. However, upon seeing and hearing Betty Davis in class they were immediately animated with emotion—running the spectrum from embarrassment to shock. Betty began to make appearances in the student’s final semester project—a themed digital mixtape complete with liner notes (designed by Dr. Ayyagari). Suddenly, only having just been introduced to her music, students started adding Betty Davis to their imagined lineage of feminist pop music. It was clear to me that Betty Davis offered something unique in the way of studying popular music at the intersection of genre, race, gender and sexuality. She was a relatively obscure artist whose sound, look, and message easily allowed students to draw connections to present day cultural politics. She was historical and relevant and, when I began lecturing on her, still very much a mystery.

Dr. Ayyagari, who is also a documentary filmmaker, informed me in the fall of 2015 that she had recently learned of an upcoming documentary project on Betty Davis while she was attending a documentary film conference in the UK. Upon hearing this news, I took to the internet and found an Indiegogo campaign that was created by British filmmaker, Phil Cox, and American producer, Damon Smith, to help fund their independent documentary about Betty Davis (“NASTY GAL The Many Lives of Funk Queen Betty Davis” n.d.). After donating a small amount of money, I wrote a message to the production team to convey my excitement about the film and tell them about the overwhelmingly positive reaction Betty incited from the college students that I taught. I was soon contacted via email by Cox who, intrigued by the notion of Betty being taught at a University, asked if I would be interested in giving a public lecture that he could film. I enthusiastically agreed. I had already given a handful of such lectures on Betty at Pitt and I was eager to stretch my newly honed public intellectual skills and support the film project in any way that I could.

I first met Cox when he visited Pittsburgh in May of 2016 to continue work on his film, facilitated by Dr. Ayyagari. Upon our introduction, at his behest, I agreed to not only provide a public lecture on Betty that he could film, but also help assist him with various tasks while he stayed in Pittsburgh to film promotional material. As his local connection, I drove him around to

meet and interview various Pittsburgh musicians, scholars, and activists who were Betty Davis fans. Many of the individuals Cox had already arranged to meet through his own work with the support and guidance of Christiane Leach, Artist Relations Coordinator at The Greater Pittsburgh Arts Council, but I also suggested several individuals from my own involvement and knowledge in the local music and DJ community.

I prepared an hour-length lecture with an accompanying PowerPoint and made a Facebook event invitation to promote the public lecture which would take place in the Department of Music at The University of Pittsburgh. On the day of the event, the Music Building room where the lecture took place was filled to capacity with all the participants giving their permission to be filmed. After giving the lecture in front of Cox's active camera work, the audience and myself engaged in a lively discussion.

Cox's time in Pittsburgh was coming to an end. He had filmed my public lecture (which, in the end, would not be used in the film) and was preparing to head back to London to begin the editing process. A day or two before he was scheduled to leave he simply asked me, "Would you like to meet her?" Shocked, I said yes, and was told when, where and how to do so. This dissertation is the result of that meeting.

1.0 “Hangin’ Out”: Introduction

I first met Betty Davis on May 16, 2016. I knew nothing about how my first encounter with her would transpire or what its outcome might be. All I knew was that I would be meeting Betty, with Phil Cox as our chaperon, and that I would be driving her to lunch in my car. Cox emphasized Betty’s infamous reclusive behavior to me beforehand. He warned me not to engage with her too directly, to avoid physical contact, and, above all else, to avoid discussions about her music. From everything I had learned over the years about Betty through interviews and liner notes, Cox’s litany of “do’s and don’ts,” gave me reason to believe that this visit would be a one-time event that I would cherish forever.

While I found Cox’s instructions a bit odd, I was not about to roll the dice during this encounter and risk offending or disturbing an artist who I respected, and who was now well known for her privacy. However, I knew if we would be in the car together we would need some background music, and I was not about to fiddle around with my phone while driving such a precious passenger. Cox previously told me that while Betty does not have a cell phone or computer, she does still enjoy listening to CDs with her small CD player. Besides hearing music on television programs, CDs were Betty’s only (and preferred) media format for listening to music. A mix CD, I thought, was an elegant solution for the established guidelines—it could simply be on in the background without any hassle, and if the lunch went well I could offer it to Betty as a gift. So, the night before our scheduled meeting I meticulously curated a mix CD that chronicled some of my favorite blues, R&B, soul, funk and rock music. I chose songs that moved me and songs that, I hoped, would move Betty. I was proud of the end result and felt it worthy to serve as Betty’s driving soundtrack for the day.

On the morning of our scheduled lunch I was overcome by a strange feeling that was a mixture of overwhelming excitement and crippling anxiety. I arrived at the address I was given in Homestead where she and Cox were waiting for me. In honor of the occasion, I adorned myself with my most treasured piece of jewelry, a hand carved pendent that my grandfather made in art school in the 1950s. After he passed, my grandmother gave it to me, and I attached it to a long piece of black leather so I could wear it as a necklace. It was extremely special to me and wielded tremendous power. I rarely wore it out as it was sentimental (and quite heavy), but I knew this

occasion called for a special statement piece. As I anxiously waited outside my car for Cox and Betty to come down from her apartment, I held the pendant in my hand trying to calm my nerves. Finally, the door to the apartment building opened and out came a lovely older lady with a small but mighty afro hairdo, clutching her purse as she gracefully walked towards me. I was in awe of her presence and stumbled in my mind for the appropriate words to greet her with. As she approached me, her eyes locked in on my necklace. Her head tilted slightly, and her eyes squinted. Before Cox could make an introduction, Betty reached out and grabbed my pendant in her hand. While admiring it, and without looking at me, she simply said, “What is this?” A long-time admirer of handcrafted jewelry herself, Betty was quite pleased with my necklace, and enjoyed hearing its origin story. “It’s very beautiful,” she said. And, just like that, our first encounter began.

Up until that moment, I had planned on simply having the music on in the background without drawing attention to the CD. However, I was feeling confident from our connection over my necklace and was emboldened to tell Betty that I made a mix CD for us to listen to on our drive. Betty, who was seated in the front next to me, seemed content enough with my announcement. “Ok,” she said. And we drove off. During the first ten or so minutes of our drive we were accompanied by Big Mama Thornton, Muddy Waters, Howlin’ Wolf and Chuck Berry. Although I did not identify it as such then, it was our first among many experiences of shared listening. Once we got to the sixth song, we really made progress. I included a live version of Etta James covering a Jimmy Reed song, in 1964, called “Baby, What You Want Me To Do?” Before the first verse ended, Betty broke her silence and said, “That’s a Jimmy Reed tune, isn’t it?” To which I replied, “Yes, it is.” She smiled and began to tap her aged fingers lightly on her thigh. In that moment, it felt as if Betty and I were alone in the car, in sync, listening to music that moved us. A few more songs in we arrived at The Coaster’s “Down In Mexico” (1957) and to my absolute amazement, Betty began singing along softly. I took her voice as invitation to join in and the two of us—only fifteen minutes into our first encounter—were singing together. After our impromptu sing-along Betty said, “You have great taste in music.” “Thank you,” I replied.

The momentum we built in the car from listening to music carried over into our lunch, where the conversation shifted toward current artists. Over Vietnamese food, Betty asked me if I had seen *Lemonade*, Beyoncé’s 2016 visual album, which had just recently been released. I told Betty that I had. “I don’t understand why she would name her album *Lemonade*,” she questioned. I then told Betty that, as I understood it, the title *Lemonade* was a metaphor for overcoming the

systematic struggles of Black womanhood and celebrating the healing power of Black love.² “I can show it to you if you like,” I offered. She seemed intrigued but did not respond. During lunch she also asked if I watched popular singing competition shows like *American Idol* and *The Voice*. I explained to her that I used to watch *American Idol* years ago when it first came out, but that I had not watched any type of program like that in many years. “Well, that’s probably good, because it’s very right-wing,” she responded. I was fascinated by this critique. “How so?” I inquired. “Well, it’s very conservative, the singers have no control over what songs they sing, and even when they do R&B it’s very pop,” she explained. Slowly and profoundly, and always in relation to music, Betty began revealing herself to me.

Lunch ended and we returned back to the car. Betty resumed her intentional silence, listening to where we left off on the CD. When the song “Sure As Sin” (1972) came on by Candi Staton, she asked, “Who is this?” “Candi Staton,” I replied. Without skipping a beat, and with more of a humorous inflection than I had heard in her voice all day, she asked, “Is she related to *Dakota* Staton?” making sure to stress the first name. I was elated. Dakota Staton was one of my all-time favorite jazz vocalists. Originally from The Hill District neighborhood of Pittsburgh, I first heard Dakota Staton when I purchased her 1957 album, *The Late, Late Show*, at a used record store and learned about her Pittsburgh roots from the liner notes. Betty seemed quite pleased that I not only knew of Dakota Staton, but that I also knew she was from Pittsburgh.

When we arrived back to her apartment building, Betty instructed Cox and I to “come up.” I stealthily removed the CD from my car stereo and slipped it in my purse. Once in her apartment, Betty instructed me to sit at her kitchen table. I obliged. I handed the CD to Betty and told her that I would like her to have it; that I made it for her. She walked it over to her bedroom where I would later learn she kept her CD player and CD collection—a musical shrine so to speak. She then sat down next to me and began writing her name and number on a small piece of paper. She handed it to me and said, “Call me sometime.” Two weeks later, we met for our second lunch (this time without a chaperon).

Seeing as how successful the first mix CD was, I decided to greet Betty at our second meeting with yet another mix CD, this time consisting of all non-American artists. She was happy

² Since Beyoncé’s *Lemonade* was released in 2016, it has become the subject of multiple scholarly studies across a vast range of fields and disciplines (Robinson 2016; Lordi 2016b; Thomas 2018; Harper 2019; Kehrer 2019; Olutola 2019).

to learn I had come with more music, and was particularly fond of Ethiopian musician, Mulatu Astatke, who she said reminded her of Miles Davis. Once at lunch, Betty began asking me questions about myself: Where is my family from? What do I do for work? What is my love life like? Nothing was off limits. Betty was intrigued to learn that I was studying ethnomusicology and that I had taught undergraduate college students about her music. “That’s incredible,” she said when I informed her about her appearances in many of their final mixtape projects. It was during this lunch that I first laid out my interests and activities as a music scholar. It was also during this lunch, propelled by our international soundtrack, that Betty told me she traveled to Japan and performed with a jazz fusion band named Arakawa in the early 1980s.³ She also told me about her love of traditional Indian music and Indigenous music. It was clear to me that while Betty had been retired from the music industry for forty years, music was still an essential aspect of her existence and crucial to her identity.

During the first year of our relationship, I showed her *Lemonade* on my computer, as I suggested during our very first lunch, and also introduced her to YouTube for the first time—I asked her to name any musician whose video she would like to watch and, without hesitation, she responded, “Muddy Waters,”—and we dove right in. Saturdays, in the late morning, quickly became our standard visiting time. Betty would often call me the night before our scheduled meeting to tell me what she had planned for us to listen to, or to request I bring her a CD of something she had in mind. I eventually shared with Betty some of the contemporary artists that I found particularly interesting at the time, including Cuban-French duo Ibeyi’s debut self-titled album (2015) and LA-based hip hop fusion artist Anderson .Paak’s second album *Malibu* (2016). Betty loved Ibeyi and insisted I buy her the actual CD—a burned copy would not do. When I played Anderson .Paak’s *Malibu* album for her she was quite literally mesmerized by the drumming and could not get over how “rhythmic” she thought it was. One day she insisted I play the same song five times in a row. Despite not having a computer or accessing the internet, Betty still managed to introduce me to new music from her CD collection, from her memories of individuals that she knew previously, or from artists she saw on television. She had a vast

³ This information is still largely undocumented and only known by her small inner-circle of confidants. Betty’s travels to Japan and her collaboration with Arakawa are outside the scope of this study. However, through this research and my connection with Saori Kappus, née Asaba (one of Betty’s backup singers while in Japan) I have unearthed a partial live recording of Betty in Japan, as well as archival newspaper advertisements and photography. It is my intention to include this information in a more in-depth biography project on Betty in the near future.

knowledge of Japanese composers and musicians that she met or learned of while living and performing in Japan, including Makoto Yano, Shimoda Itsuro, Shigeru Umebayashi, and Ryuichi Sakamoto.

Betty and I developed a rhythm and a timing that we both understood. After setting the precedent with my two mix CDs, it was understood that we would actively listen to music in the car on our way to and from lunch, as well as in her apartment while we drank tea. Betty rarely spoke during our car rides unless to comment on the song after it was over, or to tell me to turn up the volume or play the song over again (which she often did). Sharing and listening to music together still remains the cornerstone of our relationship. Her trust in me as a music scholar stems from her recognition of my musical knowledge and appreciation. Over the past four years, Betty and I have continued to spend time together, build our friendship, share music, and establish an ethnographic rapport that led us into the recording studio together (see Chapter 8).

1.1 Scope

In 2007, the raw and unapologetic music of Betty Davis was reissued on Seattle-based Light In The Attic Records to a wave of critical acclaim.⁴ The reemergence of Betty's first two studio albums (*Betty Davis* 1973; *They Say I'm Different* 1974)—along with previously unreleased and enhanced archival materials—cemented the pioneer status of the singer, songwriter and producer who was once ridiculed and boycotted for her sexually dominant lyrics and physically suggestive live performances. Due to marked shifts in Black expressive culture, mainstream feminism, and the socio-political context within the music industry, Betty Davis is now celebrated as an artistic innovator and progressive social figure whose musical ideas and aesthetics resonate

⁴ Quotes from album reviews include the following: "If you were to draw a diagram of funk music in the early 70s, Betty Davis would be dead center" (Greenman 2007: 32); "Her self-titled 1973 debut [is] a groundbreaking slab of funk that infused soul, sex, and hard rock like the best Sly or Funkadelic disc, albeit from a female perspective" (Klein 2007); "Funky Diva Betty Davis' *Nasty Gal* persona had people picketing her concerts in the '70s. As a recent reissue proves, those poor folks were clearly missing the musical brilliance behind the trashy talk" (Budofsky 2010: 93); "Incalculably ahead of her time and influential, Betty Davis will most likely top the list of what's remembered 100 years from now" (Hanni 2010); "Her work anticipated genre-blending artists like Erykah Badu and Prince and the unapologetic sexuality of '80s Madonna and Janet Jackson, and places her alongside Patti LaBelle and P-Funk in terms of intergalactic, life-affirming, and funky celebrations of blackness" (Lambert 2016).

loudly in mainstream popular music. Light In The Attic Records went on to reissue Betty's third studio album (*Nasty Gal* 1975) in 2009, as well as a previously unreleased album called *Is It Love Or Desire* (1976). With intrigue and interest around Betty continuing to grow in the following years, Light In The Attic put out an album (*Betty Davis: The Columbia Years 1968-1969*) of previously unreleased (and since mythologized) sessions tapes in 2016 that were originally produced as demos for Columbia Records by her then-husband Miles Davis, and featured an ensemble of legendary musicians including Herbie Hancock, Billy Cox (Band of Gypsys), John McLaughlin, Mitch Mitchell (Jimi Hendrix Experience), Wayne Shorter, Larry Young, and Hugh Masakela.

The following year, a feature-length documentary film, entitled *Betty – They Say I'm Different* (Cox 2017) premiered to international audiences and became the first film to represent Betty Davis as a collaborative research subject. The film, on which I am credited as Associate Producer, screened to international audiences and used a prescribed narrative lens to extend the public's access to Betty Davis as a cultural and musical figure.⁵ In 2018, at the U.S. premier of the film, I became aware of Black Women Rock, an organization established in 2004 by Detroit-based poet and performance artist Jessica Care Moore. Black Women Rock is a decentralized coalition of Black women musicians and artists that pay homage to Betty Davis through their own performance practices and everyday lives. They call themselves Daughters of Betty. As a dynamic alliance built on collaborate performance, networking, and mutual support, they actively work to reclaim Black women's role in the history of rock music.

1.2 Research Questions

Though widely acknowledged by critics as being “ahead of her time,” Betty's newfound popularity ironically came well *after* her time on the stage, when the retired singer was then in her mid-sixties. This process, as well as Betty's broader transformation into a musical hero and niche cultural icon, is one of the core issues around which this study is focused. To do so, this dissertation

⁵ *Betty – They Say I'm Different* (Cox 2017) has been screened to audiences throughout the world and is, at the time of this writing, available to rent on Amazon Prime.

addresses a number of key questions that include the following: How did Betty's recent popularity signal not only a marked shift in the musical taste of certain audiences, but point to the important role that independent, reissue record labels now play in reconfiguring both the accepted and expected boundaries of musical genres, as well as the manner in which artists are valued? What are the shifts that took place in popular music, Black expressive culture, and mainstream feminism in order for Betty to achieve pioneer status? How does Betty fit into the blues women legacy and update it for modern consumption? How has Betty's collaboration with various types of cultural production highlighted important ideas about the role of public intellectuals, like myself, in the public representation of culture, music, race and gender in the United States, and the struggles over the meanings of those representations? How did Betty's sound, look, and message circulate within a tradition of Black feminist performance, and how did that sound, look, and message galvanize future generations of Black women performers? How can Betty's story illuminate the ongoing resistance to, and alienation of unconventional, eccentric Black women who go against the grain within the music industry? And, finally, how has Betty navigated her recent success and pioneer status and re-emerged as an artistic agent in the twenty-first century?

1.3 Aims

Through a combination of historical analysis and four years of ethnographic research conducted with Betty Davis, I analyze Betty's life in music in order to interrogate the cultural work of reissuing, representing and reclaiming a previously marginalized artist for modern day consumption. My work aims to create a dialectical analysis between the cultural and industrial (music industry) forces that largely suppressed Betty during her heyday (1968-1979) and the curatorial and performance practices that attempt to re-package Betty in the present day. By exploring the critical interplay between content and context, as well as texts and audiences, this study also identifies two different interpretive communities that are crucial to Betty's reemergence: (1) the relatively cloistered community of record collecting, and (2) the Black Women Rock coalition. I am particularly interested in how these interpretive communities are enabled by different forms of cultural production that give them access to the past and, in the process, allows them to reconstruct meaning and value in the present. Furthermore, this study examines the

documentary film in which I was partly involved, and the live pre- and post-film events that I helped to organize over the span of three years—including panels, public lectures, audience discussions, DJ dance parties, and a concert that reunited Betty’s old band, Funk House, with Black and brown women vocalists from Pittsburgh who sang Betty’s songs. These events, along with the film, have helped to produce new and sometimes competing narratives about Betty’s life and career that merit investigation and scholarly attention. Therefore, through a comparative analysis of reissued records, documentary film, and Black feminist performance, this study will critically examine how certain interpretive communities are enabled by these forms of cultural production to access the past and, in the process, reconstruct meaning and value in the present.

In the wake of Betty Davis’ reemergence in popular culture, the public now knows several general details about her: (1) she was born in the South and was inspired by the blues; (2) she was a model and fashionista; (3) she was married to Miles Davis and helped to usher in his electric phase; (4) she was “ahead of her time” (a phrase I will unpack and work to dismantle throughout this study); and (5) she “disappeared” from the music industry in the early 1980s (a term I will also unpack and work to dismantle throughout this study). However, these general details about her life’s trajectory have yet to be crystallized into an illustrative study. Furthermore, they have yet to be put into dialogue with each other in a way that recognizes and privileges the intentionality and innovation of Betty’s choices (in her career and her personal life) as a Black woman musician working within (and updating) the blues women legacy.

In recent years, Betty Davis has been revered as a progressive musical figure. While Betty has garnered considerable popular literary criticism and media attention since her 2007 reissues, those who have written about and attempt to represent her often provide a narrow framework for interpreting such a complex and dynamic artist or choose to focus on alluring biographical details of her life, namely—her marriage to Miles Davis and her friendship with Jimi Hendrix.⁶ The story of Betty Davis is not without precedent and marks an interesting endpoint for analyzing a much older story of how Black women musicians—particularly singers—were framed within, and

⁶ In the last decade, there has also been expansive, thought-provoking writing on Betty Davis from a handful of women scholars (Mahon 2011; Greene 2013; Keyes 2013; Lordi 2018; Proctor 2018). Most recently, Dr. Maureen Mahon published a book in 2020 entitled *Black Diamond Queens: African American Women and Rock and Roll*, which features a chapter on Betty Davis. Published and released in October of 2020, I was too late in the editing process to engage with the book directly in this dissertation, but I am eager to read it.

shaped by, the music industry through the constitution of soul and funk as both musical genres and marketable commodities in American popular culture.⁷

In telling Betty's part of this story, I place her into the long lineage of blues women and their Black feminist legacies that inform how and why she became a neglected artist in the male-dominated canon of soul and funk during the 1970s. My study also more accurately incorporates Betty into the project of fusion that changed the international music landscape in the late 1960s. However, my principal goal in analyzing the music of Betty Davis as a case study is to further the type of Black feminist-indebted critique that does not merely insert women's artistic contributions into male-dominated expressive traditions, but also advances new modes of critical engagement with those traditions (Carby 1990, 1992; Davis 1998; Keyes 2000, 2004, 2013; Kernodle 2004, 2014; Brooks 2006, 2008; Wald 2007; Brown 2008; Mahon 2011, 2020; Greene 2013; Royster 2013a, 2013b; Lordi 2013, 2016a, 2016b, 2018, 2020). Therefore, Betty Davis' career provides a framework through which we can access the past and, in the process, create newly informed meaning and value about genre, gender, race, and sexuality in the present—for the purpose of creating more liberated and inclusive futures. In doing so, I stake the claim that Betty Davis is an organic intellectual who produced a visionary catalogue of avant-garde popular music worthy of academic study.

The term "organic intellectual" was coined by Antonio Gramsci who posited that every social group creates one or more "strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields" (1971: 5). The construction of organic intellectuals, according to Gramsci, depends on the accumulation of common sense (or, taken-for-granted knowledge) and the ability to represent the interest of one's own group. By claiming Betty Davis as an organic intellectual, I do so through

⁷ While Betty Davis is a unique example of reissue in popular culture, other Black women R&B singers have experienced similar post-career success via reissue. Most notable among them are Betty Harris and Jackie Shane. Betty Harris' music was selectively curated for a reissue compilation on Soul Jazz Records (UK) in 2016—*The Lost Queen of New Orleans Soul*—and was marketed as southern soul royalty decades after her studio recordings failed to chart and reach commercial audiences. She has since enjoyed a return to the stage. Jackie Shane's music was selectively curated for a reissue compilation on The Numero Group (Chicago) in 2017—*Any Other Way*—and was marketed as a "Transgender Soul Pioneer" (Ugwu 2017) decades after her gender identity led to her disillusionment with the music industry. While Shane did not identify as "trans" or "transgendered" during her early musical career—most likely because the term was not yet used to describe gender identity—her voice and look were distinctly feminine, causing audiences members to question her gender during live performances and in written review. Shane left the music industry in the early 1970s and continued to identify and live as a woman until her death on February 21, 2019. Before Shane passed, she enjoyed a Grammy Nomination for Best Historical Album in 2018.

the lens of Black feminist thought that reclaims Black women's knowledge as intellectual (Davis 1998; Collins 2000; Lordi 2013). More specifically, I am developing the term through "its expression in alternative institutional locations and among women who are not commonly perceived as intellectuals" (Collins 2000: 17). Musicians constitute a large group from which Black women intellectuals have emerged and the music of blues singers of the 1920s and 1930s has long been seen as an important site for this intellectual tradition (Carby 1990, 1992; Hunter 1997; Davis 1998; Harrison 2006; Lordi 2013). Although she was formally unaffiliated with feminism and the other social movements of her time, Betty communicated (via song lyrics and interviews), documented (via audio recordings and album covers) and performed (via live shows) highly transgressive and influential ideas about sexual autonomy and creative agency that aligned with the interests of both Black women and Black feminist thought. Therefore, I aim to locate the music of Betty Davis as a dynamic site of Black women's intellectual production, in the same tradition as the blues women of the 1920s and 1930s, by analyzing the cultural work, or "cultural logic" (Lordi 2020: 10), that Betty projected through an embrace of the erotic (Lorde 1984; Lee 2010; Mahon 2011; Greene 2013; Keyes 2013; Horton-Stallings 2015; Wong 2015).

More than any group, Betty Davis represented the unique interests of unconventional, eccentric Black women performers. Thus, I claim Betty Davis is what I will call an *erotic intellectual* who communicated, documented and performed a pleasure-centered poetics of artistic power that envisioned more liberated and inclusive audiences. My usage of the term "erotic" resonates with Audre Lorde's (1984) theory of the erotic as a vital source of information and power. However, I aim to extend the notion of erotic power and erotic agency (specifically in the form of performance) by engaging with LaMonda Horton-Stallings understanding of erotic space, which "looks at the constructions of Black female subjectivities cognizant of autonomous sexual desires. (And ask) how do Black women use culture to explore sexual desire that is spiritual, intellectual, physical, emotional, and fluid so as to avoid splits or binaries that can freeze Black women's radical sexual subjectivities?" (2007: 1).

Deborah Wong defines erotics as "the place where the affective and the structural come together and where corporeal control is felt and made visible" (2015: 179). Betty Davis made erotics audible and visible through her vocality, textuality, and physicality. While she was less forthcoming about her thoughts on sex, sexuality, sexual orientation, and musical sexiness during this research process (Tucker 2002), her discography boldly addressed these issues in avant-garde

ways which continue to resonant with each passing decade. Thus, this study regards erotics as important and answers Wong's (2015) call for ethnomusicology to engage more directly with music and erotics. As Wong explained, "music is a key sphere where normativities are asserted and maintained" (2015: 181). Betty Davis' music, like the music of the classic blues women, actively worked against those "normativities" and, thus, worked to queer dominant narratives, systems, and spaces within the music industry and society at large (see Chapter 2). Therefore, this study aims to address the interpretive gaps in ethnomusicological work on gender and sexuality by focusing on heteronormativity and how exceptional individuals absorb, resist, and reclaim such structural paradigms. In doing so, I hope to "queer ethnomusicology in critically useful ways" (Wong 2015: 181).

My term *erotic intellectual* is inspired by the interplay between "organic intellectuals" (as originally theorized by Antonio Gramsci and interpreted through the lens of Black feminist thought), Shayne Lee's term "erotic revolutionaries," which she uses to label those Black women performers who, throughout history, "explode the bourgeois decorum of their eras and negotiate new frontiers of female sexuality" (2010: 7), and Deborah Wong's call to ethnomusicologists to listen for erotics (2015). Wong asserts that "musicked erotics are a key means for taking the body to a place it hasn't yet arrived" (2015: 185). Thus, an *erotic intellectual* performs and affirms a pleasure-centered "cultural logic" that has not yet been absorbed as normative in their respective societies and era's. In doing so, they project and envision more liberated and inclusive audiences.

1.4 Collaborative Methodologies

1.4.1 Positionality

This study has evolved out of my personal relationship with Betty Davis and the roles I have played, and continue to play, in both her life and the interactive network that has formed around her in recent years. The more I engaged with Betty and the various projects that were being formulated around her, the more I gained access and insight into her life. While this study is not fully entwined in the "converging paths of two professional women"—the musician research

subject and the ethnomusicologist—as Dr. Stephanie Shonekan's (2003: 9) masterful dissertation on the life of Soprano Camilla Williams is, I do set out to locate myself in Betty's life and provide commentary on the process. Thus, this study is structured around a type of hybrid auto/biographical method, which Shonekan describes as a method that “embraces the concept of ‘reflexivity,’ bringing into the study and interpretation of the data the individual who makes these important decisions – the researcher” (ibid.: 29). However, locating myself in this study first requires a discussion about my positionality as a young, white woman scholar researching, documenting and subsequently representing Black music.

Ethnomusicologists Ronald Radano and Phillip Bohlman began their edited volume *Music and the Racial Imagination* by stating, “we seek to engage music’s place within history, within politics, within the realm of ideas, all toward *giving some semblance of voice* to those silenced by racism and prejudice” (2000: xiii; italics mine). While “giving voice” to those who have been ostensibly “silenced” is a laudable goal, and undoubtedly an important function of ethnography, I want to complicate the idea that privileged individuals (i.e. white researchers) allow the silenced individuals (i.e. Black research subjects) to “speak” through their production of scholarship. I do not locate myself within Black music research with the aim of “giving” voice or agency to those who already have it. My goal is to carve out discursive space for those voices to resonate. Here, I am taking a direct cue from Emily Lordi who prioritizes her critical methodology with a search for resonance that allows the affect of Black cultural expression to be “resounded” into the collective social body (2013: 6). The search for resonance turns away from treating entire musical genres (like the blues or funk) as “metaphors for culturally specific values like community,” (or, I would add, “identity”) and instead, focuses on the accounts of individual performers in order to “read the nuances of vocal and textual practice” that standard approaches often miss (ibid.: 8).

I do not claim to speak for Betty Davis, or any other participants in this study. It is with great humility that I offer myself and my interpretation of Betty's story as the ethnographic basis of this study. So, while I have been privileged to gain intimate knowledge of Betty's genuine human nature and her complex character, I am not attempting to translate all of that into this study. My own cultural and social barriers, coupled with Betty's desire for privacy, prohibit me from doing so in this venue. Rather, I work to translate and contextualize the network of people who helped to shape and reshape Betty's career, and with whom I have a unique set of relationships with.

This dynamic raises its own set of concerns, however, due to the potentially problematic nature of conducting research on someone with whom you have a relationship as a friend, or a fan, and it gave me considerable pause when deciding on my dissertation topic. Having entered graduate school with the intention of studying soul music, I was already fully aware of the racial power dynamics involved in ethnographic representation. But weighing the ethics of this particular situation was admittedly daunting. Could I produce meaningful scholarship while honoring Betty's privacy? Would these ethical concerns negatively impact the work? Would my friendship with Betty delegitimize the study in the eyes of other academics? I have not sidestepped any of these questions but, in the end, I found comfort in an ethnographic process that was organically developing and the collaborative network that was being built around it. Above all else, maintaining Betty's trust, and being as transparent as possible with all participants involved, was paramount to this endeavor.

1.4.2 Ethnographic Approach

This study is a historical, biographical, and dialectical ethnography. It is historical in that it deals largely with artists and popular music genres whose heyday is located in the past. To do justice to the subject matter, I have done extensive historical and archival research to uncover primary sources on Betty Davis from the 1950s to the 1980s. Here, I am indebted to the work of Gayle Wald who understands music/media archives as being constituted by "affect as well as performance" (2015: 8). This study understands reissue catalogues (along with oral history and memories) as archives, both of a particular time and place and of future formations. This turn towards affect in archival thought and practice allows my methodological approach to "go beyond accounts of representation" (ibid.) and focus instead on cultural performances in the audiovisual construction and negotiation of genre, gender, race, and sexuality in the music industry.

This study is biographical in that it focuses on the role of the "exceptional individual in an expressive culture" (Shonekan 2003: 23). While this study is not a tell-all biography, it is most certainly an exclusive portrait of a performer and her impact on various forms of cultural production in both past and present formations. I include biographical detail about Betty in order to analyze how her life has affected her art, as well as the art of others, because I view it as inextricable from the musical details. Thus, the biographical scope of this study is structured

around Betty's musical life. Her personal and political life is, at times, interwoven but I make it a point to not analyze or document that which does not directly relate to her musical life, or the musical life of others. Throughout this study, I make the case that Betty was, and is, a modern blues woman who created music from her cultural memory and embodied experience. By cultural memory, I refer to “those objects, rituals, persons, and places where memory is crystallized and embodied” (Krouse-Dismukes 2008: 193). Focusing on the body and how it enacts techniques of transmission, I also understand cultural memory as performance studies scholar Diana Taylor does, as “a practice, an act of imagination and interconnection” (2003: 82). Because of this fundamental fact, Betty's life and Betty's music have never been separate.

While I claim that Betty's music is intentional and inventive, and I also argue that she is a visionary—an *erotic intellectual*—I locate her within a continuum of Black women musician's that began in its modern conception with the blues women of the “race records” era and continues to be charged and updated with Black Women Rock. Because while she is a unique individual with a distinct personality and, a distinct voice, her experience as an unconventional, eccentric Black woman musician is representative of a much larger story in the history of the music industry. Betty's experiences, therefore, highlight the historical, social, and political issues associated with Black women's participation and representation in the music industry, both past and present.

This study is dialectical in that it locates the re-emergence and recent success of Betty Davis in conversation with a past that is both mediated and continually refigured through different interpretive communities, texts, and practices. Those to which I devote attention in this project are (1) independent record labels and cultural practices tied to vinyl record collecting and curation, (2) documentary film production and representation, and (3) embodied acts of transference tied to Black feminist musicianship, including oral history, memory, and performance. More specifically, my three major case studies represent three crucial parts of this dialectical process: reissuing (Light In The Attic Records), representing (*Betty – They Say I'm Different*), and reclaiming (Black Women Rock).

1.4.3 Source Materials

The ethnographic elements of the study emerge first and foremost from my personal relationship and communications with Betty Davis, as well as my relationships and

communications with individuals from *Light In The Attic* records, the *Betty* film (Cox 2017), and *Black Women Rock*. Throughout this study, I present Betty's voice using only direct quotes when applicable to our personal conversations or her interviews conducted with other individuals. As I will explain throughout the study, Betty Davis is known for setting limitations along the lines of artistic control and personal production. Throughout this research and writing process, I have held in highest regard what Stephanie Shonekan exemplified in her dissertation on the life of Camilla Williams, that "research had to be adapted to the particular circumstances dictated by the specific situation they were examining" (2003: 68). I had to "maintain sensitivity and flexibility" (ibid.: 83) because, as with her music, Betty's relationships are also cultivated around her visceral feelings. Getting acclimated to being in the presence of Betty took time. It took me a while to become accustomed to her manner of speaking, the pace and tone of her voice, and to understand the way that she told stories and used symbols and metaphors. It took time to learn both her personal preferences and how to read her attitude on that given day, and how to navigate her willingness to talk about herself and the past.

Broadly speaking, Betty Davis does not enjoy being interviewed and she did not particularly enjoy our conversations being recorded. This is why, despite spending the last four years building and sharing knowledge with each other, we had minimal recorded interviews. She did not respond well when asked to fill in a timeline of events or answer direct questions about things like her artistic vision. Rather, she was much more open to telling stories and sharing memories that held significance for her. After our first recorded interview, which only lasted seventeen minutes before Betty insisted we stop, and I shut off the recorder, I realized she would have to dictate our conversations. Because of this, I utilized a "mosaic approach" (Shonekan 2003: 97) to interviewing where Betty's memory and present desires steered the direction and scope of our talks. I followed Betty's lead as she directed our conversations and, listening to her memories and experiences—as well as her thoughts and feelings—formed the basis of my interpretation of her musical story. Due to Betty's disinterest in being formally interviewed and recorded, most of our time together over the years has been spent casually conversing, listening to music, eating, and shopping (what Clifford Geertz might call "deep hanging out" [2000: 107-142]). While it often proved frustrating as a researcher, I was only able to start understanding her personality and life trajectory because of these non-traditional research-based activities and excursions. As a result, my fieldnotes were indispensable to this interpretive process.

The method of interviewing I developed with Betty was something I continued to utilize in my research. This was especially important to me when engaging with and writing about the Black women research subjects in this study. Their conversations guide the theoretical frameworks for interpreting and contextualizing their lives and careers. My decision to use blues women and Black feminism as analytical frameworks for interpreting Betty's music and career was a direct result of her continued emphasis on the blues in our conversations, especially in relation to her music-making practices. Similarly, my decision to discuss safe spaces and rehistoricization as analytical frameworks for interpreting Black Work Rock was a direct result of hearing and engaging in their conversations.

In addition to interviews and conversations with Betty Davis and members of Black Women Rock, I also interviewed and conversed with former musical collaborators, colleagues, and friends of Betty's; founders of independent labels that either specialize in or solely release reissues; music scholars and critics who have written liner notes for reissues; soul and funk DJs who incorporate archival media into their programming; the production team from the 2017 documentary film *Betty – They Say I'm Different*; local musicians who have recently worked with Betty's music; and Betty Davis fans (dating back to the 1970s to the present day).

Beyond conversation and formal interviews, many other sources make up the source material of my study, including:

1. *Primary sources from 1959-1983*, including school yearbooks and newsletters, published interviews, journal and magazine articles, album and concert reviews, advertisements, and music industry promotional materials.
2. *Audio recordings from 1923-2019*, including recordings from the classic blues women, Betty Davis, and associated performers.
3. *Reissued records from 2007-2016*, including reissued recordings from Betty Davis' catalogue.
4. *Paratextual reissue material from 2007-2016*, including liner notes, photography interviews, journal articles, album reviews, advertisements, and accompanying websites.
5. *Others personal interviews from 2003-2019*, including audio interviews and transcriptions of Betty Davis and other research participants in this study.

6. *Documentary film and other artistic representations from 2004-2019*, including the 2017 documentary film made about Betty Davis, as well as poetry, visual art, and performance art made around the subject of Betty Davis.
7. *Public group dialogue from 2017-2019*, including audience discussion's, public lectures, panels, and DJ dance parties.
8. *Personal effects from 1964-2019*, including record collections, posters, magazines, books, jewelry, clothing, and photography (including my own, Betty Davis', my interviewees, and those collaborative actors whom are invested in my research).
9. *Participatory observations from 2017-2019*, including my experience as Associate Producer of the 2017 documentary film *Betty – They Say I'm Different*, as well as my creative collaboration with Betty Davis as a singer on her 2019 song "A Little Bit Hot Tonight," which I discuss in Chapter 8.

1.4.4 Collaboration

All ethnography is collaborative by default, but my approach to ethnography “*deliberately and explicitly* emphasizes collaboration at every point in the ethnographic process, without veiling it—from project conceptualization, to fieldwork, and, especially, through the writing process” (Lassiter 2005: 15). Aside from the labor of writing, which was undertaken by myself, collaboration has been paramount to this study. In particular, the shared source materials from individuals in Betty’s inner circle were indispensable to this study and made the writing infinitely more comprehensive.

Due to my personal relationship with Betty, I was offered access (archival materials, fieldnotes, unpublished interviews, timelines, and contacts) that many others, including Damon Smith, John Ballon, Matt Sullivan, Joost Berger, Dr. Oliver Wang, Saori Kappus, Rudy Calvo, Mark Fallon, and Phil Cox, painstakingly gathered over the last two decades and through their own research, and via their own personal finances. I have also began sharing materials with this small inner circle of Betty collectors and confidants who have pooled resources together out of a deep admiration and a sense of preservation. We share materials and memories (amongst other things) in order to cross-reference our research with each other, working to build a more accurate timeline of events and promote a type of fact-checking. Not only do we share our ethnographic and archival

materials, but (most of us) also share a close personal relationship to Betty, which gives us all a sense of purpose to work in harmony together. I recognize these collaborators as co-intellectuals and, in many cases, co-researchers, who have made this ethnographic enterprise more fully realized.

The more Betty revealed herself to me—her memories and knowledge; her perspectives and preferences—the more comfortable and prepared I felt to interpret and document her life based on my experience and knowledge with her. Just as Betty revealed more of herself to me as time went on, so too did this project. The more I traveled—the more fans and friends and musical colleagues I talked too—the more the scope of the project expanded. The "field" developed organically depending on which form of cultural production I was engaging in, and which individual and/or collective I was engaging with at the moment. Events would lead to other events; meaningful relationships with individuals and organizations would lead to other meaningful relationships. Through my role as a representative of the film, I was introduced to individuals I would have never been able to meet otherwise. Many times, these individuals introduced themselves to me, including the audience members who testified about their experiences seeing Betty perform live in the 1970s. Of course, not all of the fieldwork developed organically. I knew early on that record collector culture and reissue labels were crucial components to understanding Betty's post-career success and tasked myself with connecting with those involved. As I wrote this dissertation, I aimed to integrate the diverse network of voices that have impacted Betty's life—both personally, including friends and colleagues—and from afar, including fans and collectors. Through this growing network, I have largely learned about Betty dialogically, which has greatly informed my writing.

1.5 Musical Analysis

This study provides an analysis of Betty Davis' complete discography, including all sixty-six songs that she wrote for others or recorded herself.⁸ I first documented the song and production

⁸ Out of these sixty-six songs, three have been composed by other musicians and recorded by Betty Davis ("I Love You So," 1964; "Politician Man," 1969; "Born On The Bayou," 1969), and two have been written by Betty Davis and

credits in chronological order from when the songs were first recorded. I then listened through Betty's entire discography in chronological order and transcribed all the lyrics (some were already available via liner notes or websites, but the majority were not). Once her discography was transcribed, I began my musical analysis by deploying what Emily Lordi refers to as a "presentist method of listening," which is "grounded in a moment-to-moment description of what is happening in the music" (2020: 11). Throughout this study, I use this mode of intentional listening to reflect the activity that Betty and I most frequently engage in, as well as the way in which Betty created music from the affective intensity of the present moment.⁹

In closely listening to her songs, I distinguished the following information:

1. *Tense*: how Betty locates herself (or those performing her music) in the song.
2. *Communication*: those to whom Betty is singing and directing her attention to.
3. *Participation*: those with whom Betty is singing.
4. *Theme*: the subject about which Betty is singing.

These analytical categories, like the theoretical frameworks of this study, were not prescribed from the onset of my musical analysis but rather developed organically based on commonalities that I heard in Betty's music and was able to pick up through this particular mode of listening. Through a comprehensive musical analysis of Betty Davis' discography along the lines of vocality, textuality, and physicality I set out to emphasize Betty's role as singer, songwriter, arranger, band-leader, and producer. I choose to focus my analysis on issues of vocality, textuality, and physicality, because they speak to the dialectic nature that shapes this study. Betty's vocality, textuality, and physicality were what caused her marginalization in the 1970s and are also the reason for her newfound praise and success as a pioneer in the twenty-first century.

recorded by other musicians ("Uptown To Harlem," The Chambers Brothers, 1967; "A Little Bit Hot Tonight," Danielle Maggio, 2019).

⁹ By privileging the term affect, I am referring to an incubated space for emotional intensity, where the individual can resonate in the collective social body. This aim reflects what Gayle Wald has referred to as "a shift in humanities scholarship toward the felt dimensions of cultural production and reception and the emotional saturation of the political imagination" (2015: 8). Affect works in humanities that have shaped my thinking by privileging emotion as a fundamental role in scholarship and political activism, include Iton (2008), Gould (2009), and Muñoz (2009). Ethnomusicologist Andrew McGraw discusses affective intensity as it relates to the construction of "atmosphere" as an analytical concept: "[A]tmosphere refers to a shared sense of affective intensity and is described as occupying an immersive, resonant, and spherical spatiality, much like sound itself" (2016: 131).

In summary, using a mix of historical, analytical, participant-observation and applied methodologies, this study has assembled a multitude of media, memory, and experience that formulates my ethnography and actively rethinks the ways in which ethnographic methodologies are constructed through the act of doing research.

1.6 Theoretical Frameworks

This study is indebted to a long line of scholars of Black music and, specifically, who have challenged earlier approaches to such cultural analysis that sees Black music “as a monolithic and pathological Black experience” (Burnim and Maultsby 2006: 20). The academic field of Black music studies dates to the 1960s and is directly associated with the politics of the Black Power movement, and the initiation of Afrocentrism in the scholarly realm (ibid.: 19). Since then, Black music research has consistently produced scholarship that both expands the Black musical imagination and the intellectual territories of the discipline.¹⁰ Popular music offers an ideal site for examining the shifting identities and realities of “Blackness.” David Brackett’s work on genre and identity asserts that the Black American genre has constantly been shifting in response to, and in resistance to, the socioeconomic standing and conditions of Black citizens. Brackett uses soul music, as well as other forms of Black popular music, to articulate the “instability of social identities which, like genres, are subject to constant redefinition” (2005: 77). This interpretation allows one to understand forms of Black musical expression as existing on a spectrum of tradition,

¹⁰ Amiri Baraka’s seminal text, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (1963), places Black popular music within the context of American social history and offers a political economy view of Black American life as both artifact and entertainment; Portia K. Maultsby (1975) and Mellonee Burnim’s (1985) work on gospel music provides a uniquely ethnomusicological perspective on the study of gospel—one that embraces the socio-cultural content and technical analysis of African American music, as well as the economic forces that drive the production of African American music in the popular music industry; Paul Gilroy (1987, 1993) offers a Cultural Studies approach to explore the diasporic relationships among race, class, and nation, in order to see how the intertwined discourses of music and politics both destabilize and re-stabilize the meaning of “Blackness” within the dominant social structure; Guthrie P. Ramsey (2003) explores Black music as being shaped by ethnography, cultural memory, and identity, and privileges the role of authorial voice in scholarship in order to better understand Black music as shaped by communities through the shifting time and change of generations and genres; and Hazel Carby (1990, 1992), Angela Davis (1998), Cheryl Keyes (2000, 2013), Tammy Kernodle (2004, 2014), Daphne Brooks (2008), and Maureen Mahon (2011, 2013, 2020) supply a crucial engagement with Black feminist thought which navigates the intersection of race, gender, sexuality and genre in music and culture industry formations.

performance and texture, rather than existing as a fixed entity with boundaries set in place by the historical narratives of market structure and consumerist desires.

Throughout her career, and during her post-reissue career, Betty has been most commonly associated with the funk genre and is identified as being a funk musician (Fisher 1974; Brown 1975; Ballon 2007; Wang 2007a, 2007b, 2009; Greene 2013; Hayes 2013; Chick 2016; McCormick 2016; Chang 2017; Lordi 2018; Pareles 2018; Peters 2018; Proctor 2018; Segal 2018; Mervis 2019).¹¹ Aesthetically, funk is most clearly observed as the musical and cultural transition of style away from the soul and R&B-based performance aesthetic that included “matching suits, conked hair, coordinated dance steps in support of the lead singer backed by an anonymous band” (Vincent 2013: 51). This shift toward less conventional Black aesthetic ideals “facilitated the expression of a raucous, rebellious sensibility that allowed many musicians to call into question a wide range of presumptions and mythologies associated with the status quo” (Bolden 2013: 20). Celebrating individuality over uniformity, funk musicians performed a feeling and attitude that expanded the traditional use of stage presence, costumes, stage props, and public personas. In doing so, they created a “form of theatre” (Maultsby 2006: 301) that exploited and expanded the rock industry format.

Musically, funk is theorized as soul music’s sonic embrace of the rhythms and realities on the streets of urban Black America. The inception of funk was the inception of new rhythmic concepts and timbral qualities that redefined Black popular music. Such concepts and qualities were introduced through a new bass technique called slap-bass, and the incorporation of both the technologies of rock music (e.g. wah-wah pedal, fuzz box, echo chamber, and vocal distortion), and blues-rock flavored guitar and vocal timbres (ibid.: 297). By 1975, funk as a musical genre was characterized by a set of musical features:

Rhythm takes a definitive hierarchical position over melody; the musical foundation centers on a ‘groove’ (a repetitive, syncopated, and polyrhythmic pattern onto which other independent rhythms are layered); the sound is highly

¹¹ Perhaps the biggest limitation to this study is that I do not give an in-depth historical analysis or literature review of funk music as a uniquely raced and gendered musical genre and artistic aesthetic. The reason for that is because this project is not interested in the genre boundaries and definitions of funk—in fact, this project is working against those concepts—rather; it is interested in the ways in which Betty (and Black women today) perform and define themselves counter-narratively. I am not contending that Betty Davis is not a funk musician, because she undoubtedly is. I am contending her music needs to be upheld as an example of musical hybridity rooted in blues, soul, rock, funk and proto-punk.

percussive in quality; the bass functions as a melodic instrument; the harmonic progression is reduced to a minimum, often centering on one or two chords; and group singing assumed prominence over lead vocals. (ibid. 302-03)

This musical transition is understood to have pivoted on James Brown's post-1968 recordings that emphasized "the one" (Vincent 1996).

Politically, this newly developed aesthetic and sound embraced Black Nationalist ideologies, marking a cultural transition from the Civil Rights Movement to the Black Power and Black Arts movements. Funk lyrics often reflected two broad political concepts: (1) self-liberation from the social and cultural restrictions of society, and (2) the creation of new social spaces in which African Americans could redefine themselves and celebrate their Blackness (Maultsby 2006: 299). However, as is the case with most popular musical genres, "the paradigm through which most understand funk music is through the prism of masculine vibes and voices" (Greene 2013: 60).¹² The work of funk scholars often reflects a consistent sexism that has shaped the evaluation of funk where the objective of nation-building took priority over the intersectional objective of Black feminism: "The relationship between nationhood and gender was enforced rhetorically, politically, physically, and artistically. Thus, lines between that which was constructed as masculine versus feminine could not be blurred" (Phelps 2008: 186). Because of this, many Black women performers working in the funk idiom faced pressure to conform to the expected responsibilities and respectabilities of Black womanhood and Black nation-building while attempting to remain true to themselves and their artistic expression. From this paradigm, Betty Davis emerged.

The three main bodies of theory that inform my study are Practice Theory, Black Feminist Theory, and Cultural and Media Studies. These frameworks are interpretive lenses that emphasize studying music and the experiences of individuals as complex and intersectional. I have chosen these particular frameworks because of the methodological ways in which it informs both my conceptual groundwork and my approach to fieldwork. Every attempt has been made to let the content speak for itself and produce a bottom-up ethnography. I do not wish to input theory onto my research subjects (their memories, stories, and performances) but rather allow theory to help

¹² For an in-depth study on funk which works directly *against* this masculinist paradigm, see Proctor (2018).

unpack my experience with the ethnography and carve out a discursive space for my research subjects to resonate within those frameworks.

1.6.1 Music and Practice Theory

During the 1960s, a post-structuralist form of analysis emerged in France as a reaction against the structuralist notion of culture as a system of rules that govern behavior. Culture, in this perspective, underwent a seismic shift from being thought of as a productive to a reproductive social order, and privileging the body and voice in an active role of agency. Pierre Bourdieu's notion of "habitus" (1977) has long been a central way to analyze how social structure becomes embodied within human practice. The concept of "habitus" represents an important formulation of the principles of "practice theory" (Bourdieu 1977; Turino 1990; Ramsey 2003; Sakakeeny 2013; Mahon 2014), a theory of how social beings, with their diverse motives and intentions, construct and transform the world in which they live. Practice theory, therefore, relies on a fundamental dialectic between social structure and human agency.

Ethnomusicologists, and those scholars studying music-cultures, have found practice theory especially helpful in studying the intersections of music, race, and power. Musicologist Guthrie P. Ramsey applies practice theory through two kinds of analysis. The first "considers the ways in which historical subjects, cultural categories, and various aspects of subjectivity are shaped by structure or 'the system,'" while the second "tries to identify how real people in real time resist or engage a given system" (2003: 35). Both kinds of analysis seek to understand what types of identities are made available or are reimaged within cultural and historical discourses.

Ethnomusicologist Matt Sakakeeny approaches the study of brass band musicians in New Orleans through the framework of practice theory: "Brass band musicians are agents in the public sphere who utilize voices and instruments as technologies for producing subjectivity, identity, and culture. Their musical practices are forms of social action, and when evaluated as such they offer insight into agency as the exercise of, or against, power" (2013: 6). Using practice theory, Sakakeeny allows the actions of the musicians he is observing to reconceive his study as about subjectivity, "in the contemporary anthropological sense as individuals as subjects and agents of power" (ibid.: 7), who exist within and construct and transform the world in which they live. Similarly, cultural anthropologist Maureen Mahon suggests that by using practice theory to

examine the construction and performance of race and gender in music “we can reveal people's potential to change their worlds, while remaining mindful of the political interests and structural patterns that shape the ways social relations and social categories are constructed, reproduced, and sustained” (2014: 329). This poststructuralist theory of action sees power as culturally and symbolically created, and constantly re-legitimized through an interplay of agency and structure.

Most importantly for this study, practice theory helps us to leave behind the more essentialist connections made between “the people” and the musical practice, which tend to place too much emphasis on the idea of a homogeneous racial experience, in order to “represent a romantic view of group identity” (Ramsey 2003: 35). Therefore, this study is indebted to Ramsey’s understanding of “‘*blackness as practice*,’ or Blackness as a dynamic process of cultural and ideological shape shifting” (ibid.: 35-6). With this understanding, the in-group identity of “Blackness” can operate as both structure and resistance and can be interpreted as both a social construct and a powerful reality.

1.6.2 Music and Black Feminist Theory

While Betty Davis serves as this dissertation’s primary case study, one of my broader objectives is to illustrate how soul and funk music—as originally defined by an aesthetic of the late 1960s—is now being culturally and historically repositioned through alternative cultural production and reframed through a feminist, queer, scholarly lens (Horton-Stallings 2007, 2015; Greene 2013; Royster 2013a, 2013b; Redmond 2014; Wald 2015; Lordi 2016b, 2020). Like the blues women before her, Betty provided important information about Black gendered and erotic life beyond the respectability politics of her era. Just as Angela Davis (1998) and Hazel Carby (1990, 1992) have claimed Black women blues singers as examples of feminist thought, I am similarly claiming Betty to argue that she projected a pleasure-centered poetics of sexual freedom and artistic power that is now beloved by many difference audiences but is uniquely useful for Black women. Angela Davis (1998) offers a useful framework for claiming past artists in the present that rejects the idea of simply importing our present-day feminist consciousness onto prior musical genres and/or artists in order to make claims. Instead, she suggests we look at how women’s performances “appear through the *prism of the present*, and with what these

interpretations can tell us about past and present forms of social consciousness” (1998: xi; *italics mine*).

Emily Lordi provides a crucial discourse for analyzing the intellectual labor of Black women singers that focuses on the “intentional nature of singers’ work” (2013: 3) and the ways such intention and innovation act as powerful forms of authorship. Black women singers have dominated the major forms of twentieth-century American music, and yet only a select few iconic women are recorded into the written history of the music industry. Seldom have women artists been credited with being formative producers and players in the construction of a genre but are rather relegated to “female” versions of their classic male counterparts.¹³ In contrast, this study centralizes the intellectual labor of Black women vocalists. Lordi (2013) and Meta DuEwa Jones (2011) address the issue of singers not being viewed as musicians. Lordi recognizes the neglect of artistic agency for women vocalists as being “typical of discourse on black women’s music” (2013: 8): “Such representations are shaped by discursive history throughout which the singing of black women has been coded as natural on a number of levels” (*ibid.*).

When Black women vocalists are praised for their musicianship it is often in relation to the constructed narratives about their public lives and personas. Lordi cautions us to remember that Black women’s singing is “informed by but never reducible to [their] personal problems” (*ibid.*: 120). We must analyze the intellectual labor of Black women’s singing as intentional, inventive choices and as acts of authorship. While Black women singing is undoubtedly informed by their lives—in all their joys and tragedies; liberation and suppression—it is incumbent upon music scholars to read such singing as an “intentioned, imaginative female artistry that dispels the myth of black women’s transparent expression” (*ibid.*: 141).¹⁴

Reading Black women singer’s voices as solely representative of their personal lives further entangles the Black woman vocalist within her body. By staking a claim against a “transparent” Black women’s voice we also set forth more nuanced and empowered understandings of Black women singer’s sexual autonomy in such a way which “counters the black female singer’s subjection to the sexual male gaze” (*ibid.*). I do not refer to related claims about

¹³ A notable exception is gospel music, in which women have long been recognized as formative players in the construction of the modern gospel genre and industry. However, this recognition exists within a gendered division of labor (Maggio 2017).

¹⁴ Farah Jasmine Griffin’s (2001) study on Billie Holiday is an example of scholarly work designed to dismantle the myth that Black women singers naturally express their hard lives through their songs.

Black women singing and their bodies on the basis of anatomy and physiology, for there are clear and necessary connections there that must be bridged in order to project sound in innovative ways. Rather, I am speaking to the related claims between the singing voice and the body within the context of Black women being systematically and historically intertwined with sexualized and racialized bodies.

My theory of voice in relation to Black feminist thought exists outside of the narrow definitions in the music literature on anatomy and physiology (Titze 1984; Sundberg 1987), and rather, focuses on the broader notion of voice as being synonymous with speech where information and knowledge are transmitted through creative, cultural practice within highly contextualized settings (Connor 2000; Eidsheim 2008, 2018, 2019; Provenzano 2018).¹⁵ These theories of voice focus less on the *process* of generating vocal production and more on the *purpose*, or function, of that generative work. Here, I see Betty Davis' voice as an affective focal point for genre, gender, race, and sexuality. Through the lens of Black feminist theory, I argue that Betty activates and authorizes her own projection of self-definition through her vocal choices and her creation of an idiosyncratic vocal style that borrows from, and signifies, her polysemic understanding of race, gender, and sexuality.

Sexuality is central to Betty Davis' discography and Joan Morgan offers an instructive way to bring a pleasure-centered theory of Black embodiment—a “pleasure politics,” as she calls it (2015: 36)—to the foreground. My engagement with Betty's work similarly positions “desire, agency and black women's engagements with pleasure as a viable theoretical paradigm” (ibid.) through which to highlight the political, cultural, and artistic significance of Black women's erotic lives (sexual and otherwise). In doing so, I build upon the work of other scholars who have centered Black women's pleasure and sexual subjectivity as crucial parts of their contemporary studies of race, gender, sexuality, and representation (Hammonds 1994, 1997; Davis 1998; Horton-Stallings 2007, 2015; Lee 2010; Greene 2013; Royster 2013a, 2013b; Johnson 2014; Nash 2014; Morgan 2015).

¹⁵ Steven Conner understands the voice as an “event,” asserting that “a voice is not a condition, not yet an attribute, but an event. It is less something that exists than something which occurs” (2000: 2). Nina Eidsheim (2008, 2018, 2019) understands the voice as a powerful technology of self, which is embedded and integrated into theories of performance, race, and gender. Catherine Provenzano (2018) understands the voice as it is connected to power hierarchies that are based on value, skill, and labor.

At the end of the twentieth-century, Evelyn M. Hammonds (1994, 1997) charged Black feminist thought with moving from a “politics of silence” on Black women’s sexuality to a “politics of articulation.” Hammonds conceded that Black feminism’s focus on the politics of respectability, cultural dissemblance and other similar discourses of resistance—“interventions that theorized black women’s sexuality as an accumulation of unspeakable acts or positioned black women in ‘binary opposition to white women’—succeeded in identifying black women’s sexuality as a site of intersecting oppressions” (Morgan 2015: 37). However, what it failed to do, according to Hammonds (and those who pushed the discourse forward after her), was to produce the “politics of articulation” necessary to dismantle them. Subsequent scholarship sought to address this silence by locating alternative depictions of an autonomous, desiring, and vocal Black women’s sexuality, focusing largely on representations in Black women’s popular music, specifically blues (Carby 1990, 1992; Davis 1998) and hip hop (Rose 1994).

New feminist thinkers and scholarly collectives, including The Pleasure Ninjas, offer scholarly interrogations of Black women’s visual and performance culture that “claim pleasure and a healthy erotic as fundamental rights” (Morgan 2015: 36) and “imagine new erotic possibilities for black women” (ibid.: 38).¹⁶ These new thinkers engage with previous Black feminist historical work (including Kimberlé Crenshaw’s “intersectionality,” Patricia Hill Collin’s “controlling images,” Audre Lorde’s use of the erotic, Evelyn Higginbotham’s “respectability politics, and Darlene Clark Hine’s “cultural dissemblance”) but also absorb music, film, dance, pornography, visual art, and digital media into their work using pleasure as an interrogative lens in order to reframe the existing narrative about Black women’s sexuality and invest in queerness as a scholarly project.¹⁷

As an academic discipline, Fiona Buckland explains that “queer theory has highlighted difference in order to expose, problematize, transgress, and hopefully transcend unmarked norms

¹⁶ The Pleasure Ninjas are a Black feminist scholarly collective founded by Joan Morgan in 2013 during her tenure as a Visiting Scholar at Stanford University and consists of Morgan, journalist and playwright Esther Armah and Drs. Yaba Blay, Brittney Cooper, Treva B. Lindsey, and Kaila Story.

¹⁷ See Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) for more on intersectionality. See Patricia Hill Collins (2000) for more on controlling images. See Audre Lorde (1984) for more on the uses of the erotic. See Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1993) for more on the politics of respectability. See Darlene Clark Hine (1994) for more on the theory of cultural dissemblance. While these respected scholars form the foundation of my engagement with Black feminist theory, it is the scholars who work to “re-interrogate these venerates interventions with the temporal, cultural specificity reflected in contemporary US black women’s ethnic heterogeneity, queerness and the advent of digital technologies and social media” (Morgan 2015: 38) that have provided me with the most valent lens for interpreting the music and career of Betty Davis.

with the aim of challenging binarism and sexual and gender categories” (2002: 5-6). Black feminist thinkers as early as Hammonds (1994) argued that investing in queerness (i.e. divesting from heteronormativity) is one of the primary ways in which Black feminist theory can work to produce a “politics of articulation.” It was Black LGBTQIA+ writers and artists who deployed sexuality in various forms of cultural production that foregrounded desire and agency as significant to the theorizing of Black women’s sexualities.¹⁸ However, just as I will argue with the blues women, it was not solely their collective (or even personal) sexual preference that was cause for such intervention, but rather it was their re-working of the dominant discourse. By embracing Black feminism’s interdisciplinarity, I argue that Betty Davis (along with the blues women of the “race records” era and the present-day Daughters of Betty) are directly engaged in discourses of queerness, counternarrative, and pleasure-centered Black embodiment.

1.6.3 Music and Media and Cultural Studies

Betty Davis’ prominence as a musical and cultural figure is intricately tied to the process of having her music reissued, repackaged, and disseminated to an arguably more liberated and gracious audience than those to whom she performed in the 1970s. The success of Betty Davis marks an important dialectic between the past and the present that is mediated through independent record labels and a set of related cultural practices tied to vinyl record collecting and curation, and production. I argue that, collectively, these practices (1) valorize narratives that previously existed on the periphery of music history and, therefore, legitimize a multitude of non-canonized voices; (2) re-frame and enhance music’s material culture via paratextual elements that include extensive liner notes, interviews and oral history, photography, digital downloads, and accompanying websites; and (3) cultivate alternative historical records for various interpretive communities to reassess meaning, value and the cultural significance of both music and artists themselves. Therefore, the vinyl reissue is observed and analyzed for its ability to highlight imperative aspects of popular music heritage as it relates to knowledge formation, social memory, and issues of

¹⁸ See, Cherie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua (1981), Barbara Smith (1983), and Beverly Guy Sheftall (1995).

material music culture (Ivey 1976; Straw 1997; Bowsher 2015; Roy 2015; Bottomley 2016; Skinner 2016).

While reissue largely occurs at the point of production, this project hopes to expand the scope of reissue discourse by engaging with different audiences during and after the point of consumption. Audience consumption of reissues reflect a new kind of engagement with the past based on the cultural mediation of the reissue and its textual reconfiguration. Cultural Studies scholar Stuart Hall's (1973) "encoding/decoding" model provides a useful framework for thinking about the ways in which a cultural text is transformed in meaning, value, and cultural significance through consumption. Hall establishes that in any mass communication exchange the producer's preferred meaning (i.e. encoded message) is not fixed and that audiences can generate a multitude of meanings (i.e. decoded messages) in different ways. In the case of Betty Davis, her music was *encoded* as an erotic form of authorship that centered pleasure and denounced binarism but was largely *decoded* by a racist and sexist mainstream 1970s culture as being "brazen," "crass," "uninspired" and a "cheap thrill."

Given the limited (but growing) amount of scholarship on vinyl reissues, media studies scholar Barbara Klinger's work on reruns and restorations provides a useful framework for analyzing the textuality of music reissues. Klinger likens the recirculation's of texts to a form of "history writing, showing how the reappraisal of an old text changes the reputation of the text and its author, as well as producing in the public memory revisionist accounts of social, cultural, and political history" (2006: 103). Therefore, while this study is committed to a bottom-up ethnography, understanding how these processes and practices function within the realm of music allows us to better ascertain why certain artists, like Betty Davis, were suppressed and challenged during the heyday of soul and funk, but have found success through the reissue process.

This transformation in cultural status is predominantly organized, mediated, and disseminated by the independent label reissue—along with other forms of archival media projects, including radio shows and podcasts—as a unique cultural process that relies on related cultural practices tied to record collecting and curating. By privileging independent reissued records (specifically vinyl LPs) as reimagined and enhanced cultural artifacts that give new meaning and value to the record, the role of record collectors as preservationists and curators becomes paramount to the reissue process. However, these cultural practices exist within a problematic set of power dynamics that this study intends to highlight.

Media Studies scholar Will Straw suggests that the gendered dimension of record collecting is rooted in “the mastery of a symbolic field” (1997: 9) which functions to preserve the homosocial character of the culture.¹⁹ This homosocial character of record collecting culture has roots in colonial ideals of connoisseurship, mastery and expert status, which are then reinforced in the modern era through notions of competitiveness, rivalry, and secrecy. My gendered analysis of collecting is not meant to merely add to the growing discourse that constructs a dominant representation of record collectors as obsessive males (Medovoi 1991; Straw 1997; Dougan 2006; Maalsen and McLean 2018), but to unpack the history that has allowed such a representation to prevail. It is not my intention to critique record collecting and collectors as inherently problematic. Rather, I aim to subject this type of cultural practice to a rigorous scholarly analysis and acknowledge its importance in canon formation, historicity, and musical materiality. In doing so, I highlight the important relationship between media texts, popular memory, and political hegemony that Betty’s twenty-first century reemergence continues to navigate.

Therefore, my intention is to analyze Betty Davis as (1) a conscious creator of formative Black feminist culture, and (2) a subject of reissue. Although her present-day reflections about her musical career and reissue success are awash in humble matter-of-factness, it is my aim to show that by merging avant-garde popular music and Black feminist thought, Betty projected a powerfully erotic form of authorship that envisioned future audiences which would eventually emerge as status quo in present day popular music. And while much of the recent popular criticism and media representation on Betty positions her as an object for *rediscovery*, this study positions Betty first and foremost as an agent of artistic control.

1.7 Notes on Terminology

Throughout this study I alternate between using the terms *Black* and *African American* when describing people and cultures of African descent. These terms are used interchangeably in order to remain consistent with the popular nomenclature of the periods about which I am writing,

¹⁹ The concept of “field” is used to help explain the differential power that people experience in structured social spaces which have their own rules and schemes of domination. Furthermore, the concept of field is used in opposition to analyzing societies solely in terms of classes (Bourdieu 1977).

and all quoted material reproduces the language of the original work or individual cited. I choose to capitalize the “B” in Black when describing people and cultures of African origin. I believe this conveys a level of respect by recognizing the shared history and identity formations of those belonging to Black communities and cultures. In doing so, I follow the scholarly example of Shana L. Redmond who explains that her “use of the signifier ‘Black’ [...] is a way to call attention to the overlapping projects of diaspora and racial formation that actively seek recognition in mutual struggle” (2014: 5). I also choose to capitalize the “B” in Black out of solidarity with the Center for the Study of Social Policy (Nguyen and Pendleton 2020) and the hundreds of American newsrooms (Coleman 2020; Izadi 2020) who have standardized the capitalization in response to the 2020 anti-racist national protests against police brutality and white supremacy.

Throughout this study, I also choose to use the terms *women* and/or *woman*, rather than the grammatically correct *female*, which is an adjective that modifies a noun. I do this intentionally through a feminist and queer lens due to the fact that the adjective *female* has distinctly biological and medical overtones, whereas *women* and/or *woman* relates to one’s own identity formation. However, all quoted material reproduces the language of the original work or individual cited.

Three or less lines of song lyrics, poetry, and/or dialogue from the 2017 *Betty* film (Cox 2017) appear in the text and are italicized; anything more than three lines appears as a figure. Readers will also notice that I typically refer to Betty Davis by her first name, rather than the surname that one would typically use in both journalistic and scholarly writing. I do so for two reasons. First, it helps to alleviate the confusion of using two different names when discussing aspects of her biography as well as her artistic career, which includes credits under both her maiden name, Betty Mabry, and her married name, Betty Davis. In addition, I do so because, as her friend and confidant, Betty and I are on a first name basis.

1.8 Summaries of Chapters

In what follows, I organize my dissertation chronologically (e.g. Betty’s biography and career) as well as thematically (e.g. the cultural work of reissuing, representing, and reclaiming). The biographical details about Betty’s life are established to ascertain Betty’s socio-cultural structuring. The study then follows Betty through important life events while being interpreted

through analytical frameworks. I focus on the events that have transitioned Betty from one stage of her life to another; events which are rooted in musical practice and cultural production. While her personal life is, at times, interwoven, I make it a point to not analyze or document that which does not directly relate to her musical life. This is further justification as to why I do not disclose information about Betty during the many years she spent away from the public and the music industry. After recording her last album in 1979, Betty's life story does not return to the narrative until the early 2000s when the reissue process begins.

While there is some overlap between the practices and events I discuss *after* Betty's post-reissue career (for instance, Black Women Rock was formed in 2004 but is discussed after the documentary film premiered in 2017), the events discussed in this study occur chronologically based on my participation and ethnographic engagement with them. Each chapter title is named after a song title written by Betty Davis (spanning the 1950s to 2019). After each chapter title, I include an excerpt from a poem written by Jessica Care Moore in 2004 about Betty Davis, titled "They Say She's Different," as an epigraph.

Chapter two illustrates Betty's "essential background" as a musical creator (Shonekan 2003: 1) by providing meaningful biographical information so readers can begin to understand the social frame that shaped Betty's musical practice. In conjunction with chapter three, this chapter offers part of what is arguably the most comprehensive biography of Betty Davis published to date. Here, I draw upon her background and the work of musicologist Guthrie P. Ramsey (2003) to analyze Betty's emergence as an artist who is part of a then ongoing Black cultural dialogue between the North and South. I also spend time fleshing out the formative role her grandmother played in curating the music of the blues women who shaped Betty's cultural memory and nourished her ideas about self-expression and identity. Through various "acts of transfer" (Connerton 1989), I contend that the classic blues women of the "race records" era, as curated by her grandmother, provided a "meta-narrative of cultural memory" (Krouse-Dismukes 2008: 193) for Betty's music. In doing so, I set up the comparative, dialectical analysis of the blues women legacy that runs throughout the study.

Chapter three follows Betty into adulthood (1962-1972) as she moves to New York City in pursuit of a music career. This chapter continues the work of building a timeline around her life and career through key biographical details derived from published research, personal archives, and ethnographic interviews that myself and others conducted with Betty and a number of people

who knew her as musical collaborators, friends, or experts. My goal here is not only to provide a more robust account of Betty's experiences than is previously available, but to also contextualize the development of her careers in both fashion and music that were integrated in the 1960s countercultural scene of New York City, where she thrived as a designer, model, DJ, MC, and trendsetter. Most importantly, I establish Betty's entry into the music industry through an analysis of her first recordings as Betty Mabry and an examination of her seminal, yet largely unrecognized, collaborative role in the development of jazz fusion during her brief marriage to Miles Davis. As part of that discussion, I interrogate the masculinist tropes of the "groupie" and the "muse" that have commonly been used to locate Betty in music history. Finally, I analyze Betty's early experimentation with vocality, arranging, and bandleading that acted as a precursor to her 1970s albums.

Chapter four focuses on Betty's discography (1973-1979) and examines her experience as a Black woman songwriter, arranger, bandleader, singer, and producer through the lens of artistic freedom and musical transmission. This includes in-depth analysis of Betty's catalogue with respect to her vocality, textuality, and physicality. Having previously identified Betty as a modern blues woman, I offer a more detailed comparison here with the classic blues women of the "race records" era. Finally, I analyze Betty's image and live performance practice as a form of erotic labor through which she used her body as both a complement to her music and a site for resistance against conformity and censorship that were leveraged against Black women's bodies within the music industry (and in society at large) during the 1970s.

Chapter five begins by further examining Betty's problematic relationship with the press and her audience so that I can both continue my chronological account of her biography and provide additional context for understanding her reemergence and newfound popularity during this century. That process, and the people who made it happen, are the focal points of this chapter as I turn my attention to Light In The Attic Records and explain the story of them reissuing Betty Davis' records and helping to revive her name and image. Though the label has singularly played a crucial role in Betty's life and her musical career, it is part of a larger network of vinyl record curators, collectors, and labels that have been instrumental in preserving music history and cultivating an entirely different musical culture in the U.S. I am particularly interested in how these "interpretive communities" (Bobo 1995) shape the cultural production of music and use records as a way to not only access the past but also reconstruct meaning and value in the present.

Chapter six tells the story of the 2017 documentary film *Betty – They Say I’m Different* (Cox 2017) from its conception to its execution by drawing upon the oral history of its filmmakers and my own experiences as the film’s Associate Producer (a role I took on late in the production process). While I spend some time analyzing the documentary’s approach and tactics, I am particularly interested in discussing the collaborative, critical network of Betty fans that grew out of the multi-media events that accompanied the film’s screenings. Rather than the film itself being the source for new critical, collaborative scholarship and performance-based practice, I argue that the film acted as a catalyst for gathering and networking in Betty’s name. This chapter is largely structured around my ethnographic research conducted with the filmmakers as well as through my participation in various film premiers, reunion concerts, panel discussions, and public lectures.

Chapter seven introduces the organization Black Women Rock as a uniquely positioned interpretive community that embodies Betty’s avant-garde performativity through their own cultural memory and experience. I make the case for why this particular constellation of artists is essential to understanding Betty’s post-reissue career through the lens of the blues women legacy, and I also discuss how they help do the cultural work of re-historicizing Black women’s role in popular music’s history. I also critique the rhetoric of labeling musicians “ahead of their time” along the lines of cultural and political bias within society and, through a discussion of safe spaces and community building, illuminate present day resistance and advantages faced by Black women musicians who challenge the mainstream. Using ethnography with members of Black Women Rock, as well as observations from their concerts and panels, this chapter argues that Black Women Rock reclaims the erotic innovations of Betty Davis on their own volition and through their own performance practices.

Chapter eight turns toward participatory observation and documents my subjective experience making music with Betty Davis. In 2019, Betty wrote, arranged, and produced her first new song since 1979. At her request, I provided lead vocals. Being invited into Betty’s songwriting process, watching her teach the song’s arrangement to the band, and produce in a recording studio has provided me with a visceral understanding of Betty’s musical transmission. Drawing on ethnography during the teaching, rehearsing, recording, producing, and releasing process, this chapter focuses on Betty’s consistency in musical transmission and the technological and industrial shifts she experienced in making and disseminating media.

Chapter nine provides conclusions for this study by focusing on the role of advocacy and purpose in public ethnomusicology.

2.0 “Bake That Cake Of Love”: Afro-Modern Formations, Blues Women, and Black Feminism

birth is a sound. she was born Mabry. Carolina farm girl.
steel lungs, quietly adjusting into Pittsburgh legs,
long as freight trains. eventually carrying us to
an unrecognizable place.

Jessica Care Moore, “They Say She’s Different”

This chapter provides key biographical details about Betty’s early life and family in order to explicate her socio-cultural structuring as an artist. In conjunction with chapter three, this chapter offers part of what is arguably the most comprehensive biography of Betty Davis published to date. Here, I draw upon her background and the work of musicologist Guthrie P. Ramsey (2003) to analyze Betty’s emergence as an artist who is part of a then ongoing Black cultural dialogue between the North and South. I also spend time fleshing out the formative role her grandmother played in curating the music of the blues women who shaped Betty’s cultural memory and nourished her ideas about self-expression and identity. The blues imparted hard lessons about how to navigate a racist, sexist world as a young, gifted, and Black woman growing up in a post-war steel town. Through various “acts of transfer” (Connerton 1989: 39), I contend that the classic blues women, as curated by her grandmother, provided a “meta-narrative of cultural memory” (Krouse-Dismukes 2008: 193) for Betty’s music.

While this chapter formulates a biographical basis for Betty’s life and chronologizes her career, it is in no way the definitive biography of the “Queen of Funk.” Every attempt was made to gather as much biographical information as possible in order to create a timeline of events. However, there is much about Betty’s life that is unknown, even by those who claim to know her best, myself included, and this is largely by design. That is to say, the gaps in her biography—most evident from the end of her career in the early 1980s up until her 2007 reissue—are not due to a lack of interest from previous music journalists and historians, nor do they stem from a lack of vigorous research and questioning on my end. They also do not reflect any fault in Betty’s memory, considering that the now seventy-six-year-old woman still remembers the first and last names of practically every musician, artist, and photographer with whom she has ever worked.

Indeed, I posit that the unknown details of Betty's life, and the scarcity of personal commentary she provides about them, do not reflect an absence of something that is missing. Rather, it is evidence of how she enacts another form of authorship, or what Emily Lordi describes as "inventive execution" (2013: 11).

Throughout her career, Betty composed all but three of her own recorded songs and she made myriad performative choices about how she presented herself and her music to the public—the clothing worn on stage, her physical movements in performances, album cover designs, and her unique vocal phrasing and timbre.²⁰ In addition, her personal life choices as a Black woman, as well as her business choices as a producer, manager, and bandleader all exemplify what I will call a *multifaceted authorship* that also extends to how she narrates her past, and what she allows the public to know about her. What Betty has chosen to share with myself, and a few others in her circle, provides important insights about her childhood, her entry into music, and her mobility (or lack thereof) throughout her years in the music industry.

2.1 Afro-Modern Formations

Born in 1944 in Durham, North Carolina, Betty Gray Mabry grew up with her parents, Henry and Betty, a younger brother named Chuckie (nicknamed Chea), and an extended family that included her maternal grandparents and many aunts, uncles, and cousins (two of whom would later record and perform with her in the 1970s). Betty's maternal grandparents lived on a farm where the entire family would often gather. Betty's father served in the Army during WWII and her mother worked in the nursing profession. When I asked Betty about her unusual middle name,

²⁰ The term "performative" is largely understood to come from speech act theory of the 1950s (Austin 1962), which coined the phrase "performative utterances" for something that functioned beyond mere description or reportage within language and communications. Judith Butler (1993, 1997, 1999) offers a political interpretation of Derrida's use of the performative utterance and applies it to reading gender as a performative text. Butler originally took her cue on how to read performativity of gender from Derrida's reading of Kafka's "Before the Law" (1992), which posits the force attached to the law for which one waits. This authoritative meaning is attributed to Butler's notion of whether individuals labor under a similar authoritative expectation concerning gender. While I am not engaging with Butler directly, my turn toward the performative in analyzing the music of Betty Davis is indebted to Butler's understanding that "performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration" (Butler 1999: xi).

she insisted her father gave her the name Gray because of a gray finch bird that would “visit him” while he was on duty during the war.²¹ Betty’s instinctive connection to birds would stay with her throughout her life, as documented in the 2017 film *Betty – They Say I’m Different*, as would her profound bond with her father: “My father was really connected to me. It’s like if I did anything he was my spiritual rock. So, I was doing everything through him. I would always be confident and calm because he was confident and calm” (Davis, interview by author, Sept 7, 2019).

When Betty was around ten years old, her father joined the multitudes of African Americans who were part of the second wave of the Great Migration that radically reshaped the socioeconomic and cultural landscapes in the country. Musicologist Guthrie P. Ramsey writes:

The massive displacement of Black bodies, called the Great Migration, marks a crucial event in America’s social and cultural history. The specific migration that took place during the 1940s announced the end of the cotton industry’s hegemony over laboring African American bodies, especially in the South [...] African Americans, betting on the promise to decent wages and enhanced mobility in the North, flooded its cities and then transformed the urban spaces they now occupied. (2003: 104)

Betty’s father soon moved his family north to Homestead, Pennsylvania—a mill town in the Monongahela River valley that sits just outside of Pittsburgh’s city limits—where he found steady work as a foreman in the steel mills.

As a young girl, Betty successfully immersed herself in what she called “city life,” where she excelled in her integrated school and absorbed the local doo-wop and R&B groups for which Pittsburgh was once famous.²² Betty’s new life in the urban North was complimented by her annual summer return to her grandparent’s farm in Durham. This ebb and flow between the urbanity of Homestead and the rurality of Durham proved to be extremely nourishing for young Betty as she engaged in her own unique dialogue between the two regions that shaped her family life. Perhaps

²¹ Coincidentally, the Homestead Grays were a professional baseball team that played in the “Negro leagues” in the United States. Founded in 1912, and based in Homestead, Pennsylvania, the town Betty’s father would move his family to, the Homestead Grays were a successful and well-known team until the Negro National League collapsed after the 1948 season.

²² Famous doo-wop bands from Pittsburgh included The Skyliners, The Marcells, the Del-Vikings, The El Venos, The Four Coins, The Four Dots, The Tempos, and the Stereos. Many of these acts broke their national hit records on local radio. In 1948, DJs Porky Chedwick and Mary Dee began playing R&B records for the first time on local AM station WHOD, which later became WAMO in 1956. WAMO continued to serve the area’s Black community for the next fifty years.

not coincidentally, this is the same dialogue that was shaping modern Black expressive culture and the context in which Betty's artistic sensibilities emerged.

Ramsey (2003) describes this dialogue of cultures as an interaction between "two rhetorical fields" that are centered in the realm of performance. They include the "urban North" as signified by gestures and practices associated with the urbane and cosmopolitan and the "agrarian South," as referenced by gestures that evoke provincial, agrarian past of African Americans. Rather than positioning these as binary opposites, Black expressive culture of the mid-twentieth century innovatively employed them as a "powerfully rich and complicated dialectic" (Ramsey 2003: 47). Born of this dialectic, Betty began to ground her artistic expression in both the rural South of her childhood and the urban North of her adolescence. Throughout her career, and to this day, Betty adamantly refers back to the South and her grandparents farm as the origin of her musical inspiration and transmission, though it was in cities like New York and San Francisco where she first articulated her musical vision. Immersed in the two worlds of her family, and within the "complicated dialectic" of Black expressive culture, Betty effortlessly engaged in a set of Afro-modernist sensibilities that were already being cultivated at the time she was born.

The Afro-modernist social energy of the 1940s was rooted in "the rejection of many of the values, techniques, and procedures of the past and the embracing of new ones" (Floyd 1995: 88-89). One might understand Afro-modernism of the 1940s as an "ideologically charged condition" (Gussow 2013: 618) which worked to reject past tactics that were rooted in Victorian-esque moral grounding and what Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham has termed the "politics of respectability" (1994). By letting go of past moral grounding (values, techniques, and procedures), individuals actively aligned themselves with modernity. Therefore, a rejection of past tactics that were morally grounded was "a loss that define[d] modernity" (Gussow 2013: 626). Ann Douglas refers to this loss of moral grounding as a "discourse of disbelief" that "became the only thoroughly accredited modern mode" (1995: 54) for a young generation of urban migrants who were working to throw off Victorian-esque repression that was cast on them by both white mainstream society and the Black Christian church. Years later, Betty (and countless other Black artists) would transform these Afro-modernist sensibilities into their generation's unique interpretation in the form of Afro-futurism, an ideologically charged concept that not only rejected the updated politics of respectability, but actively engaged in the aesthetic construction of a liberated present via imagining newly fertile Black futures (Dery 1995; Royster 2013a).

In the 1940s, popular music was a promising domain for those who were seeking experimentation and self-determination through the arts, which was aided by technological advances in the recording industry and a reclassification of Black music into “Rhythm ‘n Blues” (R&B) in 1949, thus shedding the minstrel paradigm of “race records.”²³ Early R&B was certainly an evolution in sound and content from the blues inspired “race records” of the previous decade, its existence also highlighted how “aesthetic categories, including musical genres, are related to social categories, including race” (Roy 2004: 265). While the aesthetic categories that were set up by the 1940s music industry would go through meaningful and rather dramatic transitions by the time Betty was recording in the 1970s, the social categories were still very much in place, making it extremely difficult for Black artists to escape pre-conceived notions of what Black music is, and is not.

Another important mode of Black cultural expression in the 1940s was the interventionist work of re-creating the public image of African Americans that had been established by the dominant culture; and the single most effective method of doing this was through media exposure. Due to the broad developments in technology and mobility, Black musicians achieved unprecedented media exposure in the 1940s. Once the market and demand for Black music was solidified the visibility of Black performers began to be greeted with a degree of success and recognition, creating a central issue in the music industry—the issue of Black representation. Due to the “vast physical and metaphysical distance” between the rural South and the urban Northern cities as a result of the Great Migration (Carby 1990: 239), alternative forms of representation were required to navigate this newly mediated terrain.

Black performers in the music industry were constantly negotiating what Ramsey calls “a point of tension between what the Black masses enjoyed as entertainment and what image they could risk presenting to white America” (2003: 67). This “point of tension” is a crucial aspect in understanding the expressions, sensibilities, and values that have been enacted throughout the arc of Black popular music, and they are certainly crucial to understanding Betty’s career. Navigating this point of tension worked to create a general consensus image of the Black professional musician, whose mainstream success was embedded in a “code-fusion aesthetic” (ibid.: 49), or the

²³ The *Billboard* R&B record chart was known as the “race records” chart from February 1945 to June 1949. In June 1949, at the suggestion of *Billboard* journalist Jerry Wexler, the magazine changed the name of the chart to Rhythm & Blues Records (R&B). For more on how the paradigm of minstrelsy structured the American music industry, see Miller (2010).

switching between urban and rural performance practices. It is this “code-fusion aesthetic” that Betty would explicitly and implicitly carry with her into her career.

This cultural dialogue—or “code-fusion aesthetic”—between the North and South was performed and learned through various musical codes (and other acts of transfer) that gestured to the agrarian past (read: South) or the urban present/future (read: North). How various musical gestures came to signify such meanings had to do with their physical and social displacement from the Great Migration, which successfully turned the North and South into “mythic sites of cultural memory” (ibid.: 47). We know that cultural memory is always mediated and articulated through technologies and media, and beginning in the 1940s, technologies of cultural memory included film, television, radio, and the recorded music industry. However, cultural memory consists not only of the stories, images, sounds, or documents of the past but also in the acts of transfer they enable and embody, including oral history and performances: “Acts of memory are thus acts of performance, representation, and interpretation” (Hirsch and Smith 2002: 5). Among the most effective acts of transfer that emerged in order to pass down the North and South as “mythic sites of cultural memory” was the “code-fusion aesthetic” performed by Black musicians.

Ideas about the South, for example, become un-tethered from its geographic locale and deployed in nostalgic social energy that musicians could embody through performance. Such Southern gestures in music included (1) the shout or holler style of singing; (2) gritty, coarse timbre in vocals; (3) lyrical content being cast in sexual politics; (4) twang in pronunciation and/or muffled diction; and (5) the use of vernacular associated with agrarian life. The North similarly became a set of modernist signifiers that musicians learned to embody. Such ‘Northern-ness’ translated through musical performance via (1) the crooning style of singing; (2) heightened diction and/or pronunciation; (3) the use of new urban dialect and vernacular; (3) a polished, cabaret style of performing to and *for* the audience; (4) showcasing virtuosic solos, amongst vocalists and instrumentalists; and (5) expanding practices of self-promotion (Ramsey 2003).

By articulating these Southern gestures within the context of a (Northern) media apparatus, Rhythm and Blues emerged as a viable technology of cultural memory, and recorded music and filmed performances became its vehicle of transmission. Southern sensibilities were reconfigured through the Northern experience and freshly authored through the performance of Black artists. The ingenuity of these new articulations created what Ramsey (2003) calls an Afro-modernist blues “musing”: a reflection of the Southern gestures rooted in, and stemming from, the blues in a

new, updated context. This reflection—this “musing”—emerged out of a complex dynamic between past and present that revised the role of the blues within Black expression.

Cultural memory, as Hirsch and Smith note, is “most forcefully transmitted through the individual voice and body—through the testimony of a witness” (2002: 7) and Black women singers of the 1940s proved to be a potent force of testimony. Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughan, and Dinah Washington all engaged in the activity of “musing,” or the self-conscious, reflective process of responding to the relationships between the past, the present, and the future. Holiday, Vaughan and Washington do not embody the “blues muse” simply because they are Black women artists, but rather, because they utilize the blues as a musical system to enhance their own style and develop a signature sound. The “blues muse” in this sense is not a paternalist accreditation that undercuts women’s agency as artists—it is an inventive Afro-modernist modality that women artists (along with men) executed for their own aesthetic purposes.

The Black women singers of 1940s harnessed the blues modality as a “Black vernacular resource [...] to fashion individual styles” (Ramsey 2003: 73). Rather than relying on a direct set of values, techniques, and procedures from the past formation of “race record” era blues established in the 1920s (which I will return to in the next section), the blues modality became an artistic framework through which women like Holiday, Vaughan, and Washington (and, several decades later, Betty Davis) could enhance their personal styles and craft their signature voice. These women delivered an amalgamation of musical gestures that pronounced a subjective women’s presence into the cloistered male-dominated music industry.

By the time Betty entered the world, the blues had evolved into Rhythm & Blues and found security in a thriving new arena of Black cultural expression, cultural memory, and cultural production. However, when you ask Betty if she was influenced by the R&B of the 1940s, or if she recalled that music being played during her childhood, her answer is a resounding: “No.” It was, instead, the “raunchy” blues of Bessie Smith that sparked an interest in young Betty.

2.2 Buella Blackwell’s Record Collection

There is a great sense of experimentation in Betty Davis’ music as well as consistencies in her sound and style. Chief amongst them is her deep connection to the blues, specifically its

instrumental simplicity (or “pureness,” as she has referred to it), its autobiographical lyrical content, and its rough delivery. Betty has consistently articulated her love for the blues and the woman who curated it: “All of my music really comes from her. She sang The Blues, was a singer before she married, and passed it on to her daughter's. In my house that's the kind of music I grew up on. Today, Blues has become more sophisticated—rhythm and blues—but the real Blues was raunchy Bessie Smith” (Toepfer 1976: 62).

As a seventy-six-year-old woman, Betty's affirmation of her grandmother as her original source of musical inspiration is stronger than ever. When I asked Betty what her first memory of the blues was, she replied: “When I would listen to it at my grandmother's because it was very intimate. I wouldn't see her for a long time” (Davis, interview by author, Feb 10, 2018). For Betty, the blues was directly connected to her grandmother, and therefore, directly connected to her. When I asked why she thought her grandmother was drawn to the blues instead of the popular R&B stylings of the era, she replied: “Well, she was from the South. The blues and the South are connected” (Davis, interview by author, Feb 10, 2018).

Betty's grandmother, Buella Blackwell, was a woman of mixed African American and Native American ancestry (Cherokee and Blackfoot, according to Betty) who worked as a “domestic” and lived on the family farm in Durham, North Carolina. Betty remembers her grandmother being an incredible cook with long, thick black hair. After Betty's family moved up North to Homestead, Betty would go back to visit her grandmother in the summers. The soundtrack of those visits was curated by her grandmother's vast collection of blues records dating back to the 1920s. Those intimate moments of listening to records with her grandmother provided crucial acts of transfer that allowed young Betty to formulate her cultural memory around the blues. Roberta Nin Feliz describes acts of transfer as “traditions, behaviors, and mannerisms [that] are passed down from generation to generation” (2017). For Betty, the blues signifies a cultural and embodied memory of her grandmother and the Southern life she kept.

Betty has spoken of her grandmother's blues collection since she began giving interviews as a recording artist in the early-mid 1970s. In fact, Buella Blackwell's record collection and its influence on Betty's knowledge and appreciation of the blues is one of the most consistent threads of information provided by Betty throughout her entire career. She has, on more than one occasion, spoke with me about how Eric Clapton wanted to “get his hands” on her grandmother's records: “She had a very good blues collection and we used to sing, and we'd talk, and she'd tell me about

her musical experiences and so that's how I got into writing music. [Clapton] was really impressed when I told him about my grandmother's blues collection" (Davis, interview by author, Feb 10, 2018). For Betty, the South, the blues, and her grandmother exist as a matrix of cultural memory that inspired and transmitted her signature sound and style.

While Betty has said in a previous interview (from several decades ago) that her grandmother was a singer, she has never recalled that aspect of her life in our conversations. She has, however, recalled how her grandmother used to always sing and dance and entertain at the house. Embracing a flair for the dramatic herself, Betty recalled Blackwell setting up a small electronic strobe light, or stroboscope (invented in 1931), to enhance her family's dance parties. The year of Blackwell's birth is unknown to Betty, but she would have most likely been born between 1895 and 1905. If Blackwell ever did attempt to sing professionally, as Betty alluded to decades ago, it would have been during the 1920s era of the classic blues women and "raunchy Bessie Smith" (Toepfer 1976: 62). While the Delta blues men like Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker, Jimmy Reed, and Elmore James were lasting favorites of Betty's, the grainy music of her grandmother's youth was also in the mix.

2.2.1 "Race Records"

For the first six years of Betty's life, the categorization and designation for Black music, by Black artists, intended for a Black audience was "race records." While these records were history by the time Betty (and, decades later, the self-proclaimed Daughters of Betty) were expressing themselves musically, there are important connections between Betty, her metaphorical offspring, and the "race records" artists that significantly shaped their experience in the music industry. That is to say, both Betty and the Black women who were part of that earlier musical era were considered visionaries who were "ahead of their time" and often did not have financial security, nor gain proper recognition, until decades after their careers ended or they died. Betty and the women of the "race records" era also dealt with the "point of tension" that Ramsey (2003) referred to when analyzing the contradiction between what Black artists and audiences enjoyed and what they felt comfortable performing and consuming along the lines of respectability. Similarly, Betty also dealt with white, male gatekeepers that attempted to censor and/or promote her material for a segregated music market, much like it had been done to the first wave of Black

women blues singers. In this sense, I think it is appropriate to position Betty as a modern blues woman of her era. For these reasons, I find it important to establish a brief history of the contradictory “race records” era that both cultivated and impeded the blues women who were at its forefront.

By the early 1920’s, the national music industry had emerged as a viable source for the production of American musical expression and had developed successful models for selling music to the American public. The initial sales model of earlier record catalogs prior to the “race” music category was based on the notion that individuals had broad musical tastes and appealed to the entire, undifferentiated American public. This was not the case with the new sales model for “race records” which was based entirely on segregation, separating “race records” from the general popular music recordings, from everything including serial numbers, printed catalogues, and promotional flyers (Miller 2010: 188). This industry decision to separate these catalogs was not only a pivotal moment in the national emergence of the Black vernacular, but also was the beginning of a suggested “correspondence between consumer identity and musical taste” (ibid.).

While the industrialization of “race” music broke the color line for Black musicians in the phonograph industry just as a previous generation of Black artists and composers had prevailed against segregation in musical theatre and publishing, it still remained exclusively within the white expectation of Black performance. As Susan Oehler explains, the “race records” that were prized as authentic African American folk “were selective portraits of traditional performance in Black communities” (2006: 114). It was often the case that companies refused to allow Black artists to record the selections they wanted to because it did not adhere to the corporate conceptions of what “race records” were and what “race” artists sounded like.

Amiri Baraka equated the rise of “race records” to a larger phenomenon in American history—one that situates the “contemporary expression of the Negro soul” in consumer society (1963: 119). For Baraka, the creation of the “race” record signaled the transition from Black musical expression as a functional music to a professional music, that is, “a form of music that could be used to entertain people on a professional basis” (ibid.: 98). It is this transition from functional to professional that shaped the cultural politics, cultural memory, and collective identity of all subsequent Black popular music that would come to influence the music industry and mainstream culture indefinitely.

Like the Afro-modernist era of the 1940s that utilized the blues modality as a type of reflective musing, the classic blues era of the 1920s and 1930s was historically contingent and socially constituted. However, before the white, male gatekeepers of the early recording industry provided the technology to document these artists, the blues had already developed and traveled amongst the post-emancipation African American population:

The blues represent experience as emotionally configured by an individual psyche, historically shaped by post-Civil War conditions and the emancipation of the slaves. These conditions are often simply designated as ‘the blues.’ The emotional responses to them are also called ‘the blues.’ ‘The blues’ therefore designates both feelings and the circumstances that have provoked them. (Davis 1998: 112)

One of the most violent times in American history, the “chaotic time of Reconstruction” (Baraka 1963) failed to sufficiently incorporate the newly freed Black population into America’s social, economic, and political systems, nor did it successfully emancipate the Black (and white) population from the psychological systems of slavery: “Extralegal means, like lynching, rape, alongside legal but abusive practices including sharecropping, emerged to maintain the status quo of Black subordination” (Feliz 2017).

No longer legally confined as property to the families who enslaved them, newly freed African Americans were able to control the trajectory of their families for the first time. Because of this, the status of their personal relationships was revolutionized in ways that their status as American citizens were not. These new realities of mobility and sexual independence would shape the musical expression of African Americans as free women and men.²⁴ In this sense, the blues was an early construction of what Robin D.G. Kelley (2002) refers to as the “Black radical imagination.” Post-emancipation Black sexuality acted as a conceptual space to build on a politics of liberation and desire and opened the Black radical imagination up to new ways of living and interacting with each other: “Sexuality thus was one of the most tangible domains in which emancipation was acted upon and through which its meanings were expressed” (Davis 1998: 4).

When I asked Betty if she thought the blues was connected to the working-class experience, she replied: “Well, there really wasn’t a working class, because they used to work in the fields.

²⁴ Many scholars, including Albert Murray (2017), have explained how the blues was not simply an expression of melancholy or suffering, or a release from political and economic oppression (which Murray calls “the blues as such”). Rather, as Murray says, “the blues as music” refers to relationships between men and women and the truth.

There were the blues singers and when people would party [the blues singers] would come to the clubs on the weekend” (Davis, interview by author, Feb 10, 2019). For Betty, the agrarian South and the activities that came along with it, including sharecropping, were so firmly rooted in her cultural memory of the blues—her cultural memory of her grandparent’s farm—that she denied the prominent existence of an African American middle class within the culture of blues. Betty equates the blues with low-income communities who engaged in hard labor outside of the desirable (i.e. respectable) qualifications of modern work. In doing so, she unknowingly affirms Hazel Carby’s intervention in the study of blues that equates the history of the blues with a history of the Black working class: “[W]e have to challenge the contemporary histories of the formation of a Black urban culture as a history of the Black middle class” (1992: 754).

As massive numbers of Black Southerners migrated to Northern urban enclaves, the weekend practice of attending live blues shows—“when people would party”—transformed into a more consistent “commercialized vice” (ibid.: 751). At the center of this vice were young, African American women projecting a peripheral type of existence that resided outside the more elite sector of middle-class patriarchal society. Through the tangible domain of sexuality, blues women expressed ideas of mobility, desire, pleasure, and autonomy, embodying sexuality as a conceptual, performative site for identity that developed after emancipation.

Indeed, it was because of Black women’s crucial role in urban blues culture that middle-class and bourgeoisie African American communities, along with the white mainstream, deemed such expression as “low culture,” “socially dangerous,” and “pathological” (ibid.: 729-52). Blues women were unapologetically foregrounding their music in the very aspects of Black women’s sexuality that had been submerged—namely, desire and vulnerability—by both white mainstream society and the African American Christian church. By articulating another conception of their sexual identities, blues women offered representations of love and sexual relationships that deviated from the era’s established popular culture. Rather than romanticizing the dominant ideology of love, they delivered “fearless, unadorned realism” (Davis 1998: 23) through their lyrical content, vocality, and public personas. This type of reconstruction was available through the use of recorded song, which became an empowered cultural text that pushed forward the project of Afro-modernism and Black feminist thought: “The centrality of the singer’s individual persona, the highly personalized subject matter of songs, the thematic shifts toward the material world and the pursuit of pleasure were all characteristic of an emerging modern ethos” (Hunter 1997: 169).

Their songs not only challenged the dominant ideological assumptions regarding women and being in love, but often blatantly contradicted and dismantled them. Songs sung by blues women often discredited institutions of marriage, monogamy, domesticity, and heterosexuality. Socially offensive themes including extramarital relationships, domestic violence, and the ephemerality of many sexual partnerships were prevailing subjects in the blues of the “race records” era. In this sense, the blues woman challenged the “the routine internalization of male dominance” (Davis 1998: 36) through the medium of song in a way that had never been articulated or documented in public before. Because of this public display, blues women were often thought of as a threat to the progress of African Americans and believed to engage in behavior that worked against the respectability politics, integrationist politics, and Black masculinity that the middle-class and bourgeoisie African American communities believed in (Carby 1992: 742).

Angela Davis explains that “the blues realm is all-encompassing. In contrast to the condemnatory and censoring character of Christianity, it knows few taboos” (1998: 133). No taboo topic caused as much disdain and anxiety from the white mainstream and African American Christian communities as Black women’s sexuality. Up until the recordings of the classic blues women, representation of Black women's sexuality had existed within the margins of a white-dominated feminist discourse and was framed by both respectability politics and racial uplift politics. The classic blues of the 1920s and early 1930s was a radically alternative form of representation, “an oral and musical women’s culture that explicitly addresses the contradictions of feminism, sexuality, and power” (Carby 1990: 241). These fearless musicians reconstructed Black women's bodies as both performers and professionals, sexual agents, and sensitive beings. They announced women’s desire with assertiveness and independence, and in doing so formulated a discourse based on collective group experience and knowledge that was previously relegated to the private realm of society. Furthermore, they did not give up their racial politics in order to assert their sexual politics, and vice versa. In fact, the intersection of sex, gender, and race is what made their alternative form of representation so powerful and why, most likely, it still holds up today in modern feminist discourse.

How the national music industry came to record Black women was something of an accident. When an OKeh record label session that was supposed to feature Sophie Tucker—a white singer whose background was in Blackface vaudeville and other Black mimicry art forms—got canceled, the enterprising Black producer-songwriter Perry Bradford talked the record company

into recording a Black contralto named Mamie Smith (he had been turned down excessively by Columbia and other record companies).²⁵ The result was “Crazy Blues” (1920), what is now considered the first classic blues recording and first “race record.”

Mamie Smith’s booming chest voice declared her sonic presence as both a skilled musician and an unapologetic woman with desires from the onset of the recording. Bringing textuality and vocality together, Smith forcefully cut through the recordings bright horns to deliver her message with a matter-of-fact tenacity, singing, *“I can't sleep at night, I can't eat a bite, 'Cause the man I love, He don't treat me right.”* As a woman, she has been mistreated by the man she loves, causing her to become psychologically weary and physically weak. In only four lines, Smith publicized what was previously a private matter: a woman’s discontent in her love life.

The lyrics of women’s blues songs [...] explore frustrations associated with love and sexuality and emphasize the simultaneously individual and collective nature of personal relationships. Sexuality is not privatized in the blues. Rather, it is represented as shared experience that is socially produced. This intermingling of the private and public, the personal and political, is present in the many thousands of blues songs about abandonment, disloyalty, and cruelty, as well as those that give expression to sexual desire and love’s hopefulness. (Davis 1998: 91)

It is not necessarily that the meaning of the lyrics has inherent power, but rather that the intention of sharing them engenders the lyrics as meaningful. These two identities—vocalist and woman—organically merge to form what Emily Lordi refers to as a “signature voice,” or “singular, authoritative voices that pay tribute to and call out toward others” (2013: 173). It is not only that Mamie Smith’s recording enabled her to identify her own signature voice, but that it resonated within a larger collective community and allowed others to identify theirs as well.

2.2.2 Blues Women and Black Feminism

A signature voice is “singular [...] without being insular [...] individual but not individualistic” (Lordi 2013: 175), and its success lies in its ability to create an individual sound

²⁵ The Okeh record label was founded in 1918 in New York City and led the music industry in cultivating a new market of “race records.”

and feel while gesturing toward “broader imagined communities” (ibid.: 176).²⁶ The broader imagined community Mamie Smith was gesturing toward was made up of the countless African American women whose lives existed at the intersection of race, class, religion, gender, and sexuality, and whose lived experiences were often named in the lyrical content of the classic blues. Therefore, the classic blues women’s recordings and performances identified and mediatized an imagined community that was formulated around the instinctive relationship between the singer and her audience—the song and their experiences; the music and the text.²⁷

This realization of an imagined community by blues women enacts one of the primary modes of Black feminist thought, which is to authorize a collective standpoint by sharing individual experiences which resonate within a broader body of wisdom. The systematic group commonalities that developed amongst Black women under historically racist and patriarchal systems (including marriage, childcare, housing, education, and employment) fostered the formation of a group-based, collective standpoint. Emerging from lived experience and social realities rooted in oppression that are both systematically and internally perpetuated, Black women constituted a distinct body of collective wisdom on how to survive in the U.S.: “As a historically oppressed group, U.S. Black women have produced social thought designed to oppose oppression” (Collins 2000: 11). The presence of Black women’s collective wisdom directly impacts both individual and group consciousness, making such a standpoint both self-defined and group derived. However, it is important to stress that no homogeneous Black *woman*’s standpoint exists:

There is no essential or archetypal Black woman whose experiences stand as normal, normative, and thereby authentic. An essentialist understanding of a Black women’s standpoint suppresses differences among Black women in search of an elusive group unity. Instead, it may be more accurate to say that a Black *women*’s collective standpoint does exist, one characterized by the tensions that accrue to different responses to common challenges. (2000: 32)

While life for Black women during the “race records” era was multifaceted throughout America, nuanced by factors including place, class, and religion, blues women constituted a unique

²⁶ “Imagined communities” as a theoretical concept was originally developed by Benedict Anderson (1983) to analyze nationalism. Anderson perceived the nation as a socially constructed community imagined by the people who perceive themselves as part of that group.

²⁷ Emily Lordi explains that “the phrase ‘signature voice’ itself brings textuality and vocality together, evoking *signature*’s connotation of writing—its etymological root in the Latin *signare*, ‘to sign’ or ‘to mark’” (2013: 174).

inner circle within the larger population of African American women. Through their songs and their public image, we see that they made common choices about their lives and labor that went against the heteronormative pressures of society and family: “The commonality of experiences and family background of the women who chose careers as blues singers suggests that the combination of talent and a desire to perform usually outweighed the pressures for conformity to the mores and taboos of community and family regarding a performing career” (Harrison 2006: 514).²⁸

The commonality of experiences of the blues women indicate that self-definition and self-determination acted as crucial factors in manifesting their labor and mobility. Originally from Ohio, Mamie Smith started dancing and traveling in vaudeville and minstrels when she was only ten years old, eventually ending up in the Harlem nightclub circuit. Ida Cox left her home in Georgia to join the Black and Tan Minstrel Show when she was only fourteen. Josephine Baker left her home and her job as a “domestic” for a white woman in St. Louis when she was only thirteen to perform with a vaudeville troupe called the Dixie Steppers. Alberta Hunter left Memphis when she was thirteen because she heard young girls were being paid ten dollars a week to sing in Chicago.

The stories of these women are testimony to how those who have experienced systematic and internalized oppression achieve mobility through alternative routes. Joining the music industry was a conscious decision to achieve increased mobility and labor-power and turn away from other, more debilitating segregated jobs, including domestic work or laundresses: “This increase in their physical mobility parallels their musical challenges to sexual conventions and gendered social roles” (Carby 1992: 755). However, it was not simply the desire to escape the mores and taboos of community and family which drove these women to a career in the music industry. These women had innovative talent and unbound aspiration, and their ability as singers, songwriters, and performers challenged the expected and accepted performances of both femininity and vocality.

As I will analyze in Chapter 4, like Betty, blues women’s voices “were not considered ‘pretty’ or ‘lyrical,’ but rather were coarse in texture” (Harrison 2006: 515). Their melodic range was quite limited and yet the vocal power and unique inflections that they employed expressed an

²⁸ Berlant and Warner describe heteronormativity as consisting “less of norms that could be summarized as a body of doctrine than a sense of rightness produced in contradictory manifestations—often unconscious—immanent to practice or to institutions” (1998: 548).

unmatched emotional element to their songs. As a young girl, Betty took note of this unique style of singing that emphasized feeling over technique. When I asked her what the blues women taught her, she responded: “Well, phrasing. How to carry a song. How they broke up the songs that they sang” (Davis, interview by author, November 2, 2019).

Listening to the blues women with her grandmother signaled Betty’s first attempt to identify vocality in the performative realm of femininity. While Betty has not been quick to elaborate on the sexual politics of the blues in more recent conversations, it seemed to me that her understanding of the blues women’s commitment to agency, autonomy and self-definition was credited to her grandmother’s self-expression just as much as it was to the actual recorded songs themselves. By way of her grandmother, Betty was invited into the broader imagined community that was made public by the recordings of blues women who came before her.

In “Crazy Blues” (1920), Mamie Smith used her signature voice to position herself as a musical force to be reckoned with while sending out a clarion call for other Black women to join in the public affirmation of their private thoughts, feelings, and experiences. In this sense, “the term signature voice describes[s] both operations: the artists self-assertion and her extension of authority toward others” (Lordi 2013: 175). Whether women answered back with recordings of their own—as did Ida Cox, Chippie Hill, Sarah Martin, Clara Smith, Trixie Smith, Victoria Spivey, Sippie Wallace, and the most famous of all, Bessie Smith, “Empress of the Blues”—or they simply consumed and acknowledged such a text as valid—as did Buella Blackwell—Smith’s “Crazy Blues” set in motion the process of empowering Black women’s personal experience through song. The record went on to sell 75,000 copies a week consecutively for a year and successfully opened up a new market for African American music (Burnim and Maultsby 2006).

By 1930, more than 100 African American women had recorded at least one blues song (Harrison 2006: 517). These recorded responses to Smith’s “Crazy Blues” crafted a discography that documented the joys and tensions of African American womanhood during this specific era. Such joys and tensions aesthetically manifested themselves through what scholars have coined as “advice songs.” The “advice” offered by blues women was formulated around a specific type of subjugated knowledge in order to encourage, inform and warn other women: “For African American women, the knowledge gained at intersecting oppressions of race, class, and gender provide the stimulus for crafting and passing on the subjugated knowledge of Black women’s critical social theory” (Collins 2000: 11). Collins use of subjugated knowledge differs somewhat

what Michel Foucault's, for whom subjugated knowledges are "those blocs of historical knowledge which were present but disguised," namely, "a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity" (1980: 82). Rather, Collins suggests that Black feminist thought is "not a 'naïve knowledge' but has been made to appear so by those controlling knowledge validation procedures" (2000: 311n2) within the white supremacist systems of patriarchy. With the blues women, we find knowledge that testifies to Black women's experience with love, sex, abuse, jealousy, depression, mental illness, money, work, travel, friendship, domesticity, and spirituality amongst others.

Often, "advice songs" explicitly focused on how to deal with unfaithful, unreliable, and/or violent men, including Gertrude "Ma" Rainey's (1926) song "Trust No Man" (Figure 1):

I want all you women to listen to me
Don't trust your man no further than your eyes can see
I trusted my man with my best friend
But that was a bad bargain in the end

Figure 1. Song lyrics to Gertrude "Ma" Rainey's "Trust No Man" (1926).

Other times, "advice songs" protested against traditional norms about women's domesticity and male dominance by explicitly repudiating marriage, including Bessie Smith's "Young Woman's Blues" (1926) (Figure 2):

I ain't gonna marry
Ain't gonna settle down
I'm a young woman
And ain't done runnin' around

Figure 2. Song lyrics to Bessie Smith's "Young Woman's Blues" (1926).

During the "race records" era (and still, to a certain extent, throughout Betty's career), marriage was a social institution that was not just normative but required in order for a woman to not raise suspicion or fear. In the same (1926) song, Bessie Smith sings, "*Some people call me a hobo, Some call me a bum, Nobody knows my name, Nobody knows what I've done.*" These lyrics speak to the fear, mistrust, and marginalization of women, especially Black urban migrant women, who existed outside the patriarchal power of a husband and without the maternal duties of childcare. Blues

women were notoriously unmarried and without children. They were, therefore, declared independent to a society that contained women through the patriarchal institution of marriage and the insular labor of childcare.

Other more implicit advice songs displayed oppositional attitudes towards dominant ideologies regarding love and sexuality, and urged women to reject sexual passivity including Bessie Smith's (1927) song "Lock and Key" (Figure 3):

You did your stuff, so get yourself another home
I said it long enough, so pack your little trunk and roam
I used to love you once, but you took and made a fool out of me
Oh, when I get home, I'm gonna change this old lock and key

Figure 3. Song lyrics to Bessie Smith's "Lock and Key" (1927).

Blues women did not only encourage self-agency and self-respect when one needed to leave a lover or relationship, they also encouraged women to be true to themselves when choosing a lover or entering into a relationship. Blues women were well-known to proudly engage in homosexuality, bisexuality, and gender non-conformity.²⁹ In Gertrude "Ma" Rainey's (1928) song "Prove It On Me," she admits her attraction toward women and her desire to present masculinity in her style of dress and attitude (Figure 4):

I went out last night with a crowd of my friends,
It must've been women, 'cause I don't like no men
Wear my clothes just like a fan
Talk to the gals just like any old man

Figure 4. Song lyrics to Gertrude "Ma" Rainey's "Prove It On Me" (1928).

Sexual fluidity and gender-bending was an active component in urban blues culture. Alberta Hunter, Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, and Bessie Smith were all "in the life—all of them girls were," as lesbian trailblazer Mabel Hampton, a dancer during the Harlem Renaissance, once said, "every last one of them" (Riemer and Brown 2019: 56).

Not just explicitly sexual (although many of the classic blues women and Daughters of Betty identify as queer in terms of sexual preference), those that embody the blues women legacy

²⁹ What has previously been referred to as the type of "femininity" performed by classic blues women could now be referred to as queerness, genderqueer, gender-bending, and/or sexually fluid.

queer the system around them by “exist[ing] in spaces not meant for them” (Feliz 2017). By making private matters public and manipulating gender performativity into their performance practices, blues women authored a type of queerness that worked against the restrictive, heteronormative nature of victimization. In this sense, “queerness” can be understood as the “undoing of normativity” (Buckland 2002: 5).³⁰

As one of the first groups of African Americans to gesture to economic success via their musical persona, the blues women “decked their bodies out with pearls, gold, and rhinestones” (Davis 1998: 136). However, this ornate style did not always adhere to the gender binary. In 1928, Gladys Bentley, an out and proud African American lesbian, arrived in the entertainment industry doing exactly what Gertrude “Ma” Rainey referred to in “Prove It On Me”—wearing traditionally male clothing. Other blues women, including Big Mama Thornton, commonly presented themselves as masculine via their clothing, mannerisms, and attitudes.

This specific style of gender-bending performativity that was popular amongst blues women threatened what Hazel Carby refers to as the “fragile social fabric of the Black urban community” (1992: 750). What was deemed immoral by the African American Christian patriarchy and the white mainstream was recognized and celebrated as liberatory for others. The very nature of advice songs suggested that there was a broader imagined community that was internalizing these messages for their own lives and constructing new realities with them. Blues women’s songs documented a Black feminist pursuit of pleasure—a modern ethos—and their lives and public personas provided “social models for women who aspired to escape from and improve their conditions of existence” (ibid.: 755). By validating the oppressive experiences of male dominance as shared, blues women used recorded music to (1) turn personal experiences into social issues, (2) invoke a collective presence based on those social issues, and (3) provide emotional support by amplifying “attitudes that moved from victimization to agency” (Collins 2000: 62).

As single, child-less, mobile, self-defined, and self-determined individuals, blues women queered the spaces around them simply through their unapologetic and uncontained presence. By

³⁰ It is not my intention to provide a fixed meaning of “queerness,” nor do I wish to suggest an erasure of sexuality and gender from its historical uses and/or current projects. Rather, by understanding queerness as “undoing normativity” I suggest that one’s gender and/or sexuality is not dependent on their ability to engage in “queer social practices [...] that deconstruct heteronormativity” and that identifying as LGBTQIA+ is “not a conscious strategy” to deconstruct heteronormativity in and of itself (Buckland 2002: 5).

making private matters public, blues women authored a type of vulnerability that worked against the restrictive nature of victimization. And by publicly performing gender and documenting sexual fluidity through song lyrics (during a time when such activities were not only socially taboo, but illegal), blues women acted as crucial public figures in the early years of emerging queer communities (Chen 2016). In hindsight, blues women of the “race records” era should now be acknowledged as early agents of a dynamic Black queer ideology.

By living their lives outside the traditional restrictions of marriage and childcare they achieved alternative means of mobility. Through their empowered and atypical access, they became cultural mediators of a blues tradition that blurred the binaries of South/North, past/present, private/public, and masculine/feminine. Expressing a type of “brazen irreverence” (Gussow 2013: 618) for the moral grounding that had previously structured Black women’s lives, the blues women became a visible and audible symbol of both Afro-modernism and Black feminism.

Rather than the women of the blues themselves, it was Betty’s grandmother, Buella Blackwell, who was the central mechanism for Betty’s cultural mediation: “Anytime I would ask my grandmother questions about life, how to act, she would play me records” (Davis, interview by author, Feb 10, 2017). When Betty asked her grandmother for advice, she provided her with the cultural texts which she believed in and had available at her disposal. Blues women “redefined the source of theory” (Kelley 2002: 154) by expanding the definition of who constitutes a theorist, or an intellectual. By utilizing her record collection as a pedagogical tool to help formulate young Betty’s sense of self-hood as a Black woman, Buella Blackwell affirmed the blues women as organic intellectuals and carried on their commitment to a feminist oral tradition. Blackwell’s decision to transfer the music of the blues women to Betty indicates that she considered such knowledge to be especially useful for her granddaughter who, at age twelve, had written her first song: “Bake That Cake Of Love.”

Through her grandmother, Betty gained a significant amount of subjugated knowledge that was epistemologically rooted in the lived cultural practice of both the blues and Black feminism. Not only did she gain musical knowledge about the blues canon (curated by Blackwell’s record collection), she also gained social knowledge—namely, how to navigate being a young, gifted, and Black woman in a racist and sexist world; how to be mobile, independent, self-determined, and self-defined. This is demonstrated later in Betty’s professional choices as a model, songwriter,

musician, and producer, but even as a young girl it was clear that Betty was beginning to put that knowledge to use. Not only did Betty begin to test the waters of songwriting, but she also participated in local talent shows in the Homestead area, was active in school plays and cheerleading, and even contributed what can only be described as “think-pieces” to her school newsletters. Here, fourteen-year-old Betty wrote a piece entitled “Boys! Boys! Boys!” where she anticipates the “problems” those of the opposite sex will surely cause her: “When you like a boy you really have a problem on your hands” (Mabry 1958).

Asserting herself was an essential part of Betty’s self-formation and personal style. By the time Betty was fifteen she was traveling around Pittsburgh with a local DJ from WAMO—a popular R&B station and the first Black radio station in America—acting as entourage for the celebrity DJ as he played music and hosted parties at local schools and Legion Halls. On top of songwriting, acting in school plays, cheerleading, contributing to school newsletters, and hopping around with famous Pittsburgh DJs, Betty discovered another passion: fashion and design. For her Senior Prom, Betty designed and made her own dress that boldly surpassed the fashion stylings of the era: “The dress was red with gold sequins on the top and red chiffon on the bottom. And I had this gold spray [that] I streaked my hair with. And gold high heel shoes” (Davis, personal communication, June 2, 2016). But it was Betty’s love of music that shone through her other talents, and by graduation she was adamant she was going to be a songwriter. Excelling at academics, she was able to skip a grade and graduated from Homestead High School in 1961. At seventeen, in the tradition of blues women who left their hometowns at a young age to enter the music industry, Betty moved to New York City with a notebook full of songs to pursue her dream of being a songwriter.

3.0 “Get Ready for Betty”: Fashion, Fusion, and Dismantling the Muse

can't just quiet down a train moving at full speed.
not wearing those feathers & history and wild rebellion
as leather necktie. loosen up miles. Betty
is in the building.

Jessica Care Moore, “They Say She’s Different”

When Betty Mabry moved to New York City with the dream of becoming a songwriter, she carried on the long tradition of blues women who left their families and hometowns behind in order to gain more meaningful access to the world via the music business. However, as a seventeen-year-old high school graduate with no connections in the industry nor any formal musical training, Betty knew she would first need to get accustomed to the Big Apple and find her niche: “I moved [to New York City] right after I got out of high school. And I enrolled in the Fashion Institute of Technology and majored in apparel design, so I was really in the fashion world” (Davis, personal communication, August 20, 2016). While Betty had a deep reverence for fashion and was both a skilled designer and a talented model, enrolling in the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) was largely a transitional move that allowed her to settle into the city until she could establish herself as a songwriter.

This chapter follows Betty into adulthood and continues the work of building a timeline around her life and career through key biographical details derived from published research, personal archives, and ethnographic interviews that myself and others conducted with Betty and a number of people who knew her as musical collaborators, friends, or experts. My goal here is not only to provide a more robust account of Betty’s experiences than is previously available, but to also contextualize the development of her careers in both fashion and music that were integrated in the 1960s countercultural scene of New York City, where she thrived as a designer, model, DJ, MC, and trendsetter. Most importantly, I establish Betty’s entry into the music industry through an analysis of her first recordings and an examination of her seminal, yet largely unrecognized, collaborative role in the development of jazz fusion during her brief marriage to Miles Davis. As part of that discussion, I interrogate the masculinist trope of the “muse” that has commonly been used to locate Betty in music history (if at all) as a passive source of inspiration to Miles Davis,

rather than being credited as an active artist who consciously shaped his aesthetics, influenced his musical direction, and helped him reinvent his then stagnant career. Finally, I analyze Betty's early experimentation with vocality, arranging, and bandleading that acted as a precursor to her 1970s albums.

3.1 The New York Scene

By 1962, Betty was immersed in the New York City fashion world that consisted of designers, models, stylists, hairdressers, and performers who were collectively pushing the burgeoning 1960s aesthetic forward. She also briefly attended the American Musical Dramatic Academy, where she studied acting, speech, and voice. Betty's world was rapidly expanding outside the cultural dialogue of the rural South of her childhood, and the urban North of her adolescence. Denise Oliver-Velez, one of Betty's friends throughout the mid to late '60s, remembers that "Betty cultivated a lot of the designer types [...] very out there. She, in many ways, incorporated the outrageousness of quite a number of [those] folks who I knew were drag queens" (Oliver-Velez, interview by John Ballon, Dec 7, 2004). Betty quickly became a beloved figure in the underground art scene. Hairdresser to the 1960s New York City elite, Mark Okun, remembers Betty fondly: "She was selling her own designs. She was a fashion queen" (Okun, interview by John Ballon, Nov 20, 2004).

While still at FIT, selling original designs to make extra money and being introduced to an array of artists in different fields, Betty frequented the folk clubs and coffee houses in Greenwich Village that had become hugely popular through the Folk Music Revival of the 1950s and early 1960s. When I asked Betty what it was that she enjoyed about the folk music scene, she said: "Well, a lot of that [music] comes from the blues. And sometimes there would be old blues type musicians who would play" (Davis, personal communication, July 29, 2017). Even as she embarked on new adventures in more modern, youthful scenes, her love of the blues and her desire to engage with it directly was a consistent priority in Betty's life.

Blair Sabol, a fashion columnist for *The Village Voice*, remembers the impact Betty had on the New York City scene: "She exploded on the scene for such a powerfully short time. But she was influential. Well, first visually, she was incredibly influential I thought 'cause I was in charge

of that world, and I thought I had never seen anybody who could put themselves together in a very funk-chic way” (Sabol, interview by Damon Smith, May 21, 2013). After three years of school, Betty quit FIT and pursued modeling. She heard the money was substantial and was encouraged by her designer friends, including African American designer and fellow FIT alumni Stephen Burrows, who made Betty original pieces for her to premier out in New York City’s expanding nightlife. Betty recalled going to several modeling agencies without any resume or photos; armed with just her gorgeous physical appearance and delightful personality. That was enough to land her a modeling contract with Wilhelmina Modeling Agency, one of the top agencies in the country. As a “Wilhelmina girl,” Betty took the fashion world by storm, becoming one of the first African American women to appear in *Seventeen* and *Glamour* magazines, as well as appearing in premier African American publications including *Ebony* and *Jet* (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Betty Mabry in the May 9, 1968 issue of *Jet* magazine. The caption reads that Betty is wearing her “own design.” Photo reproduced from *Jet*’s online archive.

While Betty was consistently getting well-paid work as a model, she was determined to break into the music industry. Colette Harron, née Mimram, owned a chic clothing store on East 9th Street (which had no name and was simply referred to as “Colette’s” or “Colette’s shop”), and remembered that Betty’s focus was always on songwriting: “She talked about [being a songwriter] all the time, she was writing, she was singing [...] that was her main focus” (Harron, interview by Damon Smith, May 16, 2013).

In 1964, Betty was given the opportunity to transform a small basement cellar located at 90th and Broadway into a night club. The building was owned by a friend of Betty’s who thought she would be the perfect person to put it on the map of New York’s burgeoning club scene. Thus, The Cellar, a private nightclub was born. Betty was the MC, DJ, and all-around hostess: “I would play records and get on the microphone and talk up the audience [...] I would hire girls to dance and invite all my friends” (Davis, personal communication, Nov 19, 2016). Olivier-Velez recalled that “Betty not only ran the place, she was the trendsetter and maestro of the scene” (Ballon 2007: 118). Olivier-Velez also remembered Betty being a “great dancer” when she would take time out from spinning records and playing host. The Cellar quickly became a happening spot amid the burgeoning underground nightclub scene and was frequented by artists, musicians, athletes, and actors, including Jimi Hendrix, Lou Alcindor (Kareem Abdul-Jabbar), Richard Roundtree, and Max Julian (Fisher 1974: F2).

Betty quickly garnered attention for being one of the very few people in the scene who did not indulge in illicit substances. Colette Harron remembers that although The Cellar was a dance club, Betty did not serve alcohol: “It was like everybody around her was wasted and she was never ever. She was always in control. She never smoked; she never did any of that” (Harron, interview by Damon Smith, May 16, 2013). Betty’s sober, healthy living would become a mainstay in her life and something her friends and colleagues would often cite as a memorable characteristic.

It was at The Cellar, in 1964, where Betty met soul singer Lou Courtney. Betty told Courtney that she was a songwriter and had written a tune about her club, appropriately called “The Cellar.” Courtney liked what he heard and purportedly produced the song, though there is no tangible evidence to suggest it was actually released, given even the biggest Betty Davis collectors do not own a copy or a test pressing. Betty does not recall recording a B-side to “The Cellar” but she acknowledges writing and recording the song, and she even remembered some of the lyrics fifty-five years later: *“Where you going fellas, so fly? I’m going to the Cellar, My oh my, What*

you going to do there, We're going to boogaloo there" (Davis, personal communication, Nov 19, 2016). Despite the absence of a bona fide single, the recording process was Betty's first foray into the studio and her point of entry into the music industry that she marked by registering her song for publishing. It is notable that from the outset of her recording career, Betty treated 'The Business' as such and immediately began to exert the kind of control over her music that would define her pioneering role as a woman writer/producer/performer. The man who assisted Betty with the registration process, Jack Pearl, introduced her to one of his clients, an arranger and record producer named Don Costa, who had previously discovered Paul Anka and had hit records working with Frank Sinatra. This fortuitous encounter paved the way for then 20-year-old Betty Mabry to write, record, and release her first 45 RPM single later that year on Don Costa's DCP International label.³¹

Betty's appropriately titled debut record, "Get Ready For Betty" (b/w "I'm Gonna Get My Baby Back"), was produced by Don Costa and arranged by Teddy Randazzo, who composed the song around Betty's lyrics and melody. It is a doo-wop inspired soul song, drenched in the kind of textured reverb that referenced the "wall of sound" style of recording formulated by the innovative and controversial producer, Phil Spector. The song begins with a call and response between Betty's solo voice and backing girl-group vocalists who each trade the line "*Get ready*" followed by "*For Betty*." Just before the backing vocalists finish their line, we hear Betty's lead-in, "*I'm back in town*," which draws out the last word over multiple notes using a soulful pop technique of melisma. Betty's voice sounds confident and steady as she sings the lyrics in a comfortable chest belt without any added vocal ornamentation. As with nearly all of the songs she eventually composed, "Get Ready For Betty" is sung in the first person and serves as a warning to any women who might get in her way: "*All of you girls, You better hide your guys, 'Cuz I'm gonna get the first one, That catches my eye.*"

The tightly harmonized call and response backing vocals (sung by uncredited women singers) are a product of the early soul era. While not sonically representative of Betty's signature sound she cultivated in the 1970s, her debut single lyrically sets the stage for what would become her hyper-sexualized "bad-girl archetype" (Keyes 2013: 44). The song simultaneously asserts her

³¹ DCP International was founded by Don Costa after he left ABC-Paramount in 1964. United Artists Records purchased the label in 1966 and changed the name to Veep.

disregard for other women's emotional and social attachment to men, while implicitly affirming her own desire for autonomy. More broadly, it lacks all sentimentality toward the conventions of fidelity and monogamy that one would typically find in a song sung by a young woman in the early '60s (though this stance is a feature of both classic blues songs and Betty's entire body of work). When one listens to this song fifty-five years after its release, it is difficult not to interpret it as Betty's warning to those who might get in her way; although when I mentioned this interpretation to Betty and asked her to elaborate, she casually responded: "It was just a great idea for a song" (Davis, personal communication, Dec 7, 2019).

After Betty's debut single ultimately failed to chart or garner her further attention from the music industry, she returned to her modeling career for several years despite the fact that her heart was not in it. In a 1969 issue of *The Village Voice*, she was crystal clear about her motivation: "I can tell you I'm only digging [modeling] for the bread [money]. There's no brain power or heavy creation involved, but the bread sure is there" (Sabol 1969).

3.1.1 The Cosmic Ladies

As New York City became increasingly engrossed in the free love and psychedelic counterculture, Betty's infectious personality and bold fashion sensibilities garnered her a premier role as one of the scenesters in the Greenwich Village avant-garde art scene. This is where Betty befriended a small interracial group of women who became known around town as The Cosmic Ladies (Figure 6).³²

³² As of this writing, there is virtually nothing written about The Cosmic Ladies outside of oral history compiled from Betty's inner circle. Emily Lordi refers to them as "the coterie of women that inspired Hendrix himself together led by Hendrix's lover Devon Wilson and Betty Davis" (2018). Cheryl Keyes refers to them as a "group of African American women dubbed the Cosmic Ladies, who basically frequented local clubs throughout the Village" (2013: 38). Music critic Jeff Chang described them as "a magnetic clique of transplanted small-town African American women possessed of boundless energy and endless style" (2007). However, The Cosmic Ladies were a racially mixed group of women that included Colette Harron and Stella Douglas.



Figure 6. Some of The Cosmic Ladies, East Village, New York City, 1968. From left to right: Stella Douglas, Devon Wilson (standing), Colette Harron, John Edward Heys, and Betty Mabry.

The Cosmic Ladies operated as something of an artistic collective and support system for a fluctuating group of musicians, artists, models, and dancers in the Village. One of The Cosmic Ladies was Devon Wilson, a close friend of Betty who dated Jimi Hendrix and would later become the deceased subject of Betty's song "Steppin High in Her I. Miller Shoes" (1973). Other Cosmic Ladies included Winona Williams, Colette Harron, Stella Douglas and a woman named Audrey (whose last name is not remembered by Betty) who everyone called "Little Stuff." In many ways, the group embodied the intersection of Black Power politics, sexual liberation, and the psychedelic counterculture in which they emerged. Ex-Santana drummer Michael Shrieve remembers The Cosmic Ladies as a progressive, influential element to the scene: "They were at the epicenter, influencing the scene, I could see why Miles would definitely be attracted to Betty. She was completely magnetic. Being around her and the other girls made us feel that we were at the cutting edge of music, especially that New York music scene" (Ballon 2007: 118). Unfortunately, their contributions to the New York music scene have been largely forgotten as they have, in hindsight,

been ineptly reduced to “muses, groupies, heart-breakers, and trendsetters all rolled into one” (Ballon 2016).

Of all the terms that emerged out of the 1960s counterculture, the phenomenon of the groupie “gained recognition and took shape as a social identity within the counter-culture of 1960s’ rock music and continues to hold significant cultural currency and power” (Larsen 2017: 398). From its earliest inception, the term has been used to designate a type of woman fan in the rock music world and has been used in a derogatory manner both by the popular media and by fans themselves (Forrest 2010; Jensen 2011; Larsen 2017). The label groupie follows cultural assumptions about women being both sex objects and passive consumers of mass culture. Just as with the muse, which I will address in the following sections, the groupie identity is used to ‘other’ women and exclude them from the creative and inventive production of rock music and other artistic scenes. Jensen defines othering through the context of rock music journalism:

The discursive processes by which powerful groups define subordinate groups into existence in a reductionist way which ascribe problematic and/or inferior characteristics to these subordinate groups. Such discursive processes affirm the legitimacy and superiority of the powerful and condition identity formations among the subordinate. (Jensen 2011: 65)

In effect, this othering practice played an integral role in the mythology of rock that would go on to shape the music industry of the 1970s and onward. Genres including rock (and jazz) have long been synonymous with what Larsen calls “three distinct but interrelated forces [...] hegemonic masculinity, heteronormativity, and homosociality” (Larsen 2017: 401). These forces hold in place the patriarchy of the music industry. Although perhaps not labeled as such specifically during the 1970s, the mythology of the “groupie” would stay with Betty even as she wrote, recorded, arranged, and produced her own albums. Due to her association with famous male musicians, the focus from the press was on her gendered, sexualized, and raced body, as opposed to her collaborative and intellectual capabilities as an artist herself. Thus, the term “groupie” effectively strips women of everything but their perceived function as sexual partners.

Indeed, it is undeniable that sex was an important part of the 1960s counterculture rock experience and something both men and women enjoyed. However, by analyzing the male musicians in power as passive victims who have fallen prey to the aggressive whims of fans presents a "one-dimensional view of groupies as merely sexual beings [...] whose only goal in life

was to sleep with as many musicians as possible" (Forrest 2010: 137). Amongst the powerful men in the music industry that dismissed Betty (and The Cosmic Ladies) as groupies was her ex-husband, Miles Davis, who spread rumors about her promiscuity and infidelity quickly after the relationship ended. In 1980, a decade after their marriage ended, Miles wrote and recorded a song titled "Back Seat Betty," a crude insinuation of his ex-wife's hyper-sexuality. In his autobiography, Miles described Betty as a "high-class groupie" (Davis and Troupe 1989: 305), explaining that "Betty was too young and wild for the things I expected of a woman. Betty was a free spirit—talented as a motherfucker—who was a rocker and a street woman who was used to another kind of thing. She was raunchy and all that kind of shit, all sex [...]" (ibid.: 304).

When John Ballon asked him whether or not Betty and The Cosmic Ladies were groupies, Michael Shrieve, Santana's drummer at the time, answered: "They were more than groupies [...] they were like kind of at the epicenter of stuff [...] I don't think it was so much groupies as being around a scene" (Shrieve, interview by John Ballon, Dec 17, 2004). Larsen's study on "groupies" is keen to point out that "many of the original super-groupies were actually artists themselves or had artistic talents that become a central part of their experience as a groupie" (2017: 409). Betty and her friends were fans of, and often times sexual partners with, the musicians with whom they were associated, but more importantly, they were artists in their own right. Betty was a singer-songwriter, Winona Williams was a model and visual artist, and Colette Harron and Stella Douglas were both clothing boutique owners and stylists. Audrey ("Little Stuff") and Devon Wilson's activities are lesser known but, according to Betty's 1973 song that memorialized Wilson, "*she could have been anything that she wanted.*" Therefore, the label "groupie" is a profoundly misogynistic and reductionist oversimplification and misrepresentation of their experiences and activities in the counterculture.

3.1.2 "Uptown to Harlem"

Along with The Cellar, Betty frequented parties at other more elite nightclubs like The Cheetah and The Electric Banana. By 1967, she had befriending an eclectic array of artists that created at the intersection of psychedelic counter-culture and avant-garde popular music. She became an invited guest at Andy Warhol's Warehouse where she remembers being floored by The Velvet Underground (Davis, personal communication, Feb 2, 2017). However, the celebrity

connection Betty cherished the most was her friendship to guitarist Jimi Hendrix who she met through Devon Wilson:

Jimi was very colorful. Very vibrant. He was electric; not just in his sound. He felt things on a deep, deep level [...] I can't remember exactly when I met him. But he dated my friend Colette Harron and my friend Devon Wilson, who I wrote the song "Steppin' In Her I. Miller Shoes" about. So, we became very good friends [...] We would hang out and get food and stuff. I remember he used to buy all of these clothes in bulk. And he was on his way out of town and I was at his apartment at the time and he had put on this outfit and I just couldn't get over this outfit! I started laughing so hard at this outfit! He said, "What's the matter Betty?" And I said, "You can't wear that outfit while you're traveling!" So, I picked him out a Black satin suit with green ruffled shirt to wear. He told everybody that story. (Davis, interview by author, July 19, 2019)

Betty now looks back on Hendrix as a kindred spirit; someone that was on her level and understood where she was coming from: "Jimi was very quiet. He was like me, an introvert. He was an extrovert on stage and in his style, but Jimi was very quiet" (Davis, interview by author, July 19, 2019). Betty remembers singing one of the new songs she was working on—"Hangin' Out"—to Hendrix while they were in the car on their way to go shopping. While it has been insinuated multiple times over that Betty and Hendrix had a sexual relationship, Betty has adamantly told me and others they were just close friends. It was her good friend, Devon Wilson, and later Colette Harron, who was with Hendrix.

A lot of people think we were romantically involved but we were just friends. He was going out with a friend of mine at the time, Devon, and that's how I met him. And then he started going out with another friend of mine named Colette. So, we became very good friends. We talked about making music together when he was alive, but it never transpired. (Davis, interview by author, July 19, 2019)

Recommitting to her true passion—songwriting—Betty approached The Chambers Brothers, a group that commonly played at The Electric Banana, after seeing one of their shows. Inspired by their fusion of gospel, blues, and rock, she insisted she had a fabulous song for their new album. Betty sung them her song backstage and, just like Lou Courtney, The Chamber's Brother's liked what they heard. The group recorded "Uptown to Harlem" on their debut album for Columbia Records, *The Time Has Come*, released in November of 1967. The album was successful and "Uptown to Harlem" became a standout single. Not only did Betty secure her first

songwriting credit for a major act, she created her own publishing company—Mabry & Co.—so she would own the publishing rights of the song. A far cry away from Betty’s first recorded song, “Uptown” had the funky, down-home sonic stamp we have now come to associate with Betty’s music. A hybrid band in their own right, fusing gospel with soul and rock, The Chambers Brothers brought Betty’s homage to Harlem to life. Sung in the first person, Betty’s lyrics drive the rhythm section and reference Black culture via soul food—“*I’m gonna eat me some-a chicken, And some Black-eyed peas, Some barbequed ribs, And some collard greens* ”—as well as racial discrimination—“*If a taxi won’t take me, I’ll catch a train, I’ll go underground, I’ll get there just the same.*”

Due to her success with the Chambers Brothers, and her growing affiliation with significant artists of the era, Betty was able to secure a test-run recording contract from CBS (Columbia Records).³³ After her recent songwriting success, Betty traveled to Los Angeles for the first time at the invitation of her friend Devon Wilson who was living there at the moment. Like New York, Los Angeles was a hotbed for music production in the late 1960s and, with a test-run recording contract already confirmed, Betty decided it would be a smart move to take advantage of this opportunity and record at Columbia’s Hollywood studios. When she arrived in Los Angeles, Wilson threw a party to welcome her. At the party, she met South African musician Hugh Masakela. Betty and Masakela, who Betty lovingly refers to as “Hughie,” dated and lived together while Betty was in Los Angeles during the first half of 1968. The two frequented dance clubs like Mavericks and The Whiskey A-Go-Go. “I had my friend make him some leopard pants,” Betty recalled to me. “He wore them to play at the Whiskey A Go Go. He loved those pants. And they fit him perfect” (Davis, personal communication, April 26, 2018).

Betty had written two new songs to record herself for a promo single 45 RPM on Columbia. She shared her songs with Masakela and the two created the arrangements; Betty explaining her ideas for the song and Masakela transcribing them for the musicians. This marked the first time Betty was actively involved in working with an arranger to communicate her ideas about a song in its entirety, and not just the vocal melody. Masakela fondly remembered his time with Betty,

³³ CBS Records was originally founded in 1929 as American Record Corporation and renamed as Columbia Recording Corporation in 1938, following its acquisition by the Columbia Broadcasting System. In 1966, the company was reorganized to become CBS Records, and Sony Corporation bought the company in 1988, renaming it under its current name—Sony Music—in 1991.

adding himself to the long list of elite musicians who idolize Betty as a “pioneer”: “She was really a pioneer. She was before her time, I think [...] She did her stuff long before [...] the Grace Joneses and even the Madonna’s. She was really advanced” (Ballon 2016).

In 1968, it would still be another five years before Betty pioneered her sexually dominant fusion of blues, rock, and funk that pre-dated the likes of Grace Jones and Madonna. The fact that Masakela, who was already an internationally known recording artist, agreed to work with Betty attests to his belief in her ability as a songwriter and musician. Backed by a label for the first time, in a Hollywood studio, Betty recorded her final 45 RPM single as Betty Mabry. Arranged by Masakela (Betty is not credited as co-arranger), and produced by Jerry Fuller, Betty’s test-run promo single for CBS Records yet again expressed feelings of autonomous desire and personal independence.

“Live, Love, Learn” (b/w “It’s My Life”) is the only song Betty ever recorded where she sings in the second person tense throughout the song’s entirety: “*You live, And you love, And you learn.*” Again, unproduced by Betty (who had yet been given the extremely rare opportunity to do so; nor did she yet know enough about recording to demand it), the song heralds back to a more conventional soul style ballad. A chorus of women backing vocals (again, unknown and uncredited on the record) support Betty’s vocals with tight R&B call-and-response harmonies. The B side, “It’s My Life” is sung in the first person and also utilizes a tight R&B call-and-response on the chorus. “It’s My Life” is the first example of Betty’s most common form of communication in her songwriting style—singing to an unknown (and non-gendered) audience in order to declare herself present and let herself be known (Figure 7):

I’m gonna do what I wanna do
And love who I wanna love
And be who I want [...]
So, you think your way and I’ll think mine
I make no promises
Don’t worry about the time
I’ve got no cares my heart is my guide
It’s my life

Figure 7. Song lyrics to Betty Mabry’s “It’s My Life” (1968).

The production on this record lacks the textured style of reverb that “Get Ready For Betty” was drenched in, allowing her vocals to come through much more clearly. Betty’s voice, which

has audibly matured since her youthful post-doo wop record in 1964, sounds strong and eager. While Betty still sings the vocal line straight ahead in a comfortable chest belt, you can hear her experiment a bit more with pronunciation, playfully over-emphasizing words to exaggerate the care-free nature of the song which declares autonomy and independence. The songs failed to chart, and Columbia opted not to sign her. Betty said goodbye to “Hughie” and decided to move back to New York City at the end of summer in 1968; a decision which would drastically affect the trajectory of her personal and professional life, as well as alter the sound of jazz on an international level.

3.2 Marriage to Miles

Upon her arrival from Los Angeles, Betty met jazz trumpeter Miles Davis. Several different stories about how Betty and Miles met have now been documented. But the story Betty told me begins at the famed jazz night club, the Village Gate: “I was at a club in New York called The Village Gate and afterwards I was on the telephone [...] A man came up to me and said, ‘Miles Davis would like to invite you over for a drink,’ and that’s how we met, I had a drink with him. I was drinking soda at the time” (Davis, personal communication, April 26, 2018).

Over twenty-years her senior, Miles Davis was not immersed in the avant-garde art and music scene that Betty was at the forefront of. By the late 1960s, jazz had begun to fall out of favor amongst the young, Black community, making way for the popular sounds of Motown, Stax, and psychedelic rock. Bass player Dave Holland recalled how “shocked” he was at the “small audiences” for which Miles Davis’ band was performing in the late 1960s (Tingen 2001: 82). In light of his waning stardom, this shift in musical preference by young Black consumers saw Miles become “obsessed” with “not growing old; not growing stale,” as Greg Tate expressed in the documentary film *Betty – They Say I’m Different* (Cox 2017). Betty’s own musical preferences at that time speak to what were common trends: She was not a fan of jazz and had no idea who Miles Davis was at the time of their first meeting. Oliver-Velez confirms this: “I can tell you unequivocally that Betty knew absolutely nothing about the jazz world. She didn’t listen to jazz, because she literally did not know who Miles was” (Oliver-Velez, interview by John Ballon, Dec 7, 2004).

Shortly after meeting, on September 30, 1968, the couple was married in Gary, Indiana while Miles was on the road performing at a club called the Plugged Nickel in Chicago. Betty was twenty-four years old. Betty had an immediate and profound influence on the jazz legend's social life, musical taste, aesthetic, and personal style. While Betty's role in her relationship with Miles is often clumsily reduced to that of a "muse"—or, perhaps more generously, as an inspiration—she was actually the catalyst for Miles' musical transformation that saw his 1950s cool jazz acoustic style morph into the electrified, psychedelic rock-influenced aesthetic later known as jazz fusion. In a rare moment of tribute, Miles Davis explains Betty's impact on his life:

Betty was a big influence on my personal life as well as my musical life. She was really into new, avant-garde pop music. 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. She also helped me change the way I was dressing. The marriage only lasted about a year, but that year was full of new things and surprises and helped point the way I was to go, both in my music and, in some ways, my lifestyle. (Davis and Troupe 1989: 288)

Betty exposed Miles to the music of Jimi Hendrix, Sly and the Family Stone, and Santana, whom he most likely heard of but was certainly not actively listening to: "When I met Miles he was listening to classical music, like Stravinsky and Rachmaninoff [...] I used to play Jimi really loud all the time in our apartment, so that's how Miles was introduced to Jimi's music, just like I introduced him to Sly and Otis Redding" (Davis, personal communication, April 26, 2018). Beyond those psychedelic-influenced rock musicians and bands, Betty was consistently blasting a healthy dose of the latest soul from James Brown, Otis Redding, and Aretha Franklin in their apartment. Not only did Betty curate a new soundtrack for Miles at home, she brought him out to the rock clubs that she and her friends frequented, where he could experience the high-volume power of live rock music.

Betty also personally introduced Miles to many of the musicians themselves, expanding his social and musical circles. The most kinetic introduction happened between Miles and Jimi Hendrix:

I remember I had Jimi and some people over our apartment for a Moroccan meal. Miles wasn't able to be there because he was working at a club. So, Miles called, and he said, 'Put Jimi on the phone,' so I put Jimi on the phone. And Miles asked him to go over to the piano and read the sheet music and tell him what he thought. And Jimi said, 'I can't read music.' So, Miles was really surprised. (Davis, interview by author, July 19, 2019)

Jimi Hendrix and Miles Davis would go on to strike up a close friendship and would often meet to trade ideas for different projects (Szwed 2002; Momoniat 2020). The relationship between Davis and Hendrix dramatically influenced Davis' sound (specifically his use of a wah-wah pedal to mimic Hendrix's guitar and his incorporation of electrical instrumentation), his demeanor onstage, and his understanding of musicianship and artistry more generally. "I think the fact that Jimi couldn't read music, and he was that rhythmic, really impressed Miles," Betty recalled. "His understanding of what a musician was changed when he met Jimi" (Davis, interview by author, July 19, 2019).

In order to fit in with the new social and musical circles Betty invited him into, Miles reinvented his personal style. He retired the Italian suits and patent leather shoes and began to adorn a livelier wardrobe of leather, fringe, and platform shoes that was provided by the New York City designers and shops that Betty had already been frequenting: "Miles would go with me when I would shop for my clothes, and he would pick out his own things. He used to love this place called Hernandos that I went to where they sold suede and leather" (Davis, personal communication, August 20, 2016). Some of Betty's other favorite clothing stores that she brought Miles to were Madonna's, De Noyer, Colette's shop, and Dakota Transit.

Beyond his clothing, the first tangible evidence of Betty's influence on Miles' aesthetic is documented on his album *Filles de Kilimanjaro* (1968), in which a surrealist photograph of Betty's face by photographer Yasuhiro "Hiro" Wakabayashi appears on the cover, and the song "Mademoiselle Mabry (Miss Mabry)" acts as a tribute to his new wife.³⁴ The song, written by Miles and arranged by Gil Evans, is, in fact, a reworking of Jimi Hendrix's "The Wind Cried

³⁴ This was not the first or last time Miles would put his partners and/or wives on his album covers. In his 1989 autobiography, he explained that in 1961 he "started demanding that Columbia use black women on [his] album covers" (Davis and Troupe 1989: 250). Frances Davis appeared on *Someday My Prince Will Come* (1961), Cicely Tyson appeared on *Sorcerer* (1967), Betty appeared on *Filles de Kilimanjaro* (1968), and Marguerite Eskridge appeared on *Miles Davis at the Fillmore* (1970).

Mary” (1967) and marks the initial experimentation of Miles with jazz and rock (Szwed 2002: 271).

3.2.1 Fusion

Betty’s fashion aesthetic, her music selections around the house, her connection to an inner circle of experimental musicians, and her own stylings as a songwriter were the catalyst for Miles’ musical style to be transformed from a 1950s cool jazz acoustic sound a more electrified rock-based sound. This new sound incorporated echo, reverb, multi tracking in-studio recordings and the use of his trumpet playing with a wah-wah pedal with amplification—mimicking his new friend Hendrix. Miles invited different musicians to join the project to achieve more funk from the sound, bringing in young guitarist George Benson to replace Joe Beck. Chick Corea and David Holland replaced Herbie Hancock and Ron Carter on keyboard and bass, respectively. Guitarist John McLaughlin and saxophonist Wayne Shorter also joined the band for varying periods. Not only did Miles switch up the players and experiment with production, he also began to approach music making differently. Referencing James Brown, he began to expand the rhythm section, allowing it to set the tone and dominate, rather than relying on the soloist to carry the song.

This musical expansion laid the groundwork for a radical, collaborative recording project from Miles titled *Bitches Brew*, which was recorded in 1969 and released in 1970 on Miles’s long-time label Columbia Records. Adding more power to his rhythm section, Miles featured three more drummers along with Holland: Leny White, Jack De Johnette, and Don Alias. He also added bass player Harvey Brooks and bass clarinetist Bennie Maupin. The collaborative impulses behind Davis’ new style of jazz included “stylistic convergence, racial inclusivity, and instrumental and timbral expansiveness” (Smith 2010: 8-9); all of which were instincts that Betty had been living out in the Village scene and would continue to carry with her in her own music making only a few short years later. Originally titled the less jarring *Witches Brew*, Betty instructed her husband to change the name: “Well, he was going to call it *Witches Brew*, and I said, ‘Miles you should call it *Bitches Brew*. And he took my advice” (Davis, personal communication, May 22, 2018). Betty also conceived of a psychedelic-inspired Afro-centric design for the album artwork and found the artist to use, French-German painter Mati Klarwein.

Betty was not only instrumental in the title and album artwork (after, that is, introducing Miles to the new social and musical circles that sparked such drastic innovation), but has now explained that she was a creative collaborator in regard to production. In recent years, Betty's recognition on *Bitches Brew* has largely centered around her aesthetics, however she has explained to me that she, in fact, was helping Miles generate the sounds that critics would eventually call revolutionary: "He would play me the tapes and if I said turn the bass up, or turn the piano up he would turn it up [...] he always listened to what I said" (Davis, interview by author, July 19, 2019). In Michael Stradford's book on the fashion of Miles Davis, he explains that Miles "broke his long-standing rule of only musicians in the studio and had Betty at his side, looking for her critical feedback" (2020: 101). However, this is a masculinist and miscalculated observation because Betty was already an established songwriter and musician herself, which Miles acknowledged. Thus, Davis did not break his rule because there were "only musicians" in the studio, Betty included.

Betty invited Miles into an integrated, experimental, avant-garde pop scene that she was deeply immersed and highly respected in. In return, it allowed Miles to be bolder with his conception. Miles, on the other hand, brought Betty into the world of serious record label power and allowed her to be behind the sound board for the first time, granting her a first glimpse at the production aspect of recording. For a brief and dynamic moment, they were colleagues. The musical fusion Miles created while with Betty forced Columbia to recognize the counter-culture appeal that a Black jazz artist had on white rock audiences. *Bitches Brew* not only became the premier jazz-fusion album, but it also landed Miles a coveted seat at the table of white rock audiences, securing him a successful cross-over career and forcing Columbia to market jazz to a counterculture that was previously off their radar.

3.2.2 Dismantling the Muse

Upon the international success of *Bitches Brew*, Miles Davis has since been credited as being one of the few commercial jazz superstars with young audiences in the 1960s by single-handedly ushering in the era of fusion. Arguably the most neglected aspect of Betty's influence on Davis is the role she played in his musical process, specifically the development of his new 'fusion' sound. This is hardly surprising given that Davis' actual and perceived musical genius is seen by jazz historians and other musical gatekeepers as sacrosanct, as if his entire body of musical

knowledge emerged fully-formed at birth, outside of the pedestrian influences of history, culture, and politics. Such accounts of genius are unfortunately commonplace, particularly in the arts, where the notion of The Artist as (Male) Genius becomes one of the dominant narratives to emerge via modernity.

Betty has only recently begun to be acknowledged for her formidable role in Miles' musical trajectory. However, such acknowledgments are often observed through the masculinist trope of the muse: "[T]he sizzling young model about town, was Miles's muse [...]" (Goldman 2004: 53); "Miles was in the mood for change and his new wife ably assisted him as both mentor and muse [...]" (Maycock 2005); "She became a fiery muse to Miles [...]" (Toenes 2008); "The muse who changed him [...]" (Spencer 2010); "Betty made music while serving as a muse and midwife for her husband's work [...]" (Mahon 2011: 150); "She was a gifted musician who became his muse [...]" (Keyes 2013: 35); "Davis was not only a myth, but a muse as well [...]" (Hundley 2014).³⁵

While the definition of muse in pop culture does not *officially* gender it as a woman's role, its implication as inherently feminine has been supported since the time of Greek and Roman mythology (Zajko and Leonard 2008; Penier and Kolecka 2015). Such feminine implication has continued to play out in modern writing on literature, art, and music. Throughout history, the muse has been understood as a highly gendered and highly sexualized source of artistic stimulation for a superior male creator. Women who are referred to as "muses" are seen less as creative collaborators and more as naturally inspiring and transparent figures who exist in service of a male artist. Moreover, the ability of the muse to offer inspirational services is typically considered alongside their ability to offer sexual services. Because of their supposedly natural state of inspiration, which is often connected to the sexualized body and Western ideals of beauty, muses are thus coded as anti-intellectual.

At its core, to identify a woman as muse is to trace her value as solely residing in her capacity to inspire male artistry. Like the "groupie," the muse is therefore a masculinist and reductionist interpretation of women's artistic influence which locates their "idealized power (the power of the muse)" (Lordi 2013: 4) without locating the power of the individual woman. In her comparative study of African American literature and African American women vocalists, Emily Lordi critiques the trope of the muse as a distinguished title, arguing that Black women musicians

³⁵ Vivian Goldman (2004), Maureen Mahon (2011), and Cheryl Keyes (2013) offer examples of scholarly writing on Betty that acknowledge her role as a muse while prioritizing her own genius and artistic agency.

are often thought of as “embodying a material, extratextual reality” (ibid.: 104). Thus, Black women musicians credited as being muses, regardless of the acknowledgement of their own musical genius, relegates them as “embodied others” (ibid.).

By labeling Betty as a “muse” music writers discursively ‘other’ her, and in effect, maintain the gendered norms of the music industry (in this case, the worlds of rock *and* jazz) by reducing her experience to a singular one driven by gendered and sexualized inspiration. However, as we can see from the story of Betty and Miles, the idea of the muse is not the typical commonsense one. Betty and Miles demonstrate that the muse dynamic is not a “one-way channel of inspiration but a symbiotic relationship between creator and created” (ibid.: 22). Thus, Betty dismantles and reconstructs the trope of the muse by actively going against the ethereal grain of passive, innocent inspiration that muses have historically been expected to follow.

Dismantling Betty’s label as muse in order to affirm her as creative collaborator has proved even more relevant since the “lost” 1969 Columbia Sessions between Betty and Miles were released for the first time by Light In The Attic Records (LITA) in 2016. Rumored to have existed for years without any promise of hearing them, the Columbia Sessions have been exaggerated as the “holy grail” (Wang 2016; Lambert 2016) of lost recordings.

3.3 The Columbia Sessions

Readied with more songs and an unwavering commitment to work in the music industry, Betty got another opportunity to record for Columbia in 1969 at the request of Miles. Studio time was reserved, Miles’ right-hand producer, Teo Macero, was on board, and Miles called in an impressive line-up of jazz musicians who he worked with—Harvey Brooks, Herbie Hancock, John McLaughlin, Wayne Shorter, and Larry Young—as well as rock musicians who he recently met through Betty, including Billy Cox (bassist for Jimi Hendrix) and Mitch Mitchell (drummer for Jimi Hendrix). This prestigious line-up of heavy hitters no doubt added to the intrigue and anticipation of the recordings which sat locked away in the Columbia vaults for forty-seven years.

The onslaught of pop music criticism that followed the 2016 release analyzed the mythologized recordings for their historical value in the sense that it provided a window into a musically transformative moment for two highly adored musicians. However, rather than offering

fans (of both artists) an album of groundbreaking fusion—like it was fantasized to—*The Columbia Sessions* instead offers us an audible glimpse into the development of Betty’s signature voice, her growing command of the recording studio, and the power dynamics within a highly contested marriage.

In preparation for the recordings, which took place on May 14 and May 20, in 1969, Betty taught Miles the arrangements for the four original songs she wrote, as well as two cover songs which she reinterpreted, via oral cues as she did with Masakela in Los Angeles earlier that year.³⁶ Miles wrote out the charts and gave it to the band who got together for the very first time in the studio—without any prior rehearsal. On LITA’s 2016 release of Betty’s Columbia recordings, there is a stark difference between the Hollywood sessions arranged by Masakela and the New York sessions arranged by Davis. Firstly, the instrumentation on the Hollywood recordings sound much more polished due to the fact that these were completed tracks formerly released as a 45 RPM single, and not the initial jamming’s of a group of individual musicians who had never played together as a band. Secondly, Betty’s vocals sound bolder and more confident on the Hollywood songs. This could simply be, again, because she had more time to work with the musicians and finish the songs. I, however, read this difference in vocal performance as a result of three interrelated aspects of the New York sessions: (1) Betty seems to be experimenting with the contours of her voice for the first time, rather than delivering a straight-ahead, soul style approach of singing as she did on her previous recordings, therefore sounding more timid in its exploration; (2) the control that Miles’s exerted over the project and the physical space of the studio was impeding Betty’s ability to let loose; and (3) Betty’s growing interest in arranging and producing was taking up her focus just as much, if not more, than her interest in singing.

The Columbia recordings reveal Betty’s early ideas about how she wanted to present her music and, more specifically, how she wanted to present her voice. The first track, “Hangin’ Out,” begins with a collectivity of (unknown) women’s voices who are laughing and carrying on.³⁷ This

³⁶ Three of the tracks on *The Columbia Years* album were recorded in 1968 with High Masakela in Hollywood (“It’s My Life [Alternate Take]”; “Live, Love, Learn”; “My Soul Is Tired”).

³⁷ It is important to note that none of the women backing vocalists (which appear on five of the tracks) are credited as musicians on Light In The Attic’s 2016 release. This erasure of backing vocalist credits is indicative of the larger historical issue of vocalists not being considered musicians. While LITA states that it makes every effort to find all parties involved in the recordings, it often cannot account for all active musicians and offers its contact information for anyone with useful information. Rather than reading this erasure as a poorly researched project from LITA, or a lack of interest and respect for backing vocalists on their own end, it highlights the lack of documentation that was

track offers listeners early traces of Betty's intentional experimentation with timbre and phrasing. When Betty sings, "*So, brother get it together,*" she taps into a squeezed, nasal timbre to emphasize the word "*get,*" as well as the second syllable on the word "*to-ge-ther.*" These subtle hints of vocal abandon are also audible in the track "I'm Ready, Willing, & Able (Take 9)" when Betty displays her ability to deliver intensity through restraint. Before finishing the line, "*You better hold on, 'Cuz here I come, I'm gonna get,*" Betty audibly sucks in air through her teeth and holds in her breath—as if to stop herself from getting too worked up—before expelling a soft-yet-raspy delivery of the word "*loose.*" These vocal flourishes highlight the initial exploration of Betty's voice in real time, and therefore allow us to hear her later studio albums as demonstrations of her vocal mastery.

These session tapes also reveal, for the first time, an audible dynamic of control and tension between Betty and Miles. On the track, "Politician Man," Betty reworks the 1968 Cream song, "Politician," written by Jack Bruce and Pete Brown, into her own unique cover—reauthoring the Cream lyric "*I support the left*" with "*I support the women*"; and changing "*I'm a political man*" to "*I'm a political gal.*" While Betty engenders women as political actors to be supported in her version of the song—displaying a conscious form of authorship over one of the only two covers she would ever record—the main take away from this track is the session dialogue added by LITA (courtesy of Columbia Records) to make these recordings come to life as historical artifacts.³⁸

The enhanced, repackaged track begins with Miles' voice coming through the sound board as he instructs Betty to, "*Do it just like that with the gum in your mouth and everything, bitch.*" To which Betty quickly replies, "*I know, I know,*" in a dismissive, unbothered tone as to speed up the process and get back to work. At the end of the song, you hear the analog tape stop rolling before Miles' voice appears again. This time he cuts off the recording and explains to Betty, "*Okay, you can overdub that.*" To which Betty loudly replies in astonishment, "*Overdub it?! I've overdubbed it!*" Hearing Betty react to a recording decision that was not made by her and, by the inflection of her voice, one that she does not agree with expresses her early commitment to self-definition and self-production in the studio. One pop music critic suggested that:

[Miles and Betty's] musical relationship ended exactly as it should have: quickly. Miles needed to go find his own sound, and thankfully he got out of the way so that

originally provided from Columbia Records and a lack of importance placed on the artistry and agency of women backing vocals in music historicity.

³⁸ It should be noted that Columbia censored the access to dialogue recorded in these sessions and only permitted Light In The Attic to use a sparse amount of recorded conversation.

Davis could find hers. That tension on these recordings is interesting from a historical standpoint, but stunting to the music itself, unfortunately. (Fiander 2016)

While this tension between Miles and Betty is most definitely “stunting” to Betty’s music, it proves that Betty was by no means a passive participant in the studio or a submissive wife to her husband.

Perhaps more than anything, however, the Columbia Sessions reveals Betty’s growing interest in arranging, bandleading, and producing. While Miles provided the musicians with charts to read, Betty was leading the band in the studio and guided the musicians through her songs whenever confusion arose. This is demonstrated a few seconds into the track, “I’m Ready, Willing, & Able (Take 1)”, when the band’s accompaniment falls off and Betty calmly (and immediately) steps in to address the confusion: “*For that line you just practically repeat the same thing, you know? It’s just, like, a repeat of [Betty then proceeds to sing the melodic line that she wants repeated].*” This exchange documents Betty’s important leadership role in the songwriting, arranging, and bandleading process. You can sense Betty testing the waters of what it means to be in control of a studio session.

While the specific circumstances of the recordings not being released—and shelved in the Columbia vaults for forty-seven years—are unclear, Betty herself has admitted to the fact that Miles sabotaged the project:

[Miles] told me later on that if he wouldn't had them release my music, he was afraid I'd become a big star and leave him. Now those were his exact words. So, he stopped it. He just thought I would leave him if I became famous. But I never needed his fame. I was just married to him, as his wife. I was shocked that he would think that. I thought he knew me better than that. (Ballon 2016)

The sentiment expressed by Betty about Miles being paranoid over his partner achieving fame has also been echoed by Frances Dyson, Miles’s first wife who was a professional dancer for Katherine Dunham and a Broadway performer (Charles and Visage 2017). However, Betty has no regrets about the album not coming out. Rather than internalizing it as a failed opportunity Betty allowed the experience to further enforce her self-defined knowledge of the music industry. The importance Betty placed on self-definition is a testament to the “inner strength” that Patricia Hill Collin’s suggests is “essential to Black women’s survival” (2000: 111).

After an utterly turbulent and creative year, Betty left Miles at the end of 1969 due to domestic violence (a narrative also shared by Miles’ first wife, Frances Davis). However, Miles

would claim he divorced Betty because she had an affair with Jimi Hendrix; a story Betty has strongly denied to this day: "I was so angry with Miles when he wrote that. It was disrespectful to Jimi and to me. Miles and I broke up because of his violent temper. Other than that, it was a good experience for me because I developed creatively" (Spencer 2010). When I recently asked Betty why she thought Miles told people she had an affair with Hendrix, Betty simply said: "It was his ego, he couldn't face reality [...] Miles was very intense" (Davis, personal communication, Nov 2, 2019).

Never telling those close to her how "Miles was violent" during their short relationship, much of the stories surrounding their meeting, marriage, and divorce are based on hearsay and rumors which continue to get recycled in clever re-telling's.³⁹ A beloved, canonized figure in both the jazz and rock worlds, music journalism and scholarship on Miles has callously misrepresented their separation, either citing the Hendrix affair rumor or discrediting Betty as a hypersexualized women who could not be tamed; or, as Victor Svorinich sloppily does, cites both: "In the end, however, Betty was a bit too brash and immature for Miles's tastes and could no longer be trusted—he accused her of stealing his money and sleeping with Hendrix" (Svorinich 2015: 6-7).

After leaving Miles at the end of 1969, she set out to continue carving her path in a music industry known for its own mistreatment of women. She picked up where she left off, writing more original songs and undertaking modeling gigs on the side to bring in money. Her recordings from the Columbia Sessions were property of Columbia Records and had been subsequently shelved (i.e. locked away in the vaults) after her separation from Miles. To get some physical distance between herself and her complicated marriage, Betty traveled to London where her good friend Jimi Hendrix was living at the time.⁴⁰ 1970 marked the beginning of Betty's transient lifestyle, increasing her mobility and labor-power by splitting her time between London, New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. Through her growing connections in the music industry and using her appeal as an "it" girl in New York City's nightlife, Betty began shopping her new songs. It wasn't

³⁹ An example of such a re-telling is the Cinemax animated series, *Mike Judge Presents: Tales From The Tour Bus*. In the second season (which focused solely on funk musicians) Betty Davis was the subject of Episode 8, which premiered on December 21, 2018 without Betty's consent or collaboration. As of this writing, Betty Davis is the only woman musician that has been featured in the series.

⁴⁰ Hendrix died on September 18, 1970, at the age of twenty-seven, in London. As a close friend, Hendrix's death was extremely difficult for Betty and it is not a topic of conversation she likes to revisit.

long before she was approached by a newly formed soul and funk band in Tuskegee, Alabama in 1971.

The six-piece band, newly formed as The Commodores, consisted of young Black men who had met at Tuskegee University. Looking to sign with a major label, they tapped Betty for original songs to record as a demo. Betty flew down to Alabama, met with the new band, and proceeded to pitch her songs. The Commodores recorded them as a demo and sent them off to Motown Records in Detroit, their first pick for label representation. On the strength of the demo, Motown signed the Commodores in 1972 and offered Betty a contract as a Motown songwriter.⁴¹ “I worked with The Commodores,” Betty told me. “They were trying to get a deal with Motown, so I wrote them some songs.” However, Betty refused the contract with Motown because they would not give her publishing rights, which Betty insisted on. “I said no because it wasn’t a good deal” (Davis, personal communication, Aug 24, 2019). She took the demo songs back and the Commodores began their successful career as Motown artists. This story exemplifies the next decade of Betty’s life, which was structured by her unwavering commitment to artistic control and the industry’s racist and sexist discrimination against women—and especially Black women—as potential owners or co-owners of anything.

Betty Davis is far more than an inspirational footnote in a jazz icons story. While she was engaging in a reciprocal, creative relationship that produced one of the biggest-selling jazz album in history, effectively allowing Miles to overcome his fear of becoming “a memory” (Davis and Troupe 1989), Betty was beginning to test the waters with her own musical experimentation. In an October issue of *Jet* from 1969, Betty publicly addressed her decision to leave Miles, disclosing her own self-definition and ambition as the only culprit for the split:

I really dig Miles but I was never hung up on being Mrs. Miles Davis. Many women refuse to give up a guy just because he has a big name. But I’m an unselfish person. I’ve always maintained that a woman should be capable of taking care of herself and now I’ll go into song writing and I have plenty of modeling jobs to keep me going. I have no regrets over my year with Miles. (“Miles Davis’ Wife Leaves” 1969: 68-69)

⁴¹ My multiple attempts to reach the original members of The Commodores were unsuccessful.

As the tumultuous decade of the 1960s came to a close, Betty Davis began the groundbreaking and taxing work of being “different” from the mainstream when there was no delineated path.

4.0 “They Say I’m Different”: Vocality, Textuality, and Physicality

your music born free, inside a place some women
pretend not to recognize. you controlled stages
they wish they had the courage to touch.

Jessica Care Moore, “They Say She’s Different”

Betty Davis’ trendsetting cultural work in fashion and nightlife enabled her to make a strong and lasting impact in the countercultural worlds of rock and jazz fusion. Having been given an elite glimpse into the male-dominated domains of studio recording and musical arranging, Betty recommitted herself to songwriting at the start of the new decade. Cultural anthropologist Maureen Mahon points to this exact period as being transformative for Black women musicians: “As the 1960s gave way to a new decade, African American women performers tapped into the zeitgeist of racial, gender, and sexual liberation, added their own spin, and produced notably forward-looking rock ‘n’ roll performances” (Mahon 2006: 573). Betty was amongst those “forward-looking” African American women performers. No longer Betty Mabry, nor under the stifling control of Miles, Betty Davis emerged in the 1970s as an unconventional, eccentric musician with something to say, having crystalized the knowledge and experiences she accumulated since arriving in New York City in 1962. Betty developed a wildly innovative and radical sound that, in the 1970s, would be ultimately suppressed by the mainstream and cherished by the underground. Decades later, her sound and image would land her a place as an American cult icon.

In this chapter, I emphasize Betty’s role as songwriter, arranger, bandleader, and producer through the lens of artistic freedom and musical transmission. This includes in-depth analysis of Betty’s catalogue with respect to her vocality, textuality, and physicality. Having previously identified Betty as a modern blues woman, I offer a more detailed comparison here with the classic blues women of the “race records” era. Finally, I analyze Betty’s image and live performance practice as a form of erotic labor through which she used her body as both a complement to her music and a site for resistance against conformity and censorship that were leveraged against Black women’s bodies within the music industry (and in society at large) during the 1970s.

This chapter uses ethnography collected from interviews conducted with Betty, Betty’s friends and former musical collaborators; archival materials from the music press of the 1970s;

oral testimony from people who witnessed Betty's concerts; and photographs taken of Betty, including album cover art and images from live performances.

4.1 Artistic Freedom and Musical Transmission

After the Motown demos for The Commodores left Betty empty handed, she traveled back to London in 1971 to pursue more opportunities as a songwriter. While there, she met Eric Clapton and the two began a short-lived relationship.⁴² Betty shared her stories of the South and of her grandmother with Clapton, who had become a huge success with his Delta blues inspired style of rock, first with Cream (1966-1968) and then as a solo act. Betty sang her original songs for Clapton, as she had done with others (Jimi Hendrix, The Chambers Brothers, Hugh Masakela, and Miles Davis), and he liked them enough to offer his services as the producer on her debut album. She turned him down. When I asked why she rejected Clapton's offer, Betty casually brushed it off as not wanting to "mix business with pleasure," (Davis, personal communication, July 21, 2018) but it was clearly also a way for her to exercise the unique form of authorship and control over her music that would remain paramount throughout her career. After having just unsuccessfully recorded with her famous partner, she did not want to repeat the same mistake and be produced by another famed male associate. Instead, she wanted to make a name for herself without being under the wing of an already acclaimed musician.

While in London, Betty also met Marc Bolan and became very close with him and his wife Gloria Jones—an African American musician who performed in Bolan's glam rock band, T. Rex, and also had a solo career. Bolan and Jones were extremely supportive of Betty, providing her a place to live when she needed it and suggesting that she record the songs she wrote for The Commodores demo. Perhaps it was Bolan's fresh style of glamorous rock that convinced Betty to perform her own songs, or perhaps it was that no other artists were interested, but by 1972 Betty made the conscious decision to record her songs herself. Bolan set up a meeting with executives at the London-based EMI label. Betty explained to me that she was "very close" to securing a deal

⁴² Betty later suggested the reason Miles Davis made up the now-mythologized rumor about Betty having an affair with Jimi Hendrix was because he did not want to admit that Betty was romantically and sexually involved with a white rock 'n' roll musician (Davis, personal communication, May 22 2018).

but, in the end, EMI would not give her the publishing rights that she demanded. Without a manager or lawyer arguing for her, Betty continued to navigate the music industry on her own. Just as she did with Motown, Betty sacrificed the support of a major label on the principle of her being a songwriter, first and foremost. At a time when very few women musicians, especially Black women musicians, were granted artistic control, Betty held out for full creative power over her music.

That opportunity came in 1972 when she left London for San Francisco at the invitation of Michael Carrabello, Santana's percussionist at the time. Newly immersed in the Bay Area's unique West Coast psychedelic funk scene, Betty—acting as her own manager—set out to make connections:

When I was living in San Francisco there was a gentleman named Paul Ford and he was the West Coast rep for a record company called Just Sunshine. I told him I wrote songs. I met him at the Trident [Hotel] in San Francisco. The head of Just Sunshine was Michael Lang. Michael listened to my music and he played it for a gentleman named Bob Krasnow, who was very big in the business and he told Michael that I was like a female Dr. John. So, Michael decided to sign me. (Davis, interview by, July 19, 2019)⁴³

Michael Lang, who had organized the Woodstock Festival in 1969, was new to the music industry and considerably less corporate and traditional in his approach than the “record men” Betty had previously encountered at Columbia, Motown, and EMI. After promising her full artistic control and publishing rights, Betty agreed to sign with Just Sunshine records, which Lang founded just the year prior. In 1975, Betty referenced the issue of artistic control in an interview published in *Blues & Soul*: “Originally, I could have signed with both Columbia or Atlantic [...] but I could never have been given the creative freedom that I got with Michael [Lang]. Sure, a bigger company may have been better geared to promote but at that particular point in my career, I felt that artistic freedom was far more important to me” (Abbey 1975).

⁴³ Malcolm John Rebennack Jr. (1941-2019), better known by his stage name Dr. John, was an American singer and songwriter from New Orleans who combined blues, funk, psychedelia, and rock ‘n’ roll and was known for his ornate personal style and eccentric stage persona which incorporated aesthetic and ritualistic elements from voodoo/hoodoo culture.

Once Betty's publishing rights were secured, she went to work assembling her own all-star line-up of musicians. She put together a powerhouse band, by any standards, that consisted of early funk architects as well as psychedelic rock and R&B musicians:

- Greg Errico (Producer/Drums) – founding member of Sly and the Family Stone who left the group in 1971 to work with The Grateful Dead's Mickey Hart.
- Larry Graham (Bass) – architect of the slap bass technique and a founding member of both Sly and the Family Stone and Graham Central Station.
- Neal Schon (Guitar) – guitarist in Santana who co-founded Journey in 1973.
- Doug Rodrigues (Guitar) –guitarist in Santana.
- Hershall Kennedy (Hammond B-3 organ) – keyboardist in Graham Central Station.
- Greg Adams (Trumpet) – horns in Tower of Power.
- Mic Gillette (Trombone) – horns in Tower of Power.
- Skip Mesquit (Saxophone) – saxophone and flute in Tower of Power.
- Patryce “Chocl’let” Banks (Percussion/Backup vocals) – founding member of Graham Central Station.
- Anita, June, and Patricia Pointer (Backup vocals) – singers who would form The Pointer Sisters in 1973.
- Kathi McDonald (Backup vocals) – blues and rock singer who recorded with Ike & Tina Turner in 1970 and later replaced Janis Joplin as the front woman for Big Brother and the Holding Company.
- Sylvester (Backup vocals) – performance artist and vocalist who would later have success as a disco artist, becoming the first openly gender fluid/gender non-confirming musician to have a chart hit with “You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)” in 1978.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ The way in which Sylvester presented himself to the mainstream media (in music videos, TV appearances, and live concerts) was a type of public androgynous fantasy that embraced the gender spectrum and challenged the gender binary before it had a name. Unlike the public androgyny of glam rockers Marc Bolen and David Bowie, Sylvester was performing in a R&B context, rather than rock, and his unusually high, piercing falsetto voice added to his transgressive display of gender. Rather than performing androgyny as a timely and experimental performance aesthetic, Sylvester was presenting his authentic—real—self, just as he had been doing since his early days as a member of Disquotays, a Black teenage drag band, or the Cockettes, a drag performance art troupe. Decades after his death from AIDS in 1988, Sylvester has now been reclaimed in pop culture and in the academy as an important and groundbreaking genderqueer artist. When I asked Betty what she thought about Sylvester being heralded as a genderqueer person, and if Sylvester identified with any particular gender when she knew him, she simply said: “He just identified as a person” (Davis, personal communication, Dec 8, 2018). For an in-depth study of Sylvester's life, see Gamson (2005).

When I asked Betty if she assembled musicians based on them having a bluesy background, she responded:

No. I was influenced by Sly by then, and Otis Redding, so that's why I chose Larry Graham and Greg Errico. Neal Schon was more of a rock musician. There was gospel and R&B with the background singers and all of that [...] You take someone like Kathi McDonald who sang with Joe Cocker, she had a feeling to her that was very bluesy [...] I was listening to the blues when I was recording. So, I decided, funk had always come into play during that time period, so I integrated the blues with funk and that's what I came up with. (Davis, interview by author, Aug 31, 2018)

Betty's debut album consisted of the demo songs she wrote for, and subsequently took back from, The Commodores along with new material she finished writing in the Bay Area before entering the studio. While she previously got a taste for arranging and bandleading while recording with Hugh Masakela and Miles Davis during the Columbia sessions, her move to the Bay Area signaled her transition from a singer-songwriter to an arranger and bandleader, and eventually into the role of producer. But for her debut, Betty entrusted Sly and the Family Stone's drummer, Greg Errico, to serve as the album's producer. He remembered the process fondly when I interviewed him:

Me and Michael [Carabello] were working on a project. He had left Santana and we were working on a project called Attitude, we were in the studio recording at CBS. He kept telling me he was going out with someone named Betty, she was Miles's ex, she was a model [...] He kept telling me she wants to meet me [...] So, we're in the studio cutting a few tracks and he says Betty wants to come down. I didn't think much of it [...] But when she came down and she introduced herself and we started talking, she just immediately laid it out on the table; that she got a record deal with Michael Lang at Just Sunshine and she wrote some songs. We hit it off and she asked me to be a part of it and I said sure [...] In those days we were young and cocky, I didn't give it a lot of thought. It just felt right. (Errico, interview by author, Feb 14, 2019)

Errico was, in many ways, one of the first individuals to support Betty in the music industry by listening to her, giving her freedom to create, and carving out a safe space for Betty in the studio that she had never experienced before. It was a space of camaraderie and collaboration, rather than competition and hierarchy. When I mentioned this idea of creating a safe space (a concept I will return to in Chapter 7) in the studio for Betty to develop as a musician, Errico turned his attention

toward the Columbia Sessions and cited Betty's frustration with Miles' control over the studio: "She had talked upon that when we first met [in 1972]. She just goes, 'Miles brought key players in and stuff, but that's not what I wanted to do.' She just put it simply in those terms" (Errico, interview by author, Feb 14, 2019).

Betty, who had long been immersed in a racially integrated, mixed gender scene, suggested to me that one of the reasons she wanted to work with Errico (besides him playing in one of her favorite and most influential groups) was because he had experience working with Black women musicians, including Cynthia Robinson and Rose Stone, of Sly and the Family Stone:

Yeah, that was all new. But it wasn't like a radical thing to me. It was simply, [does] this feels good? Does a situation exist here? [...] But it was really challenging to the status quo. Putting males and females together; putting black and white together. They didn't know how to market [Sly and the Family Stone] either. So, I already came from that and never gave any of the industry considerations a second thought. That's why I think *Betty Davis* is so raw. I was comfortable with things being odd or challenging or out of the norm. That was my norm. (Errico, interview with author, Feb 14, 2019)

As arranger and bandleader, Betty acquired a level of power and control that she had yet to experience in the studio, and which was extremely uncommon for women—especially Black women—across the music industry at that time. When I asked backing vocalist Patryce "Choc'let" Banks what her first impression of Betty was when she arrived at the studio to record the album, she remembered it well:

I really looked up to her because I had never seen a woman in the studio do that, just being in charge like that. Because she was telling everyone what to do, what she liked, and how to do it. But the way she was doing it, no one was getting offended because it was all mostly men. Nobody got offended, none of the men started ego-trippin'. She ended up getting out exactly what she wanted from it. (Banks, interview by author, Feb 5, 2019)

Betty was able to get "exactly what she wanted" through an instinctive, embodied style of musical transmission. It was a style embedded in the oral tradition she learned from the blues artists that her grandmother curated for her. Later, as she progressed in the music industry, Betty was able to sharpen this style of musical transmission through her experiences and relationships with highly skilled musicians.

In the studio, Betty did not rely on charts (chord charts or other music charts with Western notation) that were written out for performers by other arrangers with whom she previously worked, including Teddy Randazzo, Hugh Masakela, and Miles Davis. Instead, Betty formulated her ability to write songs and lead professional musicians around a ‘feeling,’ and a visceral connection to the music located in her body and voice.⁴⁵ The 1972 studio sessions for *Betty Davis* also marked the first time that Betty used a tape recorder to document and communicate her arrangements to musicians—a practice she would continue throughout her career. “She would hum a line,” Errico explained to me. “Sometimes she had a tape, but it was the same line she would hum, and there was maybe a lyric she would sing with that line, and that was the extent of us starting, but I understood it. It connected” (Errico, interview by author, Feb 14, 2019).

Fred Mills, who played keyboards for Betty’s 1975 album *Nasty Gal* and her 1976 (previously unreleased) album, *Is It Love Or Desire*, also recalled Betty’s use of the tape recorder and the importance she placed on both bodily and vocal cues for interpreting a song’s arrangement:

She would take a tape recorder and she would start singing what she was going to sing, and then she would say, ‘This is what you do, *ack-ack-em-hmm-ack-em*,’ that’s how we put songs together [...] If she liked what you interpreted, that was it. And if she didn’t then, [she said], ‘No I want *this*, I want *that*.’ (Mills, interview by Oliver Wang, Aug 26, 2006)

Bassist Chuck Rainey, who played on Betty’s 1979 (previously bootlegged) album, *Crashin’ From Passion*, remembered recording with the rhythm section at Redondo Beach Recorders in Los Angeles on a single Sunday, with all the rhythm section players gathered together in the same room: “We got the project done in about six hours, which is kind of unusual for the LA scene [...] There were no charts, just lyric sheets [...] Betty was very interactive with the rhythm section,” Rainey told me. “She was a good leader” (Rainey, interview by author, Sept 4, 2019).

Betty also recruited legendary Motown artist, Martha Reeves, for her last studio album. Reeves is well known in her own right as a lead vocalist, but she agreed to take the job, in part,

⁴⁵ In her in-depth musical analysis of the funk genre, musicologist Anne Danielsen explains: “Feeling is no doubt a key aesthetic notion to this kind of music, because funk without feel is not funk. In this musical context, feeling has nothing to do with an extrovert style of performance or with expressing actual innermost feelings. It is about cultivating the right swaying motion; about accurate timing; about being in place, in time; about precision and relaxation at once” (2006: 198).

because she was “hustling and trying to make a living” in LA, as she told me, after Motown left Detroit in 1972 to set up shop there. “I’m not known as a background singer,” Reeves explained. “I only did that because I thought Betty was very pleasant and her music was unique” (Reeves, interview by author, March 6, 2019). In the studio, Betty explained her different vocal arrangements to the singers, and it was Reeves who helped her put it all together and find the right harmonies in those sessions:

Betty had these different arrangements and she explained them. I found the harmony note with her and helped her put it together and we sang it [...] She wrote about [the] experiences that she was going through at the time. I think that’s why I worked with her because of her state of mind and the fact that she’s such a beautiful woman and very different. I never met anybody like her. (Reeves, interview by author, March 6, 2019)

Betty arranged music using bodily and vocal cues that allowed her to fully embody her compositions in a way that made up for her lack of formal musical training and her inability to read and write Western notation. In 2007, bassist Larry Graham spoke to this point:

She didn’t play [an instrument], 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 it. And then we’d tell from her reaction if we were right on track [...] So, our job was to try and move her. (Ballou 2007: 120)

Along with the writing produced by musicians themselves, scholars have written about the important role of the body in Black music (DeFrantz 2004; Gaunt 2006), which Tony Bolden describes as “the primary instrument,” around which “all other instruments function as appendages” (2013: 11). This central role of the body-as-instrument is most true in the case of Betty Davis, who relied solely on her body to write, arrange, lead musicians, and perform vocals. She exemplified how the body can be construed as “a *technology* of black musical communication and identity” (Gaunt 2006: 59).

Betty formulated a unique method of oral composition to teach the musicians her songs for all five of her 1970s studio albums. This process belongs to a long lineage within the African American blues tradition in which Betty was reared. She never considered her lack of formal music training as a detriment, nor has she ever expressed a desire to learn music theory and composition.

Rather, she considered her process of songwriting, arranging, and bandleading to be an extension of her unique approach to creative collaboration and interpersonal communication. When I asked Betty if, when writing music, she knew how the songs were going to sound from the beginning of the process, she said she did not: “I know how they’re going to sound but I don’t know how they’re going to end up. It’s all energy” (Davis, interview by author, June 29, 2019). While living in the Bay Area and surrounded by the energy of an eclectic group of skilled, socially conscious musicians, Betty also learned everything she could about working in the studio: “I learned from Greg Errico [...] I was watching what he was doing, and I was really attuned to him” (Davis, interview by author, June 29, 2019). Errico remembered Betty being incredibly active throughout the entire process of recording her debut album:

She’d ask questions. She would observe; she’d sit right there, she kept herself part of everything that happened. It wasn’t like, ‘Okay, you go handle this and we’ll meet up later on.’ She wanted to absorb everything, and she did. And if she had a thought about any particular thing that was going on, she would express herself and it was smooth. (Errico, interview by author, Feb 14, 2019)

Patryce “Choc’let” Banks recalled that even though Betty was not credited as co-producer on *Betty Davis*, she was an integral part of the process:

[S]he was the producer. She was in charge. She knew what she wanted and nobody else knew because it was something in her mind, her vision. You couldn’t even really suggest if you wanted it to go a certain way because only she knew what she wanted to hear and it was like, sometimes extraordinary. It was something that you never heard before. (Banks, interview by author, Feb 5, 2019)

That “something” was a sophisticated mix of Betty’s contemporary musical influences at the time of recording, along with her strong background in the blues and her newly developed signature voice that disregarded the boundaries of genre, gender, and race. The result was her self-titled album, released in 1973, which fused blues, rock, and funk in a way that predated some of the music industry’s most popular trends of the decade (“something that you never heard before”).

4.1.1 The Artist as Producer

Through my own in-depth analysis of album credits via Discogs.com, it is evident that Black women were rarely given the opportunity to work as music producers before the late 1970s, and almost never credited as such on production work they did in the studio, whether on their own recordings or with work performed by other artists. Betty Davis was something of an anomaly in this regard, as she produced her next three studio albums (*They Say I'm Different* 1974; *Nasty Gal* 1975; *Is It Love Or Desire* 1976) and enjoyed the kind of artistic control that was reserved for only a very small group of (commercially successful) women musicians during the 1970s, including Joni Mitchell, Carole King, and Aretha Franklin. Once given a supportive, safe studio space in which to work, Betty began to identify herself as a producer and strongly gravitated towards that aspect of the industry. In 1974, she spoke out about the gendering of music production fields in *Essence* magazine: “Music is a man’s field—it really is. There are a lot of female singers, but to get into music from the technical end, in terms of arranging, writing, and producing, that’s really a man’s thing” (Gibbs 1974a: 30). She returned to the topic, in 1975, when she told *Sounds* newspaper: “Eventually, I would love just to do producing. There aren’t any women around who actually make their livings as producers. And that’s one area I want to get into. For a man, it’s a hard enough business but for a woman it’s twice as hard. You just have to go past yourself” (Katz 1975).

As David Ritz (2014) noted in his definitive portrait of Aretha Franklin, *The Queen of Soul* only began to be credited as co-producer in 1972, with the album *Amazing Grace* (Atlantic Records), despite being integral to the arrangement and production of her early albums on Columbia and Atlantic. Roberta Flack, who was also a highly skilled arranger and active in the production of her albums, was not credited as co-producer until 1975, with *Feel Like Makin’ Love* (Atlantic Records), which was notably under the pseudonym, Rubina Flake. Nina Simone, whose gifts as a writer and arranger helped propel her personal vision into the sound of her studio albums, was similarly not credited as co-producer until 1974’s *Is It Finished* (RCA). Yet even when these iconic musicians began to receive their proper credits as producers, it was often done in conjunction with male colleagues and they were not responsible for writing and arranging all of the material on their albums. Indeed, the patriarchal power dynamics that governed authorship in

the crediting process were so ingrained in the music industry that it is difficult to even construct an accurate history of women musicians who worked as producers.

As of 2020, a definitive source on who the first Black women musicians/producers actually were, does not exist.⁴⁶ However, based on my research—which has actively documented album credits for Black women musicians/producers from the “race records” era up until the late 1970s—I feel confident in stating that Betty Davis was the first Black woman vocalist—and only the second Black woman musician—to be solely credited with writing, arranging, producing, and performing on her own album, which was 1974’s *They Say I’m Different*.⁴⁷ In 1974, Dave Frechette also made this claim: “Betty became the first black woman to write, arrange, sing and produce her own album” (Frechette 1974: 48).

Maureen Mahon has long acknowledged Betty’s contributions and argues that “by virtue of her hands-on involvement in songwriting, arranging, singing, producing, and performing, Davis offers a rare example of a woman musician in the pop context who was in charge of conceptualizing an artistic vision and bringing it to fruition. Unfortunately, this novelty did not yield chart hits” (2013: 151). While Betty’s artistic control did not translate into hit records, it did produce a pioneering catalogue of music that documented an expansive vision of Black feminist consciousness that was engaged with the legacy of blues women but simultaneously propelled it forward for modern consumption.

⁴⁶ For an in-depth study about the gendering of music production fields within contemporary recorded popular music, especially the roles of producer and engineer, see Fournet (2019).

⁴⁷ I make this claim after four years of investigative scholarly research and an exhaustive search of album credits on Discogs.com. To my best and current knowledge, American jazz pianist, organist, and harpist, Alice Coltrane (1937-2007), was the first Black woman musician (instrumentalist) to be credited as composer, producer, and performer on her own full-length album with *Alice Coltrane – A Monastic Trio* (Impulse!) in 1968; making Betty Davis the first Black woman *vocalist* (and second Black woman musician) to be credited with doing so. For an in-depth portrait of Alice Coltrane, see Berkman (2010). It is my hope that rather than being interpreted as an unsubstantiated claim, this study will propel additional critical research that seeks to properly document the contributions of Black women musicians who have been effectively omitted from the history of music production. For instance, American jazz pianist and composer Mary Lou Williams was writing, arranging and effectively bandleading for Andy Kirk And His Clouds Of Joy as early as the 1930s. In a later era, and with different terminology, she would likely have been credited as producer. Instead, she was known as “the lady who swings the band.” It was not until 1975 that Williams was credited as producer on her own album *Mary Lou’s Mass* (Mary Records). For an in-depth portrait of Mary Lou Williams, see Kernodle (2004). I am indebted to the online record collecting community who—through a Discogs Forum Thread—helped me navigate these claims and create a working list of early *credited* Black women musician/producers (“1970s Black women producers????”). Black women musicians that I have come across who *were* credited early on as producers of their own work (not including the musicians I have already mentioned), include Johnnie Mae Matthews, Sylvia Moy, Sylvia Robinson, Miriam Makeba, Sarah Webster Fabio, Jayne Cortez, Linda Lewis, Koko Taylor, Millie Jackson, Bobbi Humphrey, Denise LaSalle, Minnie Riperton, Patrice Rushen, and Irene Perkins..

Betty was not just a visionary within racially coded *Black* genres, including blues, funk, and R&B, but also within rock music, where she thoroughly transcended barriers. In what follows I look more closely at (1) the ways in which she utilized vocal abandon with an exaggerated emphasis on high energy and affective intensity (i.e. vocality); (2) the ways in which her lyrical content announced anti-establishment and taboo topics (i.e. textuality); and (3) the ways in which her performance style presented an outsider attitude and challenged the conventions of acceptable stage presence (i.e. physicality).⁴⁸

4.2 Vocality

By beginning to analyze Betty's music with a focus on vocality, I centralize the intellectual labor of Black women vocalists, whose work as singers has historically been reduced to natural, and therefore, coded as anti-intellectual. Eileen Southern (1971) has documented early representations of Black women singers as spellbinding and almost otherworldly. Mavis Bayton suggests that, historically, women's limited access to the role of professional musician has been seen only through singing because it is coded as feminine and therefore considered natural rather skilled: "[T]he singer's only 'instrument' is her body. This both confirms and reinforces the long-standing association of women with the body and nature which runs through our culture and contrasts with the image of men as controllers of nature via technology" (1988: 13). This reduction of Black women singers as natural promotes a false binary of nature/culture that feminist theorists have long worked to dismantle (Ortner 1972; Scott 1986; McClintock 1995). By marking Black women's voices as inherently natural, the intellectual labor and artistic agency that goes into the work of singing is neglected, and instead locates such work in a sexualized and racialized body:

⁴⁸ While it is outside the scope of this study, I hope to formulate a future project that addresses the punk rock ethos that I, many of my research participants and, more recently, pop culture critics (Goldman 2004; Beta 2007; "Betty Davis" 2007; Mahon 2011; Lordi 2018; SATE 2018) have identified with Betty Davis. By injecting a new reading of Betty as an early architect of punk, I hope to engage in critical interventions into punk's historiographies and to "extend the genealogies of punk performance" (Stinson 2012: 277).

African Americans have historically been represented as naturally gifted singers and dancers and female expression has been marked as a matter of the (sexualized) body rather than the reasoning mind. These methods of song, race, and gender mean that to be a black female singer is to be coded as anti-intellectual on three different and related counts. (Lordi 2013: 9)

By challenging the conception of Black women's singing as "anti-intellectual," Lordi accounts for the "*intentional nature* of singers' work—the fact that vocalists have specific ideas about what they want to do and make choices that produce meaningful effects" (ibid.: 3; italics mine). Betty's voice itself dismantled the nature/culture binary due to the unique, experimental labor of her singing, which we know from having listened to her earlier recordings in the 1960s was something she developed as a distinctive style and interpretive technique. No one would suggest that Betty's idiosyncratic singing style in the 1970s was derived from some enchanted Black authenticity, or that her vocal style was natural. Rather, I suggest that Betty's vocality was not only intentional, but highly innovative.

In one of the few scholarly analyses of Betty Davis, Cheryl Keyes observes that, "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*" (2013: 45; italics mine). While Betty had many ideas and made many choices regarding the vocal rendering of her songs, I focus here on four major vocal characteristics that showcase the depth of her vocal intentionality and innovation: (1) timbral contrast, (2) vocal demeanor, (3) audible pleasure, and (4) rapping. I contend that Betty intentionally and inventively weaved these vocal characteristics throughout her 1970s studio recordings in a way that enacted her "signature voice," or what Emily Lordi describes as "singular, authoritative voices that pay tribute to and call out toward others" (2013: 173).

Once Greg Errico heard Betty's voice (after agreeing to produce her), he knew she was not a traditional vocalist:

She wasn't a quote/unquote singer, and that was obvious. I knew that she would be able to pull off what she was doing because of her personality, and she wasn't afraid to go out and do it. I thought, 'Ok, Bob Dylan isn't a singer, but he's an artist in the way [that] he expresses his song,' and that's what she was going to do. I knew that. (Errico, interview by author, Feb 14, 2019)

Betty herself did not identify as a singer in the conventional sense either, as she expressed to the *Los Angeles Sentinel* in 1975: “I really don’t consider myself a singer. Aretha Franklin is a singer. I consider myself more of a projector. I’m into sound. I’ll work my voice a thousand different ways. I’m into making my voice work with the rhythm track. Whatever feel I’m getting from the rhythm track I’ll do it with my voice” (Brown 1975: 47). When I recently asked Betty how she felt about her voice, she responded: “You take Aretha [Franklin] and Chaka [Khan] and Patti [LaBelle], they’re singers. I’m more of a sound projector, I know how to make a song work, to phrase [...] I don’t consider myself to be a great singer, but I know how to make a song work” (Davis, interview by author, July 19, 2019).

Describing herself as a “sound projector,” a term which still holds significance for Betty, is rather ingenious because it elegantly describes the breadth of her vocal style that is by no means limited to singing. It is a term that, interestingly enough, also flattens the arbitrary distinction that is sometimes made between musicians and singers, inasmuch as every performer on the stage or in the studio is a “sound projector” who contributes equally to the music. Whether she meant it or not, the term “sound projector” is also befitting of someone who embodies so many of the adjectival definitions of the word *sound*. That is to say, she is a projector who is simultaneously sensible, severe, and thorough.⁴⁹

It is this identification with being a “sound projector,” rather than a singer, that would propel Betty through her five completed studio albums (only three released upon recording): (1) *Betty Davis* (1973, Just Sunshine Records); (2) *They Say I’m Different* (1974, Just Sunshine Records); (3) *Nasty Gal* (1975, Island Records); (4) *Is It Love Or Desire* (recorded in 1976 for Island Records; originally titled *Crashin’ From Passion*; shelved until it was released in 2009 by Light In The Attic Records); and (5) *Crashin’ From Passion* (recorded in 1979 without a label; bootlegged without Betty’s consent in the 1990s; current plans underway to officially release it in 2021 by Light In The Attic Records).⁵⁰

Betty’s self-titled debut album is perhaps most striking for the way it introduces listeners to her raw and uninhibited voice. The sweet, feminine-presenting tone Betty offered up on her first recordings in the 1960s were intermingled with entirely new sounds that ranged from ferocious growls, to quivering whispers, to a raw-throated vocal attack. In hindsight, one can hear traces of

⁴⁹ I am grateful to Dr. Andrew Weintraub for helping me unpack this term and consider its deeper implications.

⁵⁰ See Maggio (forthcoming).

the vocal abandon with which she began experimenting in the 1968-69 Columbia sessions, but her debut showcases it through a brazen delivery that is coupled with extreme interpretive nuances that highlight her sonic, mental, and physical endurance as a singer-songwriter. One of the ways Betty accomplished this was by utilizing a contrasting timbral pallet that worked and projected her vocal register to the extreme.

4.2.1 Timbral Contrast

Through a portrait of jazz vocalist Jimmy Scott, voice studies scholar Nina Eidsheim reminds us that “while there are a number of vocal timbres in African-American singing already understood as marginal,” the unusual aspects of certain Black voices that are interpreted through the lens of race and gender can still fail to “fit into *any* known category, whether normative or marginal” (2018: 149). The most unusual aspect of Betty’s voice was the way in which she advanced a technique of African American shouting and hollering that, at the time, challenged any known musical category. By the time Betty got her first chance to record a full album of her original (demo) songs in 1969, James Brown, affectionately known to the public as Soul Brother No. 1, had evolved the African American shout and holler into a soul scream—a rallying cry toward the formations of funk and the political and cultural projects of Black Power. Before Brown, a multitude of Black vocalists, including Screamin’ Jay Hawkins, Big Mama Thornton, Howlin’ Wolf, and Little Richard, raised their voices in an increasingly modern type of abandonment that would become enshrined in rock and roll. The difference between Betty and the other Black musicians who utilized this soul scream was their ability to stay within the conventional ideas of vocal quality.

What I am referring to as vocal quality must be understood through the lens of skill, labor, and value. Catherine Provenzano’s discussion of a “vocal value system” (2018: 161) when analyzing the early uses of Auto-Tune in popular music is helpful in understanding how conventional ideas of vocal quality are connected to power hierarchies that are themselves a direct result of “ideologies of the marked body, its attendant worth, and its claims to selfhood” (ibid.). Marked as a beautiful Black woman, Betty’s voice was expected to enlist a certain level of skill associated with the collective African American and feminine experience. However, unlike the majority of other Black women vocalists in the 1970s, Betty did not learn to sing in church, which

she has confirmed for me on multiple occasions: “I wasn’t one of those people whose musical background was in the church, or gospel really. I was raised on the blues” (Davis, personal communication, April 26, 2018). As a result, there are very few traces of gospel-inspired melisma in her vocal production. There is a live action quality to the timbre(s), rhythm(s), and melodic contour(s) of her voice. By live action quality, I am suggesting her vocal emphasis was on a type of affective intensity. Rather than simply presenting herself as a singer, Betty presented her voice as a visceral, high energy source to command attention (and deliver a message) outside of the accepted and expected confines of her marked body.

Such a presentation was extremely challenging for 1970s audiences who were largely trained to listen to music within a popular culture that essentialized raced and gendered voices (Eidsheim 2008, 2018, 2019). Here, I am suggesting Betty’s vocal labor consistently pushed her physical vocal abilities and experimented with the relation between voice and self in a way that transcended conventional ideas about vocal quality and, thus, challenged the very process of listening to voices. Vivian Goldman was one of the very few women who held powerful positions as gatekeepers in the 1970s when she worked for Island Records. Goldman was assigned to cover Betty’s Public Relations after she was signed to Island in 1975, and said this about Betty’s distinctive vocality: “You can hear courage in the way Davis worked her vocal register—ratcheting her pretty alto into a drilling, grating vibrato and an off-the-meter-soprano screech—suggesting a woman pushing herself to extremes, testing her mental and physical endurance, refusing to accept limits” (2004: 57).

Betty used the raw material of her voice to reach such extremes—what Provenzano has efficiently summed up as “the fleshy folds of the larynx, the resonating chamber of the skull, the support capacity of the lungs (2018: 163)—without the addition of echo, reverb, or other technological effects that could have been applied in post-production.⁵¹ Photographs of Betty singing or, projecting, often show her contorting her face in ways that remove any conventional feminine appeal that pop artists were expected to oblige by, as well as tightening her throat and stretching her face muscles to capacity in order to produce uninhibited, and often jarring timbres (i.e. not singing pretty) (Figure 8).

⁵¹ By including this detail of Betty’s vocality, I am not suggested her voice was more pure or authentic—or less compromised—due to a lack of post-production effects. See Provenzano (2018) for a discussion on value in relation to timbre and vocal editing/enhancement.



Figure 8. Betty Davis singing live. Location unknown. Year unknown (circa 1974). Photographer unknown.

The signature rawness of her voice—her uninhibited vocal expression—contributed to what listeners might now identify as an unapologetic display of humanity. However, at the time, such vocals did not comport with the norms of pop music or the accepted sounds that the music market could effectively brand as sonically Black. There is, of course, no sonic essence to Blackness but the “*notion* of sonic blackness,” as Provenzano writes, can be “essentialized as an efficient strategy for defining things and bodies as belonging or not belonging together” (Provenzano 2018: 169).

Black vocalists before Betty who expanded the shout and holler were generally regarded as skilled singers who delivered a valuable, desirable sound within the sonic contours of Blackness defined by R&B and related music. Betty, on the other hand, intentionally departed from and challenged the conventions of R&B singing and, thus, the notion of sonic Blackness. Furthermore, being marked as a Black woman by a racist, patriarchal society encrypted such screams as angry and hypersexual, further challenging the musical trope that was most commonly regarded as masculine. Betty projected her screams in a way that departed from their conventional usage in

Black musical idioms. In doing so, she forced listeners to reassess the integrity of her voice through very specific notions of skill and value (i.e. what constitutes a ‘good’ voice) cultivated by the music industry. Betty’s voice often confused many listeners, including vocalist and friend Patryce “Choc’let” Banks, who initially had difficulty with it:

When I heard her voice, I was like [pause], okay, when is she going to quit playing and really sing? I had never heard anything like that before and it was so different; I couldn't relate to it. It was a little too different for me. I didn't appreciate her voice. I loved her songs; I loved her songwriting, all the arrangements, the music, everything. But when I first heard her voice I could not appreciate it. (Banks, interview by author, Feb 5, 2019)

Keyboardist Fred Mills similarly recalled being confused by Betty’s vocals: “When I first heard Betty’s thing, I thought [this] is kind of a strange thing to hear [...] she’s way over there [...] vocal-wise. I never really considered Betty to be a hell of a vocalist, but I considered her to be a hell of a song seller. She could sell a song” (Mills, interview by Oliver Wang, August 26, 2006). However, not all were perplexed by the unorthodox qualities of Betty’s vocals. In fact, Betty’s voice left quite an impression on vocalist Anita Pointer: “I just remember how blown away I was when I heard her sing. She was like a Janis Joplin soul sista—so much power with a real rock & roll vibe” (Pointer, personal communication, Feb 25, 2020).

Songs such as “He Was A Big Freak” (1974), “Walkin’ Up The Road” (1973), “F.U.N.K.” (1975), “Steppin’ In Her I. Miller Shoes” (1973), and “Ooh Yeah” (1973) are all examples of Betty elevating the soul scream in ways that transcend conventional and interrelated notions about vocal quality and sonic Blackness. No song exemplifies her elevation of the soul scream better than “Game Is My Middle Name” (1973). Midway through the song, she and her background singers engage in a series of vocalizations—screamed, squeezed, and stretched vocals—that are in no way concerned with conventional vocal quality or technique. Rather, they are delivered in order to attack the listener with the lyrics and the attitude of the song’s sexually liberated message. Betty and the backup singers repeat the lines, “*Whatever you want to play, I said I’ll play it with you, Game is my middle name,*” and they depart from the song’s established groove in order to project vocal sound. The line is first sung in a lower register by backup singer Sylvester, then The Pointer Sisters take the line up the octave, building in affective intensity. Finally, Betty enters and attacks the note with a shrieking scream that sounds like we are hearing her voice’s breaking point. This

song exemplifies how Betty “foregrounded a form of vocalizing that did not meet expectations for singing by black women” (Mahon 2011: 153).

While Betty Davis is overwhelmingly associated with her more aggressive, coarse vocalizations, her use of softer dynamics and breathy timbres tend to be overlooked. Songs such as “Anti-Love Song” (1973), “In The Meantime” (1973), “Shoo-B-Doop and Cop Him” (1974), “Your Mama Wants Ya Back” (1974), “70’s Blues” (1974), “Special People” (1974), “You and I” (1975), “Let’s Get Personal” (1976), “For My Man” (1976), “She’s a Woman” (1979), and “Tell Me a Few Things” (1979) all showcase Betty’s ability to create effective timbral contrast. One song that exemplifies this is “I Will Take That Ride” (1973) (which was later re-recorded as “The Lone Ranger” in 1975). In this previously unreleased bonus track (only available since the 2007 reissue of her debut album), “I Will Take That Ride” uses intimate tonal color to paint a vivid picture of Betty seducing a potential lover. The phrasing is shaped by her trapping of consonants, which then open up to the exaggerated breathy pronunciation of vowel-sounds in phrases like, “*Hey, Hey, Stranger, I hear that they call you the lone ranger.*” Shifting between hissing and growling timbres, and fluctuating between breathy and tense pronunciation, Betty’s delicate use of timbre drives the phrasing of the song and elevates its simple instrumentation, which is carried by a walking bass line and punctuated by sparse hits on the hi-hats.

In “Anti-Love Song” (1973), Betty breaks rank with legions of women R&B singers by declaring a moratorium on love songs. Throughout the song, Betty rests her vocalization in the growling space between the throat and the back of the mouth, creating a timbre which is at once gritty and breathy. She used this oscillating timbre to push out phrases like, “*I know you could make me suffer,*” to their limits by ensnaring closed-sounded consonants in her mouth and then opening up her throat to vowels with a shaky, purr-like intensity. “Anti-Love Song” also exemplifies the frequent way that Betty communicated to (i.e. sang to) a potential lover or lovers, as opposed to the common soul and R&B style of singing to, or about, a present or past lover. By singing to or about potential lovers, Betty uses inviting tonal color and vivid descriptions to put the power and agency in her own hands, by urging the songs’ subjects to earn her intimacy.

4.2.2 Vocal Demeanor

Emily Lordi describes vivid lyricism as “exploiting the sound of language to enhance visual description” (2013: 31). Betty’s timbral contrast and exploratory phrasing often did this in her recorded music, and as I witnessed firsthand in 2019, her emphasis on the sound of language while singing is still crucial to her artistic vision. Betty most frequently enacted this type of vivid lyricism—what I am calling her *vocal demeanor*—in order to perform gender and power roles. It is a technique that relies on timbre, phrasing, and text to enhance the lyrics. Songs including “Nasty Gal” (1975), “Shut Off The Light” (1975), “Dedicated To The Press” (1975), and “Stars Starve, You Know” (1976) all exemplify how Betty mediated her lyrics through her vocal demeanor.

Following her second album, *They Say I’m Different* (1974), Michael Lang sold Betty’s contract (with her blessing) to Chris Blackwell at Island Records with hopes that Island could use its bigger marketing machine to promote her music at a level that was impossible for an independent label like Just Sunshine Records. By this point, Betty had already changed the lineup of musicians on her previous album—Ted Sparks (and later Mike Clark) took over for Errico’s drums; Betty’s cousin, Larry Johnson, replaced Graham’s bass; guitarist Cordell Dudley (and, on one track, Betty’s old friend Buddy Miles) replaced Schon and Rodriguez; a third keyboard player, Tony Vaughn, was added; percussionists Pete Escovedo and Victor Pantoja contributed; and Trudy Perkins, Elaine Clark, and Debbie Burrell replaced Sylvester and The Pointer Sisters as back-up vocalists. Betty had also taken the lead as producer and begun to formulate a live show that included her own traveling band. Her third studio album, *Nasty Gal* (1975), was the inauguration of Betty’s band, Funk House, with whom she toured throughout the US and also performed overseas in the UK and France.⁵² *Nasty Gal* also marked the inception of Betty making the conscious decision to lean into, and effectively reappropriate the hyper-sexualized persona that the music press and her critics were so obsessed with following her previous releases.

Nasty Gal begins to see Betty performing femininity as playful, in order to taunt, tease, or confuse the listener. On the title track “Nasty Gal” (1975) that opens the album, Betty declares herself a “*nasty gal*” and projects lyrics that directly confronted the popular media’s depiction of her as hypersexualized woman: “*I ain’t nothin’ but a nasty gal now [...] You said I was a bitch,*

⁵² Funk House would also serve as Betty’s backing band on her 1976 follow-up album, *Is It Love Or Desire*, that went unreleased until 2009.

now [...] *You said I was an evil witch [...] You said I was an alley cat.*” She uses her lyrics to reclaim her authority to self-identify in a way that is unapologetic, but it is coupled with an expressive attitude and style that ultimately makes the song work as both critique and celebration. She manipulates her voice to present both a contrasting feminine, sweet demeanor and a masculine, aggressive demeanor. In doing so, she inventively plays both sides of the gender binary in a way that enhances the lyrical content.

This play on vocal demeanor is exemplified in “Shut Off The Light” (1975), where she lays the ground rules down before she agrees to get intimate with the song’s subject: “*Shut off the light [...] Don’t you answer your phone [...] Don’t you answer that door.*” Betty manipulates vocal demeanor to intentionally call attention to gender as a performance—she offers a syrupy, softer voice when she sings about being submissive (“*I’m a nice girl, baby*”) and returns to her governing chest growl when she sings about being dominant (“*Just shut off the light chile’, Whatcha waitin’ on now*”). The difference in vocal demeanor between Betty’s dominant, gravely chest voice and her high-pitched, breathy voice is so pronounced that it reads as both ironic and a form of vocal roleplay that challenges listeners to rethink the false binaries of feminine and masculine, submissive and dominate, sweet and nasty.

Rather than using the platform of Island Records to ease into the mainstream and crossover to a wider audience, Betty instead used songs like “Dedicated To The Press” (1975) to condemn all the music critics who treated her harshly in the years prior and, for all extents and purposes, did not grasp what she was doing artistically. While in the UK promoting *Nasty Gal*, Betty expressed this same sentiment in *Sounds* newspaper: “Once you stand out there, you are naked. People just come to look at you and take you to pieces. They take and take and take. Then, when they can’t categorise you, they put you down. Why don’t they just say they don’t understand you? But the press, especially, doesn’t like to admit they don’t understand something, do they?” (Katz 1975).

Arguably the most effective aspect of Betty’s vocal demeanor on the song resides in the way she both lambasts her ‘haters’ and reclaims their negative press as a message of resistance. For example, the *New York Times* published Les Ledbetter’s review of one of Betty’s 1974 performances in which he wrote that she “sticks her tongue out lecherously” (Ledbetter 1974). Betty then repurposed the same language of the review in the lyrics of “Dedicated to the Press” in 1975: “*Extra, extra, Have you read about me? Well, they say I stick out my tongue quite lecherously, Well I really don’t know what they’re talking about, I just can’t seem to keep my*

tongue in my mouth, That's all folks.” To further translate the message of the song musically, she mimics her accusers by playing with vocal demeanor. For instance, when singing lyrics that suggest she is sorrowful or stressed about her bad reviews, Betty taps into an overly feminine-presenting voice—softly sung in her head register—which is meant to convey innocence and submission: *“It really is a pity that you can’t get into me.”* She then quickly changes into her deep growl at the end of the line (*“I don’t care”*) as if to fake out anyone who might think she is defeated by the negative press. She does this again when she sings, *“Oh, such a shame,”* in an unordinary high head register as if to mimic a helpless woman at the mercy of the press, right before using her gravely chest voice to mock the critic: *“Maybe her mother, her mother is to blame.”*

After *Nasty Gal* ultimately failed to chart or receive radio play and substantial positive reviews, Island Records insisted that her next album for the label be more commercial. More specifically, they suggested that Betty should dress less provocatively, sing other people’s songs, have her music produced by someone else (ostensibly an established male producer who could rein her in), and they also demanded that she record a disco or dance song. On what was supposed to be her follow-up record, Betty drew on the same energy in “Dedicated to the Press” and directed her message back at those who were attempting to control her sound and image. In the song “Stars Starve, You Know” (1976) her lyrics address the specific ‘recommendations’ made by Island Records, which she taunts and teases in order to let them know that she was not intimidated: *“Oh hey, hey Island.”* She calls out to Island Records in her feminine-presenting, high-pitched voice, sweet-sounding vocal demeanor, while the rest of the song uses a chesty growl to aggressively rap about the struggles of being managed by the music industry (Figure 9):

They said if I wanted to make some money
I’d have to change my style
put a paper bag over my face
sing soft and wear tight fitting gowns
they don’t like the way I’m lookin’
so it’s hard for my agent to get me bookin’s
unless I cover up my legs and drop my pen
and commit one of those commercial sins

Figure 9. Song lyrics to Betty Davis’ “Stars Starve, You Know” (1976).

In “Stars Starve, You Know,” Betty set the record straight regarding how she feels about being censored by a record label. Chris Blackwell (Island Records) was so displeased with her

defiance that he dropped her from the label and shelved her album. It wouldn't be until 2009 that the public—including Betty—would get to hear the album.

4.2.3 Audible Pleasure

The dynamics of power and gender were not the only social issues Betty infused with her uniquely contrasting tonal color and vocal demeanor. As a modern blues woman, Betty sonically absorbed her lived experiences with sex and sexuality and inventively projected them through audible pleasure. Expressing audible pleasure, or the mimicking of sex sounds in pop music performance (i.e., orgasmic moans, groans, and sighs) was not necessarily uncommon by the time Betty was doing it. Highly sexualized Black women vocalists including Tina Turner, Millie Jackson, and Donna Summer often incorporated this type of vocal ornamentation. Before them, blues singers including Luella Miller (“Rattle Snake Groan” 1927) and Victoria Spivey (“Moanin’ The Blues” 1934) had utilized the “low moan” for erotic effect since the late 1920s. A few things set Betty apart from those who have since been considered as her contemporaries. First, was her rare standing in the music industry of existing without a male leader archetype—no lead or backup singer, no songwriter, no manager, no husband. As Hazel Carby has pointed out, the blues was a privileged site in which women were free to assert themselves publicly as sexual beings (1990, 1992). I would argue that funk (along with R&B and disco), throughout the 1970s, was a privileged site in which women were also free to assert themselves publicly as *sexualized* beings. The distinction I’m drawing here between “sexual” and “sexualized” is located at the hyper-visual culture of the 1970s pop music market (which included album covers, print media, fan clubs, and TV performances) and the male gaze that informed the look and feel of popular media of the period. I view the distinction between “sexual” and “sexualized” in the same vein that John Berger delineates the difference between nakedness and the convention of “the nude,” which extends from the history of oil painting through contemporary mass media. He writes, “to be naked is to be oneself. To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself [...] Nakedness reveals itself. Nudity is placed on display” (Berger 1992: 54). In this sense, being “sexual” is for oneself and implies agency, whereas “sexualized” is typically an act of objectification.

While many of Betty’s 1970s alleged contemporaries may have explored the erotic in their vocal rendering of their songs, I would argue that much of it was motivated by a masculinist music

industry script and served more as a stylistic tool for their particular brand of sexual pop music, rather than an autonomous proclamation of desire and pleasure. Betty deviated from this pop-oriented use of audible pleasure in the way she projected pleasure as a communicative technique. The majority of pop music in the 1970s was aimed at a mainstream, heteronormative audience, and therefore mapped the sound of desire in the background of the song, often “nonsensically behind the lead’s meaningful words” (Corbett and Kapsalis 1996: 105-6). Rather than simply mimicking orgasmic vocalizations in the background of her songs, Betty injected the words themselves with a unique aural sexuality. Betty pronounced her lyrics in the growling space between her throat and the back of her mouth, creating a timbre which was at once guttural and breathy. In this sense, Betty’s aural sexuality functioned less as an additional stimulant to the music and more as an innovative technique. “Anti-Love Song” (1973) is a clear example of this.

Other songs, including “In The Meantime” (1973) and “You and I” (1975) showcase Betty’s ability to display vulnerability within her innovative use of audible pleasure. Musically, both songs represent the rare conventional sounding ballads that Betty recorded in her career. In the organ-led song, “In The Meantime,” Betty’s lyrics and vocals coalesce to provide the listener with a much softer and understated track to close out the debut album.⁵³ Vocally, Betty played with the vulnerable nature of the song, stretching and squeezing her voice to produce more eclectic timbres on certain words and phrases in a way which complimented the more straight forward style of singing. The song begins with the line: “*Tonight I wish I had someone to love me.*” Here, Betty sings the phrase in a traditional R&B style; her pronunciation and timbre stripped of any over exaggeration. However, when she sings the words “*love me*” she taps into the breathy, growling space in the back of her throat as to audibly signal her need for pleasure and/or intimacy.

“You and I” is perhaps Betty’s most vulnerable display of audible pleasure, and certainly her most delicately sung. However, Betty is still not construed as the victim in this vulnerable song, even though she is collaborating with her ex-husband, Miles Davis, who is now infamously known to have been abusive. She opens the song with a whimpering tone, almost as if sounding out of breath: “*I’m just a child, Trying to be a woman, And you, You are a strange one, Trying to be my man.*” By the time Betty gets to the line in the phrase “*and you*” she switches into her chest register to add a heavier and denser pronunciation, signaling the responsibility of both parties. By

⁵³ The 2007 reissue included three previous unreleased bonus tracks (“Come Take Me”; “You Won’t See Me In The Morning”; “I Will Take That Ride”).

displaying intimate sonic cues of vulnerability, along with more brazen sounds of sexuality, Betty provided a range of audible pleasure, further highlighting the complex, autonomous nature of Black women's desire.

Certainly there are songs, including "I Will Take That Ride" (1974) (later re-recorded as "The Lone Ranger" in 1975) and "She's A Woman" (1979), that utilized the conventional type of audible pleasure that was returning to the pop charts in the mid-1970s. Betty's use of audible pleasure in "She's A Woman" plays directly into the delicate, feminine lyrics: "*Stay, stay, stay, Stay for another hour, Kiss my lips, Tell me, tell me, tell me you will.*" By over emphasizing the word "stay" Betty injects it with a high pitched breathiness that grows in intensity as the song builds, insinuating the mounting of physical pleasure. "I Will Take That Ride" (1974) and "The Lone Ranger" (1975) exemplify Betty's use of softer dynamics and phrasing to indicate arousal and ends with Betty vocalizing pleasure through a series of non-lexical moans, groans, and sighs, indicating the first recording of Betty's that uses vocality to signal literal orgasmic pleasure.

4.2.4 Rapping

Finally, rapping, proved to be a highly innovative technique for Betty as a vocalist and storyteller. In the same way that Betty enhanced and expanded the soul scream by placing it outside conventional notions of vocal quality, she also did this with the virtuosic African American style of rapping. While the first commercial rap song was not recorded and released until 1979 by The Sugarhill Gang, the roots of rap in the United States have a deep history that draw from the cultural and verbal traditions of the African diaspora (Toop 1984; Gilroy 1993; Rose 1994, Burns 1995; Keyes 1996; Perry 2004; Osumare 2005; Spady 2013). Historians of rap music trace its present-day form to the mid-1970s hip hop culture of African American and Afro-Caribbean youth living in the South Bronx neighborhood of New York City. But before hip hop emerged as a subculture in the South Bronx (which then spread to other neighborhoods of New York City) in the early 1970s, the musical values, ideas, and behaviors rooted in the African diasporic style of rap could be heard through the work of musician-poets from the Black Arts Movement including the Last

Poets, Gil Scott Heron, and Nikki Giovanni, and before that in the “jive-talkin style” (Norfleet 2006: 353) of early R&B, swing, and jump musicians including Louis Jordan and Cab Calloway.⁵⁴

Betty Davis always loved to “make her voice work with the rhythm track,” which resulted in several isolated moments of her rapping since her debut album. However, she leaned into this style more heavily on her 1976 album that was shelved by Island Records. Songs including “This Is It” (1976), “Whorey Angel” (1976), “Stars Starve, You Know” (1976), and “Bar Hoppin” (1976) all exemplify Betty’s forceful dynamic between singing and speaking. In “This Is It,” Betty manically commands the attention of all who are listening by declaring herself, and her band Funk House, worthy of recognition on the basis of their uninhibited intensity. Betty raps throughout the entire song, to the point of abandoning the instrumental groove, and encourages her listeners to recognize and embrace how “*funky*,” “*nasty*,” “*hip*,” and “*raunchy*” her sound is (“*I can’t give it to ya no nastier than this*”).

As I previously explained, in “Stars Starve, You Know,” Betty boldly responded to the mounting pressure of Island Records’ demands and delivered perhaps her most consistently aggressive vocal performance. Never once participating in the melody, Betty raps her anti-industry lyrics at a much faster and more furious pace than early 1970s hip hop architects. In a riotous delivery, Betty raps (Figure 10):

They said if I wanted to make some money I’d have to clean up my act
so I called Miles Davis he said that’s cause you’re a fine black bitch, that’s all of that
I said they won’t take what I’m givin’, so it’s hard for me and the band to make a livin’
Less I do myself, and let em’ win, and commit one of them commercial sins

Figure 10. Song lyrics to Betty Davis’ “Stars Starve, You Know” (1976).

“Stars Starve, You Know” is unequivocally one of Betty’s most daring songs, both vocally and textually, as it references her own mental exhaustion from the industry pressure and calls out her label for not supporting her commitment to artistic freedom. Rather than creating bouncy, rhyming phrases over an instrumental accompaniment (Ramsey 2003: 165), Betty used rap as a forceful vehicle to express outrage and convey warning.

⁵⁴ As Guthrie P. Ramsey explains, “the stylistic and thematic predecessors” of rap are numerous and both extend and anticipate its musical practice. See Ramsey (2003: 165-66) for a truncated yet insightful list of such predecessors.

Before rapping was construed as a *musical* style in the 1960s and 1970s, “rapping” referred to the “art of verbal engagement intended to impress or persuade the listener” (Norfleet 2006: 355). Betty used this vernacular term in her 1973 song, “Game Is My Middle Name,” where she starts the song by singing the line: “*Rap on, Heavy one, Tell me the world is round.*” Here, Betty’s lyrical use of “rap” exemplifies the colloquial term’s ability to signify someone (“*heavy one*”) who is engaging in impassioned conversation (“*rap on*”) in order to coax the listener (“*tell me the world is round*”). Drummer and cousin, Nicky Neal, recalled Betty’s use of rap: “To me she was like the first innovator of rap. She’s coming across straight from what she felt, what she thought and what she seen. She wasn’t holding back anything just let it out, as a flow let it out” (Neal, interview by Oliver Wang, Aug 23, 2006). Neal’s identification with Betty as an “innovator of rap”—like mine—is less about making an association with a genre or culture of hip hop, and more about recognizing Betty as a “possessor of highly developed speech skills” (Small 1987: 391) within the virtuosic continuum of Black music.⁵⁵

4.3 Textuality

Betty’s lyrical content is marked by powerful idiomatic messages that herald back to the blues, albeit through an updated vernacular. I view Betty’s discography as a collection of what LaShonda Barnett calls “autoethnographic songs,” which Barnett views “through the lens of Africana womanism to get at the ways black women understand and articulate through music how race and gender shape their identities” (2012: 151). Utilizing an active, rather than passive voice, almost all of Betty’s lyrics are written in the first person (sixty-one out of sixty-six songs) and they offer a stripped down, often autobiographical account of her personal desires and frustrations. Only one song (“Live, Love, Learn” 1968) is written in the second-person tense in its entirety, and only three songs (“Steppin In Her I. Miller Shoes” 1973; “Don’t Call Her No Tramp” 1974; “Feelins” 1975) are sung in the third-person tense.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Hip hop culture, according to Tricia Rose, consists of three modes of expression: rap music, graffiti writing, and break dancing (1994: 27).

⁵⁶ Only one of Betty’s songs (“Feelins” 1975) shifts between first, second, and third person tense, technically belonging to all three categories. Betty starts off the song by singing about women (“*she wants to feel something, she wants to*

Like the classic blues women, Betty wrote and sang songs about taboo subjects that deviated from her era's established popular musical culture. In 1976, she spoke out in *New Dawn* magazine about what was perceived as her controversial lyrics: "My lyrics may go deeper to the core, but I don't write about nothin' people don't do or think. *I don't*. I can write from a male or a female point of view" (Toepfer 1976: 79). Betty did not sing traditional love songs to men and/or about men, nor did she present herself as a victim of heartbreak or loneliness. She also did not position herself as a submissive sexual partner when singing candidly about pleasure and desire. Rather, she produced a catalogue of music that documented an expansive vision of Black feminist consciousness through several thematic narratives which I discuss in this section.

In the following section, I do an in-depth lyrical analysis that breaks Betty's songs into the following thematic categories: (1) Desire, (2) Vulnerability, (3) Celebration, (4) Warning, and (5) Respect.⁵⁷ Within these main categories are sub-categories that further explicate Betty's lyrical content. Songs of desire are subdivided into (a) explicit and (b) romantic; songs of vulnerability are subdivided into (a) love life and (b) self-care; songs of celebration are subdivided into (a) invitation to party and (b) proclaiming self-definition; songs of warning are subdivided into (a) directed at haters and (b) directed at lovers; songs of respect are subdivided into (a) Black music, (b) the South, and (c) friends and family. Some of these songs also share traits, which are depicted in the graph below by the overlapping of circles that represent each subdivision (Figure 11).

feel anything"), then singing about men ("*he wants to feel something, he wants to feel anything*"). Betty eventually locates herself in the first person tense singing, "*I wanna feel something, I wanna feel anything.*"

⁵⁷ I am indebted to Cheryl Keyes' categorization of Betty Davis' song repertoire, which locates "four broad headings: songs of passion, tribute songs, musical autobiography, and songs of protest" (2013: 45-48). My thematic categorization extends and differs from Keyes (2013) by expanding the interpretation of lyrical content in conjunction with an in-depth analysis of Betty's life and career and formulating sub-divisions within categories.

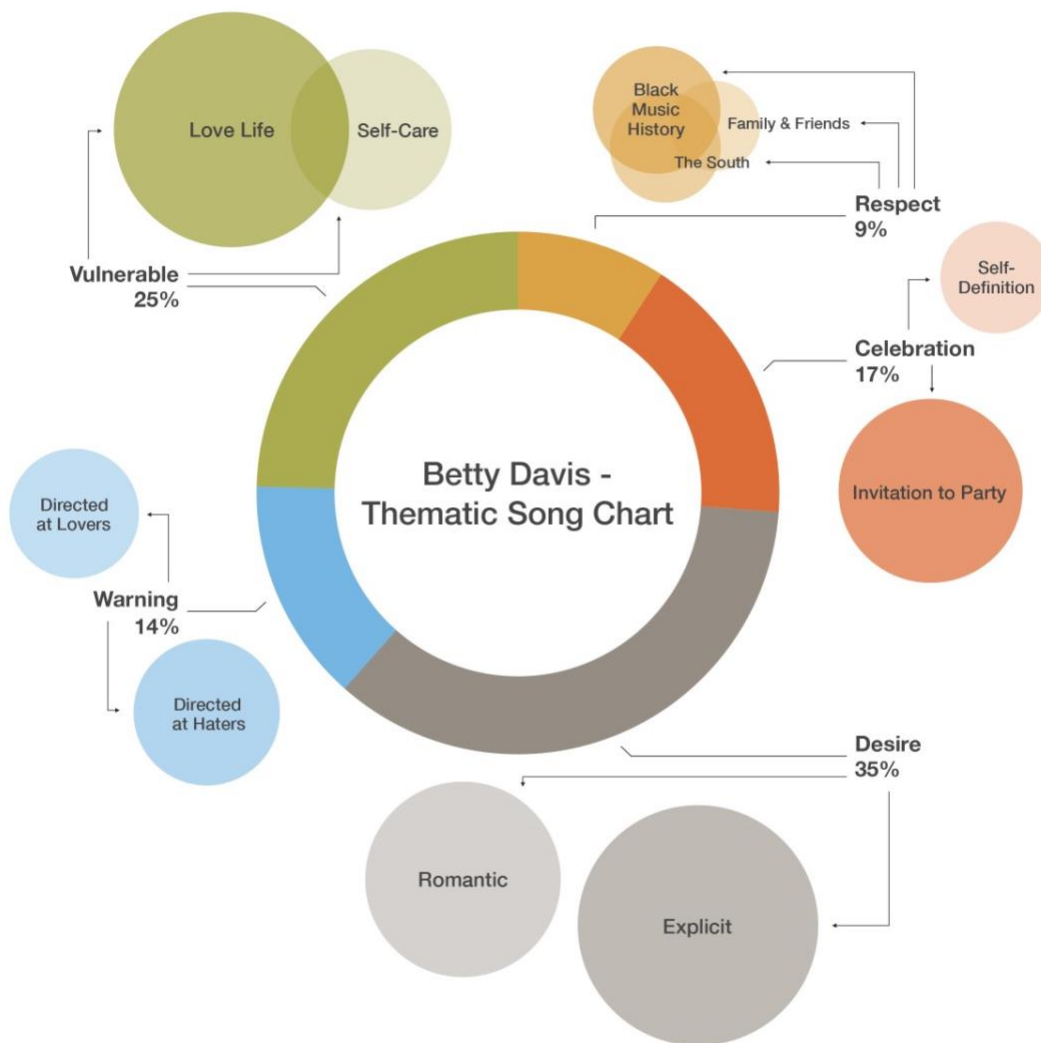


Figure 11. Betty Davis – Thematic Song Chart. Created by author.

This chart shows the consistency and depth of Betty's "autoethnographic songs" (Barnett 2012) by calculating the percentages of her songs that are based on thematic categories, sub-categories, and how her songs exist at the intersection of two or more subdivisions and categories.

4.3.1 Desire

I define songs of desire as those songs in which Betty centers pleasure (either giving, receiving, or campaigning for it) at the forefront of her lyrical content and, thus, her cultural expression. In these songs, Betty acknowledges the essential engagement with both pain and passion that is associated with Black sexuality in order to "claim pleasure and a healthy erotic as fundamental rights" (Morgan 2015: 36). *Explicit* songs of desire refer to songs where Betty uses graphic, active language that existed outside of the accepted messaging of the pop music market and her era's respectability politics. *Romantic* songs of desire refer to songs where Betty uses vague, euphemistic language that was deemed appropriate by her era and for the pop music market.

Explicit: Just as "If I'm In Luck..." (1973) exemplified Betty's distinctive new vocal style, it also signaled her transition away from the euphemistic language of R&B and rock and into more explicitly graphic language, providing a strong example for the most commonly used theme in her discography. "If I'm In Luck..." epitomized the controversial nature of Betty's songs, which garnered overly negative and fearful reception. In this case, the lyrics of the song were interpreted to be about a sex worker: "*I said if I'm in luck I just might get picked up, I said I'm fishin' trick and you can call it what you want then [...] I said I'm vampin' trampin' you can call it what you wanna.*" "If I'm In Luck..." marks the first time that we hear Betty use language that existed outside the parameters of women-fronted R&B: "*I said I'm crazy, I'm wild, I said I'm nasty.*" Here, Betty has left behind the expected and accepted sexual euphemisms that were used in both R&B music and rock and roll, and proudly adopts more explicit, graphic, or in cultural, political terms—disgraceful—language.

The explicit language (by 1973 standards) of "If I'm In Luck..." (Betty's first single on her debut album) incited a harsh response from the NAACP, who interpreted the song as being about prostitution. In effect, the NAACP slandered Betty's name throughout their organization and

personally called her to suggest that she was a “disgrace to her race.”⁵⁸ The NAACP pushed to have the song banned from radio play in Detroit, which they eventually succeeded in. Commenting on the backlash from her first single in 1974, Betty poignantly explained:

If they are supposed to help black people, why are they trying to hurt me. A lot of black people have to wake up. [Curtis Mayfield’s] *Superfly* is not going to make any black kid run out and emulate him no more than one of my records is going to make a young lady run out and become a prostitute. What people must realize is that there are all levels of blacks. We are not all doctors, lawyers, nurses and social workers. That man standing on 116th Street in Harlem selling cocaine is a real man, a pusher; and you can’t push that under the rug. Those girls standing in 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. (*Black Stars* 1974: 32)

A year later, she spoke out again in *High Society* about this issue: “Bourgeois blacks find me very offensive. They’ve been programmed to think that black women who shake their asses are whorey. The NAACP called up the record company. They’re not trying to advance me. They’re trying to stop me from making a living. They stopped all my airplay in Detroit” (Richards and Weinstein 1976: 93).

In Kansas City, a local radio station was picketed when they inadvertently played the song on air (it is unclear if the NAACP smear campaign had anything to do with this protest or if it was removed from citizens acting on their own volition). Addressing the issue of music censorship and radio programming directors, in 1974, Betty stated in *Black Music*:

I’m not planning to do anything about ‘cleaning’ up my music. I think it’s fine just like it is. Album no. 3 is going to be even funkier. If you do something that’s purely creative, that’s coming from your insides, people may accept it and they may not. 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 be, but I think there are enough commercial people out there already. I want to do something different and being creative is a big challenge whereas being commercial isn’t. (Frachette 1974: 48)

⁵⁸ Despite attempts to contact the NAACP about this incident in 1973 and find a source confirming their condemnation, I was unable to secure one. The story of Betty’s encounter with the NAACP is confirmed by Betty’s own personal accounts to me in recent years, as well as previous accounts she has shared with the press that were published in the 1970s.

When I asked Betty about her confrontation with the NAACP she expressed the same sentiment to me that she did back in the 1970s: “Well, I said, they’re for the advancement of colored people and they were stopping my advancement by banning my music, you know what I mean? That really hurt my feelings” (Davis, interview by author, July 19, 2019).

While some interpretations of “If I’m In Luck...” might insist Betty is singing to women when she says, “*So all you lady haters don't be cruel to me, Don't you crush my velvet don't you ruffle my feathers neither,*” I contend Betty is singing to a non-gendered collective, and that her lyrics are meant for anyone who would shame what (or who) Betty is singing about. Betty often explicitly states if she is singing to men or women by incorporating gendered pronouns or gendered subjects (including “gals” or “fellas”) in her lyrics. Out of Betty’s sixty-six song discography, only three songs are specifically sung to women (“Get Ready For Betty” 1964; “Your Man My Man” 1973; and “Shoo-B-Doop and Cop Him” 1974) and eleven songs are specifically sung to men (“My Soul is Tired” 1969; “Anti-Love Song” 1973; “Your Mama Wants Ya Back” 1974; “Talkin’ Trash” 1975; “You and I” 1975; “The Lone Ranger 1975; “Crashin’ From Passion” 1976; and “When Romance Says Goodbye” 1976). In two songs, Betty explicitly address both men and women (“Feelings” 1975; “This Is It” 1975). Thus, when she does not identify the gender of who she is communicating to in her songs, I read them as being addressed to a non-gendered collective, or a non-gendered individual.⁵⁹ In this sense, with the case of “If I’m In Luck...”, “*lady haters*” does not just refer to lady’s who are “hating” (i.e. shaming) Betty, but rather any individual or group intent on passing judgment on the actions of the woman in the song.

This openness and acceptance of marginal members of Black society is a direct influence from the blues women of Betty’s childhood:

The openness of the blues realm—its repudiation of taboos of all sorts—is rendered possible by virtue of the fact that the blues always decline to pass judgment. Their nonjudgmental character permits ideas that would be rejected by the larger society

⁵⁹ I am analyzing the communication aspect in Betty’s songs based on who Betty is singing *to*, which is not necessarily the same as who she is singing *about*. Therefore, songs sung about men are not necessarily being sung to a man, and songs sung about women are not necessarily being sung to a woman. This is exemplified in the songs “Your Man My Man” (1973); “He Was a Big Freak” (1974); “Shoo-B-Doop and Cop Him” (1974); “Whorey Angel” (1976); and “For My Man” (1976). Furthermore, my decision to point out the ambiguity of who Betty’s singing to is directly inspired by Betty’s own thoughts on gender fluidity. In 1976, she told *New Dawn* magazine: “I think the worst thing that ever came into this world is two sexes. No, really, I think just one would be great. If we were that evolved, then the sexual thing would be somewhere else” (Toepfer 1976: 79).

to enter into blues discourse. That is why blues women are able to speak in an active and assertive voice not permitted in mainstream society. (Davis 1998: 133-4)

Betty knew no taboos, which was made painstakingly clear in her 1974 song “He Was A Big Freak,” which offers another vivid example of a desire song that uses explicit language. Betty’s a cappella voice kicks off the track when she raises her avant-garde scream to divulge intimate information about a previous lover. In a matter-of-fact way, Betty tells listeners how she “*used to beat him with a turquoise chain*”—a line that breaks all conceivable social taboos governing acceptable and expected sexual discourse in popular music of the era. Blues women often sang lyrics about violence, either in relation to physical abuse they had suffered by men or physical abuse they themselves threatened to carry out for being mistreated, but they never sang about violence as a sexually masochistic kink (i.e. sadomasochism [S&M]). Betty did so and she clearly identified herself as the individual in control of the man (“*him*”), who is the sexual object.⁶⁰

Throughout “He Was A Big Freak,” Betty unpacks several roles that women have historically and mythologically played, or performed, for men, including “*mistress*,” “*princess*,” “*housewife*,” “*mother*,” and “*lover*.” She turns these roles on their head by way of embracing the erotic; commenting on the diversity of such performative choices and their effect on the opposite sex. By bringing the song back to the activity of sadomasochism, Betty confirms the male partner as submissive and, most importantly, consenting (Figure 12):

I used to beat him with a turquoise chain, yeah
When I was his woman, I pleased him
I'd lead him to the tip

⁶⁰ The only popular Western song to have previously made use of S&M themes is The Velvet Underground’s 1967 song “Venus in Furs”: “*Shiny, shiny, shiny boots of leather, Whiplash girl child in the dark, Comes in bells, your servant, don't forsake him, Strike, dear mistress, and cure his heart.*” While this song, based on a book by Leopold von Sacher-Masoch of the same title, offers the first known illustration of sadomasochism in popular Western music, the power dynamics between the woman (the dominant partner) and the man (the submissive partner) are problematized by the lyric’s depiction of the woman as a “*girl child*.” Moreover, the groups lead male singer, Lou Reed, is singing in the third person as if he is telling a story or instructing the woman (“*Strike, dear mistress, and cure his heart*”). Five years after this record, Betty would offer a first-person account of such power dynamics with less whimsical, albeit no less poetic, lyrics. It would not be until the Eurythmics 1982 song “Sweet Dreams (Are Made of This)” that a well-known popular Western song with sadomasochism references would surface again (Rodger 2004). However, these lyrics are considerably less explicit than both Betty’s song and The Velvet Undergrounds, and its connection to sadomasochism largely came from its accompanying music video. In today’s pop music climate, women vocalists from Britney Spears (“Circus” 2008; “Womanizer” 2008), Lady Gaga (“Teeth” 2009), Christina Aguilera (“Not Myself Tonight” 2010), and Rhianna (2011 Loud Tour) have adopted themes of S&M in their music videos and stage performances. These current trends in popular music is evidence of Betty’s music laying the groundwork for future generations of women musicians to incorporate pleasure-centered taboo topics in their work.

When I was his mistress, oh oh
I gave him cheap thrills
When I was his princess, silk and satin and lace
I'd wear for him
[...]
I'd get him off with my turquoise chain
I used to whip him
I used to beat him
Oh, he used to dig it
Yeah, he used to really dig it

Figure 12. Song lyrics to Betty Davis' "He Was a Big Freak" (1974).

Romantic: The music press of the 1970s *and* the music press of the post-2007 reissues tend to focus a great deal on the explicit songs of desire that Betty churned out in the studio. However, her fifteen-year recording career offers more nuance and balance in textuality than her critics would suggest. Betty's more euphemistic songs of desire (i.e. romantic) are found at the beginning of her career, as Betty Mabry, and at the end of her career when she was struggling personally and professionally as an unsigned artist. Her early 45 RPMs deployed accepted sexual euphemisms of the period but once the 1970s were underway and Betty had the backing of a label, she began experimenting with her lyrical content. However, by 1975, after her first two albums, the lyrical content and vocals were garnering more negative press than positive, causing Betty to be dropped from her label and have her 1976 album shelved for over forty years.

When she finally got the chance to record again, in 1979, as a thirty-four-year-old unsigned artist, she understandably delivered less jarring lyrical content, focusing on delicate, romantic euphemisms in songs like "You Make Me Feel So Good," "Tell Me A Few Things," and "I've Danced That Dance Before." *Crashin' From Passion* was recorded in Hollywood in 1979 and never legally released with Betty's consent. It has a markedly different feel than Betty's previous albums that were all driven by the sound of a tight live band using rock instrumentation and minimal overdubs. There is also a degree of experimentation with musical genres that both compliments and clashes with Betty's typical alchemy of blues, funk, rock, and R&B.

Crashin' From Passion is an experimental and performative portrait of Hollywood's opulent façade that sees Betty expanding her formats as a songwriter, incorporating new instruments (e.g. steel drums and xylophones) and techniques (e.g. scatting) into her work, and shifting gears in her vocality and textuality in ways that are unexpected and unnerving to fans who

expect a full slate of tunes about sexual dominance delivered with her signature guttural growl. Four of the tracks on the album are romantic songs of desire, including “She’s A Woman.” This song invites the listener into a new realm, where dramatic polyphonic synths accompany Betty’s exaggerated performance of femininity. Backing vocalist Martha Reeves sings in a low husky tone, “*She’s a woman,*” to which Betty coyly replies, “*I’m such a lovely flower.*” Here, Betty falls back on the accepted sexual euphemism of the woman as “*flower,*” opening up and blossoming for her lover. The other five songs on Betty’s final attempt at a studio album fall under the second most common thematic category in Betty’s discography: vulnerability.

4.3.2 Vulnerability

The hyper sexualization of Betty’s music and persona has caused fans and critics alike to underestimate her ability to communicate deep vulnerability in her lyrical content. I define songs of vulnerability as those songs in which Betty centers her personal feelings and thoughts at the forefront of her lyrical content. Without being victim to them, Betty recognizes and identifies certain feelings and thoughts as challenging to her ability to maintain a healthy and successful existence. *Love life* songs of vulnerability deal directly with feelings and thoughts that express and expose insecurities within the realm of intimacy, desire, and pleasure. *Self-care* songs of vulnerability deal directly with feelings and thoughts that express and expose insecurities within the realm of psychological or mental wellness.

Love life: “Your Mama Wants Ya Back” (1974) provides a rare example of Betty singing to a previous lover, and Betty locating the power and agency in that individual. In the song, she “*needs*” and “*wants*” the previous lover to come back for her own wellness. This song presents Betty in a more passive position, causing the listener to imagine a desperate woman seeking the love and approval of a man who is no longer there (familiar R&B territory): “*Do you hear your mama callin, She’s callin you on the phone, Do you hear your mama pleading [...].*” The listener is left wondering if the man left on his own volition? Or, was he ripped away by outside circumstances? Either way, as opposed to the majority of her work, Betty is the one seeking entry into *his* world of intimacy.

Similarly, in her 1979 track “All I Do is Think Of You,” Betty sings to a previous lover (although this time it is a non-gendered individual) and locates the power and agency with that

individual. Betty is seemingly consumed by the power that the previous lover has over her, “*I can’t concentrate on my work, it’s hard for me to control the hurt,*” depicting Betty in an uncharacteristic way: a woman without control over her desire and pleasure; a woman who thinks about, needs and is waiting for someone to deliver her from grief. This track can also be analyzed as vulnerable for its sonic likeness to disco. In this singular track (on her final attempt at a studio album), Betty goes against her documented belief that recording disco would be a “*commercial sin*”; it was Betty herself who wrote and sang the line “*take off that disco and put on some good music,*” in her 1976 song, “Bottom Of The Barrell.” In this sense, Betty has compromised artistic agency in the song’s “dance track” production, as well as sexual agency in the song’s lyrical content.

Self-care: Betty’s final studio album is a deeply personal album that exposes the insecurities of a visionary Black woman who had suffered the indignities of a white, male-controlled music industry throughout the bulk of her career. It is a musical snapshot of both vulnerability and control. On the title track, “Crashin’ From Passion,” Chuck Rainey’s bass jumpstarts the tune as the backing vocalists, led by Motown legend Martha Reeves, collectively “ooh” up and down the scale, making way for Betty’s signature gravelly voice, which shapes a hard luck story about “*getting tested, rejected, and put out.*” The song’s lyrics allude to the passion of a former lover, but they also plead for help and double as a testimony to Betty’s string of bad experiences in the music industry over the years. The chorus conveys this through a clever play on one of Betty’s older song titles, “Live, Love, Learn” (1968): “*Crashin’ from passion, You live, you love, you learn.*” However, as if to remind us that life’s hard lessons cannot be easily taught or neatly framed in a catchy hook, Betty responds to the final chorus with a line befitting of a blues woman: “*I’m going through changes, I took the wrong turn, You live but you never learn.*”

In “70’s Blues” (1974), Betty’s lyrics address feelings of sorrow and confusion, in a vulnerable state (Figure 13):

I woke up this morning
I was feelin’ so bad
I didn’t know what was wrong
I had a pain in my head
my mind was so troubled from what I did not know
I took a look at my face in the morning and lo and behold

the blues was there I said the blues was there

Figure 13. Song lyrics to Betty Davis' "70's Blues" (1974).

This track marks the only song in Betty's discography which has the word blues in its title. The majority of songs from the classic blues era were titled in such a way that identified them as a specific thing, a blues song, with various words acting as modifiers before it, including "Money Blues" or "Moonshine Blues" or "Mountain Top Blues." In this case, "70s" acts as the modifier to describe this specific blues.

Betty addresses personal feelings of vulnerability that she is attributing to the unique decade in which she finds herself in, the 1970s: "*Those livin', lovin', Tryin'-to-make-it-70's-can't-find-it blues, And I got 'em bad.*" In this sense, Betty is not suggesting she is blue because it is the 1970s, but rather that her blues are nurtured by the unique era. As ethnomusicologist Portia K. Maultsby explains about the 1970s, "despite the growth of a Black middle class that resulted from new opportunities, the social and economic conditions of the broader African American community deteriorated" (2006: 294).⁶¹ As an added homage to the blues, Betty gestures to her guitarist, "*Go on and play, go on and play,*" prompting a twangy solo to close out the song. When I asked Betty why she wrote "70's Blues," she said: "When you're inspired you just write it, when you have a feeling inside you create" (Davis, personal communication, 2018). Along similar lines, in "This Is It" (1976), Betty crafted lyrics to hint at the psychological discontent she was feeling from the music industry and society at large: "*I don't know blues, I said go on and be yourself man, Because I'm suffering for being mine.*"

4.3.3 Celebration

As a modern blues woman, it is not surprising that the majority of Betty's lyrics tell stories about desire and vulnerability. Betty's music has the unique ability to reference the past and project futuristic qualities of performance, and yet still remain timely throughout each changing decade.

⁶¹ Some of the more potent reasons for this deteriorated condition amongst the Black middle class in the 1970s was the (1) the countries shift from industrial to technological labor and the closing of factories, (2) government policy of fiscal conservatism eliminating federally funded job training, education, and social programs designed to improve conditions for Blacks, (3) the Vietnam War overwhelmingly impacted poor and Black families, and (4) the increase of hard drugs in urban societies (Maultsby 2006: 294).

One of the ways that Betty's music feels present is her ability to reference celebration in her lyrical content. I define songs of celebration as songs in which Betty centers the recognition of joyous occasions in her lyrical content. *Invitation to party* songs of celebration refer to the recognition and presence of a literal occasion celebrated amongst a group of people. *Self-definition* songs of celebration refer to the recognition and performance of oneself, in which Betty affirms her unique qualities as an individual.

Invitation to party: From the early days of The Cellar, Betty was known to be the life of the party. Many of her earlier songs, including "The Cellar, (1964), "Uptown to Harlem," (1967), and "Hangin' Out" (1969) act as a literal invitation for people to leave their cares behind and collectively party. Similarly, "Git In There" (1974) begins with an organ that is then joined by Betty's laughter. The guitar and bass sound as if they are warming up over the drummer's roll on the hi-hats, and Betty's unmeasured vocals reveal itself: "*Play anything that you wanna, 'Long as you get down, down, down, down, down, Get in there.*" The backing vocalists and bassist set the rhythm in place: "*Dance, dance, dance, All night, Dance, dance, dance, Have a good time.*" Finally, Betty invites the drums to fill out the rest of the song: "*Go on and do it, drummer.*" This song is a celebration of Betty as bandleader and arranger, and the listener gets to hear her communicate with the musicians in real time. She calls out to each musician and they respond: "*Okay, Hershell, come on,*" she says to the guitarist before he lays down a bluesy guitar lick; "*Go on play that bass, funky Larry*" after which her cousin, Larry Johnson, plays a featured bass line.

While "Git In There" (1974) and "Oooh Yeah" (1973) offer a glimpse of what a Betty Davis party might actually feel like (inclusive and funky), she also delivers portraits of social celebration that are outside her comfort zone and lived experience. Such is the case with "Hangin Out In Hollywood" (1979) where Betty mimics the carefree lifestyle of the Hollywood elite. The song is about Hollywood opulence delivered from the perspective of a high society Glamazon eating caviar, drinking champagne, and driving around in luxury cars. As an avid vegetarian and non-drinker, Betty tells a story of celebration that is largely one of fantasy.

Self-definition: One song that could not be further away from Hollywood or the opulent façade its lyrics portray, is "Walkin' Up The Road" (1973). This is a song that celebrates Betty's self-definition and represents a more literal connection to Betty as a blues writer. Here, she invokes the themes of travel, mobility, and searching which have been present from the very earliest of post-emancipation blues formations. Classic blues women of the "race records" era

incorporated themes of mobility and travel, especially the act of walking, to document the taboo subject of following a fled lover or escaping a dangerous and/or unhealthy relationship or social situation. Songs including Gertrude “Ma” Rainey’s “Walking Blues” (1923) exemplify this idea of using increased mobility to escape a place and/or person which has caused you harm (Figure 14):

Woke up this morning, up this morning, with my head bowed down, hey, hey, hey
Woke up this morning, with my head bowed down
I had that mean old feelin’, I was in the wrong man’s town
[...]
Walked and walked ‘til I almost lost my mind, hey, hey, hey
Walked and walked ‘til I almost lost my mind
I’m afraid to stop walking, ‘cause I might lose some time

Figure 14. Song lyrics to Gertrude “Ma” Rainey’s “Walking Blues” (1923).

Similarly, in “Lost Wandering Blues,” Gertrude “Ma” Rainey (1927) used her ability to travel to search for a man: “*I’m leavin’ this mornin’ with my clothes in my hand, Lord, I’m leavin’ this mornin’ with my clothes in my hand, I won’t stop movin’ ‘til I find my man.*” By today’s standards, these lyrics might be interpreted as less of an exercise in feminist autonomy and more of a desperate act incited by victimhood. However, Angela Davis explains that the very ability of these blues women to travel—uncontained by domestic service, marriage, and motherhood—implied a measure of autonomy in and of itself: “[The blues woman] is able to go out in pursuit of the object of her desire, an activity virtually inconceivable during previous eras of African-American history and beyond the realm of possibility for most black women of the time” (Davis 1998: 76).

While the blues women of the “race records” era often used themes of travel and mobility to address the search for (or the revenge of) an absconded lover, Betty’s riff on the common blues theme empowers women (namely, herself) to be mobile on their own volition. Rather than searching out a former lover, or escaping undesirable circumstances, “Walkin’ Up The Road” suggests the modern blues woman use her mobility to search out new desires and pleasures. Most importantly, the lyrics are active and assert the woman as the central figure who has the ability to affect the people and places in which she travels to (Figure 15):

I got a feelin

that I'm gonna give you children
funky like a donkey
when you feel it get down with it
[...]
I'm-a walkin' up the road
I'm gonna up and lift your soul
and when it starts getting good now
starts getting real real good
clap your hands feel free to move a little

Figure 15. Song lyrics to Betty Daviv's "Walkin Up the Road" (1973).

4.3.4 Warning

Betty encountered hostility and judgment throughout her career, like all blues women. She was similarly aware of the power that she wielded and often issued warnings to those who might challenge or diminish her power. I define songs of warning as those songs in which Betty centers cautionary advice at the forefront of her lyrical content. In these songs, Betty lets it be known that she is in control and she offers those listening a chance to reassess their opinions and/or actions. Songs of warning *directed at haters* refer to the warning of those casting judgment or attempting to shame and/or discredit Betty. Songs of warning *directed at lovers* refers to the warning of those present and/or potential lovers who Betty is considering for candidates of shared intimacy.

Directed at haters: One of the more anthemic songs in Betty's discography, "Your Man My Man" (1973), can, at first, be interpreted as a modernized version of another classic blues woman theme: rivalry amongst women who are competing for a sexual partner. While one can read this theme as an expression of male dominance, Angela Davis rightly suggests that there is an emancipatory quality to the songs because they reveal "working-class women as capable of exercising some measure of agency in choosing their partners" (Davis 1998: 46). Indeed, the lyrics to "Your Man My Man" reconstrue the rivalry theme into a more nuanced, progressive position that actually ridicules jealousy amongst women and calls out the absurd notion of possession within monogamy by suggesting openness in sexual relationships. (Figure 16):

San Francisco, New York
in between
your man my man
what does it mean?

You care I share who's to blame?
Your man is my man
it's all the same
'cuz he's yours all yours
when he's there
He's mine I have him
when he's here
you cry I sigh
what does it mean?
Your man is my man
it's all the same

Figure 16. Song lyrics to Betty Davis' "Your Man My Man" (1973).

When interrogating discourses about monogamy, Horton-Stallings uses the term "funky love" to describe "publicly radical configurations of family, love and relationships where monogamy and marriage are not situated as the ideal praxis" (2007: 122). While Betty's rallying cry for "funky love" is now more widely accepted, in 1973 such configurations of sexual relationships were beyond daring for a woman to address in her music—let alone in song where she is the protagonist and instigator.

After the verses are sung by Betty, the backing vocalists sing, "*You better stay away from him, girl, You know I ain't playin,*" while Betty responds by repeating over and over: "*Your man is my man.*" The backing vocalist then goes into spoken dialogue to simulate a fight: "*I'm gonna fight, do you understand me? Judo, Blackbelt karate[...].*" At first listen, one might think Betty is in competition with this other woman over the same man, however Betty's voice does not appear audible in the girl fight dialogue that ensues after the song's climax. Rather, she is trying to convince the other women to understand her point of view as a possible ally; another sister in the same situation. The antagonistic banter of the all-woman chorus feels like a heightened performance, a statement on the time wasted amongst women who feel they are in competition with each other over the affection of men. Significantly, the song privileges the camaraderie of women who are not only fighting for the same thing but are also the ones who could be, or should be, in control. After all, the song is called "Your Man My Man," suggesting that Betty recognizes the man is equally perceived as someone else's. There are only two songs in Betty's catalogue where she explicitly sings to women alone: "Get Ready For Betty" (1964) and "Your Man My Man" (1973). While on the surface, both songs may seem like an expression of rivalry amongst women when, in fact, both songs are a warning to other women. Rather than supporting rivalry

over a male lover, Betty attempts to warn women about her personal ideas and beliefs regarding dating, romance, and sex that she refuses to compromise on. These songs represent less of a threat to other women, and more of a declaration of self.

Another anthemic example of a warning song directed toward her ‘haters’ is “Don’t Call Her No Tramp” (1974). Backing vocalists Debbie Burrell, Elaine Clark, and Trudy Perkins support Betty by singing along on the chorus, as well as providing dialogue which seems to answer Betty’s call to action. Betty’s incorporation of dialogue—“*That girl ain’t dirty*”; “*That girl’s just tryin’ to get over, that’s all*”—highlights the camaraderie amongst women who appear in the recording, which serve the larger purpose of representing women in American society at large: “*You can call her trendy, And superficial, An elegant hustler, But don’t you call her no tramp.*” This song is a fierce defense of independent-minded women. Instead of shaming a woman with the derogatory label of “*tramp*” or “*dirty*,” Betty argues for terms including “*elegant hustler*.” Today, we identify these alternative messages as sex-positive and discredit misogynistic proclamations as slut-shaming.

On the surface, this song may seem to be sung to a male audience, but the song never specifies who Betty is singing to. By addressing a non-gendered collective, the song sets out to educate and warn all individuals who might refer to a woman as a tramp (including other women). In doing so, Betty calls out all people who work to discredit women’s thoughts, beliefs, and actions, privileges women’s ability to make choices about their lives, and reclaims language as an alternative to derogatory language.

Directed at lovers: Betty is not just on the defense with her warnings. Aware of her incredible power, she has also crafted songs that act as a warning to present and/or potential lovers. The most anthemic of these songs being “Game Is My Middle Name.” Betty delivers this same sense of autonomous duty in “You Won’t See Me In The Morning” (recorded in 1974, previously unreleased until it appeared as a bonus track to the 2007 reissue). The lyrics simultaneously explain herself and question her present and/or potential lover’s ability to hear her, warning that if he does not “*do it right*,” she “*might not be there in the morning*.” She continues to disclose her lack of interest in being possessed for any length of time longer than she desires: “*If I can love ya, There really ain’t no reason why I can’t leave ya, It really ain’t no big thing, baby, ‘Cuz words they don’t really matter.*” By declaring her autonomy along the lines of desire, she displays a type of confidence and agency that was truly transgressive for its time.

4.3.5 Respect

The final thematic category of Betty's discography concerns respect—the word that Aretha Franklin made synonymous with a feminist rallying call in 1967, when she reauthored and appropriated Otis Redding's 1965 hit.⁶² I define songs of respect as those songs in which Betty centers the act of paying tribute at the forefront of her lyrical content. *Black music history* songs of respect refer to those songs in which Betty pays homage to Black musicians and/or genres. *The South* songs of respect refer to songs in which Betty pays homage to the American South as a culturally specific region. *Family and friends'* songs of respect refer to songs in which Betty honors the life and/or memory of those closest to her.

Black music history: In “F.U.N.K.” (1975), Betty pays homage to the funk genre, locating herself in its musical history and cultural essence. Carlos Morales' guitar vamp eases Betty's breathy-yet-raspy voice into the recording as she seductively spells out the genre, “*F-U-N-K, funk, funky, funk,*” until she releases a scream and her cousin Nicky Neal brings the drum beat in: “*I was born with it, I will die with it, Because it's in my blood, And I can't get enough.*” She then goes on to name drop several soul, R&B, and funk artists from the 1970s who she is a fan of, including Sly Stone, Stevie Wonder, Tina Turner, Al Green, Anne Peebles, Barry White, Larry Graham, Isaac Hayes, The O'Jays, Jimi Hendrix, Aretha Franklin, Chaka Kahn, and The Funkadelics. During the time of this recording (1975), these artists were all releasing music and performing. By name dropping them here, Betty honors their genius while suggesting a comparison to herself. She doesn't simply list these artists, but rather inventively weaves their song titles into her lyrics (Figure 17):

So I danced to the music
And I sang a simple song
I was thankful and thoughtful
Sly Stone came along
Cause he took me higher
And he made me see
I had inner visions of a young man named Stevie

Figure 17. Song lyrics to Betty Davis' “F.U.N.K.” (1975).

⁶² For an in-depth look at how Aretha Franklin performed a “gendered reauthoring” of this song, see Malawey (2014).

Returning to this same lyrical technique in “Quintessence of Hip” (1979), Betty not only references musicians by name, but also weaves lyrics and melodies from their songs into her fast-paced declaration of hipness, from Billie Holiday’s “God Bless The Child,” all the way up to Stevie Wonder’s “Superstitious.”

The South: While the South acts as a foundation for Betty’s musical transmission and style, there have been occasions when she directly references the South in her lyrical content, including “Downhome Girl” (1969) and her cover of John Fogerty’s “Born on the Bayou” (1969). In “Downhome Girl,” Betty sings, “*I was born, In a little shack, Down in Mississippi.*” Born in North Carolina, “Downtown Girl” offers a slightly tweaked autobiographical story about growing up in the South. The lyrics act as a love letter to Southern food culture (as she did in “Uptown to Harlem”) by referencing “*chitlins,*” “*watermelon,*” and “*biscuits.*” Betty insists she is “*gonna eat it up*” because she is a downhome girl. A year before Ike and Tina Turner’s wildly successful cover of “Proud Mary,” Betty interpreted a song written by a white man (John Fogerty) that fetishized the South. Her cover of “Born on the Bayou” makes you reconsider the original in a new way through a woman who actually lived in the South, and whose connection to the South was not merely based on musical preference or reference, but on cultural memory and embodied experience.

Friends and family: Lastly, Betty wrote songs of respect about those closest to her. These are fiercely autobiographical songs that remain some of Betty’s most anthemic and cherished throughout her discography. “Steppin In Her. I Miller Shoes” (1973) is the only song in which Betty sings in the third person tense and acts as a memorial to a close friend. In this case, “*she*” is representing the late Devon Wilson, one of Betty’s best friends throughout the late 1960s and fellow Cosmic Lady. Devon Wilson tragically died in 1971 through mysterious circumstances; reportedly falling out of a hotel window in the Chelsea Hotel. The title and chorus of the song reference the popular woman’s shoe, I. Miller Shoes, which Wilson was known to wear. The song is sung in the past tense and documents the highs and lows of a vibrant, yet troubled Black woman (Figure 18):

She could’ve been anything that she wanted
Truly fine from her head down to her toes
Instead she chose to be nothing
So nothing flew from the East to the West Coast
Became a fiend

She was a dancer
Became a Harlet
She was a black diamond queen!
[...]
Music men wrote songs about her
Some sad, some sweet, some said her very mean
Rock music played loud and clear for her
Rock music took her youth and left her very dry
She was used and abused by many men

Figure 18. Song lyrics to Betty Davis' "Steppin In Her I Miller Shoes" (1973).

In the small amount of documentation about her online, Devon's life is now largely remembered through the lens of "groupie" culture. Devon died only a year after Jimi Hendrix died, which Betty alludes to in the song, referring to Hendrix as a "savior": "*She rendered her services eagerly, Because certain services were all she had to give, And after the passing of a Savior, She went and tried everything she could to stay here.*" Betty abruptly switches to the first person for one line in the song, singing, "*When they told me that she had died, I didn't have to wonder why or how she'd gone, I knew, I knew!*" Betty screams the last part of the line to signal pain and frustration over her friend's untimely death. "Steppin' In Her I. Miller Shoes" would be a staple in Betty's live act until she stopped performing in the early 1980s.

Another anthemic song of respect that deals directly with family, also happens to reference the South and Black music; making it a trifecta of the thematic category that pays homage. The title track of her second album, "They Say I'm Different" (1974), is a literal celebration of Betty's family, the South, and the blues canon. In it, Betty name drops many of the artists she grew up on, including Muddy Waters, Leadbelly, and Bessie Smith. Rather than weave the artists song lyrics or melodic lines into her own, Betty simply delivers a roll call of the artists she deems as essential. The lyrics have a down home feel, as she remembers waking up in the morning to "*slop the hogs,*" seeing her grandmother "*spit snuff*" (i.e. chew tobacco), and her grandfather "*rocking' his moonshine to the sounds of B.B. King and Jimmy Reed.*" In this song, it is her connection to the rural Southern blues tradition that leads others to think she is "*different*" and "*strange.*"

When I asked Betty if she considered her music a modern form of blues, she responded: "I thought my music was, the way it was projected, I think you can tell that I got it from the blues. Most singers don't have that kind of feeling, they don't get that feeling from the blues; it's more

pop oriented” (Davis, interview by author, Oct 5, 2019). When I asked her if the press referred to the blues when they wrote about her music, she quickly replied:

No. No. You know, not many female artists are connected to the blues now a days. I don’t think they understood, or they couldn’t feel it. When you hear Pop Staples and Mavis, and her sisters, you can *feel* the blues. You can really feel it. Well, since I was integrating the blues with Sly and James Brown and all of them, you couldn’t really get a grip on it. You know how the press is. Unless they have a format to fall back on [...]. (Davis, interview by author, Oct 5, 2019)

Unlike her ex-husband, who landed a coveted seat at the table of white rock audiences and critics after the release of *Bitches Brew* (1970), Betty was never recognized or associated with rock in the 1970s. However raw, transgressive, and blues-oriented her music was, it was only ever relegated to the popular Black genres of the time: namely, funk. Because Betty was an attractive Black woman, there was no countercultural appeal to her music in the eyes of marketing. Rather, it was marketed as hyper-Black and hyper-sexual.

By describing herself as a “sound projector” Betty emphasizes the crucial interrelation between (1) the sonic (sound), (2) the sonicized body (a projector *of* sound), and (3) the visual (a [film] projector of images) with which her music is formulated. Betty went on to explain: “I had my visual too and that was connected to the music I was making. So it was an entirely different feel from everything” (Davis, interview by author, Oct 5, 2019). The “visual” Betty is referring to would both suppress her career in the 1970s and draw a large underground cult following. It is a “visual” that looked toward the future; an unapologetic, independent, pleasure-centered embodiment of Black womanhood. In the current moment, it is a “visual” that has become more iconic with every passing year.

4.4 Physicality

Betty Davis’ visual has always been highly connected to her music and the attention placed on her image continues to be a driving force in her post-reissue popularity and cult icon status. Fans and critics alike cannot ignore her allure and appeal. It was, after all, Betty’s attractive looks that landed her a successful modeling career and acted as a catalyst for her entry into the music

industry.⁶³ However, Betty's modelling experience also served as a training ground to think critically about her body, her look, and her movement.⁶⁴ Most of Betty's wardrobe during her career was custom made, including the thigh-high metallic silver boots she wore on the cover of *Betty Davis* (1973): "I got those boots custom made at a shop in London called Granny Takes A Trip," she once told me. Unafraid to wear bold fashion designs, mix and match patterns and motifs, and show off plenty of skin, Betty's look was always a direct result of her own personal curation and artistic direction. Her experience in the world of fashion, as both a designer and model, equipped her with a kind of bold confidence that can only be described as swagger.

Kellie Jones refers to hair as the "tangible crown of African American 'difference'" (1998: 17) and Betty always styled her crown into a large, abundant afro. By wearing her natural hair, Betty aligned herself with other Black musicians and artists who made the conscious decision to reject white notions of beauty. By the end of the 1960s, Black communities all across the diaspora were beginning to dismantle these beauty norms, marking their physical appearance as inherently political (in more overt, calculated ways) (Davis 1997; Ford 2015).⁶⁵ Album art designer Ronald "Stozo" Edwards recalls Betty's afro being a distinguishing feature of her persona:

People understood Betty with the big 'fro, that was like an Angela Davis sort of statement for Black women. She was 100% natural. Betty Davis never went that weave or wig route. Because a lot of the ladies back in the day had to dress and look presentable. Betty was presentable on her own terms. (Edwards, interview by author, Feb 15, 2019)

4.4.1 Album Covers

Before she began touring in support of her second album in late 1974, Betty primarily presented herself and her music to the public via album covers. Whether laughing while adorned in indigenous turquoise jewelry and metallic silver boots (*Betty Davis*) (Figure 19), or delicately clutching long, tubular rods in a custom Kaisik Wong Afro-futurist bodysuit with furry baby blue

⁶³ There is no doubt that Betty's lighter skin color played a large part in her desirability in a white-controlled, Western fashion industry. For a discussion on colorism and light skinned desirability, see Jha (2015).

⁶⁴ Miriam Kershaw (1997) does this in her analysis of Grace Jones.

⁶⁵ See Angela Davis for her discussion on the ways in which her afro hairstyle served as "generic images of black women who wore their hair 'natural'" and made them "targets of repression" (1997: 23-31).

platform heels (*They Say I'm Different*) (Figure 20), or snarling on the floor in lingerie with black fishnets and stilettos (*Nasty Gal*) (Figure 21), Betty Davis' album covers have been a consistent force in her popularity since 1973 and have showcased her multi-faceted style and personality.

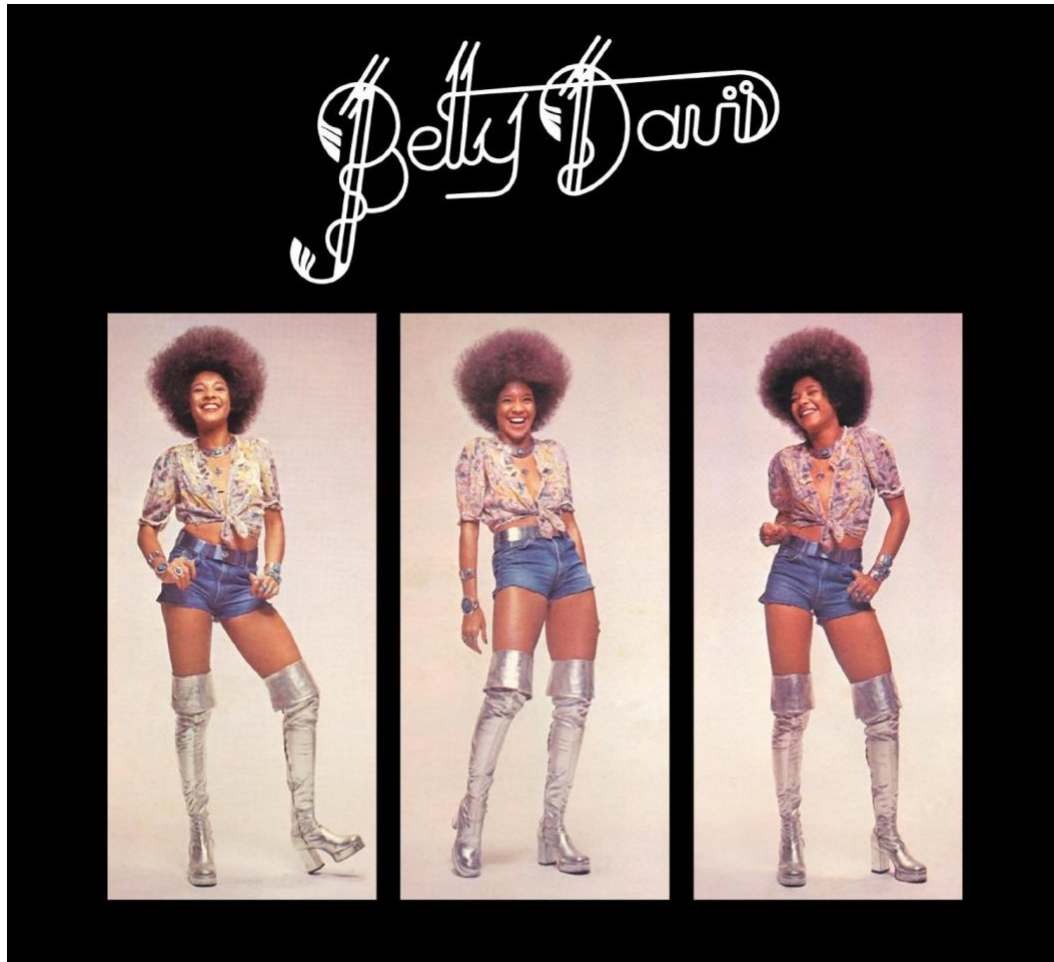


Figure 19. Album cover for Betty Davis (Just Sunshine Records, 1973). Reproduced with permission from Light In The Attic Records.



Figure 20. Album cover for They Say I'm Different (Just Sunshine Records, 1974). Reproduced with permission from Light In The Attic Records.

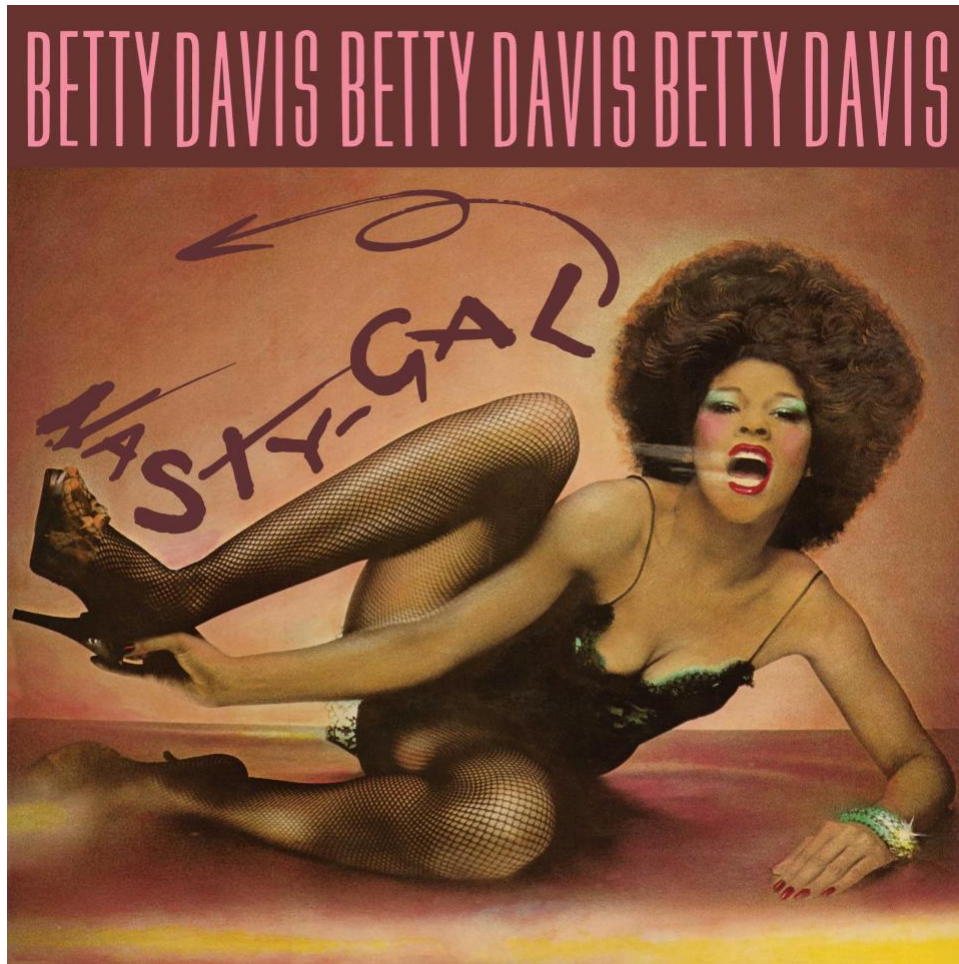


Figure 21. Album cover for *Nasty Gal* (Island Records, 1975). Reproduced with permission from *Light In The Attic Records*.

Album covers were an essential part of experiencing music in the 1970s, and as the predecessor to the music video, they were the “most direct visual and tactile connection any consumer could have with the artist outside of concerts” (Greene 2013: 60-61). As I have learned from numerous Betty fans over the years, and can personally attest to myself, seeing Betty’s album covers for the first time is a visceral experience. Her image, and the way in which she displays her body, is simply captivating. Edwards recalled his Betty discovery story to me: “I used to go in the record stores and grab records based on the cover. And I saw the cover of Betty Davis’ first album, and, being a guy, I was like, ‘Oh boy, look at her’ [...] She’s an undeniable attractor, a force to be reckoned with, visually” (Edwards, interview by author, Feb 15, 2019).

In her extraordinary comparative analysis between Betty Davis and visual artist Renée Stout, Nikki A. Greene suggests that through her album covers Betty conveyed the “active

management of her style and sexualized representation” (2013: 60).⁶⁶ What made Betty a visual “force to be reckoned with” was the innovative and uncompromising way in which Betty directly engaged in what Greene calls “self-fetishism,” or the “working out [of] womanhood in an exaggerated manner” (ibid.: 70). Because of the way Betty boldly displayed her body through provocative dress (e.g. exposing her long legs in Afrofuturist bodysuits, or wearing historically fetishized women’s clothing items including lingerie, fishnets, and stilettos) and suggestive poses (e.g. sprawled out on the ground grabbing the heel of her stiletto with her mouth wide open, or on her knees with her legs open), her image, Greene argues, becomes “much more closely related to sexual fantasy and fetish” (ibid.: 61).⁶⁷

Seductive album covers that fetishized women were becoming increasingly common in the 1970s, however Betty’s album covers were unique in the way they both adopted and challenged what Marxist theorist Laura Mulvey calls the “seductive sheen” (1993: 10) of fetish and the gaze it elicits. In the same way Betty took control over the ownership of her music, the signature sound of her voice, and the crafting of her lyrical content, Betty also exercised an uncompromising authority over her physical image. Therefore, Greene suggests, “the album cover in relation to her music came to represent ‘Betty Davis’ on her highest frequency in order to be heard and at her brightest—with *seductive sheen*—in order to elicit a gaze, even a fetishistic one” (2013: 63).

⁶⁶ Renée Stout’s official website provides a brief biography and examples of recent work: www.reneestout.com. I am grateful to Dr. Aaron Johnson for putting me in contact with Stout whom I met in Washington, D.C. in 2016 while attending and presenting at the Society for Ethnomusicology conference. Stout and I met for lunch and discussed Betty Davis’ music as a vital source of inspiration for Stout’s artwork and identity. During this meeting, she gave me two copies of her art book titled *Tales of the Conjure Woman* (2015); one for myself and one for me to deliver to Betty. Inside my book was a personal inscription that read: “To Danielle, A kindred spirit with Betty Davis as our spiritual Godmother. Thank you for being a beautiful messenger for the universe. All the best, Renée Stout” (Stout, personal communication, Nov 12, 2016).

⁶⁷ The historical use of the term fetish must be understood through the psychoanalytical and political economy lens of Freudian analysis and Marxist theory. Sigmund Freud defined “fetish” as an object of compromise, or something missing (stemming from the mother’s missing penis), that marks women’s bodies (as potential mother’s) with the burden of sexuality and identity. Karl Marx provided an alternative interpretation of “fetish as commodity.” Greene (2013) explains that both uses of the term, albeit highly problematic and debatable, “examined the value of the sign inscribed onto an object respectively either as an undervaluation [Freud] or overinscription of the value of the object [Marx]” (2013: 61). Laura Mulvey, using a Marxist lens, further illuminates that the fetish object conceals its perceived lack through surface, often through a “seductive sheen” (1993: 10).

4.4.2 Erotic Labor

Betty's light brown skin, sky-high afro, beautiful smile, tall, thin figure and suggestive body language made for an ideal image of what a Black woman vocalist should look like in the 1970s. However, to many, the visual image of Betty Davis did not match the aural of Betty Davis. Betty was painstakingly aware of this herself, which is evidenced in the critical responses she would give to the press when asked about her physicality and her performance style: "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" (Richards and Weinstein 1975: 93).

On top of the pressure she received from both mainstream audiences and music critics who all had their own preconceived ideas about aesthetics, race, and gender, bassist Chuck Rainey recalled how difficult it was for attractive women to be taken seriously in the music industry of the 1970s: "Back in that day it was very, very difficult, especially if the woman was good looking, to have control over what they're doing [...] 'Cause it was a man's world [...] It's just the way that it was. I would think that Betty would have a lot of problems" (Rainey, interview by author, Sept 4, 2019). Indeed, she did have a lot of problems. Her visual often overshadowed her music in the press, and her good looks reduced her abilities as a songwriter, arranger, and producer in the "man's world" of the music industry. Unintimidated, Betty never apologized for or compromised her image. Instead, she reclaimed the hyper sexualization of her music in her live stage show and embraced the performance of gender and power in ways that pre-dated artists like Prince, Grace Jones, and Madonna.

The physicality that Betty captured in her album covers would prove to be only a mere taste of the "self-fetishism" (Greene 2013) that she would work into her live performances. Not only did Betty compose explicit lyrics and experiment with unconventional vocalization, she also used her body in ways which suggested physical dominance and autonomous pleasure. Betty enacted this form of erotic labor by perceiving her body as a complement to the music and a site for resistance against notions of conformity and censorship that were put on Black women's bodies within the music industry (and society at large) during that era. The growing collection of photography from Betty's live shows depict her body in singular captured moments. Every image shows Betty in a moment of complete surrender: engaging in deep leg lunges, slow grinding with

her hips, slapping her buttocks with her hands, rolling around on the floor, sticking her tongue out, taunting the audience, and even using the microphone as a phallic prop (Figures 22-23).



Figure 22. Betty Davis singing live with The Ladies (Debbie Burnell and Elaine Clark). Location unknown. Date unknown (circa 1974). Photographer unknown.



Figure 23. Betty Davis singing live. Location unknown. Date unknown (circa 1974). Photographer unknown.

“She was free,” Edwards, who saw Betty perform live on multiple occasions, explained to me. “She was ahead of her time because she knew how to be free and present herself and that’s always intimidating to people when they see people that are free; she’s got no shame in her game” (Edwards, interview by author, Feb 15, 2019).

Betty’s intentional and inventive sex appeal was viewed as “intimidating” or threatening not because she exaggerated feminine sexuality, but because she playfully projected both sides of the gender binary. In doing so, she emasculated the fetishistic gaze of the audience by authoring her *own* gaze (aggressive, flirtatious, irreverent, and dominant) out onto the audience; venturing far away from the era’s accepted and expected performance aesthetic of Black women vocalists and forcing the viewers and listeners to consume her on her *own* terms. Toronto-based musician and self-proclaimed Daughter of Betty, SATE, said this when discussing the transgressive

performance politics of Betty Davis: “White men want to be able to control the fantasy. Betty was creating her own burlesque show. She was creating her own fantasy. *You* had to watch her fantasy, you had to be there” (SATE, interview by author, June 22, 2019).

Just as the blues women before her, Betty’s public creative expression about Black gendered and erotic life critiqued the respectability politics of her era by emphasizing the existence and importance of a pleasure-centered understanding of Black women’s embodiment, and the public was not ready to support a “soft” Black woman doing that. Reviewing one of her live performances in 1976, *High Society* reported: “Sex is the name of the game on all fronts, but is the world ready for an honest, straight-talking no-shit female entertainer who can play the dozens with the best of them? In some quarters she’s just too hot. She spells DANGER. She affronts, offends and loves every minute of it” (Richards and Weinstein 1976: 58).

In yet another interview from the 1970s, Betty again addressed the disconnect people find between her image and her music along the lines of sex and gender: “If men could put me in the same category with Diana Ross or Freda Payne it might be easier for them. Just looking at me, I’m soft. Then all of a sudden it’s like, ‘Why is *this* coming out of *that*?’ People like mirage. They can deal with the mirage, but not with reality” (Toepfer 1976: 62). The reality was that Betty was using the erotic as a transformative physical force, projecting an avant-garde performativity that belonged to future times and spaces. Through such projection, Betty authored a type of erotic agency and created a type of erotic space that continues to grow more influential with every passing decade.

4.4.3 Betty Davis’ Live Show

Betty developed and perfected her stage show while promoting her first two albums in concerts that, by all accounts, typically shocked American audiences. In 1975, she assembled an entirely new band of musicians from the Greensboro area of North Carolina near where she was born. Rather than call on more established musicians, with whom she had been working since 1968, she brought the focus back to the blues and back to her family. Funk House consisted of Betty’s own first cousins Larry Johnson on bass and Nicky Neal on drums, along with their friends

Fred Mills on keyboard and Carlos Morales guitar.⁶⁸ Betty's younger brother, Chuckie, also joined the crew out on the road. With The Pointer Sisters soaring into success as an R&B musical trio, and Sylvester promoting local talent and working on his own career, Betty also needed to assemble new backing vocalists. Hence, The Ladies were formed and added to Betty's live show. The Ladies consisted of Debbie Burrell—who would leave in 1975 to perform in *The Wiz* and later star in *Dreamgirls* on Broadway—and Elaine Clark, who would also leave in 1975 to record backing vocals for Stephanie Mills.

Betty's grandmother, Buella Blackwell, only saw Betty perform once at The Bottom Line in New York City on December 1, 1974. She came up from North Carolina for this specific show because Betty was opening up for blues man Freddie King. Betty brought her grandmother backstage to meet King after the show: "That was a special performance because my grandmother got to see me open for a blues musician. I was proud of that," Betty told me. When I asked Betty what her grandmother thought of her live show, she smiled and said, "I think she liked it" (Davis, personal communication, Nov 2, 2019).

Acting as stage director and stylist, Betty put together a live show that shocked even her closest friends. Fellow Cosmic Lady, Winona Williams, remembered seeing Betty at one of her very first shows at The Bottom Line in New York City:

I was shocked. My jaw was down to the floor because Betty always had this persona, very ladylike, very feminine, very stylish. And this person up on that stage was this wild, unbelievably decadent female, with fishnets, stockings, something cut up over her thigh. I mean, Madonna eat your heart out because before you there was Betty Davis. And I just could not believe this [...] I mean she was fabulous, just way ahead of her time. (Williams, interview by Damon Smith, Sept 9, 2013)

Betty's live show made an impression from coast to coast. Rudy Calvo, the famed make-up artist and a friend of Betty's, recalled watching her electrifying show at The Roxy in Los Angeles, which he viewed from the balcony alongside Patti LaBelle and Nona Hendryx—two-thirds of the powerhouse trio, Labelle. "It was like being in church," he told me (Calvo, interview by author, Feb 23, 2020).

⁶⁸ Mills, Johnson, and Neal all knew each other as young boys. They learned to play their instruments at a teen club that Neal's father (Betty's uncle) ran. Neal met Jamaican born Morales while they were playing in a local group called the Majors together. After serving three years in the Vietnam War as an Army paratrooper, Mills regrouped with Neal, Johnson, and Morales in 1974 before Betty asked them to be her band.

Drummer, Nicky Neal, described their live show as “high energy,” stating that “it was shocking, because we were half-dressed. The guys wore no shirts” (Neal, interview with Oliver Wang, Aug 23, 2006). Keyboardist, Fred Mills, also recalled Betty’s risqué art direction: “It wasn’t just her who came out in these really flamboyant and revealing outfits, she made the band members [...] have that presence on stage too” (Mills, interview with Oliver Wang, Aug 26, 2006). Mills goes on to describe that “presence” in detail:

Every gig [Betty] would put baby oil all over my body, I’m talking all over my chest and my back [...] From then on if I wore anything it was like a marine jacket that I had studded out in red and white studs, but other than that it was just shirtless with some leather pants [...] We were a very colorful show, we were very theatrical as far as selling the song. (Mills, interview by Oliver Wang, Aug 26, 2006)

In 1974 and the beginning of 1975, Betty’s career was in an upswing. Although her songs were not getting airplay or charting, Betty was in full artistic control and her live shows were getting attention from noteworthy individuals including Ahmet Ertegun, owner of Atlantic Records, along with Heavyweight Boxing Champion Muhammad Ali and actor/comedian Richard Pryor (all of whom made it a point to visit Betty backstage). Pryor was specifically intrigued by the performance and told Betty he wanted her to perform on his TV show. “We had the opportunity to do shows—Richard Prior’s show and the Ed Sullivan Show,” Neal remembers. “[But] they wouldn’t let us perform because of our attire and the sex content we had in the songs” (Neal, interview by Oliver Wang, Aug 23, 2006).

Other notable American venues Betty performed at were The Boarding House in San Francisco, The Hippopotamus Club in Philadelphia, and the Warner Theatre in Washington, D.C. It was in D.C., where Betty gained a substantial underground following and became associated with other funk acts of the era, becoming one of the favored opening acts for George Clinton and Parliament Funkadelic, Graham Central Station, The Commodores, and Mandrill. In 1974, teenage D.C. resident, Ronald “Stozo” Edwards, proudly represented Betty’s underground following. Edwards, a self-identified “funk head,” got a scholarship to attend Howard University, one of America’s many Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU). During his freshman year

he started designing album covers for Parliament Funkadelic.⁶⁹ It was at Howard where Edwards first saw Betty Davis live (Figure 24).



Figure 24. Betty Davis and The Ladies (Elaine Clark seen to the left of Betty and Debbie Burrell seen to the right of Betty) performing at Howard University's Homecoming in 1974. Washington, D.C. Photographer unknown.

Betty gave an incredible performance for the HBCU in 1974 that put her on the map in D.C.: “The word in D.C. got out in the soul community and the sister and brother community about her,” Edwards told me. Edwards went to every show that Betty played in D.C. and eventually got to meet her and the band. It got to the point where Edwards and his crew of friends were considered D.C. family and got invited to hang out backstage every time Betty and Funk House were in town: “They were such an incredible band to watch. Her shows were as good as the record, but even

⁶⁹ For a complete list of Edward’s album cover credits see “Ronald Edwards” (n.d.).

more dimensional because you got to see it wasn't just a studio concept. It was kind of like burlesque [...] It was so sexy the way she broke it down” (Edwards, interview by author Feb 15, 2019). Edwards remembered that Betty used to do a riff on "Nasty Gal" (before the song was recorded on her 1975 record) that functioned as an opening routine:

She would do ‘Nasty Gal’ live before it was a record. It was insane. That's how Betty came on stage. She would be offstage, and the two girls would sing this whole thing about who they were; [sing] their names and do these incredible solos. ‘My name is Debbie and I'm Elaine,’ and they'd do these soul singer riffs, and the band is funkling out [...] Then they say, ‘Betty? Betty Who?’ Then they say, ‘Oh, she's a nasty gal, she's a nasty gal’ And then [Betty] would come out and the whole place would flip out because she was larger-than-life, beautiful, with the boots, the ‘fro, the great little costumes; skimpy things but they'd be so classy and so funky. (Edwards, interview by author, Feb 15, 2019)

While the D.C. “funk heads,” along with Betty’s friends and contemporaries, enjoyed her live show, the mainstream press, as depicted in these reviews, was less than enthused:

It's like following a tasty, satisfying appetizer with an overcooked, tasteless lump—a rush of enthusiasm followed by boredom that approaches stupor. (Aregood 1974: 31)

Her advanced publicity gushes out pages of stuff alluding to her deep blue’s roots yet her performance (“act” might be better) is anti-blues because it is anti-music, and untrue. (Elwood 1975: 28)

A shade too brazen and harsh for wider acceptance. (McEwen 1975)

4.4.4 Reaction from Press

Along with being harshly critiqued regarding her skill and her presentation as a musician, Betty was ruthlessly subjected to the type of adverse judgments that structured the racist, sexist norms of music criticism in the 1970s. Based on my research, I would argue that such criticism toward Betty reached its apex in a 1975 review by UK music journalist, Charles Shaar. In his review, Shaar (a white male) (1) insults the intelligence of Betty’s fans by assuming they are too uneducated to understand his writing, (2) suggests the only reason her former husband, Miles

Davis, collaborated with her on her 1975 song “You and I” is because he wanted sex from her, and (3) mimics Black speech in such a way that can only be described as literary minstrelsy:

They can’t do it for ya no crasser than this, but anyone who really digs Betty Davis probably doesn’t even know what the word ‘crass’ means anyway [...] It would be less than charitable to suggest that Betty Davis cannot sing, and I wouldn’t for one moment dream of making such an improper allegation, but she sho’ can’t sing too good [...] Maybe [Miles Davis] just wanted foxy Betty to lay the turquoise chain on him one mo’ tahn right here, ladeez ‘n gemmun. (Shaar 1975)

When I asked Betty what she thought of the criticism she received from the press, she said:

Well, I didn’t really think about it. Because when you create you don’t really think about—some people are very mental when they create—other people do it from an entirely different personal level. When I created the music, I just did it from my heart and from my soul. I didn’t really think about, ‘Well, who’s gonna like this, who isn’t gonna like it,’ I just created the music. And I think anybody that’s really creative thinks that way. (Davis, interview by author, Oct 5, 2019)

While Betty claims to not think about it now, over forty years later into her retirement, she certainly thought about it while she was performing, as is evident in the cutting cultural critique she offered to the press:

I know for a fact that I give men a lot of hostile vibes, more so than I give women. I guess it’s because I’m so aggressive physically and I think I embarrass a lot of people. Women are supposed to scream for Mick Jagger and try to pull off a man’s clothes on the stage. But men are supposed to be in control on all levels. A lot of them might really want to jump up and pull off my clothes, but they know they aren’t supposed to. It makes ‘em feel weird and uptight. (Gibbs 1976: 52)

Betty’s interpretation seemed to be true, at least in the realm of music journalism. After four years of searching through historical records and archives, I have found only seven articles or reviews written about Betty in the 1970s by women music journalists (Emily Fisher 1974; Althea Fonville 1974; Vicki Wickman 1974; Robin Katz 1975; Marie Moore 1975; Sue Richards 1976; Susan Toepfer 1976; and Priscilla Chatman 1977). These women journalists, as depicted in the following reviews, brought a fresh, forward-thinking, and contextualized perspective on Betty that is much more closely aligned to present-day musings of her as a pioneer:

Betty Davis, this gentle looking woman, tells off the whole civilized world: Funk you all. But the madness is calculated. Betty Davis is all professionalism, and control is as much the key to her act as the sweet talkin' is part of her cool. (Fisher 1974: F2)

She displayed the form of her body very well and was extremely suggestive. Anyone who was squeamish may have been "turned off." But there was something fresh and invigorating about her performance that revealed a strength of character. (Fonville 1974: 15)

[S]he's the closest female performer to be funky a la Sly or Larry Graham, plus, for me, she gets added points for both writing and producing her own album. Power to the ladies! (Wickman 1974)

Betty is very much her own category. She (justifiably) heaps comparisons. And also rebuts unfair criticism by people she feels should frankly give up criticizing and admit to just not understanding her. (Katz 1975: P3)

["Nasty Gal"] may never become a hit on your stereo complex because of Federal Communications regulations which most certainly will curtail it on the airwaves. (Moore 1975: D4)

Within a remarkably short period of time, she's created tidal waves with an explicit, controversial act that forces even the hippest music enthusiasts to uncomfortably cross and uncrosses legs. In a business where image and trend define the moment and set the budget, Betty is a shimmering iconoclast who refuses to be bagged and pre-packaged. (Richards and Weinstein 1976: 93).

She is every man's bedroom fantasy unchained—and men hate her. (Toepfer 1976: 62)

Betty contends that most men get 'hung up' on her physical appearance and refuse to relate to her on any other level. (Chatman 1977: 12)

Throughout her interviews with the 1970s press, Betty continued to acknowledge the uneasiness behind her performances, citing gender norms and patriarchy as the culprit: "I'm very aggressive on stage, and men usually don't like aggressive women. They usually like submissive women, or women that pretend to be submissive" ("Betty Davis: Hard and Coarse: Star rating" 1974: 18). While Betty's aggressive physicality onstage was indeed extreme, it was not necessarily new to Black pop music sensibilities of the 1970s.

4.5 A World Without Contemporaries

In the very first scholarly article on Betty Davis, cultural anthropologist Maureen Mahon (2011) notes that other Black pop stars who performed contemporaneously with Betty also used the erotic as a performance trope. The first example Mahon gives is that of Marvin Gaye, who released *Let's Get It On* (1973) the same year that *Betty Davis* came out. The sexual overtones of the album's hit single received unlimited airplay, and the album went to number two on the *Billboard* chart. Mahon explains the reasons for this at the intersection of race, gender, and genre politics: “[T]he sexual self-expression of black men was not policed in the same way as that of black women and because Gaye’s sound was *rooted in the familiar musical and lyrical tropes of the R&B loverman*” (2011: 167; italics mine). Not only was Gaye’s sexual prowess contained within a different set of gender politics, but just as important, it was contained within a different set of genre politics. That is to say, because Gaye’s sound fit in the “familiar musical and lyrical tropes of [...] R&B” (i.e. sonic Blackness), his erotic performance was not only tolerated, but welcomed.

The next two examples given by Mahon compare Davis to women artists who similarly exploited the erotic while also enjoying approval and access from mainstream audiences. Millie Jackson (the most common Betty comparison regarding lyrical content) became known for her X-rated songs and raps while seeing her singles appear on *Billboard*’s R&B charts from the early 1970s to the late 1980s. Again, Mahon points out the intersectional accumulation of politics that supported some artists, while working against Betty: “Although lyrically adventurous, *her music and vocal style were conventional R&B fare*” (ibid.: 157; italics mine). Finally, Mahon uses the trio LaBelle, consisting of Patti LaBelle, Nona Hendryx, and Sarah Dash (the most common Betty comparison regarding fashion, style, and artistic agency), to solidify the racialized genre politics at play in marginalizing Betty’s performance.⁷⁰ LaBelle’s song “Lady Marmalade” celebrated the sexual allure of a Creole sex worker and enjoyed the number one slot on *Billboard*’s pop and R&B

⁷⁰ Both Betty Davis and LaBelle wore designs by Larry LeGaspi, renowned for his otherworldly costumes for groups including KISS and Parliament Funkadelic. For more on LeGaspi, see Markie B. (2019). Another important connection lies in Betty’s and LaBelle’s lyrical content. Most of LaBelle’s songs were written by Nona Hendryx, a queer, Black woman. Therefore, LaBelle’s songs veered away from the conventional love songs sung by women in the 1970s (LaBelle 1996). Both Betty Davis and LaBelle performed material from the perspective of Black women’s voices, which queered dominant discourse about love and relationships without the controlling agent of a male manager (LaBelle was managed by Vicki Wickman). For more on LaBelle, see Royster (2013a).

charts in 1974. This success in both the pop and R&B charts is credited to the fact that the song was “propelled by an R&B and gospel-rooted musical style and vocal sound that black women were expected to engage—even as the group’s over-the-top outfits and the progressive lyrical content of its other songs pushed the limits” (Mahon 2011: 157; italics mine). By remaining within an “R&B and gospel-rooted musical style,” LaBelle was able to have a hit song explicitly about a sex worker, while Betty’s (interpreted) song about sex work (“If I’m In Luck I Might Get Picked Up”) incited a ban from the NAACP. In 1976, Betty recognized that being in a world without contemporaries was detrimental to her career: “The one thing that I wish was an advantage, but isn’t, is being the first to do something. I made it easier for people like LaBelle and Chaka Kahn. Hell, I even had a silver space suit two and a half years ago when LaBelle were still in jeans” (Katz 1975).

While Marvin Gaye, Millie Jackson, and LaBelle were all known for their sexual lyrics, suggestive live performances and, with the case of LaBelle and other notable funk groups of the era, otherworldly fashion and “full-scale spectacles” on stage (Maultsby 2006: 301), Betty’s physicality and performance aesthetic was in a league of its own.⁷¹ Her stage presentation was stripped of the large-scale theatrics of the Afrofuturist funk aesthetic and lacked the conventional, popular fare of R&B sexuality. She utilized funk, the genre and market mold she was expected to fit in as a framework, or as Maultsby explains, as a “performative category of artistic, cultural, and political expression” (ibid.: 183). In this sense, I locate Betty’s performance aesthetics not only within the pop market contours of funk, but at the intersection of blues, glam rock, and proto-punk—raw and in your face.

Betty created a live experience that truly paired with her signature sound and uncensored message. She embodied, in almost in a satirical way, sexual acts of domination, submission, desire, and pleasure that made a performative mockery of both gender binaries and the fetishistic gaze around which the 1970s music industry was structured. It was the “self-fetishism” of her image—the way she used the erotic as a performance trope, and the ways that her physicality both complimented and clashed with her vocality and textuality—that illuminated Betty’s visionary

⁷¹ The grandiosity of 1970s live funk show spectacles were experienced by over-the-top costumes, props, and theatrical stage events. An example of this is when LaBelle performed at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City (the first Black woman vocalist group to do so) in 1974 and Patti LaBelle was “lowered to the stage inch by inch by invisible rings and wires [...] arms stretched out to showcase a twenty-foot train of black and orange feathers” (LaBelle 1996: 179). Perhaps the most iconic spectacle of funk was when the leader of Parliament Funkadelic, George Clinton, adopted the otherworldly Dr. Funkenstein character and “landed” on stage in “The Mothership Connection” spaceship (Danielsen 2006: 8).

musical practice to those who were erotically sophisticated enough to enjoy it. Betty's sound, sonicized body, and visual projected and documented her feelings and her experiences in an eccentric, unconventional way. Her voice and body functioned as a circuit of meaning that proved difficult to translate within a highly racialized and sexualized music industry and society. It was the reason she was dropped from Island Records in 1976, never to be signed again. And it continues to be the reason why, after leaving the music industry and retreating from the public, she lingered beneath the mainstream surface as an underground cult icon.

When I speak with Betty now about how she looks back on her career, she struggles to adequately express the spatial and temporal break she has experienced from that time in her life. She is content. Whatever regret or hostility she may have had for the industry or the audience or the critic has dissipated, and she locates herself in the present moment. "When it was happening," she tells me, "it was moving at a fast pace, and now that I'm older I'm surprised people are still listening to it and everyone knows who I am" (Davis, personal communication, July 21, 2018). I ask her if she credits that feeling to the fact that her music was reissued? "Yeah," she says. I remind her that I found her music, in 2007, when it was reissued on Light In The Attic records. "Thank Goodness for Matt Sullivan!" she proclaims.

5.0 “Your Mama Wants Ya Back”: Reissuing Betty Davis

How high was that Egyptian leg kick, that pushed you into
American music non history?

Jessica Care Moore, “They Say She’s Different”

Weak record sales, lack of radio airplay, negative press, and a public denouncement from the NAACP made it nearly impossible for Betty Davis to build a sustainable career during the mid-1970s. Following the release of *Nasty Gal*, her refusal to concede to Island Records’ demands compounded her problems as her new material got shelved by the label and she quickly found herself without a recording contract. Despite all this, Betty was producing music that challenged the racial and sexual politics of 1970s America and she shined an uncomfortable spotlight back on the sexually conservative, white male-controlled music industry and its audiences. The music press and her audiences often pushed back against her too, and few seemed capable of recognizing the innovative qualities of her sound (a unique form of blues-funk-rock fusion), the progressive qualities of her lyrics, or the avant-garde qualities of her performances. “What she did was a first. So no one was ready for that,” Greg Errico told me. “She was out there by herself [...] She didn’t have a manager; the music and the whole package was really challenging for what was going on in radio [...] Any artist needs support, especially at that time period, and she certainly needed it” (Errico, interview by author, Feb 14, 2019).

In the decades after Betty’s career ended, something quite unexpected happened. She slowly amassed a sizeable underground base of fans who adored her scarce records and understood just how much she anticipated every one of the unapologetic, sexually-liberated musicians who became stars in her wake. In 2019, Errico marveled with pride at Betty’s successful reemergence into the public consciousness:

The amazing thing is that all that exists is the records, not the performances, so as decades go on these new fan bases are being built from the records. It’s not like there’s a whole bunch of footage and she’s still performing [...] That amazed me [...] There really is an element here that is very powerful that we touched upon that is captured; can’t be touched, can’t be changed. It’s kept; it’s locked in. It’s something that was even beyond what we were realizing we were touching upon, and it’s a powerful thing. (Errico, interview by author, Feb 14, 2019)

This chapter begins by further examining Betty's problematic relationship with the press and her audience so that I can both continue my chronological account of her biography and provide additional context for understanding her reemergence and newfound popularity in the twenty-first century. That process, and the people who made it happen, are the focal points of this chapter as I turn my attention to Light In The Attic Records and explain the story of them reissuing Betty Davis' records and helping to revive her name and image. Though the label has singularly played a crucial role in Betty's life and her musical career, it is part of a larger network of vinyl record curators, collectors, and labels that have been instrumental in preserving music history and cultivating an entirely different musical culture in the U.S. I am particularly interested in how these "interpretive communities" (Bobo 1995) shape the cultural production of music and use records as a way to not only access the past but also reconstruct meaning and value in the present.

This chapter is structured around ethnographic research conducted with a number of different people and communities, including the founders of independent record labels that either specialize in, or solely release, reissues; music scholars and critics who have written liner notes for vinyl reissues; and both DJs and radio hosts who incorporate archival media into their soul and funk programs. All of those interviewed are both "serious" record collectors (a semantic distinction that, as I explain, carries significant weight in the community) and respected cultural intermediaries whose work relies upon record collecting and curation.⁷²

5.1 In Search of an Interactive Network

In the midst of her career as an active musician, Betty Davis attracted an underground following that consisted primarily of artistically inclined, young Black fans in cities like Washington D.C., Philadelphia, and San Francisco. But broadly speaking, she faced resistance from white and Black audiences alike. Patricia Hill Collins suggests that the classic African

⁷² My understanding of cultural intermediaries is formulated by Bourdieu who identifies cultural intermediaries as those sets of occupations and workers involved in the production and circulation of symbolic goods and services in the context of an expanding cultural economy in Western societies (Bourdieu 1977).

American call-and-response discourse mode is an essential dimension to the type of Afrocentric feminist performance that someone like Betty was expressing:

The widespread use of the call-and-response discourse mode [...] illustrates the importance placed on dialogue. Composed of spontaneous verbal and nonverbal interaction between speaker and listener in which all of the speaker's statements, or "calls," are punctuated by expression, or "responses," from the listener *The fundamental requirement of this interactive network is active participation of all individuals*. For ideas to be tested and validated, everyone in the group must participate. (1989: 763; italics mine)

While recent scholarship about Betty's career rightfully focuses on her persona and her contentious relationship to a stifling music industry, less attention has been spent considering the role of the audience in Betty's career. I contend that a lingering problem for Betty in the 1970s stemmed from her inability to access an "interactive network" in either the Black music community or the white mainstream. With the exception of a small fanbase, and an even smaller circle of music journalists who championed her work (Vernon Gibbs, in particular), few members of Betty's audience really understood her or participated in her style of communication, both metaphorically and literally. In short, her calls were not "validated" by responses.

One can turn to numerous concert reviews throughout her career that attest to the lack of response from live audiences, in particular. In a 1974 concert review of Betty's performance in her hometown of Pittsburgh, Althea Fonville wrote: "The audience sat practically through her entire performance, *spellbound and shocked*" (Fonville 1974: F1; italics mine). *Washington Post* writer Emily Fisher, described the scene at a 1974 concert in Washington D.C.: "The audience at the Warner Theatre having danced in the aisles and sung in their streets straight through the preceding act, now feel forced as if the ceiling had just caved in. And *they stared like an army of stiffs* as Davis flipped her tail about and let loose a throaty screech, an anarchist's cry" (Fisher 1974: F2; italics mine).

Accounts of Betty's audience dismissing her "anarchist's cry" are common and clearly indicate the absence of an "interactive network" that is so crucial to both the African American musical tradition and the type of erotically powerful performance that activated Betty's sound, look, and message. Here are some examples:

The feeble-minded walk out in disgust when Betty Davis wiggles her tush at them, the weak-hearted go limp with despair while the lusty ready their sticks. (Gibbs 1974b)

Audience response to Betty Davis was unusual, it seemed as if everyone was still laying back when she was finished. Applause for the sister was light and indecisive. (Glass 1974: 5)

A hostility was the reaction to her aggressively sexual posturing, which displayed little regard for bedroom secrets or social convention. (McEwen 1975)

Still the audience cannot comprehend this funk explosion; a few self-conscious shouts of approval are heard but the general atmosphere remains one of bewilderment. (Gallagher 1976: 26)

The audience at New York's Bottom Line is staring straight ahead in mute shock. (Gibbs 1976: 51)

The audience stares dumbly, hypnotized and wondering what to make of the androgynous tease. (Richards and Weinstein 1976: 58)

The confusion in Betty's crowds during her heyday, which sometimes manifested into outrage, was partly due to her unorthodox vocality and physicality, but it was largely a byproduct of an intensely racist, misogynistic, and *anti-erotic* society. Audre Lorde argues that erotics is actually an inherent "source of power and information in women's lives" that has been continually misnamed by the patriarchy and used against women. Rather than acknowledging erotics, as Lorde suggests, as a celebration of self and feeling, a tool for empowerment, a value of labor, and a profound creative source, the patriarchy "[...] confuses it with its opposite, the pornographic" (Lorde 1984: 54). By equating a woman's embrace of erotics with the pornographic, patriarchal society directly denies the power of the erotic by suppressing those who feel and wield it. In the 1970s, Betty exemplified Lorde's description of the woman who uses the erotic as a source of power and information: "the woman who does not fear its revelation, nor succumb to the belief that sensation is enough" (ibid.: 54).

5.1.1 Retreat From the Industry

Between 1976 and 1979, Betty continued to write music and travelled between Los Angeles, New York City, and London in hopes of recording and releasing her new material. Those three years were a steady struggle as Betty attempted to manage herself and book gigs as an unsigned artist. Funk House officially disbanded by 1978 and a solo Betty spent most of her time in Los Angeles, where she continued to write songs based on the experiences she accumulated as a modern transient blues woman. During a visit to London, she met Simon Lait, a man with some music industry connections who would later go on to manage Toni Basil (of “Hey Mickey” fame). She pitched him her new songs and, with Lait’s financial backing, the two traveled to Los Angeles to record what would become her final studio album: *Crashin’ From Passion*.

After speaking with bassist Chuck Rainey and backing vocalist Martha Reeves, it is clear the recording sessions at Redondo Beach Recorders and Cherokee Studios were as efficient and productive as a musician could hope for, especially after three years away from the studio. However, upon the completion of the sessions, Betty’s enthusiasm quickly began to wane after she traveled back to London with Lait to mix the album. She was not pleased with the way he was mixing her record and it became clear that, as Executive Producer, Lait could legally wield power over the final cut. “Artistic differences” ensued, as Betty told me (Davis, personal communication, Dec 7, 2019). Without the support of a label, and with her finances wearing thin in London, Betty was losing the battle for creative control when disaster struck: she got a call from home saying that her beloved father, Henry Mabry, had died. Betty returned to attend the funeral, and this event marked the beginning of her departure from the public altogether.

With the master rights to *Crashin’ From Passion* owned by Lait, Betty once again found herself shut out. Her public absence enabled others to further exploit her work through shady business dealings that resulted in the *Crashin’* tapes being licensed for a CD release without Betty’s consent in 1995 and 1996 (under two different titles: *Crashin’ From Passion* and *Hangin’ Out In Hollywood*). None of the musicians who appear on the album even knew of its release. “I didn’t even get a demo copy of it,” Martha Reeves told me of the recording session in which she participated as a singer (Reeves, interview by author, March 6, 2019).

After being badly burned by her last two experiences recording albums, and also suffering from personal trauma and private health issues, Betty retreated from the public in the early 1980s

after her brief stint in Tokyo, Japan and proceeded to live her life in reclusion in Homestead, Pennsylvania. Her whereabouts were such a mystery that rumors began circulating that she had died or become an addict. The last known interview and public photo of Betty in the twentieth-century appeared in a 1983 article in the *Pittsburgh New Courier*. The headline read: “Miles Davis’ ‘Other Wife’” (Cox 1983).

By the late 1980s, Betty’s music had begun to be sampled by hip hop artists like Ice Cube and, later, Talib Kweli.⁷³ Her scarce records, then long out of print, became prized finds amongst DJs and vinyl collectors. While her underground following grew over the decades, Betty Davis largely remained unknown outside the cloistered, male-dominated world of record collectors and DJs. All of that began to change, however, in 2003 when a small group of independent record label personnel successfully contacted her and began the arduous process of reissuing her music. In 2007, after five years of legal and personal obstacles, Light In The Attic Records reissued Betty’s first two albums, *Betty Davis* (1973) and *They Say I’m Different* (1974), and rightfully marketed her as a musical and cultural pioneer.

5.2 Light In The Attic Records

My investigation of the story around Betty’s reissue began with Light In The Attic Records (LITA), an American reissue label founded in 2001 by Matt Sullivan, in his basement apartment in Fremont, Seattle. LITA was built as a label with a “commitment to quality as well as its disdain for convention” (“About Light in the Attic”). LITA’s first release, a deluxe album reissue from hip hop architects, The Last Poets, was released in October 2002. Since then, LITA has released over 200 hidden, lost, or forgotten artists and records. Most notable is the music of Sixto Rodriguez

⁷³ As of this writing, this is a complete list of songs that have credited Betty Davis’ music as samples: “Once Upon a Time in the Projects” (1990) by Ice Cube; “Trick is a Trick” (1990) by H.W.A.; “Dance All Night” (1991) by DJ Magic Mike and MC Madness; “Piece of the Action” (1997) by Godfather Don; “Flying High” (1998) by Doctor L; “It’s Your Life” (1998) by Lenny Kravitz; “Jersey Yo!” (1998) by Redman; “Biloxi Blues” (1999) by Labba; “Revitalise” (2000) by The Nextman feat. Soulson; “Anti Love Movement” (2001) by Da Beatminerz feat. Talib Kweli; “Certified” (2003) by Diverse; “Incorporate Anthem” (2003) by The High and Mighty; “Talk To Me Betty” (2003) by Bubba Sparxxx; “Rodeo” (2004) by Method Man featuring Ludacris; “A Sad Molo Ono” (2007) by Prti Bee Gee feat. Bvana; “Haem Bracie to Zabija” (2007) by in O.S.T.R.; “Kush Talk” (2008) by Mutt; “Troubleman” (2011) by Boogie K; “24 Live” (2012) by Dioz and The Returners; and “Ni Victima Ni Delincuente” (2012) by Funky Flu (“Betty Davis” n.d.).

(born in 1942), a Detroit-born singer-songwriter who wrote and recorded impressive topical songs about inner-city America through a mesmerizing mixture of folk, soul, and psychedelia. The 2013 reissue of Rodriguez's 1969 album, *Cold Fact*, was shaped in collaboration with a documentary film about him, entitled *Searching for Sugar Man* (Bendjelloul 2012), which won the 2012 Academy Award for Best Documentary. Rodriguez received royalties from the album for the first time in his life, and *Cold Fact* remains LITA's best-selling reissue.⁷⁴ While this example is not the norm for LITA, or any reissue label for that matter, it exemplifies how recorded music can be resuscitated within the current entertainment industries and how an artist can be reinserted into the public's consciousness (and, in the case of Rodriguez, effectively lifted out of poverty and obscurity).

In 2003, LITA began operating as a distributor. In addition to its own catalog, it began distributing music from over fifty record labels by selling direct to hundreds of record stores and retailers around the globe. As of this writing, distribution is the largest aspect of their operations and funds much of their reissue catalog. LITA began to dabble in music licensing in 2006, and in order to house a new music licensing department and the growing staff that was needed to manage it, founder Matt Sullivan moved to Los Angeles in 2010 to open LITA's office. Three years later, LITA opened a brick-and-mortar record store, Light In The Attic Record Shop, in Seattle. The 180-square foot building sells vinyl from the LITA catalog, as well as records from other labels they distribute. By 2014, LITA's music licensing department became a full-service operation with a customized team of four individuals who place catalog tracks in film, television, and advertisements. In 2020, the entire LITA operation consisted of eleven people. Excluding the record shop manager in Seattle, I met the whole team during a visit to their Los Angeles office in November 2018.

The address I was given in the quiet, tree-lined streets of Los Angeles' Los Feliz neighborhood was home to an unassuming two-story building with an Italian restaurant occupying

⁷⁴ While Rodriguez did not experience commercial success in the US during his career, after he left the music industry in the mid-1970s (and was also rumored to have died) his album was bootlegged without his knowledge and experienced wide circulation throughout the world, especially in Australia and New Zealand. However, it was in apartheid-era South Africa where Rodriguez (unknowingly) experienced the highest degree of underground fame and (bootleg) record sales. His album was heralded as protest music, and Rodriguez himself as a cult icon, among South African citizens fighting against the Apartheid Government. Rodriguez had no idea of his international success until LITA and film director Malik Bendjelloul uncovered the information through their investigative research process.

the ground floor. I searched for a sign, or any hint of record label activity. For a while, I curiously walked through the Italian restaurant that had just opened for brunch. When I asked the hostess if she knew where Light In The Attic was, she looked at me like I was reciting an unsolicited poem, and she was unaware of any such place. I exited the way I had entered and meandered around the building. Toward the back of the building, directly next to the restaurant's dumpsters, I saw a gated door that had a buzzer next to it with a tiny name plaque that read: *LIGHT IN THE ATTIC*. I dutifully presented myself and was buzzed in.

The doors opened to a long, narrow staircase painted entirely white. When I reached the second floor, LITA took shape as a bright, bustling workspace. When founder Matt Sullivan greeted me, the first thing I noticed was a framed picture of Betty Davis proudly displayed as I entered the office (Figure 25).



Figure 25. Framed Betty Davis photo, Light In The Attic office, Los Angeles, CA, November 2, 2018.

Complementing Betty's picture were other framed photos, documents, drawings, and music memorabilia from their catalog that were all displayed in a French gallery style throughout the office (Figure 26).



Figure 26. Wall display, Light In The Attic office, Los Angeles, CA, November 2, 2018.

Multiple windows allowed for plenty of natural sunlight to wash over the hardwood floors, making the office a nourishing space for the many plants that hung from the ceiling and draped over the furniture. It seemed as if every surface area not used as a computer desk had a record player sitting on it, with upright stacks of LPs at their base. A few smaller cubby shelves were reserved just for records and plants (Figure 27-28).



Figure 27. Stacks of records, Light In The Attic office, Los Angeles, CA, November 2, 2018.

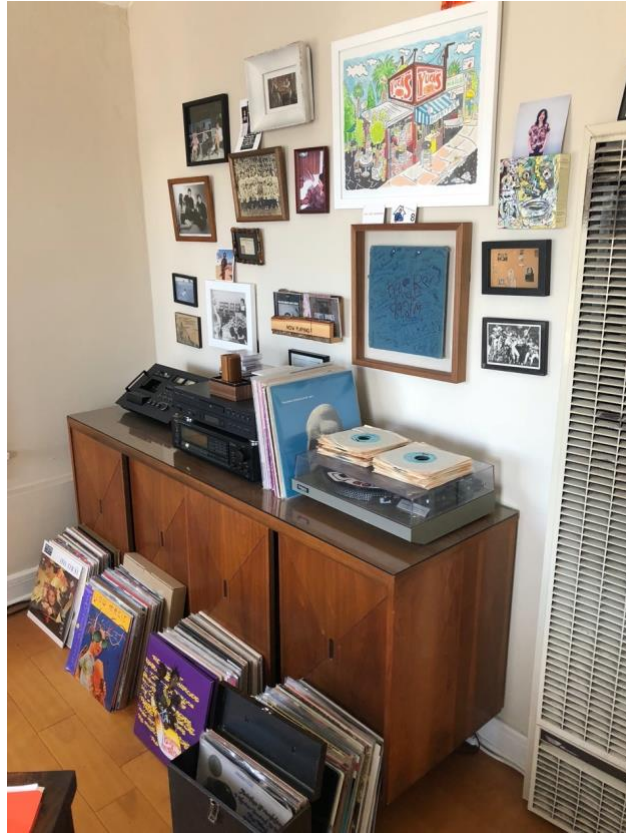


Figure 28. Stacks of records, *Light In The Attic* office, Los Angeles, CA, November 2, 2018.

Staff members each had their own workspaces that were grouped together by operation: reissue producers, music licensing, and sales administration. Sullivan gave me the tour and introduced me to everyone by explaining that I was a “friend of Betty’s” who is writing my dissertation “on reissue.” While the first part of his introduction elicited excitement and intrigue from the LITA staff (“Wow! You’ve actually *met* Betty?”), the second part prompted a surprised reaction (“Wow! It’s good to know *someone* cares.”). As I walked through the relatively small space, I kept noticing images of Betty scattered throughout (Figure 29) along with other artists and albums that were part of my own record collection: Barbara Lynn (Figure 30), Wendy Rene (Figure 31), and, of course, Rodriguez (Figure 32).

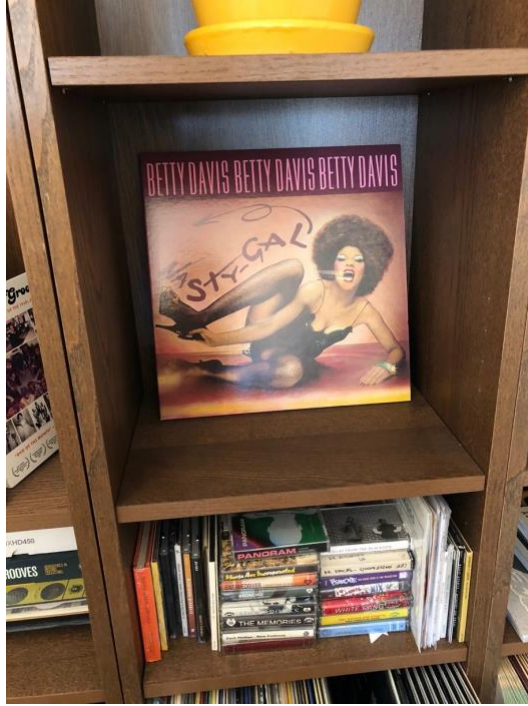


Figure 29. Betty Davis' Nasty Gal album displayed at Light In The Attic office, Los Angeles, CA, November 2, 2018.



Figure 30. Framed photo of Barbara Lynn, Light In The Attic office, Los Angeles, CA, November 2, 2018.



Figure 31. Framed photo of Wendy Rene, Light In The Attic office, Los Angeles, CA, November 2, 2018.



Figure 32. Framed film poster for Searching For Sugarman, Light In The Attic office, Los Angeles, CA, November 2, 2018.

When I got around to meeting Patrick McCarthy, one of three reissue producers, he proudly pointed to a framed LP of his recent project, an album entitled *L'Amour* that was recorded in 1983 by a man who went by the *nom de plume* Lewis (Figure 33).



Figure 33. Patrick McCarthy points to framed album of *L'Amour* (1983), *Light In The Attic* office, Los Angeles, CA, November 2, 2018.

McCarthy explained to me how this album was extremely rare because, despite significant efforts by LITA (and the original collector who uncovered the recording at a flea-market), Lewis remains a complete and total mystery, nowhere to be found. When I inquired about how they handled the finances of a situation like that, McCarthy explained that LITA has placed Lewis's royalties in escrow until he (or his family) is either found or makes himself known.

John Ballon, freelance music writer and a crucial individual to Betty's reissues, also dropped by the LITA office that day to meet me. After formal introductions were made, Ballon and I were welcomed into Sullivan's office. Once in Sullivan's office, my attention was immediately drawn to a large autographed black and white photo of Sly Stone hanging on his wall (Figure 34).



Figure 34. Framed, autographed photo of Sly Stone, *Light In The Attic* office, Los Angeles, CA, November 2, 2018.

Sullivan and Pat Thomas, a reissue producer who I would meet with later in my trip, worked directly with the legendary funk architect to reissue a double LP compilation of music from Sly Stone's own short-lived label in 1970, called Stone Flower. *I'm Just Like You: Sly's Stone Flower 1969-70* is the epitome of a deluxe, archival vinyl reissue that is supplemented by many desirable paratextual elements, including in-depth liner notes that featured an exclusive interview by Sly Stone and first-hand stories about the Stone Flower era told by many of its participants (it was nominated for Best Album Notes at the 2015 Grammy Awards). The album included ten previously unreleased recordings and, as is customary (when possible), all newly remastered tracks from the original tapes. Diehard Sly Stone fans had the option of receiving a "Sly approved" silkscreened shirt with pre-orders.

I sat underneath the autographed Sly photo and sought to better understand the label that was responsible for reissuing Betty Davis, and how its operation fit within the history of collecting, curating, and reissuing in the United States. But, first, I wanted to know how Sullivan was introduced to Betty:

Somewhere around 1998. I think the first releases I heard were from the really crappy MPC, UK label, around the year 2000 [...] I think hearing Betty for the first time was like one of those musical epiphanies that we all hear about happening. And then it finally happens to us as music fans. It was just a magical moment. (Sullivan, interview by author, Nov 2, 2018)

I asked Sullivan what specifically stood out to him and gave him that “musical epiphany” experience:

Definitely the vocals. I was a big fan of punk rock and rock music I think hearing Betty was, for me, just as much a punk experience as it was an R&B type of thing. So, when people say I’ve never heard her, I tell them her and Iggy Pop could have been siblings. I always have to say it’s not punk music but it’s really not funk music [...] That was really exciting to me and it was just so raw and edgy and funky. You could tell she was one of a kind and one of those inspiring characters because she didn’t get much love from anybody, but it didn’t stop her, which just makes her music and the whole thing even more inspiring. (Sullivan, interview by author, November 2, 2018)

It would be several years after discovering Betty Davis’ music that Sullivan began to actually learn about her inspiring story. Before he built a professional relationship with Betty and helped her narrate her story through reissue liner notes, he had only known a handful of factoids and anecdotes about her that circulated amongst record collectors on the internet:

I knew the usual synopsis: She was married to Miles Davis, inspired Jimi Hendrix, inspired Miles Davis through being close to Jimi, and the usual rock history kind of thing [...] It is kind of funny to think of how little I knew, and then what happened next. When LITA was starting I thought, ‘Wow, Betty would be great to reissue.’ So, at that point I was trying to own the rights to the records and, also at that point, I was interested in finding out if she was alive because I didn’t want to reissue the records if she wasn’t involved. (Sullivan, interview by author, November 2, 2018)

Sullivan’s expressed interest in only reissuing the records with Betty’s personal participation was indicative of his personal ethics and those of the label.

5.2.1 The Case for Reissue

The recent success of Betty Davis marks an important dialectic between the past and the present that is mediated through independent record labels and a set of related cultural practices tied to vinyl record collecting and curating. Collectively, these practices (1) valorize narratives that previously existed on the periphery of music heritage and, therefore, legitimize a multitude of non-canonized voices, (2) re-package and enhance music's material culture via paratextual elements (including extensive liner notes, interviews and oral history, photography, and digital downloads), and (3) curate alternative historical records for various interpretive communities to then reassess their meaning, value, and cultural significance.

Most of the records we're releasing, not all, but most of them were financial failures back in the day but artistic triumphs, at least in our mind. That is important. Our feeling is, at least this music has been archived and documented, and it's finally available. The artist, or whoever is around, can be interviewed, there's context that can be put to this. I love liner notes [and] learning about things. Context is a word we say a lot around here, especially in 2018, there's so much media bombardment around us, you want the music to speak for itself, and it should. But the lives of these people, like Betty, the sacrifices these people went through, it's crazy, and most people can't understand that. To make a record now [is] far easier than it ever was [when] Betty went through it. (Sullivan, interview by author, November 2, 2018)

When I asked Sullivan how the success of a reissue record was measured at LITA, he responded:

At the end of the day, even if it doesn't sell, I feel its successful in the sense that it exists, re-exists, that it's been documented in a physical form that people have access to. Success would be giving a new life to the record: Were there liner notes? Were there photos? Was the audio restored well? So, those are key things. And, of course, we're a business so it's important for us to make a profit. If these things don't sell, we don't exist. We have to move it on, pass that mark, 200-250 releases we've put out [and] there are definitely some that didn't sell at all. But fortunately, we have some that have sold that helped pay for some of the other ones that didn't. So, it's easy for me to say, 'Well, if it's archived and beautiful it's great,' but its more than that. If its archived and beautiful that's great, but the part that frustrates me is if it ends there; if we didn't get *NPR* or *Pitchfork* or people in general buzzing and excited about this [...] If the artist is happy, that's really important. If the artist is unhappy that makes me feel unhappy. (Sullivan, interview by author, November 2, 2018)

When thinking about reissued records (specifically vinyl LPs) as reimagined and enhanced cultural artifacts that “give new life” to the music, the vital role of record collectors as preservationists and curators becomes more evident. When I asked Sullivan how LITA goes about accessing materials, he explained:

A big part of Light In The Attic is being able to work with all these incredible music heads—historians or writers or DJ’s or collectors—who will turn us on to records. Kevin “Sipreano” Howes wrote the liner notes for Rodriguez—he’s out there, he’s always suggesting stuff. He’s freelance [...] We have a lot of people like that who are just bringing us ideas. Everyone here [is] constantly looking for things ourselves, a lot of times these days its word of mouth or people just turning us on to records. The web has shifted things a lot— YouTube and Discogs, so much info at your fingertips. But it’s still more from people like Kevin, or a guy in Seattle named Mr. Supreme, this incredible digger—he turned us on to the Seattle soul stuff [*Wheedle’s Groove*]. (Sullivan, interview by author, November 2, 2018)

This study considers record collectors to be preservers of musical heritage and, therefore, imperative to music history. They help revive and re-center previously marginal music and musicians, and they have built and maintained a preservationist culture around underground artists, records, labels, and scenes. As Greg Errico put it: “It’s kept; it’s locked in.” However, these cultural practices exist within a problematic set of power dynamics that are also relevant to highlight:

I wouldn’t be able to do this if it wasn’t for collectors, so bless their souls, but so much of the collector’s world is this exclusive thing and not inclusive, and that’s something that for me, personally, is a huge turn off [...] [Reissuing records] has always been incredibly important to me personally and not for a financial reason. Becoming a fan of a Betty Davis, or whatever it is, falling so in love with it to the point that I want to get it out there in the world in a way that those records and those artists deserve. So, when you meet the collectors hoarding it and [who] don’t want to share it [...] Knowing that Betty or another person didn’t make that record so a nerdy person like me could sit in their basement and hoard it—it’s so irritating. Yes, I collect records but I’m not a *collector-collector* like most people that we work with are. I’m not trying to knock these people; I just feel like it all deserves much more than that. People don’t often address that. (Sullivan, interview by author, November 2, 2018).

The “collector-collector” that Sullivan referenced has a very specific connotation to it that, in other guises, has often been stereotyped in American popular culture as a “nerdy,” anti-social, white

male fan who is obsessively and competitively driven to collect. In the case of record collectors, it is the drive to be the deepest “digger,” which is to say, someone who finds, purchases, and possesses the most rare and obscure records.⁷⁵ This stereotype certainly does not hold true for every record collector, especially for women collectors and collectors of color. However, throughout my conversations with record collectors—about both themselves and their larger community—many also described record collecting as being “nerdy” and overwhelmingly male-dominated, and they acknowledged how competition, rivalry, and even secrecy are often core motivating factors of the practice.

5.3 The Interpretive Community of Record Collectors

The accumulation of materials and knowledge that collectors can either disseminate, or “hoard,” from the public can be seen through the lens of cultural capital.⁷⁶ Record collections function in elite ways that create knowledge and inscribe power amongst its collectors, and reissue record labels rely on those collectors to share their coveted cultural capital. Through the process of systematically acquiring cultural valuable artifacts—in this case vinyl LPs and 45 RPMs—collectors accumulate their own cultural capital based on their economic and signifying value. However, the appeal to collect records does not simply exist in the realm of cultural capital; there is also a tangible pleasure that drives this practice.

Oliver Wang, who is a scholar, DJ, and music writer who authored liner notes for several of Betty’s reissues (*Betty Davis* and *They Say I’m Different* in 2007 and *Is It Love Or Desire* in 2009), explained his drive to collect records in terms of their materiality and value as artifacts:

My appeal in collecting vinyl is not because I think it’s a superior medium for music, it’s because the physical tangibility of the record has value to me in and of itself [...] I think part of it is just the aesthetics, there’s a pleasure in the form—to be able to put your hands on it. But it’s also about the artifact. So, I actually tend to *not* collect reissues, unless it’s a reissue that has added value in terms of a booklet or something. (Wang, interview by author, Oct 30, 2018)

⁷⁵ For a discussion on the contemporary record collector stereotype, see Shuker (2004).

⁷⁶ Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital explains how individuals know certain social codes, how to behave, and what works in various social contexts, or “fields” (Bourdieu 1977).

Wang went on to give me an example:

[Now Again Records] are about to reissue David Axelrod's *Earth Rod* album, which is just incredible—one of the best things he ever did! Now Again is doing a big reissue for it coming up in the next few weeks. So, I had the reissue of *Earth Rod* for years, and then after David died I was going back and looking through my collection and saw it and I said, 'You know what, I should really have an original copy of this.' And it's not because I need the music, I already had it. But having the original is meaningful to me in a way—and I'm sure most collectors would say that—it being an artifact of its time when it came out, it's imbued with this kind of intangible value to me. (Wang, interview by author, Oct 30, 2018)

When I pushed Wang to further explain that “intangible value,” and asked whether or not he would describe it in terms of “aura,” he replied:

Sure. It's an aura of authenticity, and I don't usually like using the word, but it's what it is.⁷⁷ And, so, very slowly over the years with records that are very important to me, I'll get rid of the reissues because if I have the original I don't need the other copy. And in a certain way, I don't even *want* the other copy, the reissue feels tainted for me in some way. I'm not hardcore about this stuff, so I would never advise someone to never buy reissues, but if you can afford it, and not only that, but if it's *important* to you, get the original. And it's important to me. (Wang, interview by author, Oct 30, 2018)

“If you can afford it” is a very big *if* that often gets overlooked in both the discourse about record collecting and amongst those who participate in the record collecting community. Wang tends to not buy reissues because of the value that he has personally placed on the original in terms of their authenticity, which has both an “intangible value” as well as a market value. However, the ability to participate in this valuation process largely structured along class lines that determine who has access and who does not.

Duane E. Powell, a queer, Black record collector, DJ, and music historian from Chicago, shared with me his experience of “digging” that spoke to these issues. While shopping at a record store, he ran into a “well known record collector” who was selling some records. Powell found a

⁷⁷ Incidentally, it is interesting to consider why Wang may not “like using how the word” due to how the word “aura” gets attached to artifacts that are themselves copies. In fact, no musical artist or group—except Wu-Tang, once—has made a single copy of an album (Furness 2015). Whereas, when Walter Benjamin (1936) talks about the aura of artworks, it is historically based on their singularity and uniqueness.

reissue copy of a 1970s Asha Puthli album that he had “wanted very badly.” However, every time Powell attempted to get the original record, it cost anywhere between \$150 to \$300, which was a price he was unable to pay. The reissue, however, was priced at an affordable \$8.99. Thrilled, Powell grabbed the reissued version of the Asha Puthli album. What happened next illustrated the elitist and classist practices that are too often in play with “serious” record collecting:

The collector sees [the record] in my hand and pulls me aside and says, ‘Hey, I have an original copy of that’ [...] I guess I wasn’t getting his hint that he wanted me to put that back and buy the original from him. Of course he wanted to sell me the original copy for all this money and I’m like, the reason why I’m buying [this] is because I can afford it and its accessible. It has the original artwork, sound quality and everything else. So, he hasn’t spoken with me since that day. And he has told other people, ‘Duane ain’t the collector I thought he was’ and so on and so forth. (Powell, interview by author, Aug 24, 2018)

While some collectors may not be interested in reissues because they lack the cultural authenticity of the original record, other collectors, like Powell, see reissues as an economically feasible tool to “reintroduce people to music that they might have missed” (Powell, interview by author, Aug 24, 2018).

While the drive to collect may stem from a specific goal (to play in a DJ set or on a radio program) or a need (for inclusion in label reissue), the overwhelming majority of record collectors I interviewed described a personal drive that is rooted in passion. This type of passion is inherently structured by one’s own tastes and biases:

For many, collecting sound recordings is a matter of passion: passion for intellectual content, passion for a given physical medium, and passion for a specific form of technology [...] In fulfilling this passion, however, lies the opportunity to make a much larger contribution to society, culture, and history—one of incredible significance that each collector must consider [...] Our very preferences of genre and performers, even the physical medium of the recording, have explicit inclusions and exclusions. Prone to our unavoidable personal preferences and cultural, social, and political biases, sound collectors, as do archivists and historians, open the potentiality for culturally significant yet popularly underrepresented cross-sections of musical society to be effectively forgotten to history. (Hooper 2011: 44)

Because the process of record collecting is a process of valorization, the action of exclusion is inevitable in the curation process. This function of curation has not only structured the practice of

record collecting but has also uniquely impacted and shaped the formation of genres, canons, historical records, and social memory.

The exact origins of record collecting are difficult to pin down since, after all, there have always been individual collectors. But as a cultural practice that is bigger than just individual proclivities, it seems to have started concurrently with the beginning of independent record labels and based on the desire to preserve American folklore (Kennedy and McNutt 1999). Independent record labels have been part of the American music industry since the advent of commercially distributed sound recordings. From the 1920s to the 1960s, small, independent record labels produced non-commercial American music whose obscurity would later manifest itself in the form of “rare” records. These rare records, which would eventually be construed as cultural artifacts, served as the first batch of raw materials for record collectors and constituted many of the catalogues that provided material for the first wave of reissued anthologies.

The history of independent record labels is often told through the biographies of “record men,” which is to say, the white male owners, producers, and talent scouts who both populated and dominated the industry throughout much of the last century. These men tend to be depicted in one of two ways: as visionaries, who were capable of spotting even the most obscure talent, or as entrepreneurs who were indifferent to the music but were “street smart” enough to capitalize on its unique potential (*ibid.*: xiv). The latter position is frequently invoked in discussions of white-owned “race record” labels in the 1920s.⁷⁸ With the rise of “race records” came the arrival of the new culture brokers—a class of white middlemen in the music industry. The market-driven entrepreneurial attitude of record men of that era valued quantity and consistency over quality. Ultimately, this group of self-styled “talent scouts” partly stunted the organic development of musical styles in the 1920s and early 1930s by only recording certain kinds of performers who were willing to play in specific styles that the scouts desired. Not surprisingly, those styles adhered to a strictly racialized and gender-specific set of genre boundaries. Many scholars have noted how such operationalized expressions of taste and bias had the explicit effect of “slowing (and virtual

⁷⁸ The birth of the modern recording industry in the early part of that decade quickly saw the formation of small, independent labels that released recordings by local recording artists for regionalized consumer groups, as well as recordings by and for “minority populations whose musical interests were not reflected in the releases of other labels, including poor rural populations outside the urban centers of the US, or those migrating from the South to industrial hubs including Chicago” (Bowsher 2015: 107). These labels were forced to adhere to the racist segregationist policies of the day, forming the first two music industry “genres”: Hillbilly Records and “race records” (see Miller 2010). See Chapter 2 for my discussion of “race records” and the blues women who pioneered the industry.

stopping) the recorded development of certain race record sub-genres (e.g., African American stringband music)” (Dougan 2006: 42). This scenario suggests that, well before anthologies or reissues were conceived, the practice of curating a record label was already shaping the very musical styles that the record men sought to capture in the studio.

When I asked Matt Sullivan what ethical guidelines structured their reissue process, it prompted a sarcastic interjection from John Ballon (author of Betty’s liner notes for the 2009 reissue of *Nasty Gal*, as well as the 2016 release of *The Columbia Years 1968-1969*, and now a close friend of Betty’s): “You guys [at LITA] try to discontinue that tradition of white label music guys ripping off people without legal wherewithal” (Ballon, interview by author, November 2, 2018). Our conversation then ventured into the problematic history of collecting, curating and reissuing. “These are projects of love,” Ballon said. “It’s actually the first time a lot of these [artists] will get paid.” Sullivan confirmed this:

I can’t tell you how many people we’ve worked with, people who are like, ‘I’ve been in the music business for fifty years and I’ve never got a royalty statement or a check.’ People who had some success! But that’s a big piece to the puzzle as to whether or not we do these projects: Is the artist alive? Can we get them involved? Some might have signed bad contracts and they’re not going to get any money; they don’t own any rights to the music, sadly, the master or the publishing [...] Usually the case is we get their permission. There are very, *very* few cases where the artist is alive, and we couldn’t get them involved. (Sullivan, interview by author November 2, 2018)

The sordid history of “record men” taking advantage of artists, most of all women and artists of color, haunt reissue labels and generate a certain level of outside skepticism from those not involved in the activities of the labels themselves.

Such is the case with Ayana Contrares, a record collector, DJ, and host/executive producer of *Reclaimed Soul* on Chicago’s public radio station, Wocolo. *Reclaimed Soul* is a program that specializes in soul music, history, and culture. The music is curated solely from Contrares’ personal vinyl collection and features interviews with musicians and other key players from the soul and funk era, along with vintage, archival advertisements: “Reclaimed Soul is about taking old materials (records, buildings, ideas, et al) to push us all forward” (“Reclaimed Soul (Thurs 8-10PM + Sundays 8-10AM CST).” As a Black woman from Chicago, Contrares (like Powell) has a visceral connection to soul and funk music culture that is rooted in cultural memory, and she also

has strong opinions about reissue culture. Ultimately, her work is engrained in the dialectic between past and present:

I have always been interested in the implicit and explicit messages in music. There are so many stories that are layered in a lot of these older recordings that I think we can draw from, even who collected the record. I have people's collections that I build programming around [...] I'm really interested in the ephemeral, the things that weren't made to document but *do* document in their existence. Ultimately when we're telling the story through these objects, I'm mostly interested in telling the stories that wouldn't otherwise be told from perspectives that ring true to people who were *there* in the moment. A lot of the times when we are talking about, especially larger artists, we're talking about [them] after the mythology has been set up, and that mythology is going to be rooted in their crossover moments, which is actually not representative of the body of their work. I'm going to take it from a different perspective. (Contrares, interview by author, Aug 21, 2018)

When I asked Contrares if she, herself, bought reissues, she replied:

I don't, but I support them doing that work because I think it serves as an important gateway for people to listen to older music and appreciate older music and the narratives behind them. I don't purchase it, generally speaking, because I'm personally interested in the actual older artifacts from my personal collecting perspective, but everybody doesn't need to do that. There's a role for that. Again, thinking about mythology and creating a sort of revisionist history of the importance of certain people—well, important to who? When you think of an album or a 45, I think of it as a work of art and an artifact. And when are you reissuing something you are augmenting that or changing that to something else. (Contrares, interview by author, Aug 21, 2018)

Not only is Contrares disinterested in purchasing reissue records because they lack the authenticity of the original (for reasons similar to Wang), she also brought up the issue of historical revisionism. The interplay between content and context is a primary concern for Contrares, whose recycled media project has a strong pedagogical focus and conceptualizes soul and funk as a lived cultural practice through which African Americans cultivated and popularized a set of ideas through music that shaped Black identities and created the conditions necessary for social change. For Contrares, instead of mythologizing and revising records (“creating a sort of revisionist history”), her program aims to incorporate “old materials” into a contemporary cultural practice: “When I think about soul I think about something that's very much alive and very much something

you can connect to right now, the energy is still there. And people are still creating it and building on it” (Contrares, interview by author, Aug 21, 2018).

When cultural intermediaries begin imbuing media texts and artifacts with meaning and value that were not there before, they are doing so based on their personal tastes and biases, as well as their access to cultural capital. Bias is perpetuated when personal collections become the basis of musical canons and are institutionalized via labels, archives, museums and other public sector projects. While the “record men” that birthed the American music industry in the 1920s continued to gain more power and monopolize the recording industry (Millard 2005; Dougan 2006), another group of academically minded (and motivated) individuals began a concerted effort in collecting American folklore and musical heritage. Most notable amongst these individuals are John and Alan Lomax, who played instrumental roles in the rise of public sector folklore and American ethnomusicology.

From 1933 to 1942, John Lomax—an academic and curator of the Archive of American Folk Song for the Library of Congress—got a large grant to travel and make field recordings of the American South. Lomax set off with his teenage son, Alan, to begin recording American folk music. The Lomaxes are frequently described as “cultural preservationists” (Filene 1991) whose early field recordings of American vernacular music had a powerful impact on our understanding of the authenticity of blues and folk artists. Alan was more interested in “attaching political import to their collecting” than his older, more conservative father (*ibid.*: 607). While the Lomaxes acknowledged that their personal beliefs motivated their work—particularly their shared belief in folk music as a form of cultural pluralism that had the ability to revitalize American culture—they did not acknowledge the “extent to which this agenda shaped their collecting and their scholarship” (*ibid.*: 616). Alan Lomax offers a helpful, albeit overused, example of the problematic nature of collecting and curating hidden, lost, or forgotten music cultures that are then opened up to the work of historical revision. This problematic power dynamic that stems from the highly racialized and gendered history of record collecting, curating, and the contentious activity of “preserving,” is not lost on fans and critics alike of modern-day reissue labels.

5.3.1 The Numero Group

As of this writing, the label that is most frequently associated with an “Alan Lomax-like mission” (Orzeck 2016) is The Numero Group. The Numero Group is an American reissue record label founded in 2003 in Chicago by Rob Sevier and Ken Shipley. The Numero Group’s catalog focuses heavily on label-based compilations which are exemplified in their Eccentric Soul series. The Numero Group’s approach is considerably more idealist and critical than other reissue labels, which is evident even in their online language:

Our mission is dirty and labor-intensive and it’s urgent as all hell. Time kills off precious bits of passed-over sound, story, and ephemera every day, just as fast as we can haul out of exile our sprawling treasury of under-heard recordings—along with the musicians, writers, and entrepreneurs who created them. Every recording we unearth is painstakingly re-mastered and carefully researched, with obsessive attention to narrative and factual detail unmatched in the so-called reissue field. (“Behind The Numbers”)

Having been a consumer of The Numero Group reissues for several years, I was anxious to meet co-founder Rob Sevier in their Chicago office.

When I arrived in the Little Village neighborhood early one morning, I encountered another non-descript building that resembled a large garage. I searched for the buzzer and was greeted by Rob Sevier. Once inside, I was given a tour of the space by Sevier, who was the only person there and had some building tasks and chores to tend to before we could begin our interview. The first floor housed the warehouse operations and a very small record store that exclusively sold The Numero Group releases. Wooden record shelves for browsing housed impeccably organized vinyl LPs by series and volume number. Their featured LPs were presented on one wall, delicately resting on thinner display shelves (Figure 35).



Figure 35. The Numero Group record store, Chicago, IL, August 25, 2018.

A few framed posters of reissued artists modestly decorated the remaining wall space. Sevier's bike was leaning up against one of the record shelves that housed two turntables and a mixer for testing out records before purchase. Behind the one-room record shop was a warehouse filled with non-descript boxes that seemed to reach the ceiling (Figure 36).



Figure 36. The Numero Group record store, Chicago, IL, August 25, 2018.

I followed Sevier through the maze of boxes, at points having to literally squeeze myself through extremely narrow passages, until we reached a small kitchen station. While making himself a cup of coffee he explained to me the importance of reuse in the building (everything is recycled or composted). In fact, Sevier has plans to make the warehouse, which houses The Numero Group's archive and the office, totally "carbon neutral."⁷⁹ Once the coffee was made, he led me upstairs to the office, which consisted of one large work room and three smaller rooms. The space was dimly lit and overly cluttered with papers, records, cassettes, and a host of other materials. Before we went into his office, Sevier changed the humidifier filter and explained the importance of keeping the air temperature controlled for their physical products. I pulled up a chair, cleared off whatever space I could for my recorder, and set out to understand how The Numero Group—an operation that, as of 2020, consisted of twelve individuals—became known as the leader of reissues in the United States.

⁷⁹ Sevier is committed to making the building a sustainable physical space and produce as little waste and admissions as possible. On top of recycling and composting, Sevier's working on getting solar panels and a biogas food converter, so they can eventually heat the building from it.

[We are] focused on what I would call story or recreating what happens. We wanted to get away from fetishizing and idealizing DJ's and curators. There's no Rob Sevier presents; there's no Ken Shipley presents. We're fairly hidden in it. We credit ourselves as producer and compiler but it's very fine print [...] But we [were] sort of fatigued about reading the story from the perspective of the storyteller rather than the perspective of the artist. Also, and I think this has gotten away from us at times, the approach of idealizing a warts-and-all strategy. We try to take a warts-and-all approach, but it gets a little complicated. We'll acknowledge things like domestic abuse, but it gets really tricky, because usually you're up against things like libel and slander. But we try to get that in there and let the people know; we're just trying to present an honest picture. (Sevier, interview by author, Aug 25, 2018)

Through in-depth research, ethnography and archivist work, The Numero Group carves out a space to tell the “story” of unknown music labels, scenes, albums and artists. However, Sevier does not consider his work to be revisionist:

I don't use the term revisionist really because I don't care about the established history in any real way. *The established history is the history of hits*—who had the biggest hit? That's not really history, that's just the history of the charts. So, we're not revising that. The charts are fixed, historically. It's more like trying to encapsulate history, hard to pin down histories. (Sevier, interview by author, Aug 25, 2018)

Sevier's argument against the narrative of revisionism is a crucial one. Not only is the established history a “history of hits,” it is also, inadvertently, a history of distributors (and, more specifically, those that had enough money to stick around as the music industry was increasingly monopolized). The history itself is always already representing specific interests, perspectives, and sociotechnical arrangements.

As it did with LITA, our conversation begins to steer toward the power dynamics involved with the history of musical collection, curation and preservation. I take the opportunity to ask him about the comparisons between The Numero Group and Alan Lomax. He quickly dismissed the association as “trite, evaluable comparison,” and suggests that Lomax “did a totally different thing.” When I push him to consider why The Numero Group is so often compared to the work of Lomax, he replied:

Because Alan Lomax is the biggest brand in archiving music. Our approach isn't the same. I think that he's ethical, but it's complicated [...] There's a legitimate

problematizing with Alan Lomax's work. People can problematize what we do, too. I problematize what we do. But I think that a big part of the difference is that we are aware of a lot of what's happened since Alan Lomax was doing his thing and can recognize that. Looking at things and saying, 'Are we doing the best with what's available to us? What kinds of paradigm shifts might happen in the future?' Part of the reason why we can't be that similar to Alan Lomax is because we're *aware* of Alan Lomax, and the many people like him who traveled and did oral histories and recordings. (Sevier, interview by author, Aug 25, 2018)

The labor-intensive work of Alan Lomax, and the many others like him that Sevier referred to, provided the raw materials for early reissue projects in the late 1940s that were marketed as preserving music heritage. Around 1,000 new labels were formed between 1948 and 1954 (Kennedy and McNutt 1999). One of those labels would turn out to produce a highly influential and historical reissue project, although its cultural significance would not be valued for decades to come.

Folkways Records, founded by Moses Asch in 1948, provided a diverse array of releases intended to "promote international, racial, and ethnic understanding through recorded sound" (Skinner 2006: 68). Folkways Records has since gone on to enjoy a revived existence as Smithsonian Folkways, a non-profit record label of the Smithsonian Institution as a part of the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage.⁸⁰ Folkways began reissuing albums in the late 1940s and early 1950s when many major-label studio and field recordings of blues and folk musicians from the 1920s and 1930s were beginning to go out of print. Asch produced professional "bootlegs" of songs under the belief that he was providing a public right to information and access to historically significant recordings (ibid.: 68). As I will explain later in the chapter, producing professional bootlegs carried on well into the twenty-first century, although it was not a commitment to public rights that fueled its practice.

In 1952, Asch collaborated with record collector Harry Smith who convinced Asch to assemble an anthology from his personal collection of rare commercial folk music recordings from the 1920s and 1930s. The result was a three-volume LP collection, the *Anthology of American Folk Music*. While the anthology made little waves at the time, its re-emergence forty-five years later as a Smithsonian Folkways CD reissue (1997) garnered a flood of accolades, two Grammy

⁸⁰ The acquisition of Folkways Records by the Smithsonian Institution in 1986 occurred after Asch's family donated his entire collection to the Institution upon his death.

awards, and lucrative sales. Smith's editing of *Anthology of American Folk Music* (1952) was a "singular moment in musical archaeology" (Dougan 2006: 50) and marked the legitimization of record collectors as culture brokers themselves. Independent collectors, including Harry Smith, continued to create anthologies that would go on to define the canons of blues, folk, country, and soul. Decades later, we still see modern independent collectors—including Kevin "Sipreano" Howes and Mr. Supreme—determining the majority of the content for reissue labels including LITA.

5.3.2 Power Dynamics

As I have already briefly alluded to, the treasure trove of intellectual and material culture that collectors can potentially disseminate to the public exists within a complex set of power dynamics associated with race, gender, sexuality, and class. These power dynamics not only enforce canons but also shape discourses that, in turn, reinforce the values of the collectors. William Ivey's (1976) "Issues and Reissues in Country Music Recording," is the first scholarly article to analyze the practice of reissue, and he identified the problematic nature of the collector as a tastemaker: "Though it was the folklore scholar who ultimately placed a stamp of legitimacy upon this material, it was (some would argue unfortunately) the record collector and discographer who most often controlled the selection and organization of historical materials to be reissued" (1976: 163). The record collector gained this level of control because (1) they committed time, labor and money to collecting the physical materials, (2) the rarity of these materials was imbued as authentic and valuable, and (3) their personal bias and passion worked to curate these rare physical materials.

This issue of curation is a contested topic amongst collectors and labels. While some embrace the title, others have no use for it. When I asked my interview subjects whether or not they considered themselves curators, I received several different answers. Label owner Matt Sullivan proclaimed: "I love the curation aspect of it," while scholar Oliver Wang said: "I kind of hate using this term. I'm curating a collection that has some kind of meaning to me. What that meaning *is*, is something that's evolving." Radio host Ayana Contrares proudly identified with the term while LA-based Frontier Records label owner, Lisa Fancher, could not relate to it: "[The

term] curator is too academic for me.” The individual who had the strongest reaction to the term “curator” also had the strictest definition of record collecting:

Record collecting fundamentally is about acquiring records in an organized way. That’s what record collecting is. You can be a record digger and not a record collector. That’s what a lot of people are. A lot of people are just trying to get valuable records cheap and either sell them or collect them, but that’s just not record collecting. Record collecting means assembling label discographies, assembling artist discographies, completing sets of things that somehow fit together. One of the things that I find the most confounding is that the term record collecting has literally just become owning records. You might have a record library, and we can call it a collection, but you’re not a record *collector* unless you’re assembling a collection of records that has an organized structure. Otherwise, your pile of records is just a story of places you’ve been and trips you’ve taken. That’s just not a record collection. That’s a personal collection of stuff. And that’s great. You should have that. Honestly, I don’t even think anyone is that serious unless they’re collecting along the lines of labels. (Sevier, interview by author, Aug 25, 2018)

Sevier’s definition of record collecting could easily be associated with curation: selecting certain items and organizing and caring for them in a collection that is based on your personal preference and, in the case of The Numero Group, is made public and available to purchase. However, he was quick to disassociate himself with the act of curation, citing the principles of collecting:

[W]hen you go to a museum and see an exhibit, it’s not every painting, it’s some guy who says he’s an expert who has selected certain paintings. You go there, and you see that person’s text about it, and you see their selection of that prolific painter’s work, and that’s curation to me. When you’re doing record collecting you’re not, by definition, curating it. You’re sort of obeying the founding principles of collecting. So, you’re looking at an artist or label and saying, ‘I got it all.’ Collecting is getting it all and organizing it. But it’s not curating. (Sevier, interview by author, Aug 25, 2018)

Whether or not one wants to identify with an academically institutionalized term with roots in Museum Studies and Art History is obviously their own preference. Not much can be gleaned from such responses other than how an individual recognizes their labor. However, much can be gleaned from a discussion on the “seriousness” of collecting: “‘Serious’; as a quality connected with predominantly male collecting activity and male musical tastes, has significant implications for cultural memory and heritage through the marginalization of other collecting styles and tastes” (Maalsen and McLean 2018: 49). More than simply an acquired interest in a specific media format,

being able to identify as a record collector (as opposed to someone who simply has a few records amongst their collection of other commodities) does indeed require a certain amount of time, finances, labor, and knowledge. It is, at its core, a privileged activity that requires disposable income and physical space for non-essential items. While there is no fixed amount of time, finances, labor, and/or knowledge that is required to participate in record collecting, the scale on which a collector may fall determines their “seriousness” as a collector.

The “seriousness” of a record collector can be analyzed in relation to Bourdieu’s concept of “field.” Will Straw suggests that gendered connoisseurship of record collecting is rooted in “the mastery of a symbolic field” (1997: 9) that functions to preserve the homosocial character of the culture. This study considers record collecting as a “field”—consisting of physical spaces, including record stores, swaps and fairs, as well as virtual spaces, including websites, forums, and blogs—in order to unpack the differential power dynamics that people experience in structured social spaces (both physical or virtual) which have their own rules and schemes of domination.⁸¹

5.3.3 Women in Collecting

Given the time period in which record collecting took form as a cultural practice (1920s-1950s), it comes as no surprise that women were not well represented in its formation. Women were socially, politically, and economically consigned to the private sphere of society (Crenshaw 1989). Labor and time were traditionally spent on the domestic front, namely raising children, making it nearly impossible to be a part of such a specialized, time consuming, and obsessive accumulation of cultural capital. In the rare case that women did have time and resources to buy records, the physical space of record stores have not historically been inclusive and welcoming spaces for women. The record store to this day reveals itself as a homosocial space, and is acknowledged as such by those in the community:

Record collectors are presented as boy’s club, they’re functional as boy’s club, they’re not places that are designed to be welcoming to anybody really. They’re not welcoming to outsiders and an easy way to spot an outsider is that they’re a woman [...] So, what you have is a culture that develops that never opens up to women,

⁸¹ See O’Connor (2008) for an engagement with the definition of “field” in relation to both popular music and record labels.

compounded of decades of cloistered men in a room where women aren't involved. (Sevier, interview by author, Aug 25, 2018)

By acknowledging record collecting as “cloistered,” the co-founder of The Numero Group emphasized the homosocial interaction that has come to define record collecting. As of this writing, few scholars (Medovoi 1984; Straw 1997; Dougan 2006; Maalsen and McLean 2018) have focused on record collecting through the lens of gender. “I always go back to the Will Straw essay,” Oliver Wang tells me:

It's a desire for mastery. And I don't even think that a lot of men are self-aware of it. It's just how hegemonic masculinity works. It's so sublimated that we don't need to think about it in a conscious way. And if you look at who runs these labels it's mostly men, which is representative of the music industry in general. But this idea that, 'I know more than you,' it's an extension from a collector's culture. (Wang, interview by author, Oct 30, 2018)

“Collector's culture” in general, regardless of materials, is very much rooted in early colonial practices via the context of hegemonic masculinity and imperial conquest (Straw 1997). Colonial ideals of connoisseurship, mastery, and expert status are reinforced in the modern era through notions of competitiveness, rivalry, and secrecy.

Despite discourses that marginalize their contributions, women are highly skilled collectors and have long contributed to creating archival formations. Women like Cheryl Pawelski (Rhino Entertainment/Omnivore Records), Lisa Fancher (Frontier Records) and Ayana Contrares (*Reclaimed Soul*) have been in the record collecting scene their whole lives, often times being the only girl or woman around. The lack of gender diversity in record collecting does not mean that women do not collect. Rather, “the gendered construction of collecting renders women collectors less visible” (Maalsen and McLean 2018: 26). Such invisibility is recalled when Lisa Fancher described her time working in record stores in Los Angeles in the late 1970s: “There would be a guy standing next to me, and the customer would turn to the guy and go, ‘Who does Rock the Casbah?’ And I'll go, ‘The Clash.’ But nobody would ever ask me anything unless it was like, ‘Help me with the bongs,’ or whatever. But they never would ask me who did what” (Fancher, interview by author, Oct 28, 2018). Fancher continued to address the competitiveness, rivalry, and secrecy that is often associated with “collector's culture”:

Some guys won't even tell you where they get shit, or they'll tell you some war story about how they got this record. I used to go to the Capitol Record swap meet and I would be holding [a record], looking at it, and some guy would talk to whoever owned it and go, 'I'll buy that.' I'm like, 'I'm looking at it. So, back the fuck up and get out of here.' I have no problem at all being a total asshole to people. I never did. Guys just always want to be the number one record collector. (Fancher, interview by author, Oct 28, 2018)

Fancher's story of being ignored while working in a record store and buying records at swap meets highlights the masculinist fallacy that Ayana Contrares addresses as a woman collector: "There's a misconception that a girl [collector] is not really *serious*, that it's just a little hobby, a cute little hobby" (Contrares, interview by author, Aug 21, 2018). Grammy-award winning producer and co-founder of Omnivore Records, Cheryl Pawelski, who was once head of A&R for Rhino Entertainment, reminisced about her early days of collecting and her rare standing in the industry: "I was a veracious collector. I'm still one of the only women, at least in [the] major label world. I've always worked with guys. All of my partners are guys. We're just not out there because there was no representation of it as a job. And there was really no pathway to it" (Pawelski, interview by author, Oct 30, 2018).

The skilled and committed women record collectors that began to pop up in the last half of the twentieth century were previously confined to the masculinist physical spaces of record stores, fairs, and swaps. However, the beginning of the twenty-first century ushered in another paradigm shift that would change the actual space, and certainly the atmosphere, for record collecting. Almost immediately after the mainstream music industry had spent its resources delegitimizing independent record labels as ineffective and vinyl LPs as outdated media, the 2000s began with a rampant project of media recycling. New technologies for storage, distribution, and consumption of records became available in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Selling and buying records over the Internet, and using online mechanisms for finding, auctioning, and price-comparing—like eBay, Gemm, Popsike and, perhaps the most well-known and most often used, Discogs—radically transformed the collecting experience and have widely expanded the realities for record dealers and collectors.

Critics of such changes in distribution and consumption traditions argue that the market has expanded "while also robbing some of the romance and random epiphanies from record shopping in the real world of stores and record fairs" (Reynolds 2011: 96). Statements like this

completely ignore the homosocial reality of record stores as cultural spaces of exclusivity and romanticize the notion of physically searching for and purchasing records.⁸² As some of my research participants have already highlighted, that primary physical activity of searching and purchasing, with which all other related activities are contingent upon, is colloquially referred to as “digging” within record collecting culture. While many studies on record collecting (and related cultural practices including DJing and beat-making) use the term “digging” generously as an insider vernacular, often without any explanation (Mitchell and Imrie 2011; Paz 2015; Hendricks 2016; Arditi 2017; Kushner 2020), the term *itself* is rarely critically addressed.⁸³

In his examination of the gendered space of the turntablist battle (or DJ battle), Mark Katz defined “digging” as “the dogged, even obsessive search for vinyl discs in record shops, thrift stores, dumpsters, and elsewhere” (2006: 593), and went on to explain that the term “is often spoken of by DJs as a physically demanding, even treacherous activity, an Indiana Jones-like adventure that suggests hunting rather than gathering” (ibid.: 594). While not (intentionally) subjecting the action of “digging” to the type of gendered analysis he provided for the activity of DJing (hip-hop style battling, more specifically), Katz’s associating of the term to such gendered, colonial language and imagery (“Indiana Jones-like adventure”) removed it from the representational realm of women’s work and located it within a masculinist history and mythology. By emphasizing the “hunting,” rather than “gathering,” aspect of “digging,” Katz, along with Roy Shuker (2010) and Peter Blecha (2005), compare the activity of record collecting with the historically masculinist activity of “hunting” or, “the hunt,” without unpacking its gendered implications.

⁸² Beyond the competitive, homosocial environment that the physical spaces of record collecting nurture, another structural reason why there is a lack of gender diversity in record collecting stems, more broadly, from the socially constructed assumptions about gender and technology. The early years of record collecting culture were directly connected to the technology of the phonograph and the active construction of the phonograph as masculine due to “longstanding stereotypes about male technological mastery and female technological anxiety” (Katz 2006: 584). While women collectors and DJs are far more prominent now due to evolved social norms that critique patriarchal spheres of society, as well as a concerted effort to make training and welcoming communities available, there are still assumptions that women cannot operate turntables; or that women cannot master turntables as well as men. I experienced this sexist assumption firsthand when I had my first public DJ set at a local bar called The Goldmark in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in January of 2019. Halfway into my all-vinyl set, a middle-aged white male (who I would later learn to be a DJ himself) made his way to the DJ booth and began watching me closely. Seemingly pleased with my selections and skill set, he then said to me (as if he was complimenting me): “It’s nice to see a female know her way around a turntable.”

⁸³ For a discussion on “digging” in relation to hip hop culture and DJ/producer communities, see Schloss (2004: 79-100). For a discussion on “digging” in relation to bootleggers and tape traders, see Marshall (2003). For discussions on “digging” within the realm of digital platforms see Taylor (2001) and Hayes (2006).

Perhaps the most scholarly, in-depth analysis of the term “digging,” as of this writing, in relation to record collecting, can be found in Elodie A. Roy’s work. She first identified “digging” as a “metaphorical method” (2015: 83) for “vinyl archaeology,” and defined it as “the practice of unearthing old recordings, for example at flea markets or in second-hand record shops” (ibid.: 119n1). While not engaging in the gendered implications of the terminology, she uses Walter Benjamin’s analogy of memory, in relation to book collecting (1968 [1931]), to unpack the metaphorical verb:

For Benjamin, the buried past needs to be dug out, and as one digs one upturns the soil: to dig is, to an extent, to destroy an apparent homogeneous stratum in order to reveal, locate and isolate one singular element within the stratum. It follows that the act of digging (or remembering) inevitably creates disorder or chaos. Similarly to locate old recordings or to think about old recorded objects one needs to extract them from an apparently linear narrative of recorded music. Once they are torn out from the past they enter a new context and a new narrative. (Roy 2015: 19)

The term “digging” is, in fact, saturated with imperialist, materialist, *and* gendered meaning. Rather than simply calling record purchasing what it is—shopping—the term “digging” is an insider vernacular that provides a masculine alternative to a social activity that has historically been associated with women’s work and the feminine sphere.⁸⁴ As Oliver Wang previously explained, male record collectors most likely did not consciously label their purchasing activity as “digging” to disassociate from women’s labor (although it is hard to parse out the notions of competition and mastery that the term alludes to). Nevertheless, it is a manifestation of the kind of sublimated hegemonic masculinity that has shaped record collecting culture.

5.4 The Story of Betty Davis’ Reissues

The expanded virtual spaces of record collecting are what allowed artists like Betty Davis—who were completely absent from the public at the time of their retirement—to continue

⁸⁴ My thoughts on the term “digging” as a masculine alternative to the activity of shopping stem from my conversations with The Numero Group co-founder Rob Sevier. As of this writing, I have not found one scholarly source that intentionally unpacks the gendered implications of the term “digging.”

circulating underground and become both accessible and desirable for reissue. The story of how Betty Davis' music came to be reissued—legally and legitimately—upholds the dubious tradition of shady business deals within the history of the music industry. The story of Betty's reissue is as confusing and frustrating as one could image, spanning six countries and eight different record labels. The fact that Betty herself is not aware of the specific circumstances, nor does she like to discuss such matters, does not help to understand the process. Even the few people affiliated with LITA who were instrumental in the reissue process are unclear about certain dates, individuals, and deals. What follows is a meticulously formulated oral history of the process of Betty's reissues from conversations with Matt Sullivan, John Ballon, Damon Smith, Greg Ericco, and Joost Berger.

Betty's music was bootlegged by five separate record companies between 1995 and 2005. A compilation CD comprised of Betty's first three studio albums entitled *Anti-Love: The Best of Betty Davis* was bootlegged by a UK label called Vinyl Experience. The only information on Vinyl Experience that exists is a London contact address that appears on the popular record selling and buying website, Discogs.com. Even LITA founder Matt Sullivan, who has an impressive knowledge of international labels, is unaware of their operations, and how they got their hands on Betty's bootlegs in the first place. This compilation was what many heard for the first time in the mid to late 1990s. Prior to this bootlegged compilation, which came out several years before the advent of YouTube, the only way to access Betty's records—which were long out of print—was to acquire the original vinyl records. In addition to the initial bootleg compilation CD, Betty's fifth and final album (*Crashin' From Passion*) that she recorded as an unsigned artist in 1979 with the financial backing of Simon Lait began to appear as unauthorized releases. The first unauthorized release happened in 1995 via the Japanese label P-Vine Records, and again in 1996 via the US label Razor & Tie, and finally, via the UK label Charly Records (this time re-titled as *Hangin' Out In Hollywood*).

Capitalizing on the growing underground interest in Betty's music from virtual record selling, shopping, and blogging spaces, Betty's first three studio albums (the only albums that were released to the public during her career) were all bootlegged by a UK label called MPC which released its own bootleg compilation titled *Anti-Love: The Best of Betty Davis* in 2002. MPC took their bootleg operation a step further and falsely claimed they owned the rights to Betty's records and illegally sold the music to a Spanish label called Vampi Beat so they, too, could put out a

bootleg compilation titled *This Is It* in 2005. All of this activity was done without the knowledge or permission of Betty (or the other musicians involved).

While the stories behind the bootlegging of Betty's music are uncharacteristically dubious, the story of Betty's reissue began at the turn of the twenty-first century with an online music blog created by John Ballon. Ballon has proven to be an instrumental person in Betty's life and is most notably recognized as the author of the 2007 *Wax Poetics* feature article on Betty entitled "Liberated Funk." As a close confidant of Betty's, Ballon now reflects back on the responsibility he bares as a music writer for perpetuating the mythology of Betty in contemporary popular culture:

I wrote this [*Wax Poetics*] piece that's kind of become the definitive piece, and I'm the first one to tell you that I know as little about Betty is anybody. She's still a mystery, but I'm like the world expert somehow now [...] So, I apologized to her because I got some things wrong in that article. And now that is the historic record. (Ballon, interview by author, Jan 7, 2019)

Before Ballon would come to know Betty personally, and before he landed the feature cover story for *Wax Poetics*, he was a self-described "record nerd" who created a music criticism blog in the late 1990s called MustHear.com. MustHear.com reviewed albums that Ballon himself considered to be "five-star albums," focusing specifically on albums by lesser known individuals.⁸⁵ When he heard Betty's music from a "DJ friend" in 2000 or 2001 he knew immediately he wanted to write about it for his blog:

Me and a DJ friend of mine were driving up the Pacific Coast Highway and he and I were each playing the other tracks we thought they'd never heard before—classic white guy one-ups of music nerdiness—and he played "Anti-Love Song," which had just been put on a compilation, and I was like, 'Oh, fuck.' I ended up picking up a bootleg, because her stuff was only bootlegged then, and got really into it and wrote the review. (Ballon, interview by author, Jan 7, 2019)

Ballon went on to write a music review of Betty's first album (*Betty Davis* 1973) for his blog in 2003. He ended the review with a call for information in the form of a "WANTED" graphic: anyone who knew anything about Betty's whereabouts, her master tapes, or her music rights

⁸⁵ As of 2020, MustHear.com is no longer a functioning website. Without archiving its contents, Ballon let the site go dormant and eventually took it down (a decision Ballon now regrets).

should inquire within. Although Ballon's original blog and graphic does not exist anymore, his original album review of *Betty Davis* was reproduced in AllAboutJazz.com in 2003. Ballon's (2003) review provided meaningful and updated commentary on Betty's transgressive position within the music industry of the 1970s: "That the record buying public shunned Betty Davis should come as no surprise. She had a much rougher edge to her music than other female funk and soul artists of the '70s. Song for song, Betty Davis is actually one of the most extreme sounding debut records of the decade" (Ballon 2003). He also focused on vocality and her emphasis on timbral contrast: "Like all original sounding music, Betty's voice eludes description, and must be heard [...] Betty was a powerhouse, pushing her vocal cords to the limit on every performance. She gave it all up, unpredictably alternating between sexy breathiness, moans, and full throated screams" (Ballon 2003).

Published on a website dedicated to jazz, it is no surprise that Ballon contextualized his review of Betty in relation to beloved trumpet player, her former husband, Miles Davis. However, as Ballon himself will attest to, the review carried on the unfortunate legacy of fetishizing Betty as a hyper-sexual muse to Miles Davis:

The former wife of Miles, Betty Mabry Davis is perhaps the only woman in the world who could rightfully have the following legend tattooed across her rear: THIS ASS INVENTED FUSION [...] Betty conquered the man twice her age with a potent mixture of youth, beauty, and sex [...] Betty ruled as the mentor-muse for the original man and his music [...] Betty was fire, and while Miles welcomed the sparks, he knew better than to stay too close for too long. (Ballon 2003)

In this review, which would serve as the catalyst for her future reissue projects, we get a glimpse of both the progressive, analytical insight that Betty's music deserved *and* a heaping dose of the masculinist mythology that would shape Betty's narrative in the twenty-first century.⁸⁶

In 2003, Ballon was approached by an Australian label called Aztec Records who wanted to put out a quality historical reissue of Betty's records, complete with extensive liner notes, interviews, and photography. Having read Ballon's music blog, they thought him the perfect

⁸⁶ Seventeen years after Ballon wrote his initial waxing's on Betty Davis (and after he became a close friend and confidant of Betty's), he does not hesitate to critique his original work: "It's deeply problematic on many levels and establishes/perpetuates unfortunate myths and inaccuracies. I wouldn't have written it the same today" (Ballon, personal communication, March 10, 2020).

person to write the liner notes.⁸⁷ Believing MPC was the lawful rights holder to Betty's music, Aztec Records—just like Vampi Beat in Spain—bought the counterfeit rights to Betty's music from MPC for 10,000 pounds (roughly \$13,000 US dollars) and began the process of creating their own reissue project. Assigned with his first professional writing assignment, Ballon began the research process to write the liner notes for Aztec by first contacting Michael Lang, the famed organizer of Woodstock who signed Betty to his label, Just Sunshine Records, in 1972. Once Ballon was in communication with Lang, the truth about the bootleg operation(s) started to unravel. Lang explained to Ballon that he himself, and *not* MPC, owned the rights to Betty's albums. With this revelation, Ballon broke the news to Aztec that they purchased illegitimate rights to the music they wanted to reissue. Having spent most of their budget on buying the phony rights, Aztec had no choice but to abandon the project.

Not only did Lang explain to Ballon that he was the rights holder, but he also confided in Ballon that he had been sitting on a large sum of royalty money for Betty from the hip hop samples in the hopes he would someday be able to get the funds to her. Newly tasked with the ethical and moral obligation to help Lang get Betty her royalty money, Ballon spent countless hours looking for Betty through tax records (who, according to his 2003 review, was “a rumored victim of a drug overdose”). He eventually found her through her lawyer, and the two men worked together to get Betty her long-overdue royalty money from Michael Lang, as well as help her move into a new, more suitable apartment. From that point on, John Ballon and Betty Davis began communicating over the phone on a regular basis and established a friendship based on trust and mutual respect. Ballon fully acknowledged that the initial monetary offering he tracked down for her is no doubt the reason why Betty agreed to communicate with him.

During this same time period (2000-2003), Matt Sullivan—unaware of what was happening in Australia with Aztec Records—was also looking for a way to buy the rights to Betty's music, so he could do a quality historical reissue with his newly created label LITA. Just like the individuals at Aztec Records in Australia, Sullivan contacted MPC in the UK to license the rights to Betty's music. However, unlike the individuals at Aztec, Sullivan became suspicious of their operation:

⁸⁷ Ballon had a substantial online presence in the early years of blog-style music reviews. Along with his own website—MustHear.com—he also wrote concert reviews for Launch (which was rebranded as Yahoo! Music in 2005) and album reviews for AllAboutJazz.com.

I contacted MPC—I even remember sending them a proposal, this is probably 2002, 2003—saying I want to reissue these records. It just seemed like, ‘Do they *really* own these records?’ They didn’t sound right. It didn’t sound like a legit mastering job. It seemed kind of dicey. Then at that point, I guess I got a hold of Michael Lang and he clarified that he owned them. So, that’s where that rat hole started. Michael said if I wanted to get in touch with her there’s this guy named John Ballon and he found her. I called [John] and told him Michael Lang gave me his number and that I wanted to reissue Betty’s records, and it all went from there. (Sullivan, interview by author, Jan 4, 2019)

Once Betty had been located, compensated, and situated in her new living environment, Ballon and Sullivan teamed up to convince Betty to allow LITA to reissue her records—the proper way.

In 2007, LITA—in consultation with Betty Davis—purchased the licensing rights from Michael Lang for the first two studio albums, *Betty Davis* (1973) and *They Say I’m Different* (1974), and reissued them both simultaneously in 2007. LITA hired Oliver Wang to write the liner notes, which Ballon assisted on by sharing contact information and materials he began acquiring for Aztec Records. At the time of Betty’s initial 2007 reissue, none of her songs were circulating on the three-year old video sharing website, YouTube, and a Google search for “Betty Davis” yielded results for the famous white Hollywood film star, Bette Davis. The only substantial information available on Betty existed in the form of Wang’s extensive liner notes that have since come to define the modern historical reissue. To create his liner notes for *Betty Davis* (1973), titled “The Music and Mystique of Betty Davis,” Wang used interviews with the musicians on the album, as well as a brief, uninspired interview with Betty herself (only one of a handful of interviews she had consented to prior to 2007). While the quality of writing was captivating, and the information gleaned from these liner notes were substantial—especially the revelation of her whereabouts in Pittsburgh—Wang focused on the narrative of “mystique:”

For the last 30 years or so, the way most people discovered anything about Betty Davis was the same as I did: by flipping through LP bins in a record store. Her album covers leapt out at you—a young, beautiful Black woman with a massive Afro, sporting either a space-age go-go outfit or a bizarre, pseudo-Egyptian get-up accessorized by a three silver javelins [...] Yet, despite the intense interest around her, surprisingly few details have filled in the blanks in her life and career. As you’ll find, these liner notes go a long way to try to provide stories and details never reported before yet ultimately, we don’t claim to fully resolve the mystery. (Wang 2007a).

Betty's reemergence into public consciousness via quality historical and archival reissue garnered much attention from music and pop culture journalists and, for the first time (besides Ballon's 2003 online review), her albums received an overwhelming amount of praise. It seemed (as if almost immediately after the reissues were released) that Betty was being canonized and inserted into mainstream music history. *The New Yorker* stated that "If you were to draw a diagram of funk music in the early 70s, Betty Davis would be dead center" (Greenman 2007). Not only were her albums being praised, but Betty was beginning to be identified as a pioneer and powerful influencer of contemporary popular artists:

Bulked up with fabulous photos and extensive liner notes, both CDs offer a wealth of visuals and information. Incalculably ahead of her time and influential, Betty Davis and her shotgun blasts of funk will most likely top the list of what's remembered 100 years from now when folks want to get funky, 1970s style. (Hanni 2010)

Her work anticipated genre-blending artists like Erykah Badu and Prince and the unapologetic sexuality of '80s Madonna and Janet Jackson, and places her alongside Patti LaBelle and P-Funk in terms of intergalactic, life-affirming, and funky celebrations of Blackness. (Lambert 2016)

By rights, she should be a legend [...] She laid the groundwork for Madonna and Grace Jones and remains the clear influence on such contemporary Divas as Peaches and Janelle Monae. Betty wrote and produced her own material, her erotic Funk predated Rick James and Prince, both huge admirers. (McCormick 2016)

In 2009, LITA reissued *Nasty Gal* (1975), Betty's third album that she recorded while signed with Island Records, and enlisted John Ballon to write the liner notes. After the success of these three reissues, new *unreleased* material became available through the international cultural work of record collectors. After reading John Ballon's 2003 review, a Dutch record collector named Joost Berger contacted Ballon in response to his "WANTED" graphic. In The Netherlands, Berger had been developing his own interest in Betty Davis after a friend of his in Paris played her music for him sometime in the early 1990s.

The MPC reissues didn't exist yet and I managed to get a copy of [the] *Nasty Gal* album soon after, which blew me away. It was not easy to find Betty Davis' albums here in Europe; they were rare and expensive. It fascinated me that no background information on Betty Davis seemed to exist. So, when the internet got bigger I

searched through newsgroups and started buying all kinds of music papers and other memorabilia. (Berger, personal communication, May 21, 2020)

Berger's impressive collection of Betty "memorabilia" spans multiple decades and countries of origin and consists of vinyl LPs, 45 RPMs, 8-track tapes, reel-to-reel tapes, acetate metal pressings, and print media. In 2003, Berger bought an acetate pressing at an Ebay auction of a never-before-heard unreleased album that Betty recorded in 1976 at Studio In The Country in Bogalusa, Louisiana for \$300.⁸⁸ The album, originally titled *Crashin' From Passion*, was funded by her then-label, Island Records, but was shelved after it was completed (see Chapter 4). Somehow, the licensing rights for this unreleased album reverted back to Michael Lang once Betty was dropped from Island Records in 1976. The details are unclear, but Sullivan explains that "these types of things happen all the time." Sullivan and Ballon acquired the acetate pressing from Berger, bought the rights from Michael Lang who, to his surprise, owned the rights, and shared the music with Betty. It was the first time she and her former band members had heard those recordings in thirty-three years.

This moment of "sound repatriation" is a particularly proud one for Sullivan and Ballon who experienced first-hand how delighted Betty was to gain access to her long-lost album. Nannyonga-Tamusuza and Weintraub define "sound repatriation" as the "process of returning cultural knowledge encoded in sound to the source of origin as well as presenting it in a format that is accessible to the communities to which it is returned" (2012: 207). By expanding the term "repatriation" to incorporate the recorded voice in existence within and outside the body, the crucial arrangements of ownership, dissemination, and access are privileged in this type of cultural work. Furthermore, focusing on the return of voice as ethnographic material highlights the intangibility of musical recordings as "traces of a communal past" (Lancefield 1998: 49-50), while simultaneously being made tangible in the present through the reissue practice.

Sullivan proudly remembered this moment of sound repatriation: "With *Is It Love Or Desire*, which never came out, the main question was, 'What's the album cover?' I remember sending [Betty] a bunch of photos that we found and then saying to her, 'What do you think?' She picked out the photo that's on the cover and then we ended up sending her the art for the approval"

⁸⁸ Berger also purchased the reel-to-reel rough mixes of Betty's second album *They Say I'm Different* (1974) for \$150 from "a guy in a warehouse owned by Atlantic Records scout Mario Madiou" (Berger, personal communication, May 21, 2020).

(Sullivan, interview by author, Jan 4, 2019). Not only did Betty experience a unique form of repatriation through the return of her lost studio album—newly titled *Is It Love Or Desire*—but, she also experienced economic repatriation in the money that was owed to her from Michael Lang, as well as a returning sense of artistic control and agency that was so fundamental to Betty’s identity.

The issue of presenting repatriated musical texts “in a format that is accessible to the communities to which it is returned” (Nannyonga-Tamusuza and Weintraub 2012: 207) brings up an interesting dynamic between media technologies and non-record collecting audiences. Betty’s reissues started out as a vinyl LP (and CD) format, catering to a specific audience of music fans that, for the most part, were already engaged in record collecting and buying. However, after the initial success of her reissues, Betty’s music and image began appearing online through video sharing sites, including YouTube, as well as music streaming services. Once Betty’s music evolved into other more mainstream media formats, a wider audience was cast. Specifically, young people of color and queer people who identified with Betty’s sound, look, and message. While the consumerist nature of the media complicates the traditional understanding of repatriation as preserving and returning cultural heritage to its origin, the labor of inserting an underground, bootlegged artist like Betty back into the public consciousness via legal and legitimate reissue suggests an interesting intersection between cultural memory and cultural production. Impey explains that: “Participatory methodologies generate vast amounts of information through discussion, negotiation and re-memorization. Memories of the past become an index of contemporary sense of place, and processes of emplacement become shaped by the way narratives of the past are recreated in the present” (2002: 22).

LITA would succeed once more with the acquisition of their latest Betty Davis release—this time in the form of never-before-released, and since mythologized, Columbia Records studio sessions from 1968 and 1969 between Betty and her then-husband Miles Davis (see Chapter 3). Rumors had flourished that these recordings existed (and was documented as early as 2003 in Ballon’s review: “There are even rumors about an unreleased album of songs that Betty wrote and recorded with Miles and his band”), but no one had heard them or had any real evidence of them. According to John Ballon, sometime between 2009 and 2012, an “Italian bootlegger connoisseur” read his 2003 review and “WANTED” post and, just as Joost Berger did in The Netherlands, contacted Ballon and sent him a single disc compilation of five or six tracks from the rumored

sessions (that he acquired by unknown means). Ballon played them for Matt Sullivan and put the label owner and the bootlegger in contact with each other. Afterwards, Sullivan tried for years to get Sony (who acquired Columbia) to go through their archives and find the master tapes. For years, Sony insisted that the master tapes did not exist and that they did not have them. However, now that LITA had the bootleg copy, they had proof that the session tapes actually existed. Somehow, around 2015, a new relationship was formed with someone at Sony who finally admitted to having the tapes in their archive. The result was *Betty Davis - The Columbia Years 1968-1969*, released by LITA in 2016. John Ballon, again, would be hired to write the liner notes. While Betty (and Miles Davis) fans were overjoyed with the archival release of this mythological album—which sold out of the “deluxe ‘Solid Gold Edition’ copies” in less than two days—Betty herself was not as pleased.

When I asked Betty why she was not excited for this album she simply said: “They’re just demos. They’re not finished” (Davis, personal communication, June 2 2016). In that moment, early on in our relationship, I understood Betty a little bit more. First and foremost, she was a producer. In her mind, and to her ears, it made no sense to release material that was essentially an un-mixed rehearsal session. The fact that the album documented some of the most famous players in the jazz, rock, and R&B worlds of the era, as well as the fact that her long gossiped about relationship with Miles Davis was caught on tape, was not of importance to her. Betty understood why everyone was obsessed with those things, but it was irrelevant to her. Being viewed as an artist is of paramount importance to her, and the production was more important than the gossip. The reality of the album for Betty was that it was incomplete, and therefore, unprofessional sounding. However, for the multitudes of fans out there, the album represented so much more than unearthed rumored recordings. It provided a glimpse into the life of Betty during that tumultuous year with Miles Davis leading up to his recording of *Bitches Brew* (recorded in 1969; released in 1970). The 2016 audience engendered those incomplete demo recordings with more meaning than they were ever meant to carry, exemplifying how reissue projects allow individuals to access the past and, in the process, reconstruct meaning and value in the present.

5.4.1 Recoding the Past

Twenty years ago, Betty was not part of the mainstream or academic conversations about important Black women artists and/or funk musicians of the 1970s (with exception, perhaps, of those who were fans from her underground following and the few Black women scholars who located her in music history). However, if you were to leave Betty out of this conversation today, it would be a massive gap in the history of both Black women artists, fusion, and funk. While this work is extremely case sensitive and requires a significant amount of ethical consideration, it is (for better or worse) a dynamic aspect of reissue culture.

There are three general approaches to reissue. These three approaches differentiate from each other in the ways in which they incorporate textuality into their meaning and value as cultural artifacts. The first approach, (1) “quality historical reissue,” is typically understood as providing a “special” or “deluxe” entrance into the world of the record through remastered audio, elaborate packaging, and extensive liner notes. These types of reissues are almost exclusively aimed at the high-end market of collectors and are priced accordingly (Bottomley 2016: 156). The second approach, (2) “budget repackaged reissues,” are cheaper and inexpensively produced. These typically appear as “best of” artist collections, “hits” compilation albums; and are often repressing’s of back-catalog titles with no enhancements to packaging or minimized packaging. The third approach, (3) “archival reissues,” are distinct because these represent rare or out-of-print recordings that are usually picked up by a new label and put into wider circulation (ibid.: 158). Betty’s music has experienced all three types of reissue approaches. The bootleg releases and compilations in the 1990s and early 2000s from Vinyl Experience (UK), MPC (UK), Vampi Beat (Spain), P-Vine Records (Japan), Razor & Tie (US), and Charly Records (US) represent the “budget repackaged reissue”; the first three reissues from LITA in 2007 and 2009 (*Betty Davis*, *They Say I’m Different*, and *Nasty Gal*) represent the “quality historical reissue”; and the last two releases from LITA in 2009 and 2016 (*Is It Love Or Desire* and *Betty Davis - The Columbia Years 1968-1969*) represent the “archival reissue” due to the fact that they were previously unreleased by former labels. *The Columbia Years* release exemplifies the archival reissue with its emphasis on paratextual elements including legal documents, archival photography, and interviews with those involved.

The criteria through which reissues get legitimized as historically valuable and/or authentic reside, in a large part, within the textuality of its cultural production. The textuality of a reissued record is composed of the actual audio recording itself, as well as paratextual elements (e.g. cover art, liner notes, photography, and enhanced packaging including digital downloads and accompanying websites) and extratextual elements (e.g. reviews, awards, and affiliations). Reissue labels like LITA and The Numero Group are actively disseminating a new presentation of musical genres, eras, and scenes that are formed around a multimedia ensemble of texts consisting of remastered audio, photographs, oral histories, liner notes, and archival documents. Textuality, in this sense, acts as a signifier of value within the cultural practice of reissue. This enhanced materiality is of core concern to the cultural work of reissue labels as it acts to imbue a historical musical text with a certain authenticity.

Reissue texts re-emerge and gain cultural significance at particular times and for particular reasons. Betty's transformation in cultural status occurred once her music underwent a dramatic shift in valuation in the mainstream. In order for this to happen, the interplay between content and sociohistorical context had to shift as well. As we have seen throughout history, the content of a cultural text does not alone determine its inclusion or exclusion. Rather, a range of factors, including historical circumstances (especially conceptions of race, gender, and sexuality), organizational structures (including the music industry and other entertainment industries) and activities of key players who hold positions of power (including cultural critics) shape the system of cultural valuation (Skinner 2006: 58).

Like most every conversation I have ever had with Betty, her humble character outshines any in-depth critique of her own musical contributions. There is, surely, a desire to not dredge up a complicated past that was largely consumed by Betty fighting against the music industry and the mainstream public for recognition. But there is also a deep sense that Betty was always aware of the process of encoding/decoding (as theorized by Stuart Hall) that all artists experience, and that she never expected everyone to understand her music how she may have intended it: "When you write, you don't really think about what other people like. You just write what you feel inside. If people like the music, or if they receive it a certain way, you really have nothing to do with that" (Davis, interview by author, July 19, 2019).

Betty's ability to distance herself from the dramatic shift in valuation that her music and legacy has experienced in recent years is both empowering and problematic regarding the realm

of reissue discourse. It speaks to the ability of reissue to recalibrate meaning, value, and cultural significance without the active participation of the artist. And while Betty gave consent for the reissue projects, and later for the 2017 documentary film (which I will discuss in Chapter 6), she still existed as an enigma to the public who prescribed additional new meanings that updated the historical text for modern consumption. As Oliver Wang explained, it is through this type of dynamic and complex interplay between text and audience that a reissued artist may find themselves at the center of rehistoricization:

I've had people push back over the years to argue Betty Davis wasn't a major player in the early '70s in terms of, if you look at charts and all that. An example of this just happened when I reviewed *The Columbia [Years]* reissue for NPR and one of the comments I saw online about it was, 'Why is this being given a spotlight? She wasn't that big of a deal compared to other artists.' And again, maybe at the time that was true, but I feel like the fact that someone is even complaining about it actually suggests the way in which that narrative has been rewritten now. (Wang, interview by author, Nov 1, 2019)

Expanding on Hall's (1973) theory of encoding/decoding, Bottomley (2006) introduces the new task of "recoding" into the cultural work of reissues. For instance, *The Columbia Years* album is widely acknowledged as being lackluster in terms of musical content by LITA affiliates and fans of Betty alike. However, it was deemed historically valuable by modern audiences and critics because (1) many of the session musicians on the album are now considered legends in their own right, (2) spoken conversation between Betty and Miles were available for the first time, offering a glimpse—albeit highly curated and censored—into their notorious relationship, and (3) Betty had achieved much more recognition as a cultural and musical pioneer since her last reissue in 2009. These three aspects, on top of the larger reputation of LITA as being a quality archival and historical reissue label, act as the "authenticating agents" (Skinner 2006: 69) that provide legitimacy to the text and transform its cultural status as significant. Modern audiences "recoded" *The Columbia Sessions* with meaning and value that is attached to musical legacy and mythology. Though, the reputations of musicians and reissue labels are not the only factors in this type of transformation in meaning and value, as Betty's case perfectly highlights.

Recoding a musical text is often greatly impacted by broader social and political conditions, especially transformations concerning cultural perceptions of race, gender, and sexuality. According to Bottomley, for a reissue text to succeed for an artist or album that is not

already in the canon: “[I]t needs to reflect the styles and tastes of the current music scene, and thus its meaning and value are transformed to conform to those views” (2016: 169). While this strict definition of success certainly does not define most reissue texts, Betty provides a clear example of how a reissued artist can reflect the current music culture and, in return, be interpreted and appreciated through modern day cultural critique, or as Angela Davis might put it, through “the prism of the present.”

5.4.2 Envisioning the Future

In LITA’s liner notes for the reissue of Betty’s third album, *Nasty Gal* (1975), John Ballon wrote that, “[Betty] was a musical extremist who paid the price for *demanding* too much from her audience” (Ballon 2009; italics mine). Indeed, like so many visionaries who paved a new way toward the future, Betty was met with shock and dismay, and suffered from a severe lack of security after she left the music industry. However, rather than understanding Betty’s musical career as suffering from “demanding too much for her audience,” I read her career as *envisioning audiences* that were not yet realized. Through this lens, we can see the wonderfully capacious and futuristic qualities of the term “sound projector,” which suggests that Betty not only propelled a transgressive sound and visual into the future, but also worked to establish more liberated, inclusive, and gracious audiences.

Many shifts and transformations in the social and political conditions of mainstream American society had to take place in order for Betty to be held up as the pioneer that she is now known as. In 1975, UK music journalist Robin Katz (one of the only seven women to write about Betty during the 1970s) predicted this: “With Betty Davis, although one shouldn’t predict her becoming a household name, she is certainly an extraordinary character worth keeping a watch on. She will emerge as a talking point once a few more barriers between social graces break down” (Katz 1975).

Indeed, it would not be until many “barriers between social graces” (or, the “point of tension” that Guthrie P. Ramsey [2003] refers to) began to be dismantled that Betty would successfully emerge in mainstream culture. The commercialization of the counter-culture scenes of punk and hip-hop that began in the late 1970s forged a path for new types of artists, sounds, and industry models that simply did not exist before. Just as Betty was retreating from the music

industry and public, musicians and acts like Nona Hendryx, Grace Jones, and Vanity 6 were completely overhauling notions about how Black women should sound, look, and act. Betty left the industry, and the public, just as “the performance of black womanhood and queer-of-color sensibility in the 1980s” permeated the cultural moment (Royster 2013b: 78).⁸⁹

By the early 1980s, one of Betty’s biggest fans, The Artist Formerly Known as Prince, was changing the face of popular music and bending notions of race, gender, and sexuality in an extremely avant-garde way.⁹⁰ There has been speculation that if Betty had started making music only five years after her debut album came out, she would have encountered much less criticism and hardships. Oliver Wang told *The Stranger* that “if [Betty] had waited five years, and come out during the punk era, she would have killed it” (Reighley 2007). In the documentary film that was made about Betty in 2017, music journalist (and rare male champion of Betty’s from the 1970s) Vernon Gibbs candidly explained that: “Betty basically sacrificed herself to pave the way” (Cox 2017). My time with Betty over these last four years has proven that statement to be a true, and I have seen first-hand the consequences of such a taxing labor that too often falls on the shoulders of Black women’s pioneering cultural work.

While still an imperfect format, the LITA reissues created a new material music culture that set in motion the important dialectic between past and present with which Betty’s career has now come to be associated. Furthermore, the reissues created new material culture through active

⁸⁹ Emily Lordi observes that, beginning in the early 1970s, there was an outflow of feminist performance from Black women, including a notable queer presence. This was especially true in the realm of literature, represented in writers including Audre Lorde, Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker who “privileged the exploration of intraracial dynamics over the interracial contests often depicted by their male predecessors” (2020: 33-34). By emphasizing this rise in representation of Black (queer) women, Lordi challenges the dominant narrative, discourse, and logic of soul and its supposed decline: “It is ironic, if not surprising, that male critics should date soul music’s decline to precisely the moment of heightened cultural representation of black (queer) women” (ibid.: 34). While Lordi highlights these connections to offer an intervention on the concept of post-soul (coined by Nelson George in 1992), I bring up these developments in Black feminist thought and fiction more generally to reference the shift that was beginning to happen in public surrounding sexuality, identity, and pleasure, which allowed for new notions about Black women to take root in the music industry. Maureen Mahon also notes that “Betty emerged alongside several signal black feminist events [...]” (2011: 147).

⁹⁰ There is an urban legend that when Prince set out to form his first band he cited Betty Davis as his main immediate influence, explaining to his potential bandmates that they had to be down with Betty’s music in order to be down with his. While no official oral history exists of this story, Betty and others have confirmed that Prince attempted to contact Betty several times throughout the recent decades. In fact, in 2012, Prince got closer to contacting Betty than ever before while he was working on a documentary film project about bassist Larry Graham. Prince’s manager, Gene Anderson, emailed John Ballon a set of interview questions that Prince wrote for Betty, hoping she would participate in the documentary film. One of Prince’s questions to Betty was: “During the early ‘80s, was she aware of her influence on the Minneapolis Sound” (“Prince Q’s for Betty” 2012). The documentary on Graham was never completed and Prince died in 2016.

communication and collaboration with Betty. Thus, the LITA reissues were this first mediated collaboration that highlighted the important relationship between media texts, popular memory, and political hegemony that Betty's twenty-first reemergence continues to navigate.

6.0 “Dedicated to the Press”: Representing Betty Davis

the industry was not ready
& still has not recovered from the powerful likes of you.

Betty Davis

Where are all your image awards
Your rebellion statues in your honor

Jessica Care Moore, “They Say She’s Different”

The Betty Davis reissues were an overwhelming success for both *Light In The Attic* (LITA) and Betty herself, who not only benefited financially from the arrangement but also felt encouraged to include her voice in more conversations about her life and music via interviews—something she had not done for over two decades. No longer a collection of fragmented texts and images on the internet, Betty’s life and musical discography were now documented, preserved, and accessible to everyone. Through paratextual elements including interviews, oral history, photography, and archival materials, LITA worked to present Betty in a distinct way that foregrounded her own experiences and memories and made them a central part of the alternative historical record they are curating as a reissue record label.

In the years that followed, many others would express an interest in representing Betty and telling her story in some kind of way. Greg Errico recalled that he was bombarded with inquiries by people who wanted to collaborate with her:

I was just amazed by the amount of people who would get ahold of me over time. I would get calls from Australia, South Africa, Europe, all over the world, every couple of years, from different directors, filmmakers, writers, wanting to do a story on Betty. I just kept being amazed, there was never a hit record, never a big tour, so where is this being generated from? It would amaze me. (Errico, interview by author, Feb 4, 2019)

Interest in Betty was being generated across all creative fields, including music, literature, visual art, photography, and film. While some artists, like Renée Stout and Jessica Care Moore, had already paid tribute to Betty in the years before her reissues (see Chapter 7), others used their respective mediums to depict and interpret her work in subsequent years. Dr. Margaret Rose

Vendryes included Betty in her painting series titled the “African Diva Project” (Figure 37) and Brooklyn-based performer Nucommé produced a multimedia musical tribute to Betty (Figure 38). Harold Offeh used Betty’s album *They Say I’m Different* (1974) for his performance project titled *Covers*, where he re-enacts album covers by Black singers from the 1970s and 80s (Figure 39) and Numa Perrier recreated Betty’s album covers with model N’dambi using 8mm film for her photography exhibit titled *AUDACIOUS* (Figure 40). Most recently, London-based singer Lydia Lutudi dedicated her music career to Betty Davis and is preparing a tribute show (Figure 41).



Figure 37. Dr. Margaret Rose Vendryes, *Kwele Betty – African Diva*, 2010. Oil and cold wax on canvas and paper, 30 x 30 inches. Reproduced by permission of the artist.



Figure 38. Nucomme (right) performing in her multimedia musical tribute to Betty Davis, Brooklyn Museum, New York, NY, 2012. Reproduced by permission of the artist.



Figure 39. Harold Offeh re-enacts Betty Davis' album cover for his performance project entitled Covers. Reproduced by permission of the artist.

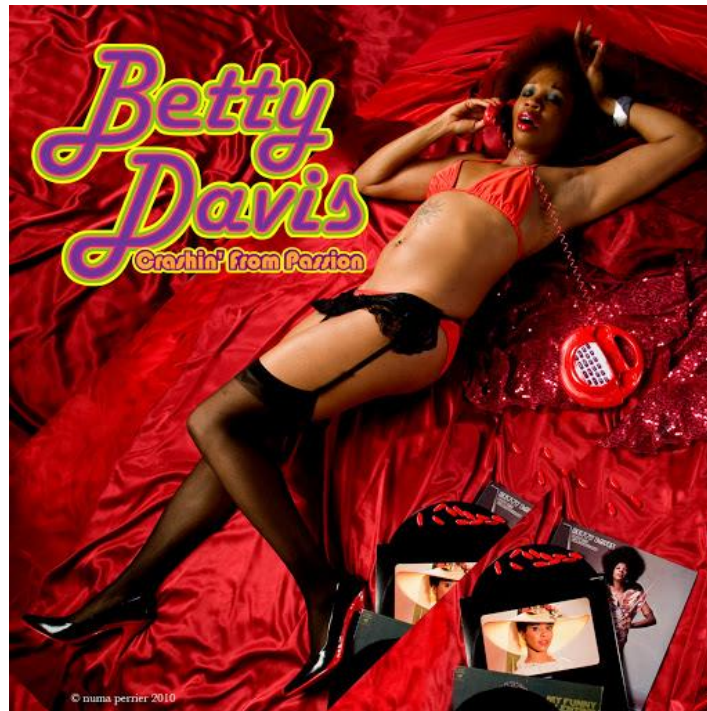


Figure 40. Photographer Numa Perrier and model N'dambi recreate Betty Davis' image for photography exhibit entitled AUDACIOUS. Reproduced by permission of the artist.



Figure 41. UK singer Lydia Lutudi emulates Betty Davis as she prepares for her tribute show. Photographer: MaryAnn Ezech. Reproduced with permission from the artist.

Unquestionably the most ambitious project that sought to collaborate with Betty and present her story to the public was the independent documentary film, *Betty – They Say I'm Different* (Cox 2017) (Figure 42).

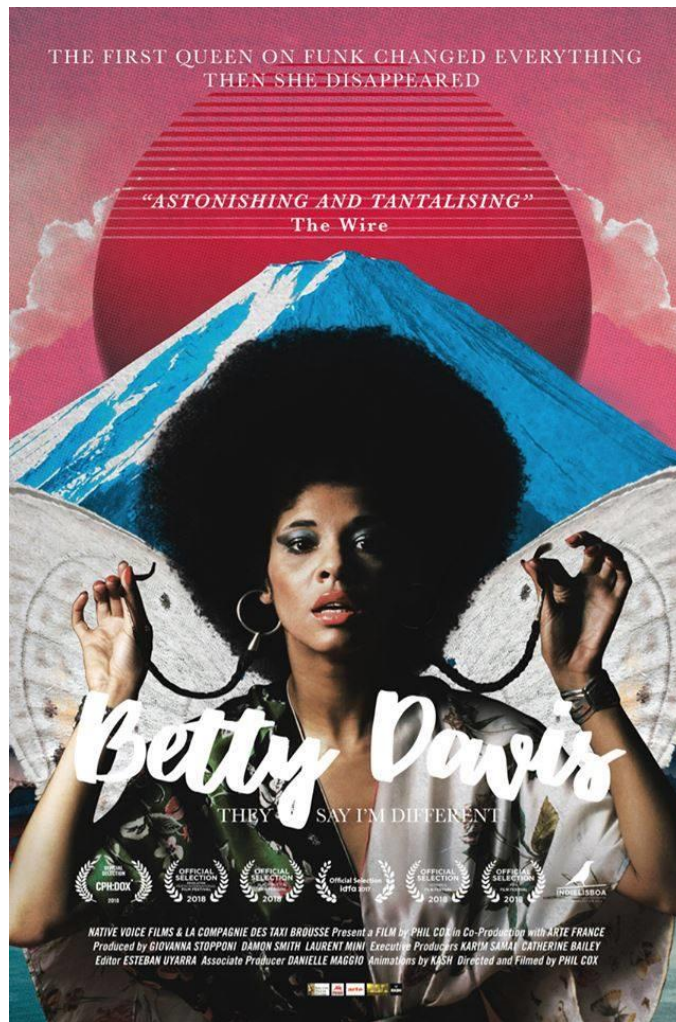


Figure 42. Official poster for the documentary film entitled *Betty - They Say I'm Different* (Cox 2017).

Initially conceptualized by two filmmakers, Damon Smith (USA) and Phil Cox (UK), *Betty – They Say I'm Different* premiered in the Netherlands at the 2017 International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA), the world's largest documentary film festival. It was this film, and

its filmmakers, that facilitated my initial introduction to Betty on a personal level and acted as the catalyst for my applied work with Betty in the public sector.

This chapter tells the story of the film's process from conception to execution by drawing upon the oral history of its filmmakers and my own experiences as the film's Associate Producer (a role I took on late in production process). While I spend some time analyzing the documentary's approach and tactics, I am particularly interested in discussing the collaborative, critical network of Betty fans that grew out of the multi-media events that accompanied the film's screenings. Rather than the film itself being the source for new critical, collaborative scholarship and performance-based practice, I argue that the film acted as a catalyst for gathering and networking in Betty's name. This chapter is largely structured around my ethnographic research conducted with the filmmakers as well as through my participation in various film premiers, reunion concerts, panel discussions, and public lectures.

6.1 Making *Betty - They Say I'm Different*

The documentary film project officially began when Native Voice Films, a “collective of independent filmmakers based out of London UK & Palermo Italy” (“About Native Voice”), reached an agreement to make a film with Betty Davis in 2012. However, the story of how and *why* this film was made begins many years before that. I sat down with the film's producer, Damon Smith, in his apartment in Queens, New York to learn more about the origin of this film and his relationship with his good friend, Betty. I was not shocked to learn that, like so many Betty stories, it began at a record store.

In 1989, Smith was a college student in Boston who also played in bands and DJ'd for his college radio station. Originally from Texas, Smith grew up in the DIY punk scene and eventually became interested in a wide range of musical genres, largely from collecting vinyl:

I started collecting vinyl, and there's a record store in Boston called In Your Ear Records. I went in there almost every weekend; not always with money in my pocket, but at the end of every month when I got paid I would go in and I would spend all my disposable income on records. (Smith, interview by author, Sept 14, 2019)

It was this record store that housed a rare original copy of Betty Davis' second studio album, *They Say I'm Different* (1974). However, Smith did not discover it while perusing the bins of vinyl LPs—he heard her first:

I went in and the guy who ran the record store, Conrad—who was the epitome of the record store snob—was behind the counter. When he dropped the needle on *They Say I'm Different* and the first cut started, I literally froze in my tracks and said, 'What the fuck is this? Who is this?' I felt struck. And I went up to the counter and I said, 'What album are you playing, Conrad?' And he just gestured to the record shelf behind the counter. (Smith, interview by author, Sept 14, 2019)

At this point in our conversation, Smith got up from the couch, walked over to his record collection, carefully pulled out Betty's original 1974 album and handed it to me. As Smith gently handed me the record, with deep reverence for the object, he continued:

I said, "I got to have this. How much?" He's like, 'It's not for sale.' And I said, 'Okay, why not?' And he said, 'Cause I'm listening to it.' So I spent my time in the store, the record ends and I could see him taking it off the turntables. So I went back up to the counter and said, 'Conrad, I really want to buy that album. Will you please sell it to me?' And he goes, 'for \$30,' which was exactly how much money I had in my pocket [...] At the time It was unusual to see a record priced above \$7; that was expensive [...] I didn't think about it twice. I put \$30 on the counter. And he reluctantly handed me this amazing album. (Smith, interview by author, Sept 14, 2019)

Smith took his newly purchased record home and had his first intimate Betty listening session. Playing the record on his own stereo personalized and unpacked that instinctive feeling he got from hearing the music in the record store: "The music itself was so hard and tight and aggressive [...] I grew up on punk rock [...] And this brought me back to that feeling of exhilaration. It was the same feeling, although in a different register, that I had the first time I listened to *Minor Threat*" (Smith, personal communication, Sept 14, 2019).⁹¹

As I explored the original record for the first time, I surveyed the content inside, which included a centerfold glossy poster of the album cover tucked inside the sleeve, along with the

⁹¹ *Minor Threat* is widely considered to be a "seminal hardcore band" (Haenfler 2006: 7) and one of the most influential acts in the history of U.S. punk rock. Band members Ian MacKaye and Jeff Nelson, who previously played together in *Teen Idles*, also co-founded the Washington, D.C. based *Dischord Records*, which is one of the most successful and longest running independent record labels in the U.S.

standard album credits printed on the inside and back of the cover. After experiencing the exhilaration of Betty's music, Smith realized he had no information about this captivating musician: "I didn't know anything about her life or who she was. The only clues, as you know, are reading what's inside [the record]" (Smith, interview by author, Sept 14, 2019). Smith used the resources he had available to him in 1989 to try and learn more about Betty Davis. After gently taking the record from me and placing it back in his collection, he then walked over to his bookshelf, pulled out an aged, thick paperback book off the shelf and handed it to me:

At that moment in time before the internet, the most authoritative source for music was the Trouser Press Record Guide [...] That was pretty much the authoritative source for non-mainstream music [...] And there's nothing on Betty [...] So, every source that I consulted trying to learn something about her led nowhere. I had no information. I just had this album.⁹² (Smith, interview by author, Sept 14, 2019)

After exhausting all available resources, Smith went back to Conrad, the "record store snob," and found out that Betty recorded other albums. He spent the next six years looking for them: "Every time I went to a record store, the first place I went was 'D' in the funk, R&B, and soul section, hoping to find something" (Smith, interview with author, Sept 14, 2019). Smith found Betty's third album, *Nasty Gal* (1975), two years after his initial transaction with Conrad, and then found her debut album, *Betty Davis* (1973), three years after that when he moved to Pittsburgh for graduate school. By 1995, Smith had acquired all three original albums that Betty released in the 1970s when another resource became available to him:

In 1995 I accessed the web for the first time at home. The internet was dial up modem; it could not have been slower. And what do you think the very first thing I searched for was? Betty Davis. And I came across a site that Joost Berger had put up. And it had a couple of her modeling photos from *Jet* magazine—it had threadbare information about her—but it was like finding the Rosetta Stone for me. I found out she was from Pittsburgh; she'd been married for a year to Miles Davis; she'd been a model for Wilhelmina, she hadn't been heard from since she made these albums. That was all new information to me. I hungrily took all that in and

⁹² *Trouser Press* was a New York-based rock music magazine from 1974 to 1984. In 1983, the editors of the magazine authored the first of a series of record guides. More than a decade after the magazine ended its ten-year run, *Trouser Press* first went online in 1997. In 2002, the contents of five *Trouser Press Record Guides* were consolidated online. A 2020 relaunch has turned its consolidated materials into a digital music publication optimized for various devices ("Trouser Press").

found nothing else—absolutely nothing. Joost was the only person that put that information up on the web.⁹³ (Smith, interview by author, Sept 14, 2019)

After moving to Boston in 1999 to become a journalist for the *Boston Phoenix*, Smith's first pitch to his editor was a story about Betty Davis, which he detailed in a letter that explained why he wanted to write the piece and continue his research on her: "He loved it. But, at that time, papers were just writing about product that was coming onto the market. So, he said, 'As soon as somebody reissues some of her work you can write about her'" (Smith, interview with author, Sept 14, 2019). Several years later, and unbeknownst to Smith, John Ballon and Matt Sullivan (in collaboration with Joost Berger, in The Netherlands) were beginning to connect with Betty, gather materials, and build a professional relationship with her. In 2007, her first two records were reissued, and John Ballon wrote the first extensive article about Betty's life and music in *Wax Poetics*.⁹⁴ Smith stumbled across the magazine cover at a local bookstore, which featured Betty's image next to Ballon's article, titled "Liberated Funk" (Figure 43):

⁹³ The website that Damon is referring to no longer exists and is barely remembered by Joost Berger himself: "The website must have been a short term stint. I was young and impulsive, had a lack of computer knowledge and not enough expertise on Betty Davis back then" (Berger, personal communication, May 21, 2019).

⁹⁴ First issued in 2001, *Wax Poetics* is a quarterly American music magazine dedicated to vintage and contemporary jazz, funk, soul, Latin, hip-hop, reggae, blues, and R&B.

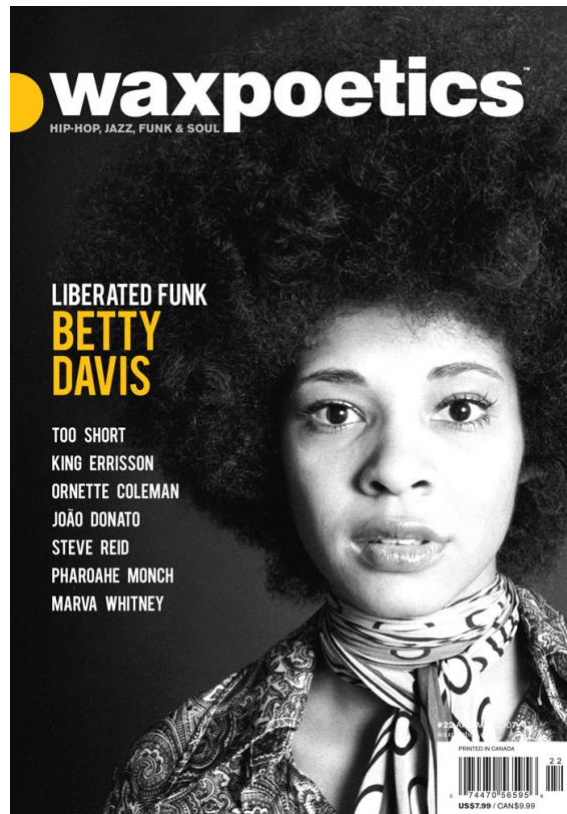


Figure 43. Cover of Wax Poetics magazine featuring Betty Davis and John Ballon's article "Liberated Funk," April/March issue, 2007.

I got the sensation again and I remembered everything I just described—the feeling that I had—and I thought I should do something with her; about her. I bought the article. I took notes. I took note of John's name, I found his email online. And I just had a notepad on my computer, and I thought at some point I need to get into this. (Smith, interview by author, Sept 14, 2019)

That point came when Smith met a British filmmaker named Phil Cox in 2012. Cox had just finished filming and directing his documentary, *The Bengali Detective* (2011), which was supported by the streaming company for whom Smith worked at the time. Smith met Cox briefly at the American Museum of Natural History while viewing the film. Smith then commissioned Cox to make a short film for a series he was working on as the supervising producer. “Every once in a while he’d call me [...] He said, ‘aw man, I really want to do a music documentary.’ And I said, ‘I have the story’” (Smith, interview with author, Sept 14, 2019).

Cox, who had never heard of Betty Davis, was in Japan working on his next documentary, *Love Hotel* (2014), when Smith began to email him his initial notes about Betty Davis: “He wrote

back and said, ‘Wow, this looks great. Do you want to work on it together?’” (Smith, interview with author, Sept 14, 2019). Smith jumped at the opportunity to manifest his passion project into a reality and agreed to work with Cox. Betty’s complex relationship with the musical milieu in which she existed in, her connection to canonized male figures, and her perceived disappearance from the public made her an ideal subject for Cox who set out to make a documentary about music. Unlike all the other key players in Betty’s story, Cox had not been admiring Betty for years, nor was he a self-proclaimed record collector or music lover. His motivation to do a music documentary was broad based, and when Smith suggested it be on Betty, Cox was drawn to what he identified as her authenticity as an artist: “What drew me to Betty was, her voice is not a beautiful voice, but there’s something so authentic and honest [...] Betty has something where you really feel the person there, and you don’t have to like the music, but you can’t argue against that authenticity” (Cox, personal communication, Nov 18, 2017).

Armed with Ballon’s *Wax Poetics* article, the LITA reissues, and a film partner, Damon Smith began the in-depth research process: “The first phone call I made was to Greg Errico. We chatted for a while and he said, ‘You should really talk to John Ballon. He’s the guy who’s in touch with Betty.’ So my next phone call was for John [...] John spent weeks filtering me” (Smith, interview with author, Sept 14, 2019). By this point, in 2012-13, John Ballon and Betty had been talking on the phone for eight years, building both a professional relationship and a strong friendship. Ballon was responsible for finding Betty’s coveted contact information and getting Betty her long overdue royalties. In many ways, Ballon was the gatekeeper to access Betty and he was protective of her privacy.

Ballon told Smith that many people have approached Betty over the years, and she has “refused them all.” For instance, right before Ballon and Smith began communicating, Ballon was in contact with Black filmmaker Nichole Jefferson who wanted to write a screenplay about Betty.⁹⁵ Betty agreed to consider the proposal and Jefferson even met with Betty’s lawyer. However, Jefferson did not honor Betty’s wishes in terms of privacy and began to reach out to people in Betty’s life before receiving Betty’s permission. Once this happened, Betty refused to sign any paperwork and Jefferson’s project promptly ended.

⁹⁵ Jefferson is a successful and prominent writer who most recently wrote the Netflix Mini-Series *Self Made: Inspired by the life of Madam C.J. Walker* (2020).

Being a fellow music lover and record collector, Ballon came to trust Smith on the strength of his longtime admiration for Betty: “John was extremely skeptical, and I wasn’t pushing it. I just kept calling him and saying, ‘I really want to honor her.’ And I told him the story about how I discovered Betty, and eventually he talked to Betty about it” (Smith, interview with author, Sept 14, 2019). Then one day, without notice, Smith received a call from Ballon saying he had Betty on the line. The three engaged in their first conference call:

My heart was racing. I was freaking out. I didn't know what I was going to say. I was totally unprepared, so I was as transparent as I possibly could be, and I told her the story about the record store [...] That was my gateway in. It just developed from there. Every couple of weeks John would connect us and the three of us would be on the phone. (Smith, interview by author, Sept 14, 2019)

These three-way calls continued for several months and, eventually, Betty started to engage more with Smith and the conversations became more balanced. Finally, Smith asked if Betty would like to pursue a documentary film project with himself and his collaborator, Phil Cox, who was still in Japan working on another film. Betty’s response: “I’ll think about it.” Two weeks later, Ballon called Smith to share two pieces of good news: Betty had agreed to the film project and she also granted permission for Smith to call her directly: “That was the beginning of our journey. She felt comfortable enough being directly contacted by me rather than having the intermediary” (Smith, interview with author, Sept 14, 2019).

The film project was a unique opportunity to present Betty’s story in a way that had not been done before, and it manifested only through Betty’s collaboration and consent. Betty’s deep commitment to privacy and trust was made abundantly clear to Damon Smith via John Ballon’s mediation, and it confirmed what Smith had surmised over the last twenty-five years of independent research: Betty was, in fact, living a life of deep reclusion. This issue was so paramount that Smith ended his first official correspondence with Cox about the film project by saying: “Winning her trust is key to everything” (Smith 2012).

Smith was firmly committed to “winning her trust” and wanted to delve into the complexities of Betty’s life and music. He embarked on a professional working relationship with Betty that turned into a dynamic friendship through regular phone calls; just as Ballon did beginning in 2003:

The more that we spoke on the phone, and the closer that I got to her, the more I started to understand her, the more interesting she became, and the more I realized the potential that we had for a film was in her. She's the film, we don't need to invent anything. This person is here, she's alive. She's sitting in front of us. We just need to find a way to work with her on her terms. (Smith, interview by author, Sept 14, 2019)

Those “terms,” set by Betty, put considerable limitations on the film from the very beginning. One such provision was that Betty refused to be filmed on camera. When I asked Betty why, she said, “I want to leave [my fans] with what they had,” (Davis, personal communication, May 22, 2018). Another restriction was that Betty moved at her own pace and expected those working with her to honor and respect it. This was not an issue for Smith, who had been actively researching Betty since 1989 and was not about to rush the artist he so fiercely admired. During a post-screening audience discussion at the film’s international premier in 2017, Cox explained the film’s timeline to the audience:

The film took five years, the longest film I’ve worked on. Betty is a woman who doesn’t compromise. She does things her own way, which is part of the reason her story is like it is. Also, things are done at Betty’s time, or they’re not done at all. So, I had to learn how to respect that [...] We just planted the seed of possible collaboration, so that took two years to think about the seed and then she invited us over. (Cox, personal communication, Nov 23, 2017)

It was, in fact, Smith who “planted the seed” through his extensive groundwork, patient communication, and deep respect for Betty. After two years of communicating with Smith on the phone, Betty agreed to give a limited number of extended interviews and in February 2013, she consulted with her lawyer and signed a life rights agreement with Native Voice Films, thus giving the independent film collective the exclusive rights to her story. Once the life rights agreement was set in place, Cox (who had just wrapped his latest film in Japan) joined Smith in Pittsburgh and the two men met Betty in person for the first time in early 2014.

Smith and Cox began to conduct Betty’s contractually obligated extended interviews in the comfort of her home. Without Betty appearing in the film directly, and without any available video footage of her performing, Native Voice Films recognized that they needed more content and Smith had a vision for how to present Betty on her own terms:

Now, anytime you have a limitation, it opens up possibilities. So, we started thinking about what we can do if we have just these extended interviews, which we hope will be revealing. Well, we can use Betty's voice. Because we don't have any video. We're desperately looking for video. And that search is happening [...] So the idea that I presented to Phil was what if we went through every single piece of writing on Betty that we have, including all the interview material and extract everything verbatim that she ever said, and we write a script based exactly on Betty's words. So, we're not inventing anything she didn't say. (Smith, interview by author Sept 14, 2019)

Between 2014 and 2015, with Betty's blessing, Smith contacted individuals close to her and began piecing together a timeline of Betty's life and career. In fact, Smith conducted every interview during the making of the film except for those with former Funk House bandmates in North Carolina. Native Voice Films had secured Betty's collaboration—legally and personally—however, Smith and Cox struggled to collaborate together in response to the limitations Betty put into place. One such obstacle was Betty's reticence to discuss her artistic process: "It was difficult to engage closely about any aspect of the artistic process or being conscious about the process" (Smith, interview with author, Sept 14, 2019). Another pressing issue at the time was securing enough money for the music licensing fees, as was tracking down the rumored 35 mm film footage of Betty Davis performing at the Riviera '76 Jazz Festival in Le Cartellet, France.

Giovanna Stopponi, one of the film's producers, spent almost three years hunting down the video footage: "We spent ages tracking people down, it was all very shadowy [...] Eventually we managed to track it down with the help of Michael Lang, the producer behind Woodstock and Betty's first record label: a reel of film located in a cupboard" (Cox, interview with author, May 9, 2019). It was and still is unclear how Michael Lang came into ownership of the footage, but the discovery prompted Native Voice Films to create an Indiegogo campaign with a flexible goal of \$65,000 that would be used to pay music and film licensing fees, unearth additional archival materials, and cover travel expenses for the crew to interview Betty's friends and contemporaries. It was at this point, in 2015, that I became aware of the project.

6.2 Joining the Team of *Betty* – *They Say I’m Different*

As Damon Smith and many others have explained, there was no popular or collective memory of Betty in the mainstream or alternative media when they discovered her music. Beyond the early web content posted from individuals like Joost Berger and John Ballon, there was little *public* knowledge or ephemera of Betty until the late 1990s when people started piecing it together. George Lipsitz argues that hidden histories excluded from dominant narratives constitute “counter-memories” that “force revision of existing histories” (1990: 213). Betty Davis’ unique story as an avant-garde Black musician epitomizes a socially significant counter-memory of America’s music industry in the 1970s. Getting the opportunity to help construct this counter-memory and revise existing music history, is what initially motivated me to research, write, and teach about Betty when the opportunity presented itself.⁹⁶

After meeting Betty in the Spring of 2016 (see Chapter 1), Cox began to recognize my important role in Betty’s life and decided to credit me as Associate Producer on the documentary shortly before its international premier—a decision with which Betty was quite pleased. While I had nothing to do with the creation of the film or its technical aspects—my introduction to Cox, Smith, and Betty was when the final footage was already being shot and edited—I was an important local individual who had access to Betty, as well as a strong working knowledge of her music and career, and connections with a network of musicians, DJs, artists, and activists to whom Cox wanted access. However, I was unaware that while I was building my friendship with Betty, Smith and Cox’s creative differences were mounting.

While the two had finally acquired the coveted footage of Betty’s only known filmed performance, and had traveled together interviewing celebrities and people from Betty’s life, Cox was becoming increasingly frustrated with Betty’s demeanor, which he discussed somewhat candidly in an interview following the film’s release:

Betty didn’t want herself to be filmed. So after some years I realized that I needed to impose a method of telling her story [...] She was someone who had [...] [a] fierce pioneering spirit in the ‘70s of doing what she wanted to do, when she wanted. The fact that she was so single-minded in the ‘70s was, in a sense, the reason for her downfall. That single-mindedness is still there today. (Fuchs 2018)

⁹⁶ I first lectured on Betty Davis in 2014 as a Teaching Assistant for Dr. Shalini Ayyagari’s Introduction to World Music course at The University of Pittsburgh.

Betty's limitations may have been frustrating for Cox as a filmmaker, but publicly ascribing her career roadblocks to her "single-mindedness" is both problematic and reductive; it ignores the well-documented racism and sexism that structured the music industry of the 1970s as well as the broader sociocultural milieu in which Betty's sexuality and agency were always construed as threatening. Cox's stated directorial decision (to "impose a method of telling her story") was undoubtedly a factor in creating friction within the production partnership, as it strayed from the way that Smith was conceptualizing the project: "I said, 'I think that we need to rewire our understanding of what kind of film we're making because we have this amazing resource here, let's find a way to presence her in creative ways and make a documentary and not try to make a hybrid film,' even as much as I personally am interested in that kind of form" (Smith, interview by author, Sept 14, 2019). Smith's plea to Cox—to appreciate Betty as an "amazing resource"—was met with resistance.

Without a clear plan on how to finish the film, and with concerns being raised by his partner, Cox abruptly traveled to Sudan for five months to start another project (*Captured in Sudan*, 2017), and Smith made the difficult decision to no longer be actively involved in the film. Smith and Betty's relationship had grown into a deep and trusting friendship and Smith continued to stay close with Betty while Cox rushed to finish the documentary after he returned from Sudan. Betty's lawyer previously made sure Smith was specifically named in the life rights agreement that Betty signed with Native Voice Films, ensuring that Smith and Cox have 50/50 split: "My rights are simply, if somebody wants to tell Betty's story via film, television, theater, music, write a book, whatever, I have every bit of say in whether or not that moves forward just as much as Phil has" (Smith, interview by author, Sept 14, 2019).

Betty and I rarely spoke about the film leading up to its premier, as she was much more interested in sharing her collection of Japanese ambient CDs (many of which were gifted to her by Smith) and tapping me for new music. Unlike the LITA reissues, Betty was not brought in on the editing or artistic design process with the film and had not been shown any rough cuts (nor had I, since I was not part of the production process). Then, in early Fall of 2017, Cox invited me to join the production team in Amsterdam where the film was slated for its world premiere at IDFA. Being a full time graduate student and Teaching Assistant, I had to weigh the financial feasibility of such a trip despite being excited about the invitation. But when Betty expressed her desire for me to go,

so that I could represent her there and also take pictures and videos to bring back home for her, I decided to attend the premier. Throughout that week of the premier, which included multiple screenings in different venues, I actively began participating in post-screening audience discussions and talkbacks alongside Cox. I was the only American on the production team following Damon Smith's departure as an active participant (although his name still appears as Producer in the credits).

The fifty-seven minute film—which I viewed at home for the first time right before traveling to Amsterdam—premiered at IDFA in November 2017 to crowded international audiences. The first screening on November 18, 2017, held at the massive Pathé de Munt multiplex theater, was supplemented by a Dutch DJ and record collector, Koert Sauer, who set up his turntables right outside the door of the theater and played Betty's records (Figure 44).



Figure 44. Koert Sauer playing Betty Davis records before the international premier of Betty - They Say I'm Different (Cox 2017), International Documentary Film Association Festival, Amsterdam, Netherlands, November 18, 2017.

Sauer set the musical tone for the screening and his presence there was also a fitting reminder of the substantial connection that record collectors and DJs have to Betty as an underground musical

icon. It was also at this premier that I met Joost Berger (Betty's biggest collector) in person, who was in attendance as an audience member. Just before we entered the theatre, Cox casually informed me that I should go up with him to participate in the audience discussion after the film, and I gladly obliged in the role of public intellectual and confidante of Betty. As Betty's records played in the theatre lobby, we made our way into the theatre where I proceeded to watch the film for the first time with an audience present. After the final credits rolled at the end of the film, Cox and I made our way down to the front of the theater where the moderator handed us microphones and started off the discussion by asking Phil a crucial question about the film that I had also been pondering since first seeing it: "*Why this style?*"

6.3 Analysis of *Betty – They Say I'm Different*

Through Damon Smith's groundwork and extensive knowledge of music, Phil Cox gained exclusive access to tell the story of an iconic artist who previously made the choice to evade public attention and simply live a life of privacy, routine, and serenity, as a senior citizen. Betty's album reissues opened the door for people to better understand the complexity of her story, and the film would attempt to expand on that narrative by also emphasizing her childhood and life beyond her music career. However, with Smith no longer actively involved as of 2016, the direction of the film seemed to lack the same kind of intentionality that, for example, guided LITA's album reissues, which were explicitly designed to preserve, contextualize, and make accessible her music via archival materials and oral history. "Really I had no vision at the beginning, I just knew this woman had a profound personal journey and story, but I didn't know how it would be visually. The problem was, after some years, I was still in the same position. I had no idea how to make the film" (Cox, personal communication, May 9, 2019).

By 2016, Native Voice Films had acquired archival photography, hours of extensive interviews with Betty (mostly audio, along with some video footage where she agreed to have her hands and silhouette filmed), and video interviews conducted with former colleagues, friends, and family, as well as current musicians, journalists, and scholars who could speak to her music and life. Moreover, they had successfully acquired the only known video footage of Betty performing. However, Cox struggled to piece it all together in a way that he felt would "make people care about

Betty,” as he once put it to me. In order to finish the documentary, he enlisted the help of the film’s Editor, Esteban Uyarra—an award-winning documentary filmmaker and editor who previously worked with him on *Love Hotel* (2014)—and the two sculpted what would become the finished product.

Engaging in a comprehensive critique of the film and the documentary format is outside the scope of this project, but I do want to briefly discuss the film’s voice and style in order to comb out the issues of musicianship that arise (or do not arise) throughout the film’s narrative. The final cut of the documentary incorporated a number of stylistic tactics and poetic motifs that yielded a bricolage of interviews, archival and stock footage, voiceover narration from scripted writing, animation, and heavy symbolism—especially in the form of a crow. The result is what others have described as both “an impressionistic meditation” (Lordi 2018) and a “haunting mood study” (Brooks 2018) that is “trippy and melancholic.” (Metz 2018). When the Dutch moderator asked Cox, “*Why this style?*,” at the world premiere at IDFA, Cox explained that it was largely due to Betty’s limitations as a research subject: “Betty was really reticent to let us come close [...] So, Esteban and I would talk, but we had to respond—in the end—to a very mixed style” (Cox, personal communication, Nov 18, 2017). Editor, Esteban Uyarra, confirmed the difficulties in making the film: “It took five years to make and it was the hardest thing I’ve ever worked on in my life [...] The process was very abstract [...] Remembering little details that she would say that made no sense [...] There was so much exploration, we tried everything, reconstruction, animation, photos, the heavy sound cues” (Uyarra, personal communication, Nov 18, 2017).

During my time alongside Cox at post-screening events in Amsterdam and at the U.S. premier shortly after, I noticed how he often fell back on Betty’s unwavering commitment to artistic agency and personal control as a reason for the film’s abstract nature, as well as its unanswered questions and otherwise cryptic symbols. I found this to be an odd framing device on his part given that the film does not once mention Betty’s commitment to artistic agency and personal control, nor her rare standing as a Black woman producer in the music industry of the 1970s. In her essay on the ways in which Zora Neale Hurston’s novel *Mules and Men* infuses West African dance, African American literary and performance scholar Onda Krouse-Dismukes explained, “the power of narratives as an instrument of agency requires an understanding of past events and their significance upon the present. The power of narratives, then, lies in their ability to bring the past into the present” (2008: 195). Rather than being part of the film’s narrative,

Betty's agency to withhold her knowledge, memories, and experiences was being used, after the fact, as an excuse for the film's shortcomings. Rejecting Betty's truth as a producer and artistic agent, Cox attempted to neatly package Betty for the film industry just as record labels and critics attempted to package her for the 1970s music industry, displaying a deep lack of understanding about Betty's past.

Like most documentaries about an individual subject, *Betty – They Say I'm Different* is an impression of Betty's life from the perspective of the director, who has long admitted it was Betty's "authenticity" that intrigued him enough to start the project proposed by Damon Smith. Without any substantial background or expressed interest in the history of American popular music, Cox relied heavily on Betty to invite him into her story in order to reveal information and details that she had not previously disclosed. Rather than focusing the bulk of his attention on Betty's music and her role as a Black woman producer, the intervening focus of the film was on what Cox identified as salient: the "disappearance" of Betty Davis after her career ended. His motivation in telling her story was thus driven by a desire to solve what he, and many others, perceived to be a mystery. This framing device is evident not only in the film's aesthetic choices but also in the film's tagline, "The First Queen of Funk Changed Everything – Then She Disappeared," and its opening text: "Betty Davis, the pioneering and controversial first Funk Queen, mysteriously disappeared from the music scene some 35 years ago" (Cox 2017). It has been further reinforced in the language Cox has used when discussing Betty, including repeatedly referring to her as "the Greta Garbo of funk" during audience discussions and in written interviews (Fuchs 2018; Cox, personal communication, Nov 23, 2017).⁹⁷ Ultimately, Betty did not sign off on solving the ostensible mystery of what amounts to her own private life.

Just as collecting and curating vinyl records involves the twinned acts of inclusion and exclusion, constructing documentary narratives is also a process of remembering and forgetting (Misztal 2003) in which "the objectives of a particular narrative affect its content" (Arno van der Hoeven 2018: 210). Cox's main objective was to solve the mystery of Betty's disappearance and that shaped the voice of the film and the way the subject matter and plot were conveyed (Nichols 2017: 43). In this sense, the organizing logic of the film's subject matter is not Betty's music, or even Betty as a musical figure—it is a narrative about Betty's experiences with music, from the

⁹⁷ Greta Garbo (1905-1990) was a Swedish-American actress who had massive success in Hollywood cinema. At age 35, she retired from acting and led a private life void of any publicity.

perspective of the director. Producer Giovanna Stopponi affirmed this in an interview at the Italian premier of the film: “*Betty* is not necessarily a musical documentary. It’s a story that describes the human condition” (Fuchs 2018). Cox made very specific decisions about inclusion and exclusion to build his narrative about Betty “disappearing” and drew on numerous representational resources to do so.

The film largely relies on what documentary film theorist Bill Nichols (2017) calls a “poetic mode of representation.” This mode tends to transform raw material in distinctive ways that emphasize “mode, tone, and affect much more than displays of knowledge or acts of persuasion” (2017: 103). With the help of editor Esteban Uyarra and the London-based animation team KASH, Cox pieced together a representation of Betty’s story inspired by the raw materials Damon Smith had acquired: “When I realized the clues lay both in the audio telephone transcripts and in her song lyrics, I realized I had the inner voice of the film that would connect us with the interior woman and not the public superface” (Cox, personal communication, May 9, 2019). In the attempt to try and externalize Betty’s interiority, the film ironically downplays her musicianship when it is arguably one of the best ways to understand who the “interior woman” of Betty Davis really was and is. Rather than flesh out that untold story of Betty-as-producer/bandleader/musician using the familiar conventions of the music documentary, the film’s discussion of music is limited to explications of Betty’s provocative lyrics and stage performance, which is both necessary and well done, but also narrow in scope. The film is mostly constructed around moments of tension between key biographical events in her life (e.g., writing her first song as a child, listening to blues with her grandmother, enrolling in the Fashion Institute of Technology, and writing/selling her first song to The Chambers Brothers) and it tends to treat some of the more complex social and personal issues that affected Betty’s life as either historically fixed (such as racism) or abstractly (such as spirituality and mental illness).

While the voice of a documentary film is a metaphorical concept, there are often actual voices that shape the tenor of the film through voiceover narration, particularly when it is presented in first-person as the subject herself. In the *Betty* documentary, one would presume that the voice of the narrator is, in fact, Betty herself given that the material is written in first person and there are other visual clues presented to viewers that clearly show Betty’s participation in the film despite her reluctance to be filmed—we are shown her hands but not her face, her silhouette but not her whole body. In other words, these clues, along with the film’s overall poetic style, suggest

that we are hearing but not seeing all of Betty Davis, and that this is an intentional aesthetic choice. However, the scripted voiceovers that help construct the film's narrative are not recorded with Betty's voice but, rather, the voice of a local Pittsburgh actress named Kim El. The film is more than slightly misleading in this way since El's voiceover role is not properly disclosed anywhere in the documentary. The film merely credits her as an actress, with no explanation of her role. Because of this, most audiences and critics naturally assumed they were hearing Betty's actual voice:

[...] A familiar, husky voice making sage, pointed observations about her life, career, and the pop world. (Brooks 2018)

[...] But the heart of the film, the thing that makes it more than just a deft agglomeration of what little we already know, are the interviews with Betty Davis herself. (Kulkarni 2018)

The present-day Ms. Davis is shown mostly from behind and heard in voice-over [...]. (Pareles 2018)

The film relies heavily on Betty Davis' taped, off-camera recitations of what appear to be diary entries. (Segal 2018)

Betty did lend her actual voice to the filmmakers over the course of several hours of extended audio interview sessions, but Cox ultimately decided not to use it in service of his poetic mode of storytelling. Rather than use Betty's voice to speak her own words, Cox formulated his own scripted dialogue that acted as the basis of the film's, and therefore Betty's, narrative. It was comprised of her song lyrics, archival print interviews conducted during her career, and fragmented texts from his recorded interviews with Betty.

In deciding to also exclude the overwhelming majority of footage gathered over the previous five years—including both Betty's audio and video interviews, along with interviews from Jessica Care Moore and footage from a Black Women Rock concert in New York City—Cox gave narrative form to Betty's experiences and memories using various stylistic tactics including heavy use of symbolic imagery and sonic cues interspersed throughout the film. At the beginning of the film, the audience is first greeted by a metaphorical crow that guides the film's narrative arc from beginning to end. According to Cox, "crow represents [...] her spiritual identity, the inner Betty" (Fuchs 2018).

I realized I had to stamp an approach on the narrative of the film and could not wait around forever for it to magically appear. I went back to the transcripts of our original phone conversations. There in the transcripts lay the clues to finally tell this story. Betty is very spiritual and deeply about energy. She had talked about how as a young child, a little cardinal bird used to come to her window. Then elsewhere I saw her say that a crow was her spiritual animal. And then it was a lightbulb moment, I saw the connection between the little cardinal bird becoming crow. I realized I had found the visual metaphor for the inner Betty Davis and thankfully it came from her, it was, yes, cinematic and poetic, but it was true and authentic, and I knew would work on the big screen. (Cox, personal communication, May 9, 2019)

Throughout the film, we see the black crow perched on a tree limb, taking off for flight, or soaring through the air to represent various stages of Betty's creativity and growth throughout her life.

One also hears a heavy sound cue throughout the film—an unpleasant, sharp, piercing, high-pitched tone—that symbolizes the mounting strain of Betty's reality. We also see images of Betty broken up into two through split screens that both symbolize the perceived binary between her stage persona (i.e. “nasty gal”) and her real-life personality (i.e. sensitive and introverted), and also elude to a mental health diagnosis that is never disclosed. We see stock footage of a rotating flower on top of an apple—at times in full bloom, to symbolize Betty's fortitude and security, and at other times slowly wilting away, to symbolize Betty's fading public presence and declining mental health.

Filmmakers working with material from the past are dependent upon the cultural artifacts available to them. When it is too expensive to get permission to use copyrighted material, it limits the cultural content they are able to utilize, as was the case with this low-budget independent film (which did not meet its Indiegogo crowd sourcing goal). For this reason, a handful of pictures of Betty are reused and repurposed throughout the documentary to visualize Betty during the heyday of her career. Cox enlisted KASH, an animation company based in London, to transform these images into brightly colored collages and animated music sequences that depicted various places of importance for Betty, including the steel mills of Homestead and the mountains of Japan.⁹⁸

There is also a considerable amount of stock footage throughout film that is used to transport the audience to a particular place or back to a specific era. When a young Betty leaves Pittsburgh

⁹⁸ See KASH's website for a full depiction of collages and animated music sequences from the film (“Animated Music Sequences for Feature Documentary About the Life of Cult Funk Singer Betty Davis” n.d.).

for New York City, we see stock footage of graffiti lined streets as young men roller skate dance, along with a young Black woman with a large afro, and an interracial group of people dancing at a disco. This footage is meant to represent the popular culture and nightlife of 1960s New York City in which Betty was immersed. When the music industry is addressed in the scripted voiceovers, we see black and white footage of an older white male in a suit smoking a cigar with a satisfied look on his face, representing the power dynamics of the white-run, male dominated music industry. While the use of stock footage in these instances do little more than add a visual element to the narrative fabric of the story, there are other moments in the film when stock footage is precariously used to represent issues of race, gender, region, and culture. For instance, when the narrator's voice delves into a nostalgic memory of Betty as a child growing up in North Carolina, viewers are shown images of African American share-croppers picking cotton, which is meant to signify the Southern rurality of Betty's early childhood. While the South played a crucial role in Betty's musicianship (see Chapter 2), these images of silent, unidentified, laboring Black men and women lacks a clear context and inadvertently hints at the indistinguishability of Black southern bodies. Similarly, stock footage of rural African American women doing housework and childcare is clearly deployed to signify women's domesticity and the lack of options that Betty's close childhood friend, Connie Portis, explained in the film: "*women didn't have [options]*" (Cox 2017). Collectively, I would argue that the use of such stock footage in the film ultimately works against the "authenticity" of Betty's life that Cox initially found so appealing.

In addition to ideas about the South and Blackness that are represented via out-of-context stock footage, one can find similar depictions of Eastern Asian culture and spirituality. Those close to Betty know her deep connection to Japan. After the death of her father in 1979, the same year her final studio album—*Crashin' From Passion*—was shelved, she moved back to Homestead for a short period of time before traveling to Tokyo in 1983. Alone, and without label representation or management, she connected with a jazz fusion band named Arakawa and secured a recurring gig at a nightclub called The Crocodile Club. This time in Japan (1983-84) further enhanced her long-time interest in spiritual wellness and provided a much needed escape from the grind of the American music industry and the hyper-racialized and hyper-sexualized politics that came with it. In a brief moment, the *Betty* film alludes to the escapism of Betty's trip to Japan while leaving out any mention of her performing in Japan, or her musical collaboration with Arakawa. The narrated voice of Betty simply says: "*But in Japan I found silence [...]*" (Cox 2017). Coupled with this

cryptic revelation about Betty's time in Japan is stock footage of a monk hitting a gong, a geisha slowly moving on top of a bed, and clouds parting to reveal Mount Fuji. These silent, unidentified Eastern Asian bodies are used to manifest a visual representation of Betty's memory and experience, but they exist through a Western, white, male gaze. While it is common for documentary films to use stock footage metaphorically or to connect views with a specific spatiotemporally, the ways it is used in the *Betty* film are both fragmented and essentialist. Rather than drawing connections between Betty's musical style and the transmission of Southern blues that it nourished, the film used images of the South as a generalized site to locate her Blackness. And rather than associating Betty's time in Japan with her work as an active fusion musician, the film uses loaded images of Asian-ness (e.g. monks and geishas) as a generalized site to resolve her spirituality and inner peace (and, more importantly, as a site to resolve the film's narrative). In the end, it creates a mode of storytelling that is indeed poetic, but also formulaic and essentialist.

Cox stayed true to the poetic mode of representation in his transformation of raw materials in the film: photography became animation and audio interviews became scripted voiceovers. His commitment to this mode is again realized with his transformation of the precious 35 mm film footage of Betty performing at the Riviera '76 Jazz Festival in Le Cartellet, France from 1976. The original footage showed Betty performing her song of respect to deceased friend Devon Wilson, "Steppin In Her I. Miller Shoes," with her band Funk House. As of this writing, this high quality three minute long clip is still the only known video footage of Betty performing live. By including it in the film, Cox gave fans and newcomers the opportunity to see Betty's live action performance and hear her live vocals. However, rather than showing the footage in its entirety, with the corresponding audio track, Cox made the decision to edit and distort the live concert footage without the original audio. When I asked him why he made this decision, he answered in a way that reinforced his commitment to the documentary's poetic mode of representation:

This was the only footage that ever existing of Betty performing, and her live performances are what defined her and caused so much controversy. Therefore, I didn't use this as a single song and with the original audio, I used it in a poetical and lyrical way across the film to represent Betty's artistic free spirit and her dynamic raw energy on the stage. (Cox, personal communication, May 9, 2019)

The fact that this was an unprecedented opportunity to present Betty's live vocals and on-stage physicality to audiences was not paramount to Cox: "It wasn't about the song being sung for me,

it was about bringing the audience to see and understand Betty's total energy on the stage, which is why I slowed it down, cut it up and used it across the film" (Cox, personal communication, May 9, 2019). This transformation of the most coveted Betty Davis material on the planet highlights one of the distinct ways that the film breaks with the conventions of the music documentary that are admittedly trite but serve an important function when one constructs a filmic narrative about music history and an artists' musicianship, accomplishments, innovations, contributions, and unsung achievements.

While the film never attempts to be a traditional music documentary, it also evades substantive detail about Betty's discography. There is no mention of her initial 45 RPM's as Betty Mabry; no mention of her record deals and/or refusals of deals; no mention of players on her albums or of album release years; no mention of the two completed albums she recorded in 1976 and 1979 that were shelved; and no mention of the LITA reissues. The only moment in the film that alludes to Betty's discography is when her three 1970s album covers (noticeably displayed out of chronological order) are shown on the screen while the narrated voiceover of 'Betty' says, "*I put out three albums of hard funk [...]*" (Cox 2017). In addition to the dearth of details regarding Betty's discography, the film does little in the way of musical analysis. Betty's music acts as a soundtrack throughout the film, and at times her lyrics appear on screen in conjunction with the beautiful moving collage art from KASH. But beyond this, the vocality, textuality, and physicality of Betty as a musician are only presented a handful of times throughout the film. The singular moment in which Betty's vocality is mentioned is by her close friend and former Cosmic Lady, Winona Williams. Williams recalls her memory of seeing Betty perform at The Bottom Line ("*one of her first shows*") and being shocked by this "*deep, gravelly voice [...]*" that came out of her onstage (ibid.). This assessment of Betty's voice is notably told as a personal memory outside of any analytical context that would help unpack the significance of Betty's voice to filmgoers.

There are two moments in the film where Betty's textuality—her lyrical content—is addressed in the documentary. The first happens in the midst of Williams's memory of Betty performing: "*The raunchiness of these songs that she was belting out [...] what she wanted to say in her performance—there were no other women doing it*" (ibid.). The second moment happens when Tamar-kali, a self-proclaimed Daughter of Betty, breaks down why "*songs like 'Big Freak' are so powerful [...]*." She says: "*Betty Davis was pushing against the grain because the objectivation of women via men and their fantasies was very real, whereas Betty owned her*

[sexuality] in a way which was atypical” (ibid.). The only time Betty’s physicality is mentioned throughout the film is when Militia Vox, another self-proclaimed Daughter of Betty, addresses Betty’s fashion choices and body language: “*When I was looking around for a goddess to pray to, on the internet, I found this picture of her, and I think she was wearing a zebra bodysuit [...] And she had her hair big and she just looked so powerful [...] And I was just like, whatever she’s selling I’m buying*” (ibid.). As Daphne A. Brooks notes in her review of the documentary, the film is “conspicuously absent” (2018) of Black feminist scholars, thus making Tamar-kali, Militia Vox, Winona Williams, and Connie Portis’ roles in the film so crucial. Because while they are not scholars (Tamar-kali is a composer and musician; Militia Vox is a musician; Winona Williams is a personal friend and artist; Connie Portis is a personal friend and entrepreneur), these four Black women reclaim the film’s narrative with their interjections from a Black woman’s standpoint and, in doing do, they provide a more straight forward account of Betty as a musician than we find from many other commentators in the film.

While the film evades discography details and substantial musical analysis, it did account for certain aspects of music history and mythology. Traditionally, the music documentary is “a genre that lionizes certain figures more than others, revealing the ways in which idolization and ideology can interweave in the context of filmmaking” (Dunks 2019: 95). And, while I (and the filmmakers) have made the argument that the film is not really about music, it still managed to reveal this genre-specific trope through its focus on Miles Davis. In fact, the very first sequence of the film is of a press plant where we see the 2016 release of *The Columbia Sessions* (Betty’s collaborative demos with then-husband Miles Davis from 1968-69) being printed. Layered over images of the pressing plant producing masses of album covers, we hear Mike Canton’s voice, a local Pittsburgh radio host from WYEP 91.3 FM, explaining that he has got a “*crazy new piece of breaking music news [...] a new album about to be released between jazz legend Miles Davis and his one-time wife Betty Davis*” (Cox 2017). The film, therefore, began with Betty in proximity to Miles. After the opening sequence, the title credit appears and we hear archival recording of Betty’s voice for the first time calling out for the canonized jazz legend: “*Miles, we’re fixin’ to get it on right now*” (ibid.).

The film continued to lionize Miles Davis by perpetuating the trope of the muse that has followed Betty throughout her post-career life. Touching on popular music’s past, acclaimed “talking head” music scholar, Gregory Tatt, discusses “*this connection between Betty Davis as*

muse and Miles' turn to the electric era" (ibid.). Tatt discusses Betty as muse to Miles in terms of other artists she was listening to and personal style, but not in terms of her own music making practices. Discussing how jazz was falling out of popularity amongst young Black audiences in the 1960s, Tatt explained how Betty's musical preferences were representative of those young Black audiences during that time period. In the end, more time is spent unpacking Miles Davis' musicianship in this one scene than there is analyzing Betty's music throughout the entire film.

To its credit, the film does spotlight Betty's connection with blues women and Betty's relationship to the South and her grandmother. The blues are situated as Betty's foundational musical background and includes Gertrude "Ma" Rainey's song "Trust No Man" (1926). While the song plays, the lyrics are displayed for the audience, which allows for comparison and conclusions. Images of "blues women" are displayed in a montage style while Kim El's scripted voice-over explained Betty's love for "*the women of the blues [...] women who sang about how they felt inside, and struggling to make ends meat, and their lives with men, women who sang about things that were not right, work, relationships and race; old women who sang it real*" (ibid.). However, even in this singular reflective moment about Betty's musicianship, Cox's lack of knowledge about Black music, and specifically blues music, is evident. A photo of Mahalia Jackson, the renowned gospel singer and Civil Rights activist—who *never* sang about her life "with men"—appears in the montage, as does a photo of young Etta James. While James was part of the same blues idiom described by the narrator, she did not perform in the same era as the other women who appear in the montage, such as Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, Big Mama Thornton, and Koko Taylor. This scene is an important moment in the film because it explicates two integral and interrelated aspects of Betty's life: her grandmother and the blues on which she was reared. It effectively conveys a huge part of Betty's musical identity but, unfortunately, with the accompanying issues already noted above.

While Cox's intention (as well as Damon Smith's, initially) was not to make a traditional music documentary, the film's overall approach to narrative and aesthetics makes it fall short as both a music documentary and as a historical document. However, after nearly three years of viewing the film in group settings and also organizing events around the film throughout the country, I have realized that the content of the film is not the only way that it articulates meaning. My unique ethnographic experience as Associate Producer has made it clear that the film is made

meaningful by what people have also done with it. That is to say, how others have organized and networked around it.

6.4 Observations as Associate Producer

Audiences have the agency to construct their own readings of narratives against a backdrop of their own memories and lived experiences. Since the documentary was released, I have been actively engaging with, and also actively facilitating, different audiences for the film. Over the span of three years, I participated in various screenings and follow-up discussions or lectures with audiences in Amsterdam, Pittsburgh, Los Angeles, Chicago, and New Orleans. In that same time period, I also organized multimedia events in tandem with film screenings, including a concert in Pittsburgh of Betty's old band, Funk House, who reunited on stage with young Black and brown local women singers who sang Betty's parts. After being involved with the film in such different events, locations, communities, and settings, I have witnessed firsthand how the film gets interpreted, critiqued, and praised by different audiences in so many different ways. Moreover, I have both observed and participated in a burgeoning network of Betty Davis fans that were effectively brought together through the film and the spotlight that the documentary put on Betty's work.

At each of the various film-related events in which I have appeared as a speaker, I always begin by telling the audience that I am not a filmmaker and I did not participate in the writing, filming, or editing of the documentary. I explain that my credibility and authority as Associate Producer is entirely rooted in my relationship with Betty and my background in Black popular music studies. After three years of post-film conversations that begin in this fashion, I have come away with an understanding of how many viewers are left reacting after seeing the film:

- Confused or underwhelmed by the mysterious disappearance plot line the film follows, which suggests her father's death caused her to fall into a severe depression, marking the beginning of her public retreat.
- Desiring more details about her musical discography, including her role as songwriter, producer, and performer, as well as her relationship to labels and the LITA reissues.

- Questioning her spirituality (the film alluded to the fact that Betty visited Japan and used stock footage of monks, causing many audience members to ask if Betty identifies as a Buddhist).
- Inquiring whether it is Betty's actual voice narrating the film.

It is also my understanding that after every screening the audience is elevated by the sheer image and sound of Betty which permeates the viewing space. As one audience member said to me after the Los Angeles premier at the ARPA International Film Festival, "it just felt so good to hear her music coming through those theatre speakers" (Giles, personal communication, Nov 3, 2018).

My role, as far as I am concerned, was not to justify the decisions and non-decisions that the director made, nor to suggest what I would have done differently—but, rather, to offer my scholarly opinion about Betty as a popular musician and cultural figure, and provide insight on Betty's present-day circumstances through my direct relationship with her. What follows are a few short vignettes of selected film-related events that I participated in which highlight the work of the audiences in receiving and dissecting the film.

When the film had its international premier at IDFA in Amsterdam, the audiences were vast and internationally diverse. While there were certainly some Betty Davis fans in attendance, including Dutch superfans Koert Sauer and Joost Berger (whose collection of Betty's materials was and continues to be instrumental in Betty's reissue process), the majority of the audiences seemed to be unfamiliar with Betty. Being the largest independent documentary film festival in the world, many questions focused on style, as I mentioned previously, and process. However, the international audiences also prompted more large-scale questions about American race relations and the music industry. During one of the audience discussion, a Dutch gentleman from the audience spoke of his time visiting New York City in the mid 1970s and seeing shows at The Bottom Line, CBGB's, and Max's Kansas City. He then made the correlation between Betty and other American artists during the same time, including Iggy Pop and Patti Smith, who were (in his opinion) making "aggressive, avant-garde music." Thus, he posed the question: "Were the race barriers so high [in America] that there was no contact between Betty and her audience and the punk audience of the day?" Silent, Cox turned and gestured to me to respond to the question. Pleasantly surprised with the gentleman's correlation—seeing as I had identified Betty with a punk rock ethos from the first moment I heard her music—I responded:

I absolutely agree with you that there's a correlation between Betty and artists like Iggy Pop and Patti Smith. And, essentially, I would say, yes, the race barrier, as you called it, was that high while Betty was performing. But I believe, by the mid 1970s, at least, it was largely a barrier that was upheld by the music industry categories and radio formats, rather than the audiences themselves. I believe very strongly that if Betty was marketed and written about as a rock act and was not simply branded as a hyper-sexy Black woman, the rock audience [...] would have been able to better access her.

Back in the U.S., after the film premiered in Pittsburgh at The Black Bottom Film Festival, which I will shortly return to, the film was sought out by several American film festivals. Without securing a distribution deal, the film could only screen at film festivals.⁹⁹ Therefore, the audience became more specialized. Betty fans were present, along with Miles Davis fans who were hoping to glean more information about their relationship's effect on his music. Such was the case in Chicago, during the Black Harvest Film Festival, an annual festival celebrating a month of independent Black cinema presented at The Siskel Film Center. The audience discussion was moderated by music historian, record collector, and DJ, Duane E. Powell. An older white gentleman asked me what Betty thought of *Bitches Brew*, Miles Davis' album that he recorded while the two were married. I explained to him that: "Betty was never a big fan of jazz. From my understanding, her role was more on the production end, Miles would ask her advice in the studio and she would suggest amplifying the bass and things like that. I think her interest was more in the aesthetic aspect of the album, helping him title it and pick the album cover artist." Unsatisfied, the man posed a follow up question: "Well, what did she think of his albums after *Bitches Brew*?" "Again," I responded, "Betty really isn't a fan of jazz, so we haven't spent much time discussing Miles' music. She's much more interested in discussing current artists."

My presence during the audience discussion's that followed the film screenings at festivals that were structured around Black cinema and life (including The Black Harvest Film Festival in Chicago and The Black Bottom Film Festival in Pittsburgh) appropriately complicated the issue of representation and the ethics of storytelling that arise when white people (like myself and Cox) tell Black stories. In Chicago, a Black woman, seemingly disappointed with the film, questioned my ability as a white woman to represent Betty. Rather than posing a question to me, she simply

⁹⁹ As of this writing, the film has now been made available to purchase on Amazon Prime.

addressed the audience and declared, “we have to stop letting them tell our stories.” In Pittsburgh, after the very first U.S. premier screening, a Black woman in the audience asked myself and Cox: “How do you propose white creators start to care about Black *lives* and not just Black stories?” Again, silent, Cox gestured to me to rally the question. Referencing the Black Lives Matter movement, I answered the very large and important question to the best of my ability:

I can only speak for myself about what Betty and this experience has taught me. Working with Betty is a truly humbling experience, the more I get to know her the more I respect and admire her, and the long lineage of Black lives that came before her. I think associating and communicating and collaborating with people outside your race, or religion, or sexuality, or whatever the perceived social difference is, allows you to bare witness and affirm those lives in a way that reading about it, or listening to the music, or watching a film, never could. I’m an ethnographer, so the experience of working with people and communities, and creating research *with* people and communities—not just about them—is important to me. So, I would say to white creators who are interested in Black stories, offer yourself to the Black lives which those stories surround; be present to their needs and, essentially, sit down and listen.

In New Orleans, during the PATOIS Human Rights Film Festival in March 2019, the post-screening audience discussion was moderated by DJ, radio host, and musicologist Melissa Webber (also known as DJ Soul Sister): “Let’s talk about some of the things that you can shine a deeper light on, including, how [Betty] was perceived in the ‘70s and the backlash she faced” (Webber, personal communication, March 24, 2019). So began my crucial role as a post-screening interpreter, shining a “deeper light” on Betty that the film either glossed over or ignored altogether. Webber knew I could “shine a deeper light” on the backlash that Betty faced in the 1970s because, the day before the PATOIS film screening, she attended a public lecture I gave on that very topic. I was invited to lecture by one of the PATOIS festival organizers, Shana M. Griffin, who ran a feminist lecture series called PUNCTUATE.¹⁰⁰ Co-sponsored by PUNCTUATE and PATOIS, I gave an hour-long public lecture at the Neighborhood Story Project, entitled “‘Don’t Call Her No Tramp’: Reclaiming the Erotic Innovations of Betty Davis” (Figures 45-46)

¹⁰⁰ For more on Shana M. Griffin see (“Shana M. Griffin” n.d.).



Figure 45. Flyer for author's public lecture, *Don't You Call Her No Tramp: Reclaiming The Erotic Innovations of Betty Davis*, New Orleans, LA, 2019. Created by Shana M. Griffin.



Figure 46. Melissa Webber (DJ Soul Sister), author, and Shana M. Griffin, Neighborhood Story Project, New Orleans, LA, March 23, 2019.

After briefly touching on my scholarly analysis of Betty for the PATOIS screening audience (which I had delved deeply into the day before for the smaller, lecture series audience), Webber then moved on to the more difficult question of why Betty's disappearance was not really answered in the film. I resorted back to my carefully crafted description of Betty as a private person:

She can be very elusive, and she is very humble. She doesn't give away any energy that she doesn't intend to [...] And you have to respect that. I know there's often frustration from fans and audiences because we don't have a concrete answer—the hard facts of what happened—and, I know the director *wanted* to reveal that—but once he began the project he realized Betty was not going to reveal that. And I really respect that about her. It's really none of our business; whatever the actual event or label or diagnosis is. And, of course, it's a culmination of many things. But her personal issues from her past she keeps private, and out of respect for her I also don't speak about them.

In that moment, the audience applauded—condoning my response. These are the moments in the post-screening conversations when a sense of understanding typically washes over the viewing space, especially from women of color, and detailed questions that may have arisen from the film or the mythology that has been created around Betty, dissipate.¹⁰¹

Every audience presented a diverse range of questions, critiques, and praises that I had the responsibility of fielding as the singular representative of the film (besides the international premier in Amsterdam and the U.S. premier in Pittsburgh, I appeared by myself). However, there were consistencies amongst audiences' reactions to the film's content, and how that content was presented. The consistency in reception that stood out most to me was the collective moment of laughter, usually followed by a combination of applause and cheering, during one particular scene in the film. This collective affirmation occurred during—what I consider to be—the most sincere moment of the entire film when Betty's four former bandmates (collectively known as Funk House) gather together in their hometown of North Carolina. The four musicians—Fred Mills (keyboards), Carlos Morales (guitar), Larry Johnson (bass), and Nicky Neal (drums)—set up their

¹⁰¹ There has only been one instance where an audience member was not satisfied with my response. This occurred in Chicago, during The Black Harvest Film Festival in August of 2018. After giving essentially the same version of my “why-did-Betty-disappear speech,” a white male raised his hand to awkwardly proclaim: “But, what *happened* to her?” He asked the question as if I would simply forget or ignore both my ethics as an ethnographer, and the complicated intersectional dynamics of Betty's backlash that I laid out for the room only moments before.

instruments in a rehearsal space rented by the filmmakers and reminisce about making music with Betty as they look over an old concert poster that one of the members brought from home. Once the musicians have settled in, they call Betty on a cell phone that is propped up on a stool. With each ring amplified by the speaker phone, the musicians anxiously await to hear from their former bandleader, friend and, in the case of Johnson and Neal, first cousin. Finally, we hear Betty's actual voice pick up and the musicians engage in a heartfelt phone reunion. After telling Betty how much they miss her, Morales proposes to Betty that they "*do one more thing at least,*" suggesting a musical collaboration of some sort. Johnson then interrupts, raising his voice to make sure he is heard amongst the group: "*And, Betty, you don't got to go through what you went through with record companies no more, because they ain't that important no more, with social media n'that [...]*" (Cox 2017). It is this moment where the audience consistently erupts in a mixture of laughter and cheering out of affirmation for Johnson's statement. Unknowingly, Johnson delivers the only non-scripted statement in the film about Betty's complicated and mistrustful relationship to record companies in the 1970s. The scene ends with Funk House jamming to Betty's 1975 song "F.U.N.K." before segueing into the film's final voice-over dialogue and animation sequence.

Just as the cultural commentary and personal memories from Tamar-kali, Militia Vox, Winona Williams, and Connie Portis provide the film with a crucial Black feminist standpoint, the scene with Funk House lifted the abstract veil of the film's various tactics toward narrative to expose—briefly—Betty as a musician, friend, and family member. This final scene with Funk House led to one of the most consistent questions I have received throughout the post-screening audience discussion's: "Did Betty ever reunite with her band?" The first time I received this question in November of 2017 in Amsterdam, I replied by saying: "Not yet. But we are in the process of planning something soon."

Beginning in February of 2018, I oversaw the U.S. premier of *Betty – They Say I'm Different* in collaboration with the City County Building, August Wilson African American Cultural Center, Row House Cinema, Pittsburgh Filmmakers/Center for the Arts, and Red Bull Music Academy. My vision was to engage with local organizations, businesses, and artists to develop a series of events in honor of Betty's legacy in Pittsburgh. Three screenings in three different theatres were planned, along with post-screening audience discussion's with myself and Cox, as well as an after party element to each screening. For these after parties I brought in local Pittsburgh DJs who were both fans of Betty Davis and played vinyl records. The repertoire of these

DJs spanned decades and genre, but all had a style rooted in soul, funk, and R&B. I teamed up with the Director of Exhibitions at Pittsburgh Filmmakers, fellow DJ and event producer Lauren Goshinski, to incorporate educational and outreach events including a documentary film workshop and panel on women in media and the music industry. All of these events would culminate into the grand finale: a live reunion concert with all four original members of Betty's band, Funk House. With Betty long retired as a vocalist, and uninterested in public appearances, I brought in local women of color vocalists to stand in as lead vocalist and perform Betty's songs with Funk House.

6.4.1 The U.S. Premier of *Betty – They Say I'm Different*

The premier events began on February 5th at the City County Building for its annual Black History Month Exhibit. Betty was one of the local Black figures who was honored. I wrote a short essay which was printed on the wall of the City County Building's entrance, along with other local Black figures who were being honored. For the entire month of February, leading up to the U.S. premier of the film, Betty's image, song lyrics, and connection to Pittsburgh were proudly displayed. On February 25, on the cusp of Black History and Women's History Month, the film premiered at the Black Bottom Film Festival, hosted by the August Wilson Center. The film festival, named after the 1982 play by August Wilson *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, featured films by Black filmmakers and films that dealt with issues of race. Local Black owned businesses and individual vendors filled the August Wilson Center during the three day long film festival. Betty's friends, Connie Portis and Winona Williams, who are featured in the film, were in attendance, along with Kim El, the woman who performed the voice of Betty in the film (Figure 47).



Figure 47. Kim El at the US Premier of Betty - They Say I'm Different (Cox 2017), Pittsburgh, PA, February 25, 2018.

Director Phil Cox flew in from London the day before the premier to attend the events, and a representative from Red Bull Music Academy (who donated \$2,000 to the entirety of all the events) traveled from New York City to view the film.¹⁰² I sat next to Williams amongst the audience and watched the film. When Betty's neighborhood was shown on the screen for the first time with a caption that read: Pittsburgh, PA, the audience erupted into applause. The entire screening was charged with an energy of excitement and pride.

Following the film, Cox and myself engaged in an audience discussion moderated by August Wilson Center's Curator of Visual Arts, Kilolo Luckett. The insight I offered was on a personal level, letting those concerned individuals know that Betty—who was not in attendance to the disappointment of everyone at August Wilson Center—was healthy, happy, and honored to be received so warmly by her hometown. Once the audience knew I was in contact with Betty, the questions shifted to affirmations. An older Black man stood up and proudly stated: "We always loved Betty, we want her to know," and requested I deliver the message to her. An older Black

¹⁰² The partnership with Red Bull Music Academy was organized and conducted by Phil Cox.

woman then stood up and exclaimed that her “sexuality began” when she first heard Betty Davis and also requested that I “let Betty know.” Angela Davis has explained that: “Progressive art can assist people in learning not only about the objective forces at work in the society in which they live, but also about the intensely social character of their interior lives [...] it can propel people toward social emancipation” (Davis 1989: 187). This woman’s testimony—that Betty Davis helped to initiate her understanding of sexuality—explained the answer to Greg Errico’s query: How was it that an artist who never had a hit song, a big tour, or even a music video, could remain in public consciousness after all these years? The answer lay in the ability of Betty’s music to “propel people toward social emancipation.” That was, and still is, the driving force that connected her music to a fanbase.

After the audience discussion, we made our way to the second floor of the building where DJ Selecta was spinning vinyl for the after party reception. During the reception, the same gentleman that affirmed his love for Betty in the audience approached me. In his hands he held a faded LP of Betty’s debut album (Figure 48). He explained to me that he had driven from Washington, D.C. to see this film and that he had to bring his album, which he prided himself on having since 1973.



Figure 48. Audience member holds up his original copy of Betty Davis’ debut album (1973) after the US premier of the documentary film, The Black Bottom Film Festival, August Wilson African American Cultural Center, Pittsburgh, PA, February 25, 2018.

Not expecting to get the album signed (nowhere in the publicity or promotion for the film screenings did we suggest Betty would be present), this gentlemen simply brought his record with him because it carried a certain “intangible value” (as Oliver Wang described of his original records).

The next screening took place on March 1st at Row House Cinema. The marquis in front of the small, one screen independent theatre read: Pittsburgh Betty Davis Sold Out (Figure 49).



Figure 49. Marquis of Row House Cinema, in collaboration with The Black Bottom Film Festival, Pittsburgh, PA, March 1, 2018.

After the screening and audience discussion, the majority of the audience made their way to the after party that was happening at a local club in the neighborhood (Figure 50).



Figure 50. Flyer for post-film event, created by author, Pittsburgh, PA, 2018.

DJs Selecta, Buscrates, Kelly Carter, and Gina Mungo curated a high energy dance party of soul, funk, and R&B records spanning several decades, including Betty Davis records. During these post-film after parties, which I organized and hosted, I noticed the depth of conversation that was able to occur outside of the traditional audience discussion format. Often times, individuals who had just viewed the film and were silent during the post-film discussion would present a question or comment to me simply because they felt more comfortable doing so once away from the public spotlight. I also noticed how the activity of dancing to Betty’s music (and music of her era) after watching the film often heightened the overall experience for many audience members.

In her study on social dancing and “queer world-making,” performance Studies scholar Fiona Buckland explained improvised dance as “a way in which participants both remembered the

past and imagined possibilities for the future” (2002: 1).¹⁰³ Dancing together as an audience blurred the divide between the film subject (Betty Davis) and those viewing the film and, rather, produced a site of interaction and affective intensity that equally required the music (provided by Betty and the DJs playing her records) and those being enveloped by the music. Thus, the improvised social dancing that took place during the post-film after parties transformed the filmic experience as an object of representation to a physical medium where participants shared their love for Betty through embodied action.

On March 3rd, the culmination of my planning and collaborating materialized when an entire day of educational, community, and celebratory events around the legacy of Betty Davis and the future of women in music and media took place at Pittsburgh Filmmakers (Figure 51).



Figure 51. Flyer for pre- and post-film events, created by Lauren Goshinski, Pittsburgh, PA, 2018.

¹⁰³ “By using the term “world-making,” I am not referring to the creation of a bordered culture with recognizable laws, populated by homogenous subjects, but rather, I mean a production in the moment of a space of creative, expressive, and transforming possibilities, which remained fluid and moving by means of the dancing body, as it improvised from moment to moment” (Buckland 2002: 4).

The first event—free to the public—was a workshop titled “Method, Innovation & Multi-Tasking In Contemporary Documentary” where young and seasoned filmmakers discussed the methodologies within documentary filmmaking with Phil Cox. The second event—also free to the public—was a panel titled “Industry Women – Empowering Future Voices & Visions.” The panel, moderated by Vivian Host (Red Bull Radio) and Jocelyn Cooper (Afropunk), who both appeared via video conference, featured local women in the music industry and was an open forum to discuss their experiences, as well as share their visions for the future of the music industry. Panelists included myself, Sarah Huny Young (American Woman), Lauren Goshinski (VIA Festival, girlFx), Kahmeela Adams (RuggedAngel Productions), Blak Rapp M.A.D.U.S.A. (1 Hood Media), and Maggie Negrete (Women In Sound) (Figure 52).



Figure 52. “Industry Women – Empowering Future Voices & Visions” panel, presented by Pittsburgh Filmmakers in collaboration with Afropunk and Red Bull Music Academy, Pittsburgh, PA, March 3, 2018. From left to right: Maggie Negrete, Kahmeela Adams, Sarah Huny Young, Black Rapp M.A.D.U.S.A., author, and Lauren Goshinski.

Each panelist gave an opening statement that described their work in the music industry and their connection to Betty Davis. Graphic designer and DJ, Sarah Huny Young, described her connection to Betty along the lines of sexual agency just as the older audience member at August

Wilson Center did: “I was connected to her because I thought, this is a bad bitch right here. I’ve always loved bad bitches—Janet Jackson, Madonna—when I was growing up. I was really attracted to a woman who was fearless, sexually confident, and charged.” (Young, personal communication, March 3, 2018). We all shared our Betty “discovery” stories; visceral memories of hearing and seeing her for the first time and how it made us feel. And it was those stories, rather than our vast array of experiences in the music industry’s various fields, that connected us as panelists.

The two moderators, both having worked in the industry a bit longer than the younger panelists, focused the conversation on how we honor Betty’s legacy by moving forward the industry politics that held her back during her career. Jocelyn Cooper (Afropunk) related Betty’s struggle in the industry to her own as a Black woman: “I grew up and worked at a time where there were absolute gatekeepers and there was nothing you could do to get past gatekeepers; white gatekeepers, male gatekeepers, it was just very, very difficult. Now we have access to social media and crowdfunding platforms” (Cooper, personal communication, March 3, 2018). By acknowledging the new forms of digital media that are now accessible, Cooper challenged the traditional forms of gatekeeping that were rampant in the music industry until quite recently. By emphasizing the individual agency that is now enjoyed by the masses due to an access of media innovation, Cooper addressed what she considered to be the progressive shifts in the music industry that we (as a panel) get to enjoy that individuals including Betty did not.

Representing various mediums—music performance, production, promotion, style and design, radio, and DJing—the panelists continually brought the conversation back to Betty. Emphasis was placed on the role of white and non-Black women in addressing disparities in representation in the music industry, as well as the importance of working to rehistoricize the music industry from a Black woman’s standpoint. Hip hop artist and activist Blak Rapp M.A.D.U.S.A. stressed the importance of acknowledging the creative labor of Black women that often falls prey to cultural appropriation or cultural amnesia: “What happens when we break down? What happens when we don’t want to carry everyone else’s burden? What does that look like? Does it look like being erased? Does it look like being silenced?” (M.A.D.U.S.A., personal communication, March 3, 2018). Speaking specifically about Black women being erased from (music) history, M.A.D.U.S.A. draws an important connection between the type of

uncompromising artistic control that Betty exhibited and the inability to carry on in the face of its repeated denial and disrespect.

When the panel opened up to questions from the audience, the first person to address the crowd was Toronto based musician SATE, who drove down from Toronto to see the film later that evening and attend the day's events:

[Betty Davis] changed my fucking life because she gave me permission. So, I'm so happy to be here in this room hearing you all. I just want to affirm you all and say thank you. I'm so glad this has finally come to fruition and can be seen on screen. So, this is a dream come true, and to know that there's a community here for Betty. (SATE, personal communication, March 3, 2018)

At the end of the event, SATE and I personally introduced ourselves to each other and she proceeded to tell me about a woman in Detroit named Jessica Care Moore who started an organization of Black women musicians in honor of Betty: "We call ourselves Daughters of Betty," she said. This new information from SATE felt urgent and important. We exchanged contact information and made plans to see each other later at the final screening.

This event, along with the others similar to it, highlight the important work of forming an interactive network around Betty Davis; an interactive network that would not have existed in its form today without the release of the 2017 documentary film *Betty – They Say I'm Different*. It is a community of solidarity that is in service to Betty's legacy and, in effect, helps to advocate for thinking about Betty's legacy in a specific type of way that the film could not capture due to various limitations. Rather than the film itself being the source for new critical, collaborative scholarship and performance-based practice surrounding Betty's career, the film acts as a facilitator for gathering and networking in Betty's name. And no event exemplified this more than the Funk House reunion concert that closed out the U.S. premier of *Betty – They Say I'm Different* in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

6.4.2 Funk House Reunion Concert

The night before the workshop and panel at Filmmakers, myself and Lauren Goshinski met and greeted the elderly men of Funk House at Regent Square Theatre and conducted a single full tech rehearsal with lights, sound, and vocalists. The scarce amount of money we received from

Red Bull Music Academy went to securing the bands travel and lodging costs, as well as securing the backline for the live performance. Due to our low budget, the four men drove up in a van from North Carolina, accompanied by Nicky Neal's daughter, Rachelle Neal. Accidentally taking a longer route and having to stop several times due to Carlos Morales' asthma, the group arrived late into the evening, almost ten hours after they were scheduled to. Unable to stop at the hotel due to our time limit with the theatre, the van from North Carolina pulled up directly to the theatre to get in what little rehearsal we could before the big event. After unloading the equipment, setting up with the sound stage, and getting somewhat acclimated after a day of travel, we finally began rehearsal.

Prior to their arrival in Pittsburgh, the musicians picked four songs they felt comfortable playing: "F.U.N.K.," "Nasty Gal," "If I'm In Luck I Might Get Picked Up," and "Steppin In Her I. Miller Shoes." Once their songs were decided, I worked directly with the four local vocalists who I had asked to stand in for Betty: Shayontani Banerjee (whose stage name is Shani Banshee), a South Asian punk musician; Morgan Hawkins, a queer Black vocalist; Shanyse Strickland, a queer Black vocalist and multi-instrumentalist; and Jacquea Mae Olday, a Black vocalist and activist. They would each perform one song, inflecting it with their own unique style. We met as a group at my house to discuss the meaning behind the songs, which was especially helpful for Olday who did not realize the song's lyrics for "Steppin In Her I. Miller Shoes" were in tribute to Betty's deceased friend Devon Wilson. When Shanyse Strickland found out the song "If I'm In Luck I Might Get Picked Up" was banned by the NAACP, she was outraged and felt a strong push to interpret the song in a way which came to Betty's defense.

After rehearsing along with the original recordings, the four women had one chance to rehearse with the band (who had not performed together in forty years) before performing in front of a sold out theatre. After the band warmed up for a few minutes, we worked through the set list. Fred Mills, who was the unofficial leader of the band, communicated for the group—adjusting the tempo a bit so Olday could keep up with the hard rocking punk ethos of "Steppin In Her I. Miller Shoes"; planning an instrumental vamp so Strickland could incorporate her jazz flute to "I'm In Luck I Might Get Picked Up." With only three hours of rehearsal under our belts, Funk House checked into their hotel just before midnight and we geared up for the next day, which was promoted as a post-screening Funk House Reunion Concert.

The line to get into the Regent Square Theatre wrapped around the block. The marquee read: Betty Davis Funk House Reunion. The four members of Funk House were given the best seats in the house to view the documentary they were featured in. As the credits came to an end, Funk House began to set up and I took the stage and proceeded to thank all of the collaborators involved with the U.S. premier. I then read the handwritten note that Betty gave me earlier that day: “Thank you all for coming to see my film. I hope you enjoy it. I’m sorry I cannot be with you but, in a way, I am. Sending love and positive vibrations, Betty Davis.” This note would travel with me to all future screenings where I would read it either before or after the film. The packed theatre erupted into applause as I introduced the musicians collectively known as Funk House. Still images of Betty from the film washed over the large screen, providing a vibrant and colorful backdrop for the performances. And, with that, the now deceased Carlos Morales (seated in a chair due to his fragile state) began the guitar lick of “F.U.N.K.” with his signature top hat affixed on his head. As the momentum of the song’s intro grew, Banerjee crawled onto the stage on all fours, punching and growling out the letters of the song’s title (Figure 53-54):

I was nervous to get up on stage with only two run throughs of a song that I had only started learning two weeks prior. I didn't know if I was going to pull the performance off [...] I was comforted by the faces of all the outstanding women involved in the film and performance and by all of the cheers from the packed theater. (Banerjee, personal communication, May 3, 2019)



Figure 53. Shayontani Banerjee performs live with Funk House, Regent Square Theatre, Pittsburgh, PA, March 3, 2018.



Figure 54. Shayontani Banerjee performs live with Funk House, Regent Square Theatre, Pittsburgh, PA, March 3, 2018.

The audience would never have known Banerjee was nervous from her incredibly charged performance, channeling Betty’s raucous stage presence as she snarled and belted out the song of respect that honored Betty’s favorite funk musicians:

I launched myself into the air with every legends name uttered, pounding the stage with my fist, crawling across it to Carlos' feet, as he ripped a guitar solo with his teeth upon the invocation of Jimi Hendrix. Betty gave me a standing ovation by way of the crowd, lighting a path for me to embrace what is inherent in us both. (Banerjee, personal communication, May 3, 2019)

The set continued with Morgan Hawkins, who mounted the stage in a gold lamé skirt to deliver Betty’s signature “bad girl” anthem “Nasty Gal” (Figures 55-56).



Figure 55. Morgan Hawkins performs live with Funk House, Regent Square Theatre, Pittsburgh, PA, March 3, 2018.



Figure 56. Morgan Hawkins performs live with Funk House, Regent Square Theatre, Pittsburgh, PA, March 3, 2018.

Fred Mills supplied the backup vocals just as he did on the original recordings, kicking off the song with his line, *“I’m gonna run it down now,”* to which Hawkins replied, *“Tell ‘em anything you want to!”* Hawkins, a skilled vocalist with choral and theatrical training, injected a warm, smokey timbre into Betty’s insidious lyrics:

That experience of standing in her place with her amazing band and singing her words was one that will influence what I do for a long time, and that energy is something I aspire to harness every time I perform [...] When I look back at the performance and rehearsals I remember feeling intensely surrounded by such a powerful vibe that came from working closely with these other amazing women, all inspired by the singular legacy of Betty. (Hawkins, personal communication, June 7, 2019)

Shanyse Strickland then took the stage with her flute in tow to sing the 1973 song that once caused Betty so much controversy, *“If I’m In Luck I Might Get Picked Up”* (Figure 57).



Figure 57. Shanyse Strickland performs live with Funk House, Regent Square Theatre, Pittsburgh, PA, March 3, 2018. Funk House members from left to right: Fred Mills, Nicky Neal, Larry Johnson, and Carlos Morales.

Stomping her feet on the stage as she suggestively moved with the curvature of her body, Strickland instilled jazzy improvised flute riffs after singing each verse: “When I found out the history of the song and that it was banned by the NAACP, I imagined the flute riffs as a response to the backlash Betty got. Almost like it was representing those voices who would have stood up for Betty” (Strickland, personal communication, May 10, 2019). Every time Strickland lifted the flute to her mouth she was playing in symbolic solidarity with every woman of color who has ever been made to feel ashamed for their displays of eroticism. Funk House, who approved of the additional instruments use the night before, was especially galvanized by Strickland’s soaring lines of improve, riffing off of her flute in ways we had not anticipated in rehearsal. After all the musicians took turns on an impromptu solo, Strickland and Mill’s eye contact synced up and Mills returned the group back to the melody for Strickland to close out the song—her flute held high above her head as the audience roared with applause.

Finally, Jacquea Mae Olday took to the stage to close out the post-screening reunion concert with undoubtedly the most difficult song of the night— “Steppin In Her I. Miller Shoes”— a fast-paced, high energy, lyrically dense tribute song about Betty’s deceased friend and fellow Cosmic Lady, Devon Wilson, who died in 1971 (Figure 58).



Figure 58. Jacquea Mae Olday performs live with Funk House, Regent Square Theatre, Pittsburgh, PA, March 3, 2018.

When Betty recorded and performed the song in the 1970s, the lyrics were projected as a screeching type of belt that laid somewhere in between Betty's growling chest voice and her proto-punk screams of vocal abandon. Olday, a profound vocalist in the blues, gospel, and R&B tradition—known for her rich, booming chest voice—had to keep up the song's intensity without relying on Betty's screams and squeals. Instead, she belted out the song's syncopated lyrics in its entirety with her deep, resounding contralto voice, often tweaking the ends of melodic lines to go down in pitch, allowing her to adlib and add a more literal bluesy flare to the hard driving rock song:

To sing a song honoring Devon, Betty's best friend that passed on decades ago, for the last performance of the night, I was definitely shaking. But it was so packed and

so much good energy in that space, all of those uneasy feelings went away, and I killed it! I am still learning and becoming a better me because of that performance. (Olday, personal communication, June 13, 2019)

Not only did Olday “kill it” vocally, she delivered an electrifying performance that organically incorporated the type of unapologetic physicality that Betty embodied—fiercely stomping her feet and clapping her hands to keep up with the fast tempo, making facial expressions of abandon while wiping the sweat off her brow in a theatrical gesture, and taking off her earrings and throwing them across the stage to signal her inhibition.

By the end of her song, many in the theatre were up on their feet, some with clenched fists held high in the air; some jumping up and down or pacing the aisles out of pure adrenaline (Figure 59).



Figure 59. The audience during the Funk House Reunion Concert, Regent Square Theatre, March 3, 2018.

Fred Mills, Nicky Neal, Larry Johnson, and Carlos Morales were visibly moved by the audience’s reaction. Keyboardist Fred Mills—a Vietnam War veteran—held his clenched fist in the air towards the audience, drummer Nicky Neal looked almost in shock with his mouth agape, bassist Larry Johnson smiled from ear to ear looking back and forth to his fellow musicians in astonishment, and the late guitarist Carlos Morales, seated in his chair with his eyes closed and

chin lifted up to the ceiling, slowly nodded in an almost meditative state. The audience's applause quickly developed into a collective clap as the three other vocalists joined Olday on stage for an impromptu encore reprise of "Steppin In Her I. miller Shoes." The four women huddled together around one microphone stand as Funk House jumped back into the groove upon Mill's four count (Figure 60).



Figure 60. Encore performance of Funk House Reunion Concert, Regent Square Theatre, Pittsburgh, PA, March 3, 2018. From left to right: Shanyse Strickland, Morgan Hawkins, Shayontani Banerjee, Jacquea Mae Olday, and Larry Johnson.

The women adlibbed and improvised, as Strickland added her flute to Funk House's instrumentation. When the encore reprise finally came to a momentous end—with each musician embellishing their instrument to its full capacity—the four women embraced each other on stage in awe of what they had accomplished in such little time. The musicians slowly walked to the center of the stage, Morales being helped up by his bandmate Johnson, joined hands and took a bow. And with the crowd still erupting in a thunderous standing ovation, they concluded their first reunion as Funk House in forty years.

6.4.3 The “Lifeworld” of Betty Davis

Through my analysis of the film, and a dialogical understanding and engagement with embodied interaction amongst its participants, I aimed to show how the live performative events in relation to the film (lectures, audience discussion’s, panels, dance parties, and reunion concerts) carved out a space for a counter-narrative of Betty to be presented; one that was more closely associated and sensitive to her authenticity. Thus, I contend that the performative film-related events present a counter-narrative that is more aligned with musicianship, Black feminism, anti-industry sentiment, affective intensity; and *critical* of the masculinist focus on Miles Davis, the “poetic essentialism” mode of filmmaking, and the consumption of Betty as a tragic, mysterious figure. Thus, the filmic can be synthesized as narrative (i.e. an object of representation) and the performative as counter-narrative. While I have been referring to these performative pre and post-film events as an interactive network, Fiona Buckland’s concept of “lifeworld” and its ability to articulate “environments created by their participants that contain many voices, many practices, and not a few tensions” (2002: 4) is an interesting way to consider the international reception and interaction that surrounded the documentary film and, through embodied practices, performed the legacy of Betty Davis.

The next morning, after the Funk House reunion, a second reunion took place that would cement this understanding of filmic as narrative and performative as counter-narrative for me. It had been almost twenty years since Betty saw her cousins Nicky Neal and Larry Johnson, and even longer for Fred Mills and Carlos Morales. After much consideration, Betty decided to meet the four men for brunch before they returned back to North Carolina. I picked Betty up from her apartment and drove her to meet the musicians at a local soul food restaurant that she had picked for the occasion. Sitting at the table with Betty and her former bandmates, I listened as they replayed the details of the concert for their former bandleader who was eager to hear how it all went: “They were all incredible,” Morales said, “but there will never be another Betty Davis.” Betty laughed and carried on as she looked at pictures and videos I had taken from the night before. Just as the brunch was coming to an end, I told the table about meeting Toronto-based musician SATE and learning of Black Women Rock. To my surprise, Betty responded by saying, “Is that Jessica Care Moore’s group?” and proceeded to tell us about the woman who wrote a poem for her and started an organization in honor of her.

As the U.S. film premier ended—after months of labor and collaboration and communication and frustration—the world of Black Women Rock opened up to me. SATE had unlocked the door for me at the “Industry Women – Empowering Future Voices & Visions” panel, and then, over brunch, Betty kicked it wide open in the presence of Funk House. I quickly learned, and would later get to witness firsthand, that the apex of performative counter-narrative practices that formed an interactive network around Betty Davis (or, the “lifeworld” of Betty Davis) resided with and was being nurtured by present-day Black women musicians and artists who had been gathering and performing in honor of Betty since 2004—they call themselves Daughters of Betty.

7.0 “Don’t Call Her No Tramp”: Reclaiming Betty Davis

how do we breath, still?
your metaphorical daughters
they will forever wonder

Jessica Care Moore, “They Say She’s Different”

Music reissues and documentary films can provide a certain freedom from the recording artist’s original socio-political context. No longer stuck within the respectability politics or the industry marketing model of the era, reissued artists that were suppressed by cultural backlash and/or abusive business models like Betty have the opportunity to experience newfound autonomy and agency. Of course, not all reissue projects are meaningful because of a shift in socio-political context from its original era. The majority of historical, archival reissues from labels like LITA and The Numero Group are meaningful simply because they exist (as Matt Sullivan said, “at least this music has been archived and documented”). However, Betty Davis’ re-emergence into public consciousness as the “Funk Queen” is accented by her unapologetic sexuality, aggressive physicality, and innovative genre-bending that dominates mainstream popular music today in a way that is not only acceptable, but desirable. Broader socio-political shifts within the music industry, Black expressive culture, and mainstream feminism have transformed Betty Davis from a cult icon into a Black feminist icon.

Since her music and story have been made more accessible following her album reissues and the documentary film, a new generation of women of color, particularly Black and queer women, have become new fans of Betty’s music and cite her as an inspiration. Unlike older waves of fans—some of whom just fetishized the rarity of her records or her relationships to famous male musicians—this unique audience has been charged by a sense of empowerment they get from Betty’s sound, her look, and her message. Betty’s call, or what Emily Fisher in 1974 described as her “anarchist’s cry,” is finally being heard and responded to by people who see her as a musical and cultural innovator in the twenty-first century world of unapologetic Black feminist performance.

In a post-third wave feminist society, Betty is now considered to be representative of and specific to a Black women’s artistic identity that reclaims intersectionality and the performing of

erotics. The very performance characteristics that garnered Betty such weak record sales and negative reviews are now the characteristics that people cite as “pioneering” and “ahead of its time.”

This chapter introduces the organization Black Women Rock as a uniquely positioned interpretive community that embodies Betty’s avant-garde performativity through their own cultural memory and experience. I make the case for why this particular constellation of artists is essential to understanding Betty’s post-reissue career and I also discuss how they help do the cultural work of re-historicizing Black women’s role in popular music’s history. I also critique the rhetoric of labeling musicians “ahead of their time” along the lines of cultural and political bias within society and, through a discussion of safe spaces and community building, illuminate present day resistance and advantages faced by Black women musicians who challenge the mainstream. This chapter uses ethnography from my interviews with the Daughters of Betty, as well as observation and personal communications from two Black Women Rock concerts that took place on March 16, 2018 in Detroit, Michigan and June 22, 2019 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, along with two “Daughters of Betty Speak!” panels that took place on March 17, 2018 in Detroit and June 23, 2019 in Pittsburgh.

7.1 The Interpretive Community of Black Women Rock

According to Jeff Titon, authenticity has at least two historical meanings that are related, but not the same. The first meaning can refer to the originality of an artifact or text, including an original pressing of a vinyl record. The second can refer to being true to oneself or one’s group. Titon goes on to explain that authentication is not quite either of the two historically agreed upon definitions: “Rather, it involves a process in which an interpretive community validates a story” (2012: 228). Without labeling them as such, previous chapters have all introduced different interpretive communities that have been instrumental to Betty Davis’ career, including the underground funk scene of the 1970s, the record collecting community of the 1990s/2000s, and disparate audiences of her reissued records and film documentary. This section focuses on the interpretive community of active Black women artists who I view as the most significant cultural

readers and interpreters of Betty Davis due their shared cultural memory and embodied experiences.

My understanding of “interpretive community of Black women cultural readers” is indebted to Jacqueline Bobo’s use of the term in her 1995 work *Black Women as Cultural Readers*. Bobo’s theorization of the “interpretive community” positions Black women cultural readers (e.g. producers, critics, scholars, and consumers) within the context of media representation in film and literature. Using Bobo’s concept as a lens allows me to analyze the critical interplay between text and audience and how performance, cultural memory, and extra-musical values all work together to attract and constitute an “interpretive community.” Furthermore, Bobo’s attention to Black women as cultural readers prioritizes a type of Black feminism that originated from the blues women legacy and formed the foundation of Betty’s musical career, and therefore this study.

Black feminist scholars like Patricia Hill Collins (1989, 2000), believe Black women’s individual acts of resistance can be seen in the context of a culture of resistance, where there is a supportive Black women’s community. Their collective actions, therefore, are part of a sustained movement. Bobo also identified Black women within an interpretive community through the lens of resistance: “As cultural producers, critics, and members of an audience the women are positioned to intervene strategically in the imaginative construction, critical interpretation, and social condition of Black women” (1995: 27). The Black women performers who participated in this research present their art as individual acts of resistance against a heteronormative, white supremacist patriarchy or, as Audre Lorde referred to it, an “anti-erotic society.” Through performance (both musical and non-musical), they form supportive relationships based on knowledge-building, recruiting, networking, and the creation and nourishing of “safe spaces.” In doing so, they exemplify the types of relationships ethnomusicologist Tammy Kernodle analyzes in her study on women jazz musicians; relationships that are:

[D]efined by layered and multifarious praxes through which collectives of black women have engaged in self-definition; created systems of knowledge that provided the skills to navigate political, social, and economic spheres; and formed ‘safe spaces’ that have supported their process of brokering power. (2014: 28)

Therefore, Black Women Rock (BWR) is identified in this study as a highly attuned politically conscious interpretive community of Betty Davis.

7.1.1 Daughters of Betty

BWR is a growing coalition of Black women musicians and artists that pay homage to Betty Davis through their own performance practices and their everyday lives. They call themselves Daughters of Betty and metaphorically link themselves to a lineage of Black feminist musical practice in which Betty Davis is viewed as a vital foremother. They honor Betty by saying her name, gathering, claiming space, sharing her music, citing her as an influence, and most importantly, by being true to their individual look, sound, and message that often challenges the traditional grain of R&B-based music (i.e. Black music). BWR, as a dynamic alliance, reclaim Betty Davis by acknowledging the struggles that still exist for Black women in the music and culture industries. My use of the term “reclaim” here is indebted to cultural theorist and performance studies scholar Harvey Young:

Re-claiming does not require that we erase the past and script a new one. The prefix tells us this. To reclaim is to take something back. It is to possess something in the present while knowing that it has only recently been back in your possession. It is to remain aware of its previous ‘claims’ even as you articulate your own. *It is to know the past in the present as you work toward creating a future.* (2010: 135; italics mine)

The Daughters of Betty engage in what Amber Johnson calls *performative counternarrative*, or a way of “uncovering and performing the tensions of what it means to be oppressed yet resist” (2014: 197). Present-day Black women artists who challenge normative conceptions of both Blackness and femininity know all too well the oppressive reasons behind Betty’s downfall in the 1970s. This is precisely why BWR was formed: “A tribute to Betty Davis and other trailblazing women who came before them, the self-proclaimed Daughters of Betty are a cultural force in an industry that often doesn’t celebrate their intellectual power, self-empowered lyrics, independence and sexually confident music” (“Jessica Care Moore’s Black Women Rock!”).

BWR was originally the brainchild of Detroit-based poet and performance artist, Jessica Care Moore, who gained prominence in the 1990s when she won the legendary “It’s Showtime at the Apollo” competition a record breaking five times in a row with her searing performance of the poem “Black Statue of Liberty.” In 1997, she paved her own path and launched her own publishing company, Moore Black Press. A highly respected poet amongst hip hop artists, Moore recorded

with rapper Nas on his 1999 *Nastradamus* album and was signed to Talib Kweli's Javotti Media Label. In fact, it was hip hop artist Ahmir "Questlove" Thompson (of The Roots) who introduced Moore to Betty Davis in the late 1990s when, according to Moore, he came up to her backstage after a gig in New York City and said: "You smile with Betty Davis teeth." Unfamiliar with Thompson's reference, Moore sought out information online and found a small collection of Betty Davis photos as well as the bootleg CDs that were released in the mid-1990s. Moore was viscerally moved by Betty's image, the intimate truth of her lyrics, and her raw blend of blues, funk, and rock. She felt an instant connection with Betty as a Black woman and an artist, and she was frustrated with the lack of information about her new icon, or as she called it, the "non-story."

Since Moore had discovered Betty through her inner circle of performing artists, she made it her mission to make sure other people could discover her as well. In 2004, at the National Black Arts Festival in Atlanta, Moore produced a tribute performance to Betty Davis that would give birth to the BWR community: "Black Women Rock came to me because at National Black Arts Festival, when I was producing, it was missing all these bad ass Black women I knew who were making funk rock; badass music that had full string sections. And I was like, where are these women?" (Moore, interview by author, Jan 19, 2019). To remedy what Moore saw as a lack of diverse musical representation within the Black arts community, she created a show that featured uncompromising Black women musicians who, Moore felt, channeled Betty's progressive, genre-blending spirit and were proudly rooted in rock music's historical blues tradition. The first lineup for that 90-minute performance included spoken poetry by Moore, musical performances by Divinity Roxx, Imani Uzuri, Tamar-kali, as well as live art by Marcia Jones. It was the first known tribute to Betty Davis in the world, and the first gathering held in her name.

According to Moore, one of Betty's friends (Moore does not remember this person's name, but it was most likely Connie Portis) was actually in Atlanta and saw the performance. Moore was ecstatic to receive a call from Betty's friend who let her know Betty was alive and living in Pittsburgh (information unknown to the public prior to her 2007 reissues). Contact information was exchanged between the two women and, soon after, Moore discovered a personal card in the mail from Betty that read: "Dear Jessica, Thank you for keeping my music alive. Best wishes and

love, Betty Davis.” Immediately after receiving that card, Moore sat down and responded by writing a poem entitled “They Say She’s Different”¹⁰⁴ (Figure 61):

birth is a sound. she was born Mabry. Carolina farm girl.
steel lungs, quietly adjusting into Pittsburgh legs,
long as freight trains. eventually carrying us to
an unrecognizable place. unfiltered feminine funk don’t
know boundaries.

can’t just quiet down a train moving at full speed.
not wearing those feathers & history and wild rebellion
as leather neck tie. loosen up miles. betty
is in the building. inside your covers. on the notes,
brewing extraordinary fuses between
muddy waters bb king big mama thornnton, lightnin’ hopkins
conjuring jazz & electric high powered anthems
she wailed. moved. took them for an afrofuturistic ride.

Betty found herself inside a movement
that did not include self defined, self empowered
sexually confident women, especially beautiful
brown ones.

How high was that Egyptian leg kick, that pushed you into
american music non history?

How do you measure the time it takes to suspend your leg
minus the minds you blow when you finally decide to place
it back on the ground and howl inside the mic.

why do women, ordained as goddess, legend,
get swallowed whole by the fear of industry.

we just the blues, sped up

who can hold a note while singing bout chitlins, beat
him with a turquoise chain, celebrate the sharing of lovers
from San Francisco to Detroit & shout out
john lee hooker as necessary blues in one heavy breath.

¹⁰⁴ I render the poem’s line breaks as they appear in the original document Moore sent me in 2018. In 2020, the poem appeared in a published book of poems by Moore entitled *We Want Our Bodies Back* (177-182) with slightly different line breaks and an opening dedication that read: “(Betty Davis and all her metaphorical daughters. After 15 years of *Black WOMEN Rock!*)” (Moore 2020: 177).

veins deep as spirituals. betty told our collective story,
straight. without fear, no chaser.
this wide hipped music is spit out of a defiant flame
a hungry gut of midwest grit, of heart and
longing for truth.

authenticity was not sexy in the 70's if you
were a tall nubian killer of beauty, Funktified fro as crown
growl of language, mask for no one. spun records & men
on her fingers.

sangin' anti-love songs.

black.
betty.

jazz muse. miles could not hold you the way
he played that horn. you unloosened the tie.
made them beg. moved their minds
into uncomfortable places.

muses ain't for idle worship, you know?

you refused to tone it down for them.
you. daughter of Kilimanjaro
never turned your black scream into a purr
or bowed down to the phallic worship
of masculinity

hendrix and sly knew. you.

we just the blues sped up.

your music born free, inside a place some women
pretend not to recognize. you controlled stages
they wish they had the courage to touch.

hands & time

failing to grasp the weight
of your young genius.
your before your timeless/ness
that doesn't pay the bills, but leaves them guessing.

how did she do it? how did she survive?
outwit a young rock & roll death

choosing life, being fully awake
can be lonely

how do we breath, still?
your metaphorical daughters
they will forever wonder

this alien place that works to silence black women's
voices their entire lives, then labels us "crazy" when
we finally decide
to stop talking to them. refuse interviews or access
to our souls.

How did you balance being from
the future in the past? to be the queen of funk. a black
rock in a land of pebbles. being black genius
& sexy was so confusing for the often low vibration
of this planet.

the industry was not ready
& still has not recovered from the powerful likes of you.
Betty Davis

Where are all your image awards
Your rebellion statues in your honor

?

They love looking at us, once we'd turned to stone.
You forever our Black rock.

Jazz's conduit into the hereafter
in this place that kills kings
& destroys the magic of women
you continue to live on.

Figure 61. Jessica Care Moore's poem "They Say She's Different" (2004).

Moore's poem authorized a more intersectional, innovative analysis and appreciation of Betty than arguably any other work had previously done. Moore "uses her own poetic craft to re-create [...] and re-mythologize" (Lordi 2013:216) the life and music of another iconic artist and, in doing so, carries on the legacy of Black women artists finding resonance within the work of other Black women artists. In her own masterful work on the resonance between Black literary and musical traditions, Emily Lordi (2013) emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between music

and writing. Lordi draws upon examples from Nikki Giovanni, who wrote a poem for Aretha Franklin (“Poem for Aretha,” 1970) and Linda Susan Jackson, who published a collection of poetry for Etta James (*What Yellow Sounds Like*, 2007), to explain that “while the singer inspires the poet, the poet also re-creates the singer, candidly conjuring her muse” (2013: 216).¹⁰⁵ Both Lordi and Moore provide powerful examples for how to interpret the idea of the muse in terms of reciprocity. When Moore writes in her poem, “*muses ain’t for idle worship, you know?*” she challenges the masculinist trope of the muse by acknowledging such cultural and artistic work as dynamic, fluid, and worthy of further engagement and interpretation; rather than a fixed, trivial pleasure for adoration. Thus, the literary expression of Moore’s artistic resonance with Betty Davis reclaimed Betty through a more inclusive lens and acted as the clarion call for future resonance to take place.¹⁰⁶

Following her direct communication with Betty, Moore was galvanized to continue BWR in some kind of sustainable way, and through which an active process of knowledge-building and support that was desperately needed. The importance of Betty’s reaching out to Moore in 2004 cannot be understated. It was three years before her albums were reissued, and thirteen years until her documentary would be released, and Betty was then still deep in her reclusive state. The card was undoubtedly sent as a token of appreciation for Moore’s beautifully crafted tribute, but more importantly it was the connection Betty felt to Moore’s project, which was created, performed, and produced entirely by Black women, that incited her to send out a signal. After that initial 2004

¹⁰⁵ For Lordi’s analysis on the resonance between Nikki Giovanni and Aretha Franklin, see Lordi (2013: 173-208). For Lordi’s analysis on the resonance between Linda Susan Jackson and Etta James, see Lordi (2013: 209-225). Moore also wrote a poem for Aretha Franklin entitled “Aretha in August” (2020: 99-100). However, unlike Giovanni’s rare example of writing a poem about an artist not only while they are alive but at the height of their fame, Moore’s poem was written in the more traditional context of eulogizing a musician after they have died. Aretha Franklin died on August 16, 2018. Both Giovanni and Moore establish Franklin’s broad aesthetic and political impact while humanizing her through an emphasis on her embodied experience as a woman, Giovanni (1970) framing her as “*a mother of four children having to hit the road,*” and Moore (2020) recognizing that “*Aretha was a teen mother, and she struggled with things that all women before their time struggle with. Women who unapologetically walk in their power, balancing the men they love while still loving their own damn bodies.*” When Aretha Franklin died, Betty requested I bring my computer over to her apartment so we could watch Aretha’s funeral service broadcasted on August 31, 2018. As we watched the funeral service, Betty also emphasized Aretha’s womanhood (albeit through casual conversation rather than literature) when, disturbed by the long row of seated men on the church stage, she exclaimed, “Why are there so many *men* up there? Aretha was a real woman. She would have wanted more women to be up on that stage” (Betty Davis, personal communication, Aug 31, 2018).

¹⁰⁶ While John Ballon’s clarion call that he set forth in 2003 with his online blog was for information and materials on Betty, Moore’s clarion call that she set forth in 2004 with the writing and performing of her poem was for a resonance with Betty at the level of cultural memory and embodied experience. Both calls to action have proven to be necessary and indispensable to Betty’s reemergence in the twenty-first century, with Ballon’s call providing many of the raw materials for Betty’s reissues and Moore’s call forming a network of performance in tribute to Betty.

performance in Atlanta, and the signal of support she received from Betty, Moore has continued to work tirelessly to bring BWR concerts to cities across the country and produce an annual concert in her hometown of Detroit.

7.1.2 Black Women Rock Concert

After learning about BWR at the Pittsburgh premier of the *Betty* film in March 2018, I connected with Moore and sought out to understand who the Daughters of Betty are. Following several phone conversations with Moore, I traveled to Detroit in March 2019, at her invitation, to attend the Black Women Rock 15th Anniversary concert (Figure 62).

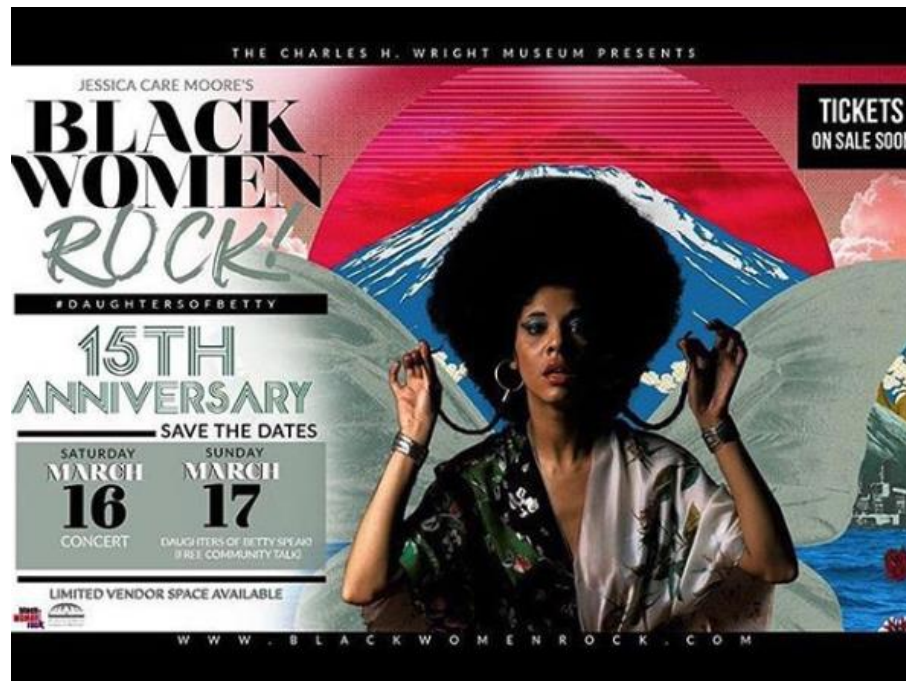


Figure 62. Flyer for Black Women Rock's 15th Anniversary Concert, Detroit, MI, 2019.

In my possession was a sealed card from Betty who gave me instructions to deliver it directly to Moore.

As I entered the impressive Charles Wright Museum, the second largest African American history museum in the country, I felt a kinetic energy as I joined the others who were filing inside after the museum's official operating hours for the BWR concert. Given that it was both the 15th

anniversary of BWR and also held in Moore's hometown, the overall feel of the evening was one of camaraderie and celebration. Several vendor tables were set up along the wall near the entrance to the theater and featured items for sale such as Moore's books and albums, BWR merchandise (including hoop earrings and t-shirts that read "Daughters of Betty"), original pieces from local visual artists, as well as Betty's music and uniquely crafted items that featured her image. I knew immediately that Betty would want a pair of earrings (her favorite accessory), so I purchased the "Daughters of Betty" hoops along with a vinyl LP of Moore's latest music poetry project, *Black Tea: The Legend of Jessi James*, which Moore later told me was inspired by the late poet and musician, Gil Scott Heron. I could hear the music of Tina Turner pouring out from the theater's open doors and proceeded to enter with my newly purchased merchandise and the printed program I was handed by the usher.

Inside the theatre, DJ Stacey "Hotwaxx" Hale—known in Detroit as the "Godmother of House Music" due to her being credited as the first DJ to play house music on the radio in Detroit—was curating the pre-show soundtrack. Tina Turner's (1970) cover of the Beatles' (1969) song "Come Together" was playing as I picked out my seat in the modestly sized theatre. The crowd consisted overwhelmingly of older Black women, many dressed impeccably for the occasion. On the side of the stage was live painter, Sabrina Nelson, working on her easel, carrying on the mixed-media tradition of the concert's origin. Images of Betty slowly appeared on a large projector screen that was located far down center stage, behind the drum set. Inside the program, on the very first page, was a scanned image of the card that Betty wrote to Moore back in 2004. As I flipped through the rest of the program, the BWR orchestra led by Music Director and guitarist, Kat Dyson, began to set up. Adorning tall white leather boots, a short red dress, long black cape and a black top hat, Moore was greeted by her hometown with roaring applause (Figure 63).



Figure 63. Jessica Care Moore on stage reading her poem, "They Say She's Different" (2004), The Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History, Detroit, MI, March 16, 2019.

After welcoming the audience and taking a moment to acknowledge the 15-year anniversary that was being celebrated, Moore kicked off the evening's performances with a reading of her tribute poem, "They Say She's Different," which had come to serve as a ceremonial introduction to all of BWR's concerts. Anthropologist Paul Connerton suggests that embodied practices allow for recollected knowledge of the past to be sustained by ritual performance (1989: 79), and watching Moore perform her poem felt like a ritual performance—an act of transfer meant to invoke and nourish the cultural memory of Betty Davis' music. Not the memory of her life, as Moore (like Giovanni) resisted the common act of honoring an artist with poetic tribute only *after* they have died, but rather the cultural memory that Betty's life articulated and embodied.

While I had read the poem numerous times since Moore first sent it to me, witnessing her performing the poem live brought new life to it as she exploited the relationship between speaking and singing—a characteristic Betty and other Black feminist performers, including Nikki

Giovanni, also utilized. Witnessing the manifesto-like poem performed on stage, with such urgent delivery, made me feel, in that moment, a sense of surrender. I surrendered to the revelation that the “lifeworld” of Betty Davis was so much richer than I ever knew; or ever could know. I surrendered to the understanding (which I always knew, but never experienced on a visceral level) that no matter how much I engaged with her material and her legacy, it could never resonate with me as deeply as it did for the Black women who “*controlled stages*,” as Moore puts it in her poem (women like Jessica Care Moore, SATE, Tamar-kali, and Militia Vox). And, in that moment, while witnessing Moore perform Betty’s poem, I felt a resounding sense of pleasure knowing that Betty was understood, internalized, and loved this deeply.

Following Moore’s poem, each individual performer sang two or three of their original songs with the band that remained onstage to accompany each act. The lineup of performers always varies at BWR concerts, depending on which city it is held and the availability of the artists. For this concert, performers included Liza Colby, Celisse Henderson, V Bozeman, Shelley Nicole, Militia Vox, Steffanie Christi’an, Ideeyah, and Kia Ifani Warren. The images of Betty on the large projector were replaced with images of the musicians during their set, bringing the visual focus to the women on stage. It was reminder to the audience that, while they gather and perform in honor of Betty, BWR’s primary goal is supporting *current* Black women artists who struggle with the same issues that Betty faced in the 1970s, as Moore made clear to me in our first conversation: “These women’s stories are important too. We’re not going to wait until we’re old to tell our stories and somebody has to come in and find us. The thing is, we tell their stories now so they can have fruitful lives and careers and they can help other Black women who come after them do the same thing” (Moore, interview by author, Jan 19, 2019).

Moore’s focus on supporting the individual performers in order to uplift the greater BWR community was even more evident in the artists’ decision not to cover Betty’s songs in their sets, as is often the case with traditional tribute concerts. Rather than covering Betty’s material, or imitating her look and sound, all of the performers presented themselves as uniquely individual musicians, from the manic funk rock of Liza Colby, to the blues guitarist stylings of Celisse Henderson, to the moody alternative soul of V Bozeman, to the heavy metal of Militia Vox. As is BWR’s tradition, the musicians came together onstage to close out the show by performing one of Betty’s song as a group finale. At this 15th anniversary concert, the finale was Betty’s 1975 song “F.U.N.K.” Each artist took turns singing the verses and adding their own embellishments. During

this number, their collective performance onstage turned more towards each other than the crowd, so that they were essentially performing to and for each other. By that point, the entire theater was up on its feet, taking their cue from the group of women already on stage who were so clearly in their element. Fiona Buckland suggests that “groups provide individuals with frameworks within which their memories are localized, including the spaces and activities shared by that group” (2002: 22). By claiming the stage together, the BWR concert finale visually and sonically located BWR as a group that not only shared spaces (stages) and activities (singing), but also memories and experiences.

7.1.3 “Spreading the Gospel of Betty”

While many BWR artists were aware of Betty Davis before Moore’s 2004 clarion call, some self-proclaimed Daughters of Betty only learned about their metaphorical foremother after Moore reached out to them with an invitation to join BWR. Detroit-based vocalist, Ideeyah, told me that this was how she first heard Betty: “I had never heard of Betty Davis prior to joining BWR about eight years ago. But, since then, I have dug so deep into her music and after three albums, I’m like, ‘Damn, where’s the rest of it? We need more’” (Ideeyah, personal communication, March 19, 2019). Once trumpet player, Leslie Vonner, learned about Betty after joining the BWR orchestra a few years ago, she applied it to her jazz history studies: “I used to get into fights with kids on campus. I studied jazz, so at jazz school I was talking about how if it wasn’t for Betty Davis there would be no electric miles; no *Bitches Brew*” (Vonner, personal communication, March 19, 2019). The discovery of Betty by other Black women artists, passed down largely through oral tradition and other acts of transference, is a direct engagement with the type of Black feminism that the blues women of the “race records” era spearheaded. Betty’s sound, look, and message articulated a type of cultural memory that resonated with the embodied experiences of these women. Such was the case when Moore was introduced to Betty by Ahmir “Questlove” Thompson in the late 1990s:

I looked her up and I just went crazy. She looked like my fine, tall Aunty [...] The broader thing for me was her non-story and not being able to find any information about her. Then I started talking to the women in my circle and everybody loved

her. Everybody worshipped her [...] All these edgy women who the music industry just didn't really have a place for. (Moore, interview by author, Jan 19, 2019)

Two of the women in Moore's "circle" were Erykah Badu and Joi Gillam, who both had success starting in the 1990s with their own forms of Afro-centric, highly sensual music that defied industry genre formation. In 2018, Gillam told Red Bull Music Academy what it was about Betty that attracted them to her: "It was the music, it was the lyrics, it was the texture of her voice, it was the veracity in the voice, it was the honesty. There was just something different about Betty. I could see my fearlessness in the other people [who influenced me], but I didn't see the unapologetic sexuality. I felt very, very alone in that" (Kariisa 2018). Badu also spoke out about the commonalities she shared with Betty: "I just want my opportunity. I just want my chance, too – with no judgments or roles. I don't understand roles [...] my life is nothing like that. That's what I have in common with Betty's spirit. She just wants to live [and to] be able to share her song" (ibid.).

The knowledge-building and reverence surrounding Betty from people like Moore, Thompson, Badu, and Gillam problematize the idea that Betty was virtually unknown until her records were reissued, highlighting the important issue of cultural capital that record collectors and reissue labels so desperately thrive on. By marketing Betty as "lost" or "forgotten," and emphasizing her disappearance as evidence of her "mystique," the record collecting community privileged their own lack of knowledge about Betty as primary in order to set her up for "discovery," and ultimately, fetishization. As I mentioned in Chapter 5, prior to reissue in 2007 Betty was largely unknown outside of the hip hop and DJ community. However, this oral history amongst Black artists and musicians associated with BWR reframes the idea that the hip hop and DJ community were crucial sites of knowledge-building around Betty, and that women within that community were essential carriers of such knowledge.

The specialized knowledge that manifests from cultural memory has long been a staple of Black feminist thought. Cultural memory consists not only of the stories, images, sounds, or documents of the past but also of the acts of transfer they enable, including oral history and performances: "Acts of memory are thus acts of performance, representation, and interpretation" (Hirsch and Smith 2002: 5). BWR vocalist and composer Tamar-kali remembered the importance of "spreading the gospel of Betty": "Someone tells you, you tell people, and I was telling everybody and anybody that was special to me, anyone I loved, anyone who had great respect and

love for music” (Tamar-kali, interview by author, Sept 23, 2019). These accounts of oral history are evidence that Betty was being sought out by various communities, especially the Black feminist avant-garde music community, in the 1990s.

Just as Betty had an underground following in the 1970s, so too did she have a similar following prior to her reissues. However, because there were no quality historical reissues available there was often no context to go along with her image or the (bootlegged) content that was available via CD. BWR vocalist Militia Vox remembers her initial hunt for Betty: “We’re talking the internet early days, and I saw that picture of her, but couldn’t find what she sounded like; couldn’t find information about her. She was like a cult figure. And then I would see on message boards [other] people looking for” (Vox, personal communication, March 19, 2019). Similarly, Tamar-kali expressed feeling at odds with Betty’s entrance into her life because of the lack of information surrounding her: “Why didn’t I know? The chord that was struck in me was a revelation, but it was also grief because I would have wanted to walk with her since I was born” (Tamar-kali, interview by author, Sept 23, 2019). By saying she would have wanted to “walk” with Betty her whole life, Tamar-kali locates Betty within the African diasporic concept of ancestral presence. “Spreading the gospel of Betty” (as Tamar-kali referred to it) was a way for Black women artists to pass down and update the specialized, shared knowledge originally formulated by the blues women. For this new generation, Betty represented a transgressive Black women’s standpoint that resonated with both individual experiences and a broader body of collective wisdom.

7.2 The Blues Women Legacy

Like the blues women who came before her, Betty Davis used music to convey information about Black women’s erotic life beyond the respectability politics of her era. Her music made personal experiences public and inventively related them to larger social issues in a way that “moved from victimization to agency” (Davis 1998: 62). Making private matters (i.e. women’s experiences) public via expressive culture is a way of authorizing and performing vulnerability, which is an imperative feature of the blues woman legacy. Angela Davis writes: “[Blues women] forged and memorialized images of tough, resilient, and independent women who were afraid

neither of their own vulnerability nor of defending their right to be respected as autonomous human beings” (ibid.: 41). In the *Betty* documentary film, *Militia Vox*, one of two Daughters of Betty whose interviews were shown in the film, provided a rare moment of Black feminist interjection by explaining that “*for a long time [...] women felt like it was safe to be victims on stage, or to perform from a place of victimhood, and that’s just not what someone like Betty is about*” (Cox 2017). In this sense, vulnerability functions in a performative way that the Daughters of Betty relate to on a deeply personal and artistic level. By identifying the importance of accessing the vulnerability that is inherent to their cultural memory as Black women, the Daughters of Betty (taking a cue from their metaphorical foremother) present themselves as autonomous, artistic agents ready to reclaim control over their lives and their art.

Not only does BWR reclaim Betty as an icon through performance, cultural memory, and extra-musical values, they identify with her experiences as they traverse the cultural politics of race, gender, and sexuality in their own music-making practices. For BWR artists like Toronto-based SATE, Betty is an emblem with which she can draw inspiration and strength from. But beyond that, there is something about Betty that connects with certain Black women in a visceral way that is intrinsically linked to embodied experience:

Honestly when I found Betty it changed my entire life [...] She fanned a fire that was already there, but I thought was only mine. But, of course, I'm not alone. We're not alone in this world. So, finding her was like, ‘oh my God, that's me! That's what I want to do. That's how I want to do it. That's how I see myself. If she can do it I can do it,’ and she was just like my template; she was my jump off. She was my foundation. She was inspiration; affirmation. (SATE, interview by author, June 22, 2019)

This association with Betty as being part of one’s own identity—especially one’s own family lineage—has been a recurring theme in my conversations with BWR musicians: “I felt like she was in my DNA and I didn’t know. I felt like I had an Auntie that my mother had and never told me. It felt like this sacred important knowledge that was at the epicenter of some part of me that I had been kept away from” (Tamar-kali, interview by author, Sept 23, 2019). Daughters of Betty speak about Betty as if they are talking about a family member: one of their Aunties, mothers, or grandmothers.

This instinctive connection to Betty stems from her body of work as a musician but also through her ability to navigate her sexuality and creative agency as a Black woman in a racist,

heteronormative, and sexist society. As some Daughters of Betty understand it, this is a direct connection with, and expression of, the blues:

When I said to you it wasn't just about an artist and the music, but it was a deeper level of connection, that's because of the blues Betty's people came up during the great migration, my people came up in the great migration; we share an ethno-cultural identity. And the blues is a musical tradition within that identity. So it's just kind of like a foundational understanding of my roots. (Tamar-kali, interview by author Sept 23, 2019).

There is a strong sense among those women who honor Betty as an icon (musicians, visual artists, photographers, and poets alike) that they are living in the tradition of the blues woman; that they are part of a continuum of uncompromising, unapologetic Black women who define themselves outside of the church, the patriarchy, and the mainstream. "Betty owns her sexuality," SATE told me. "And you can hear that because of the things she's saying, it is the blues. The feminism of blues came from the control they were taking, just that alone [...] This is Betty. This is why I do this. This is my mom. This is my family" (SATE, interview by author, June 22, 2019).

The familial connection many of these women have for Betty highlight just how successfully Betty embodied the modern blues woman during her career. Just as Betty was galvanized to reinterpret the blues women's sound, style, and message to fit her modern era, so too are Daughters of Betty fueled by a long tradition of Black women visionaries who have paved the way. Affected by their music and their lives, a kinship is formed around the heritage of blues women as a group of organic intellectuals who performed and documented knowledge and, thus, carved out enough space in the music industry to significantly alter the cultural landscape of American life—to perform vulnerability without presenting themselves as victim while they artistically labored in the public sphere.

While reissue discourse and documentary film are largely working through the narrative lens of music mythology and residual media, BWR works through the performative counter-narrative lens of cultural memory and embodied experience. Betty is considered by BWR to be representative of and specific to a Black womanhood artistic identity that reclaims the performing of erotics that is rooted in rock music's blues origins. In effect, this type of Black women's artistic identity actively works to queer the racist, heteronormative system of patriarchy that Black women artists continually learn to navigate and resist. This type of queering of a dominant system (e.g.

the music industry) was spearheaded by the classic blues women in the early years of the modern American entertainment industry (see Chapter 2).

7.2.1 Anti-Erotic Binary

Challenging racialized notions of gender, Daughters of Betty perform “disidentifications” (Muñoz 1999: 185) with the toxic binarism aspects of Black womanhood that Betty’s career was up against, and which still threatens the safety and agency of Black women today. This performative “disidentification” was something that specifically drew Tamar-kali, who came up in the hardcore punk scene in Brooklyn in the 1990s, to Betty Davis:

I engaged in performative masculinity because it was safe. By engaging in performative masculinity people would hit on me less, I would be taken seriously in the pit. Cause I wasn't there to be anybody's girlfriend and that was a major issue for me, not being sexualized. So, having Betty come into my life was the beginning of me opening up [...] She was just a woman, and that can encompass a lot of things, but I feel like *what she represented to me was her full humanity*. It wasn't in a box. I was engaging in performative masculinity as a shield, and there's also performative femininity, and I feel like she was just herself. (Tamar-kali, interview by author, Sept 23, 2019)

While I have suggested that Betty intentionally and inventively engaged in erotic labor—performative masculinity and femininity—I do not posit that such expression was in service of some scripted “nasty gal” alter-ego character. Rather, I suggest that Betty decided to present and make public those aspects of herself—“her full humanity”—as an intentional and inventive choice. In doing so, she authored and projected the erotic as a vital source of information and power as Audre Lorde theorized it: “My fullest concentration of energy is available to me only when I integrate all the parts of who I am, openly, allowing power from particular sources of my living to flow back and forth freely through all my different selves, without the restriction of externally imposed definition” (Lorde 1984: 120-21). In 1976, Betty echoed this desire for an integrative self, telling *New Dawn* newspaper that she wants “so much from life, everything that I can get, and what I put into life I want back” (Toepfer 1976: 110).

From the moment Betty Davis emerged as a recording artist in 1973, the mainstream press rested on the oldest false binary in the patriarchy: Madonna/Whore. 1970s music journalists

constantly remarked on her shy demeanor during interviews, puzzled by how the same woman who used a turquoise whip as a prop and grabbed her crotch on stage the night before could be so introverted offstage. To this day, narratives about Betty's music have been at odds with what people think they know about her life. It has caused post-reissue cultural critique about Betty to suggest she was performing out an alter ego. By suggesting Betty's performance is the work of an alter ego, post-reissue cultural critique shines a light on the present-day expectations of Black women's sexuality and essentialized notions of Black subjectivity.

When I spoke with BWR artist SATE, she related to this on a deeply personal level. As a self-described "shy" person, she is often frustrated by the way audiences and press are intimidated by her sexuality on stage and shocked by her sensitivity offstage:

There are those fine lines where we start to step over what it means to be a sexy Black woman—a woman in charge. I love to spread my legs and pulse my pussy in the audience. That's what I do. Because that feels grounding for me; that makes me feel strong. And that's in the moment [...] It's how the music moves me. I love when there's a relationship between me and the music and the legacy. And that's also what I feel from Betty, she is of the legacy. (SATE, interview by author, June 22, 2019)

Rather than Betty's, or SATE's, performance being observed as an alter ego, I observe Betty and SATE's dynamic onstage personas as a form of erotic sovereignty; a multifaceted authoring of sexual agency and artistic control that highlights the many facets of their identity and desires.

After seeing the documentary, singer-songwriter Jamila Woods spoke about Betty as an inspiration and unpacked the anti-erotic binary so often placed on Black women: "Betty called herself an introvert, but then she would have this transformation on stage. People would say, 'Oh, you're one Betty off stage and you're one Betty on stage.' And she's like, 'No, there's one Betty and I just have multitudes.' That's really inspiring to me" (Peck 2018). In 2019, Woods released an album entitled *LEGACY! LEGACY!*, which consists of twelve songs named after and inspired by twelve artistic legends. The first track, entitled "BETTY," is a tribute to the type of "full humanity" Betty represents (Figure 64):

Oh, I'm different, I'm a cup of mild sauce
Sweet tongue, but don't get me in a paper cut
I'll fight you with my eyes, oh, when they call me shy
They just frightened of what's in my mind
These great greats won't let me lie

Midnight eyes wide feels like I'm at the riverside
Great greats come down, they whisper to me quiet
"I'm alive, I'm alive, I'm alive"

I am not your typical girl
Throw away that picture in your head
I am not your typical girl
Work harder now, work harder

[...]

Oh, I am different, I am different
I am, I am

What is it with you independent men? It's always something
Threatening your masculine energy, you think it's fleeting
Nothing you ain't give to me I can take away from you now
Let me be, I'm trying to fly, you insist on clipping my wings

[...]

Figure 64. Song lyrics to Jamila Wood's "BETTY" (2019).

In an interview, Woods explained the motivation behind her song:

I recently saw the documentary about her, *They Say I'm Different*, and it gave me an even bigger picture into how she pushed what it meant to be a woman performing onstage. She was really sensual, and people couldn't handle it. I always admired that. But that actually closed a lot of doors for her, with men in the music industry feeling like she was going to be *too much*. The second verse of this song questions the tension that exists when women want to step outside of the box that's prescribed for them, and how men sometimes see that as a threat as opposed to us just expressing ourselves. (Anderson 2019)

Woods comments and song lyrics allude to a moment in the film when former friend, Desmond Nakano, comments on how there was a "split" with Betty: "*I remember once she said something to me like, 'Well, you know I'm a very sensitive girl.' So, that was her real—that was her—but her persona as Nasty Gal, you can't get further away from it—the split*" (Cox 2017). This "split" suggested by Nakano is then visually reinforced by a split screen, fragmenting Betty's image down the middle in two parts. During a post-film audience discussion in Chicago, this moment in the film was referenced by another Black woman creative, Denenge Akpem, who boldly exclaimed: "This world both refuses to acknowledge Black women as genius and at the

same time steals everything from us while vilifying us, stuck in this fucked up groove of patriarchy and misogyny, Madonna-whore [...] It's not either-or; we are a spectrum of all things" (Akpem, personal communication, Aug 19, 2018).

As Tamar-kali expressed it to me, Black women, as uniquely interpretive cultural readers of a post-reissue Betty Davis, have consistently located Betty's music and persona outside of the "nasty gal" persona and within a long tradition of Black queer ideology that centers bodily agency, unapologetic sexuality, and the undoing of normativity:

Black women owning their bodies and their sexuality is nothing new. The first rebels were Black women singing songs like, "I Want a Little Sugar in My Bowl," "One Hour Mama"; you're talking about Ida Cox, Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, they were doing really risky stuff. Women were talking about their satisfaction; Alberta Hunter, Victoria Spivey's "Black Snake Moan." Sisters been talking about how they like it and where they want it, and that was the beginning. That was the nation state of the rebel rocker. It's just that things aren't put in the appropriate context [...] *Betty's sexuality was obscured because the historical context of blues women was obscured and co-opted to fit a white male package.* Meanwhile, she comes from this long tradition, but if that tradition is obscured, then people think she's just sexy and she's putting it out there. (Tamar-kali, interview by author, Sept 23, 2019)

By acknowledging the erasure of Black women's place in the "nation state of the rebel rocker," Tamar-kali speaks to one of the crucial functions of BWR, to respond to "the void in music concerts and education around women in the rock and roll genre" ("Jessica Care Moore's Black Women Rock!").

7.2.2 "Just the Blues, Sped Up"

Not only is it the cultural work of BWR to extend the legacy of blues women through their own performance practices and everyday lives, but to actively work to dismantle the mythologies of rock music culture and criticism that "depends on a narrow discourse of shared knowledge that largely marginalizes (if not altogether erases) the presence of women and particularly women of color in alternative music culture" (Brooks 2008: 61). BWR Music Director, Kat Dyson, one of the "elders" amongst the Daughters of Betty, emphasizes the importance of this mission: "Just saying those three words, Black Women Rock, tears down the foundation of this whole industry, even though they are now starting to go back and thank the Big Mama Thornton's and the Sister

Rosetta's because the footage is there, they can't lie. They can't sweep it under the carpet" (Dyson, personal communication, March 17, 2019).

It is the mission of BWR to not only honor Betty by supporting the work of present day Black women artists, but to actively rehistoricize the canon and culture of rock music through the lens of race, gender, and sexuality politics. By acknowledging the ways in which Black women musicians were promoted or constrained within the past (and present) contours of racially coded genre formations, BWR address the present day constraints Black women artists face today who do not neatly fit into racialized genres and market niches. Through performance, cultural memory, and extra musical values, BWR actively works to dismantle these masculinist histories of popular music so as to see and hear "America through the voices and sounds of eccentric female musical pioneers" (Brooks 2008:58). However, as Betty Davis can attest to, achieving recognition as a "pioneer" long after your career has ended is a difficult honor to navigate.

In 1977, after being dropped from Island Records and her fourth studio album was shelved, Betty candidly spoke out against the press's attempts to compare her with other Black women vocalists: "The press can't say I'm like Diana Ross or Freda Payne and when they can't compare me to these individuals, they make up things to say, which is indicative of my mixed reviews. If you want to compare me to someone, compare me to Bessie Smith, I'm about that" (Chatman 1977: 12). While I have already situated Betty in the tradition of blues women and the legacy of Black feminism that they performed and documented, I find (and, more importantly, Betty finds) particularly important similarities between Betty's career and life and that of Bessie Smith, Empress of the Blues. Beyond the performative similarities that both of their careers offer up for analysis, the bond between their relationships to the music industry and the changing cultural and technological landscapes of both their respective eras deserve a closer look. Not only do Bessie and Betty share similarities on the basis of style, content, and audience reception during the times when they were recording and performing, but their public decline and post-career reputation are also united by several factors.

Both women suffered a decline in record sales that eventually caused them to be dropped by their labels. Bessie Smith was dropped from Columbia Records in 1931 and Betty from Island Records in 1976. It is not only the fact that both artists were dropped from large mainstream labels that accounted for their similarities, but rather the larger socio-economic reasons for their release. Smith's record sales suffered from a few factors: (1) the Depression affected American workers

and consumers (especially African American workers and consumers) on a significant level, creating a hostile market where buying music records was an indulgent luxury most could not afford; (2) the advent of radio and film as new modern mediums for media consumption swept the entertainment industry; and (3) the classic blues style that Smith and countless other women established was quickly losing popularity amongst all demographics of American listeners. The male-dominated, guitar-driven folk music of the Delta Blues, riding the wave of access and opportunity that the classic blues women afforded them as the first recording artists of the “race records” era, was soon authorized as more authentic—and hence deemed more desirable—by the burgeoning class of record collectors and industry scouts.

Betty also suffered from a drop in record sales for similar economic, technological, and cultural forces specific to her time. While nowhere near as severe as the Depression of the 1930s, the Recession of the mid-1970s proved to be a moment of economic crisis that was particularly felt in African American communities across America, furthering racial difference amongst class lines and pushing a significant amount of Black citizens out of the middle-class (Collins 2000). The rise of disco music and the ascent of the nightclub DJ was a sobering shift for many avant-garde Black artists in the 1970s. This new “four to the floor” sound and polished look of disco proved successful for many Black artists who crossed over from soul, R&B, and funk, but those who were not willing to fit the mainstream mold quickly found a lack of radio air play and a growing absence of nightlife venues that hosted audiences eager to hear live music. Finally, coming off the heels of the Civil Rights movement, its subsequent public assassinations and exiles, and the emerging militant Black Power politics and arts movements, many Black artists and intellectuals in the 1970s were actively arguing against the blues (which Betty publicly heralded in interviews and through her songwriting) as a style that “enforced racist stereotypes of Black emotionality and promiscuity” (Lordi 2013: 111). Blues was not claimed as conscious music by a large majority of Black audiences who subscribed to the ideologies, politics, and artistic projects of Black Power and Black Arts.¹⁰⁷

As I explained in Chapter 4, Betty herself was painfully aware of this during her time performing in the 1970s. Betty’s embodied experience and cultural memory of the South and its

¹⁰⁷ Franz Fanon, Ron Karenga (US Organization), Sonia Sanchez, and Haki Madhubuti are all powerful public figures in Black Power politics and arts who “disavowed blues as regressive” (Lordi 2013: 112). There were, of course, exceptions to this cultural opinion. Those public Black figures who most notably affirmed the blues during the 1970s included, James Baldwin, Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal, and Abbey Lincoln.

homegrown blues performed a type of nostalgia that Betty believed to be a significant factor in the marginalization of her career. In the 1970s, Betty suggested she was different because of her connection to the blues and how she manipulated its style with contemporary forms of music:

I was brought up on Jimmy Reed, Lightnin Hopkins and Robert Johnson. But a lot of blacks don't want to hear the blues. They want to get away from it. There are some bad times in the back of that music. They don't want to know about it. It's like a Jewish person not wanting to go back to Germany. It's the same way with the Blues. (Richards and Weinstein 1975: 93).

By the early/mid-1970s, the blues was experiencing commercial success in the form of white British and American rock bands who had successfully reappropriated the songs and the style to fill arena stadiums. Just as jazz experienced a fall out in young Black communities at the end of the 1960s, young Black communities were not taking as much of an interest in music that was actively *identifying* as the blues (regardless of the fact that all forms of R&B and rock are deeply rooted in the blues). Blues, at this point in time, was largely deemed “country” to an urban Black population that had been moved forward through the musical projects of soul and funk and the political movements of Civil Rights and Black Power. When I asked Betty why she thought blues was less popular amongst Black listeners in the 1970s, she said: “Well, because there was Motown that changed everything. The whole structure of the music from Motown changed everything. And eventually everything got watered down. When there used to be pop and R&B, now there’s only pop” (Davis, interview by author, Sept 7, 2019).¹⁰⁸

BWR artist Tamar-kali, who herself has “Gullah roots,” understands Betty’s Southern blues heritage as both a badge of honor and a signifier of difference:

Being country has always been something people have always looked down upon. And so that's why I love the song "They Say I'm Different," because my family raised hogs and all that. And she wore that shit as a badge of honor, and it was a proud moment for me [...] We don't have to divorce ourselves from that. She really represents a high union of all of her experiences because we're all a synthesis of everything we've seen, heard, think. And I felt like she represented such a wonderfully holistic integration. And that's what I seek in my life. (Tamar-kali, interview by author, Sept 23, 2019)

¹⁰⁸ Betty continued to tell me why she thought the blues fell out of popularity in terms of music industry marketing: “I don’t think there was enough power behind the blues to keep it going. It wasn’t really a power-oriented music where big business was concerned, and I think that’s what happened, it wasn’t a power structured industry” (Davis, interview by author, Sept 7, 2019).

What Betty identified as her “difference” in the 1970s—her unwavering commitment to the blues—was now forming and galvanizing a reclaimed sense of community and pride amongst the Daughters of Betty, as Moore repeatedly acknowledged in her poem: “*we just the blues, sped up.*”

7.2.3 Ahead of Her Time

In a rare positive and insightful review of Betty (written by a male journalist) during her time performing, in 1974, *The New York Times* prophesized this:

Her recognition by most of the pop world will be a long time coming. For, like Bessie Smith and all those other dirty-blues singers of forty years ago, Miss Davis is trying to tell us something real and basic about our irrational needs; and Western civilization puts its highest premiums on conformity and rationality and *rarely recognizes the Bessie’s or the Bettys until they’re gone*. (Ledbetter 1974: 28; italics mine)

This phenomenon of labeling artists, especially women, as “pioneers” has its roots in the early formation of the American music industry that was made successful via the artistic labor of Black women singers. Often women musicians would be labeled as “pioneers” years after their careers ended, or they had died. Today’s cultural intermediaries continue this phenomenon with Betty Davis: “She was just ahead of her time ” (Davis and Troupe 1989); “Way ahead of her time, Betty was the original super freak ” (Ballon 2003); “Incalculably ahead of her time ” (Hanni 2010); “The times have finally caught up with Betty Davis ” (Chick 2016); “Betty’s time is finally here ” (Peters 2018).

In her review of the *Betty* film, Emily Lordi problematizes the label of pioneer in the context of historical amnesia:

Like many uncompromising, creative women, the funk-rock diva Betty Davis is often called a pioneer. The term is a tribute, of course, a way of defining her legacy in terms of the inroads that she made for later artists Still, *such legacy narratives can understate past struggle and overstate subsequent progress*, as if the past were mere prelude to our more liberated present. (2018; italics mine)

Today's cultural intermediaries claim that Betty Davis was simply too far ahead of her time to be understood while she was recording music and performing live. Likewise, Phil Cox, the film's director, claimed Betty's "narrowmindedness" in the face of artistic and personal control structured her life in aversive ways. However, narratives like this suggest the affirmation of genius or innovation is a matter of timing, rather than a matter of cultural and political biases that have structured the music industry since its inception.

Unimpressed with the label "pioneer," especially when it acts as an alternative to other prestigious accolades—including financial security—Moore also complicates the notion of being ahead of one's time in her 2004 poem: *"failing to grasp the weight of your young genius. your before your timeless/ness that doesn't pay the bills, but leaves them guessing."* Here, Moore emphasizes the lack of awareness (*"failing to grasp"*) and failure to support (*"the weight"*) from those in power—the tastemakers—while still affirming Betty's avant-garde cultural work (*"of your young genius"*). In honoring Betty while she is still alive, Moore (and the Daughters of Betty) reclaim Betty as "pioneer" by acknowledging the challenges that still exist within the music industry regarding Black women's sexual agency and artistic control. This interpretive community does not simply label Betty as a pioneer of a less liberated past, but rather say her name to warn and mobilize against notions of censorship and conformity that are still found within the music industry. This elevated understanding of Betty was made clear at the Detroit premier of the film, which screened the day after the 15th BWR Anniversary Concert. The film screened directly prior to the "Daughters of Betty Speak!" panel that always follows BWR concerts (Figure 65).

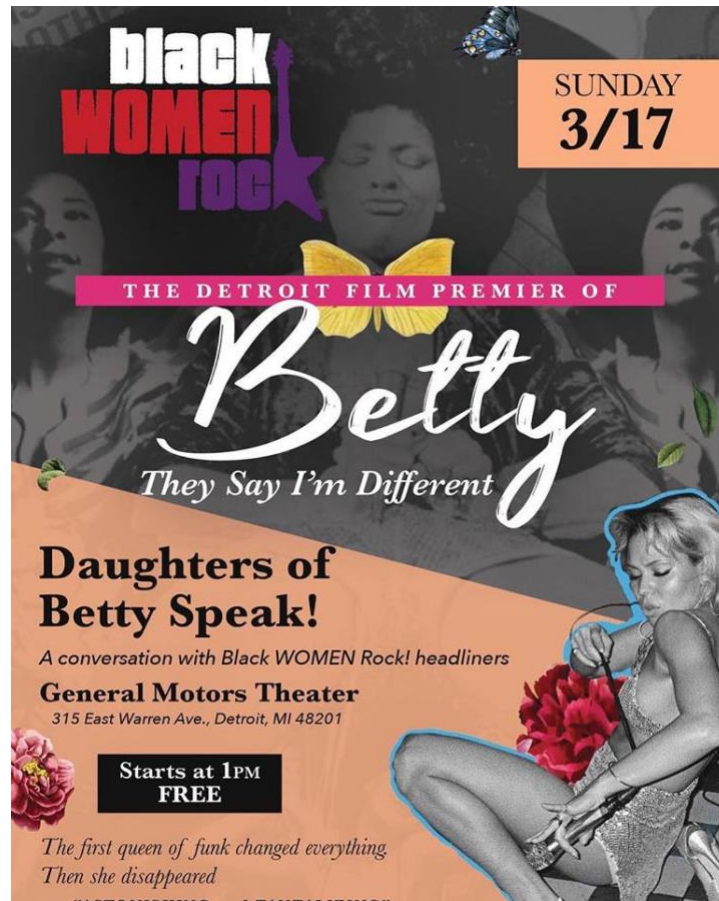


Figure 65. Black Women Rock flyer for the Detroit premier of the documentary film in collaboration with *Daughters of Betty Speak!* panel, featuring Liza Colby (bottom right), March 17, 2018.

As an interpretive community, BWR acknowledged the narrative of “disappearance” that the film crafted not as a form of mystique, but rather as symptomatic to the larger issues Black women “pioneers” face within the music industry. “It’s hard for me to watch that film,” Moore says to the audience to begin the post-film panel discussion. “I think about a lot of women I’ve known” (Moore, personal communication, March 17, 2019). The filmic narrative provides a “sense of continuity” for BWR as they link the past to the present, exemplifying the process of “enabling individuals to see their experiences from a historical perspective” (Van der Hoeven 2018: 209) that the medium of film so often allows. Rather than questioning the congested poetic style of the film and seeking out concrete answers for unsolved questions, the *Daughters of Betty* unpack the filmic narrative through their own cultural memory and embodied experience—reclaiming the power of Betty’s narrative as an “instrument of agency” (Krouse-Dismukes 2008: 195). And, in doing so, activate a counter-narrative that is truer to both Betty and themselves.

Uninterested in the appeal of the term pioneer, Daughters of Betty emphasize the importance of appreciating the cultural work of liberated Black women's artistry in the present moment. "This is what happens to us," Militia Vox told the crowd. "This is what happens to us if there's no audience around. You think no one cares. And I've seen it happen to so many women artists. They disappear because they feel un-listened to and misunderstood." The label pioneer must be contextualized by the cultural bias, conformity, and censorship that suppressed the artist during her time. To quote former Cosmic Lady Winona Williams in one of the most poignant moments in the film: "*When you're ahead of your time, it can also mean you're ahead of your country, and they're just not ready or willing to accept who you are. And, let's not forget, [Betty] is a Black woman, so she started the race off from behind the rest*" (Cox 2017). By dismissing the notion of mystery and disappearance that the filmic narrative propagates, and problematizing the label of pioneer, Daughters of Betty relate to Betty's story on a personal level and recognize it as part of an all-too-familiar cycle that Black women performers have experienced since the birth of the entertainment industry.

7.3 Safe Spaces and Shared Stages

While these sexist, racist cycles of control are still engrained in the fabric of the music industry, the ability to network and create community outside of those industry formations has experienced dramatic progress. Music Director Kat Dyson emphasized the censoring role that the music industry had on Betty's ability to find her audience: "I feel like what broke Betty's spirit was the gatekeepers, not the people that loved her. The gatekeepers kept her from getting to those people" (Dyson, personal communication, March 17, 2019). In response to Dyson's comment, an older Black woman in the audience stood up and shared with the group that she went to Howard University from 1975 to 1979, and that Betty's music was "blasting in the quad." The woman does not have a question, but simply affirms Dyson's belief that Betty did, in fact, have fans who loved her. However, without the ability to build community and network outside of the white, male-controlled industry formations of the era, these fans remained on the fringes of the mainstream and were, therefore, considered expendable.

New York-based musician, Liza Colby, further amplified the duality of the moment by expressing both sorrow for Betty's circumstances and gratitude for the present-day community built around resisting those circumstances: "You find these communities like Black Women Rock [...] so that you don't feel alone. Because the bottom line is this: I'm riding on a high from last night's performance. I'm about to go on tour with my band. So, I'm okay. But if there was nothing on the books right now and I had just seen that movie, I could be crying" (Colby, personal communication, March 17, 2019). Colby suggests the reason why she is not crying after viewing the *Betty* film is because of the community that she is surrounded by. In the feminist tradition of gathering together outside of the male gaze, BWR creates "safe spaces" (both cultural and physical) for Daughters of Betty to not only remain visible, but to recruit others and nourish that visibility.

Betty resonates with each and every performer who has ever participated in a BWR concert not only because of her visionary musical choices and style, but because of how those choices and style were interpreted and suppressed in the music industry. In one of our first phone conversations, Moore explained to me that many of the Daughters of Betty have been told by labels and managers "we don't know what to do with your music; it's not black music [...] That was Betty's story in the damn '70s, how is it that we have this same storyline?" (Moore, interview by author, Jan 19, 2019). Daughters of Betty relate to the pushback Betty received as an unconventional, eccentric Black woman performer who was making music that sounded different from what people expected; who was singing about things that were considered taboo, and who presented herself as a multidimensional artist who did not fit into a recognizable category.

Through acts of transfer (not only the practice of performance, but also oral history and memory), BWR historicizes and authenticates the very recent movement against "toxic everyday harassment of women by cultural gatekeeper males in the entertainment business" (Goldman 2019: 12) and illuminates the music industry politics that marginalized unconventional, eccentric women performers from finding their fanbase. Unlike in today's digital era where artists can float their music and persona into the world via YouTube, Soundcloud, Bandcamp, Instagram, and other social media platforms, during Betty's era (and up until the first decade of the twenty-first century) women needed to be "approved by the guys in the band or the label" (ibid.: 22). Renée Scroggins, who formed the genre-bending group ESG in 1981 with her two sisters, begrudgingly looked back on her career through the lens of technology and access: "There are avenues today we never had.

I wish the internet had been available when we started out, because it would have freed us to do—meet—connect” (ibid.: 65).¹⁰⁹ As an unconventional, eccentric Black woman musician, Militia Vox recounts her experience with censorship in the industry which caused her to seek out other women who had similar experiences:

I relate to Betty's story because when I was coming up I was the only Black person in the metal scene where I came up. When we encountered labels they were like, we can't market this. So, you need to look more white because your audience is white, so you need to straighten your hair or wear a wig, always be in heels. Always look hot and fuckable. That was the directive. That's why I found Betty because I was searching for women who had gone through this before. (Vox, personal communication, March 17, 2019)

Through their experiences as Black women musicians, Daughters of Betty—with Jessica Care Moore as their champion and organizer—form their own safe space based on the supportive network of other Black women musicians:

I put the Black Women Rock sign out in the universe, and they respond [...] There's a lot of us. And there's some young one's coming though [...] I figure out who doesn't know each other yet. Because these women are all sisters, right? And so, for me, I've created some sisterhood around myself [...] But you would be surprised, finding safety among women is not always the easiest thing when you are actually gifted. (Moore, personal communication, March 17, 2019)

Patricia Hill Collins, inscribing Black women's cultures as a form of resistance, describes the concept of “safe space” by explaining that “while domination may be inevitable as a social fact, it is unlikely to be hegemonic as an ideology within social spheres where *Black women speak freely*” (2000: 111; italics mine).¹¹⁰ In general, I am defining “safe space” as being (1) ideologically secure against bias (i.e. surrounded by like-minded people); (2) providing mental and emotional support; and (3) forming a successful defense against outside violence (whether in the implicit

¹⁰⁹ Perhaps the most obvious example of how BWR utilizes and benefits from technology that was not previously available for women (or any musicians) is there use of the hashtag #DaughtersofBetty on social media.

¹¹⁰ Emily Lordi uses Collins' (2000) analysis of “safe spaces” when discussing gospel icon Mahalia Jackson and how the African American church was often considered the only welcoming site for Black performers, specifically Black women gospel performers, to “announce desires for freedom” (Lordi 2013: 80). While the reasons for identifying the African American church as a “safe space” for Black women performers are just and vast, I would problematize an essentialist reasoning of the church as “safe” for all Black women performers on the basis of race. In particular, I am thinking about how queer Black women performers, and men, have often felt that the church was a site of antagonism (see Maggio 2017).

form of historical erasure or the explicit form of sexual harassment and/or physical violence).¹¹¹ These properties are not inherent in a space but rather are actively formulated and nurtured by the activities of those inhabiting and creating it. For a space to *feel* safe it must be realized as safe by all inhabiting and creating it. With regard to BWR and Daughters of Betty, I understand the safe space spearheaded by Moore to be an activity rather than a physical location. Although BWR utilizes venues and other performance spaces, the ways in which they create a safe space are not determined by a specific and consistent physical site. Rather, it is the networking done nationwide—the “lifeworld” of Betty—that carves out and creates the notion of a safe space; a sense of belonging attached to music making and identity. “I’m always on the lookout,” SATE told me. “When I find someone else I’m like, ‘Jessica check this person out.’ We all do” (SATE, interview by author, June 22, 2019). In this sense, I am using “safe space” as a colloquial term to reference and understand the actual network and community of support and recruitment enacted by BWR.

In the 1970s, the potential “safe spaces” at Betty’s disposal as an unconventional, eccentric Black woman musician were limited, to say the least. Before the advent of music video culture and social networking, Betty’s audience had to resort to the few avenues available during that time: radio, live music venues, and televised programs that supported Black musicians. However, as I have explained, none of these spaces were particularly welcoming to Betty, and often verged on becoming hostile. Betty was not the only unconventional performer in need of a safe space. Black musicians who did not fit neatly into an identifiable category based off industry marketing often relied on their own work of community building and networking.¹¹² In forming an organization to address the racial and gendered limitations they encounter in their chosen profession, BWR

¹¹¹ I find it necessary to note here that, at the time of this writing, Americans are experiencing an alarming rise in gun violence and mass shootings, and we must reckon with the reality (just as Collins did by proclaiming “domination may be inevitable as a social fact”) that no space can ever be deemed entirely “safe.” This has been and, continues to be, most disturbingly true for houses of worship across all major organized religions. I am moved to note this repugnant “social fact” because of the recent attack that took place on October 28, 2018 at the Tree of Life Synagogue in my and Betty’s hometown of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania where thirteen Jewish worshipers were shot and murdered by a white supremacist. Like the rest of the city’s residents, Betty and I were devastated and traumatized by this massacre. A few weeks after the attack, Betty suggested we buy flowers and lay them in the front yard of Tree of Life as we had seen others begin to do (Betty and I often drive past the synagogue during our outings). I note this here, in this scholarly work on popular music, to document a defining moment I had with Betty which brought us closer as friends and allies against hatred and violence, as well as to question the very notion of “safe spaces”—propagated by Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies and Queer Studies—and suggest such a phrase deserves vigorous academic attention.

¹¹² Such is the case with the Black Rock Coalition (BRC), an organization that was established in 1985 to “provide a structure and context through which members could affirm who they were as black rock musicians and begin the arduous process of reclaiming for African Americans the right to rock” (Mahon 2004: 7). BRC was formed by its architects to address a lack of representation and community building amongst the idea of “black rock.”

continues a long-standing African American practice of forming associations around social, political, and cultural concerns (Mahon 2004: 27).

Guided by the rhetoric of knowledge-building, rehistoricization, recruitment, and networking, the formation of a safe space is created, realized, and experienced amongst Daughters of Betty. When I asked SATE what it meant to be a Daughter of Betty, she responded in terms of support:

For me it means I have community. It means I have people that are moving through a similar path, not the same path but a similar path, and we've got each other. It means that I can always come and perform with them and not feel like I have to lessen or dim my light or be less of who I am. It means that we can celebrate each other. (SATE, interview by author, June 22, 2019)

Galvanized by the type of alternative vision and sound Betty displayed in the 1970s, BWR set out to find each other and establish professional and personal relationships. It is a type of inclusivity that is based on a collectively experienced exclusion. As a decentralized coalition, BWR provides structure and context to those affiliated so they can affirm themselves, each other, and begin the process of reclaiming Black women's role in the music industry (past, present, and future).

Detroit-based musician Ideeyah discussed how being affiliated with BWR has educated her on the music industry's attempted erasure of Black women:

This was definitely the place where I learned about how invisible the industry has tried to make Black women doing rock music. You know, how they have tried to obscure us and keep us from audiences much like they have done to Betty Davis [...] I never ever had a stage until [Jessica] shared one with me. (Ideeyah, personal communication, March 17, 2019)

While sharing stages is an important aspect of BWR, it is the recruiting activity and relationships of support, not necessarily the physical spaces they hold together (or separately), that informs and engenders their space as safe. However, when BWR does occupy a physical space together, as I have witnessed, they boldly reclaim it with a performative counter-narrative.

There is power in the Daughters of Betty being in the same space at the same time—gathering together outside the white, male gaze. The spaces are transformed—activated—by their performance of knowledge and memories. Perhaps nothing exemplifies this concept of safe space as a physical site more than BWR's post-concert public panels entitled “Daughters of Betty

Speak!”, which occur the day after the concert. Audience and community members are inviting to meet the musicians (at no additional cost of the concert ticket) and engage in an open dialogue. This post-concert extra-musical event emphasizes the work of rehistoricizing and reclaiming Black women’s role in music history and creates a space where Black women, most definitely, “speak freely.”

Fiona Buckland, using Pierre Nora (1989), distinguishes between “places of memory” and “environments of memory” (2002: 20). Places of memory refer to sites of modern production of a national collective memory, which are fixed and static, including monuments, museums, or reissued records and documentary films. Whereas, environments of memory are the oral and embodied retentions of cultures, which are dynamic and responsive to the changing demands of the present. I view BWR concerts and panels as environments of memory in the sense that they are performing knowledge and memory about Betty, the blues women legacy from which she emerged, and the ways in which they carry on that legacy. It is a type of performance that is situated in the present where performers dig through layers of past experience in order to “create futures” (Young 2010). The transmission of knowledge and memory is “sedimented in the body” (Connerton 1989: 79) and sustained via ritual performance, including playing instruments, singing, dancing, reading poetry, painting, speaking, and listening.

7.3.1 Daughters of Betty Speak!

On June 22, 2019, BWR brought their concert to Pittsburgh for the first time, performing for a sold out audience at The August Wilson Center. Many of the same artists that I saw in Detroit the year prior were present, including Stephanie Christ’ian, Militia Vox, Ideeyah, Stacy Hotwaxx, and Kat Dyson, along with several members of the BWR orchestra. SATE, Kimberly Nicole, and Nick West joined the Pittsburgh show, along with Nona Hendryx, a Black feminist icon in her own right, who was one third of the Afrofuturist funk rock trio known as LaBelle from 1968-1975. Hendryx has been a fan of Betty’s ever since she saw her perform at The Roxy in 1974 alongside bandmate Patti LaBelle and friend/make-up artist Rudy Calvo.¹¹³ As I explained in Chapter 4,

¹¹³ During the Daughters of Betty Speak! panel in Pittsburgh, Hendryx echoed Rudy Calvo’s description of affective intensity when describing seeing Betty live: “I saw Betty perform in Los Angeles and it was a religious experience” (Hendryx, personal communication, June 23, 2019).

LaBelle is often compared to Betty as a contemporary, however their musical practices are less aligned than their aesthetics. Hendryx insightfully pointed out that, while she understands the comparison between LaBelle and Betty Davis, LaBelle—having previously been successful as a standard R&B girl group known as Patti LaBelle and the Blue Belles *before* transforming into LaBelle in 1968—enjoyed the type of support that Betty never had: “We had a strong following, from the Apollo; LaBelle had a community. Betty didn’t, because she came right out of the box, fully formed” (Goldman 2004: 57).

I visited with Betty the morning of the BWR concert (she had, once again, turned down August Wilson Center’s generous offer to send a car for her and provide her with a private seat to view the concert). Delighted that Moore and the Daughters of Betty were in town, she instructed me (as per our usual arrangement) to take videos and pictures of the event. She inquired about who was performing. When I told her Nona Hendryx was performing she was pleasantly surprised: “Nona!” She exclaimed. “I used to see Nona around.” In that moment, she went into her closet and came out with a rare blue and silver silk screen poster of her from *Light In The Attic Records* (only one hundred were made as promotional merchandise for the 2007 reissues). As a gesture and act of communication, she autographed the poster for Hendryx. She instructed me to give the poster to Hendryx, as well as a pre-written note she had prepared for Moore, continuing the tradition of communicating via personal writing that Moore and Betty established in 2004.

After I left Betty, I spent the day interviewing the Daughters of Betty at The August Wilson Center before and during soundcheck. The reverence they had for Betty was palpable. Performing in Pittsburgh—most of them for the first time—made them geographically closer to Betty than they had ever been before. This knowledge alone, along with a deep adoration for “Betty’s city” (as they often referred to it), seemed to heighten the experience for them. As I spoke with different musicians I explained to them Betty’s preferred method of communication and listening and invited them to give me their CDs and write personal letters and notes to Betty which I would then deliver directly to her. After several interviews, I finally connected with Moore, who was running around in producer mode, and handed Betty’s letter to her. I also told Moore that I would be watching the show with two local Black women musicians—Morgan Hawkins and Jacquea Mae Olday—who had sung with Funk House the year prior. When I delivered Betty’s gift to Nona Hendryx, she was deeply moved, and simply said to me: “I understand why she’s not here. You tell her we love her.” By not asking questions about Betty’s whereabouts, and instead simply

saying that she understood her absence, Hendryx's communication heralded back to a line in Moore's poem that humanized, rather than interrogated, Betty's absence: *"this alien place that works to silence black women's voices their entire lives, then labels us 'crazy' when we finally decide to stop talking to them. refuse interviews or access to our souls."*

The concert was electrifying. Moore opened the show by acknowledging how special it was to "bring BWR to Pittsburgh—Betty's city." I sat in the audience with Hawkins and Olday as Moore christened the evening with her ritual performance of Betty's poem. The Daughters of Betty put on a high-energy show that had the Pittsburgh audience up on its feet. The energy culminated with the headlining performance of (as of this writing) 75 year old Nona Hendryx who, adorned in form fitting gold lamé pants and her signature punk rock hair style, left the audience in shock (myself included) as she took her shoes off, climbed on top of the bass drum, and finished the remainder of her song balancing and gyrating on top of the drum kit while it was being played. In BWR tradition, all of the musicians took the stage to collectively perform a Betty Davis song for the finale—this time around it was "They Say I'm Different" (1974). As the finale began, unbeknownst to me, Moore grabbed the microphone and invited Hawkins and Olday on stage. Enthralled, they both jumped on stage and added their voices and bodies to the tribute that seemed to last forever. As the song came to its end, the Daughters of Betty (including Hawkins and Olday, who had just experienced their initiation) embraced each other and the physical collectivity of Black women musicians filled the entire width of the August Wilson Center stage (Figure 66).



Figure 66. Black Women Rock musicians on stage after their encore, August Wilson African American Cultural Center, Pittsburgh, PA, June 22, 2019. Jessica Care Moore is seen center standing, Nona Hendryx is seen center kneeling, and Jacquea Mae Olday and Morgan Hawkins are seen far right standing.

On June 23, 2019, the “Daughters of Betty Speak!” panel took place at the August Wilson Center (Figure 67).



Figure 67. Black Women Rock panelists during the "Daughters of Betty Speak!" panel, August Wilson African American Cultural Center, Pittsburgh, PA, June 23, 2019. From left to right: Steffanie Christi'an, SATE, Kat Dyson, Jessica Care Moore, Militia Vox, Ideeyah, Kimberly Nichole, Nona Hendryx, Stacey Hotwaxx Hale, and Lessie Vonner (seated).

Before it began, several Daughters of Betty gave me their CDs with letters or notes attached to them so I could, as promised, deliver them to Betty and act, as Moore so graciously described in her heartfelt thank you to me during the panel, as a “conduit.” The audience—significantly smaller than the night before—settled in and Moore gave an emotionally vulnerable introduction:

The reason I do this is because we don't want to become recluses, we don't want to get sick of people not respecting our work, we would like that to change so that we can show up, get paid what we deserve, and continue to do the work to inspire young girls to play rock and roll, or whatever they feel like doing on their own terms, and we can be that example [...] we can make more space for other women. (Moore, personal communication June 23, 2019)

By acknowledging the reality of Betty’s public absence (rather than questioning it), Moore empathized and related to Betty’s lived experience and located it within a much longer lineage of erasure and historical amnesia. There was a sense that she was painfully aware that any one of the women she was sharing a stage with could “become recluses” without the support they needed and

deserved; and without the cultural work being done to rehistoricize and reclaim Black women's role in the music industry.

During the Pittsburgh panel, an older Black woman named Cheryl stood up to address the Daughters of Betty: "When I think about Betty 40 years ago, she didn't have this community. She was by herself. She was alone having that burden. So, as challenging as it is for you today, you are so blessed to have each other and to have Black Women Rock. That's what Betty gave you." As a dynamic alliance, BWR and Daughters of Betty reclaim the Black erotic innovations of Betty Davis on their own volition and through their own performance practices. In return, they form an interactive network based on Black women's performance, support, and knowledge-building, which prioritizes a distinctive Black feminist music history. Whereas the reissues and the documentary film present Betty as a figure of mystique that is re-emerging, Daughters of Betty embody and update Betty's legacy—the legacy of the blues woman—as part of a continuum of cultural memory. In doing so, they provide an important outlet to critique and resist any ongoing censorship and conservatism that threatens to marginalize the future of unconventional, eccentric Black women musicians going against the normative grain.

8.0 “Live, Love, Learn”: Making Music with Betty Davis

How did you balance being from
the future in the past? to be the queen of funk. a black
rock in a land of pebbles.

Jessica Care Moore, “They Say She’s Different”

One of the key lessons I learned from my cumulative experiences with the documentary film, record collectors, and *Black Women Rock*, is that Betty Davis resonates with many different people on many different levels. I also keep returning to a statement made by Cheryl, an older Black woman in the audience at the “Daughters of Betty Speak!” panel in Pittsburgh, who said, “That’s what Betty gave you.” Thinking about what Betty gave/gives us, is actually a useful lens to look at all the cultural production that has been responsible for creating the “lifeworld” of Betty Davis. Beyond the pure enjoyment that her music has given me since first hearing it in 2007—an unforgettable sensation of power, danger, and pleasure—Betty Davis has now given me the honor of carving out a discursive space in which to share her stories. Through her companionship and collaboration, she has given me the ability to act, in the words of Jessica Care Moore, as a “conduit” to convey meaning about this ever-expanding “lifeworld.”

As if this were not privilege enough, Betty gave me the opportunity to record myself as a vocalist for the first time in a studio when, in Spring 2019, she asked me to sing the first song she had written since 1979. However, what she really gave me, as I describe in this chapter, was an intimate glimpse into her process and practice as a songwriter, arranger, and producer. Betty has remained consistent in both her commitment to artistic control and her unique style of songwriting and arranging. Watching her command band rehearsals, teach musicians their parts via head arrangements, and take on the role of producer once the song was recorded, all confirmed this for me in a way that no amount of research or interviews ever could. This chapter is structured around recorded personal communication between myself, Betty, the musicians (Dr. Matt Aelmore, Dr. John Bagnato, Nick DeAngelo, Morgan Hawkins, Samuel Okoh-Boateng, and Brian Riordan) and the studio engineer, Jason Jouver. The dialogue is taken directly from our interactions during the rehearsal on March 30, 2019 (Band rehearsal 2019), the in-studio recording process that took place

on April 13 and April 14, 2019 (Studio Day 1 2019; Studio Day 2 2019), and the in-studio producing process that took place on April 19, 2019 (Studio Day 3 2019).

8.1 “Live with the Song”

Shortly after I met Betty in 2016, during one of our many car rides home while we were still building our relationship, she casually asked me: “Now, Danielle, aren’t you’re a singer?” I did not know exactly how to respond. Yes, I had studied singing and performed on stage throughout my life, and I gigged a few times here and there when I lived in New York and Chicago. But I did not identify myself as a professional singer; I had no recordings, no band, and no current projects. At the time she asked, I was not singing much at all and was, instead, immersed in my graduate studies and my youth education work in the performing arts. “Yes, I sing,” I reluctantly replied. “You’ve given me all these CDs of other people singing, I want to hear you sing,” she firmly stated. I was stunned. Never had it crossed my mind that Betty Davis would be interested in hearing me sing. I nervously laughed, unaware of how to proceed in the conversation. “Next week,” she said, “you’ll play me something of you singing.” This was a demand, not a request, and I knew what was expected of me during our next visit.

The next time I saw her, and once we were settled in the car, Betty patiently waited on me to deliver her what she requested. “This is not a professional recording,” I began to preface. “This is just me singing around a piano with my two friends backing me up [...] we were just goofing around.” My stalling and excuses were both ignored. Betty sat in silence waiting for me to share my voice with her, just as I had previously shared dozens of other musicians and singers with her. Seated next to Betty, I played the song from my phone and proceeded to excruciatingly listen to an iPhone recording of me singing “Killing Me Softly” in the style of Roberta Flack. The song (finally) finished and Betty, who tapped into her stoic, intentional style of listening, came out of her silence and said in a genuinely impressed tone: “You have such a soulful voice.” I was overwhelmed with joy and disbelief. In that moment, I introduced myself as a singer to Betty Davis and, without knowing it at the time, entered into a different ethnographic position.

Sometime in late 2018, once we had established I would be writing my dissertation about her musical career and our experiences together, Betty casually said to me: “I’m going to write

you a song someday.” Honored, I smiled at the idea but never considered it as a real possibility. I was perfectly content with our musical journey together that included shared listening and media discoveries, and a few bonus impromptu car sing-alongs. But something had changed. After two solid years of us building a relationship that spanned Light In The Attic’s release of *The Columbia Years* in 2016 and the international premiere of the documentary in 2017, Betty felt empowered to create music again. And just like during the heyday of her career, nothing was going to stop her.

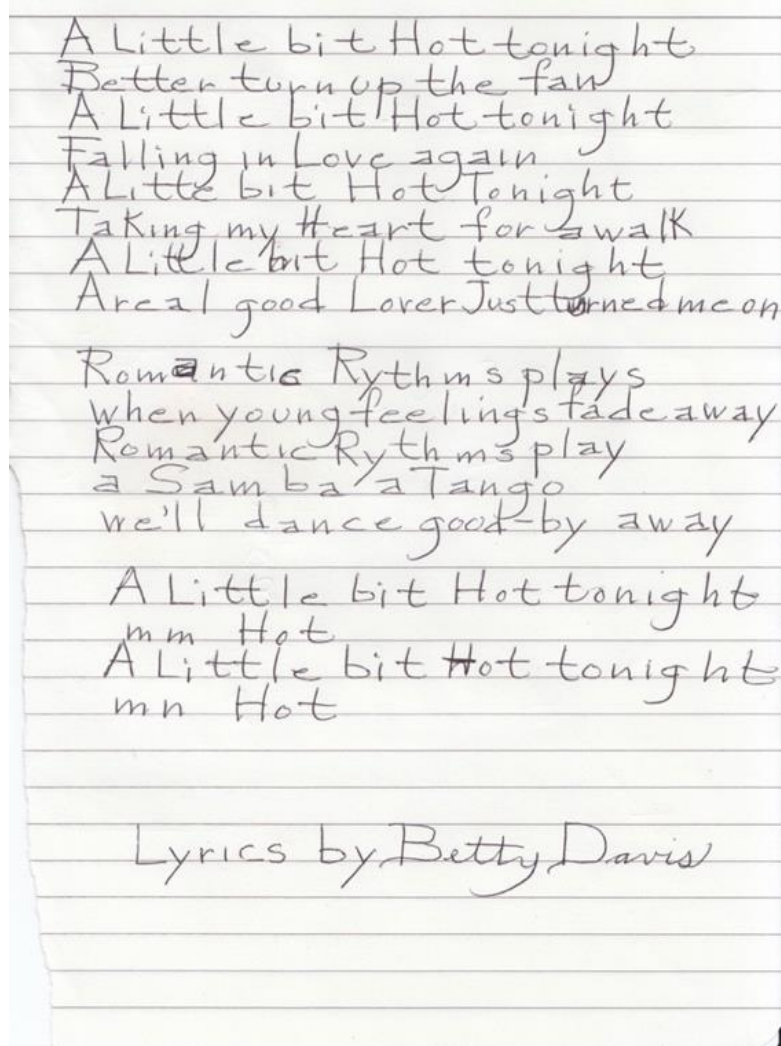
One Saturday in November 2018, I visited Betty for our usual gathering. It had become customary for Betty and I to visit in her apartment over a pot of tea before heading out to eat lunch, shop, and run errands. We would catch up on any official matters, including film-related events or upcoming interviews she agreed to do. Often times, I would deliver her letters or gifts that journalists or fans would send to my home address, which became more common around this time. If there was any recent press that featured Betty, I would either bring my computer to show her or print out a copy and read it to her. When “business” was done being discussed, Betty and I would decide what we would listen to in the car. On this particular day, however, the conversation veered into unknown territory. Seated at the kitchen table where Betty first wrote her phone number down for me two years prior, she simply said: “I have something for you.” She walked into her bedroom and returned with two pieces of paper that she laid down in front of me. On them were handwritten lyrics for an original song titled “A Little Bit Hot Tonight” (Figures 68-69).

"A Little Bit Hot tonight"
I was a shooting star
Three or four times
Love turned into stardust
Sun and moon shined on my mind
I fell in Love with you
and said forever we shall be
Forever rained never
Good-bye was said to me

A Little bit Hot tonight
Better turn on the fan
A Little bit Hot tonight
Falling out of Love again
A Little bit Hot tonight
Taking the Blues for a walk
A Little bit Hot tonight
An Ice cold Lover Just turned me off

So I decided to Live alone
Talk to myself
Then I Looked into your pretty eyes
And decided something else
one plus one is two
You Love me I Love you
One plus one is two
Together Just me and you

Figure 68. Lyrics to "A Little Bit Hot Tonight" written by Betty Davis, Pittsburgh, PA, 2019.

A photograph of a piece of lined paper with handwritten lyrics in cursive. The text is written in dark ink and is somewhat messy, with some corrections and overlapping. The lyrics are for a song titled "A Little Bit Hot Tonight".

A Little bit Hot tonight
Better turn up the fan
A Little bit Hot tonight
Falling in Love again
A Little bit Hot Tonight
Taking my Heart for a walk
A Little bit Hot tonight
A real good Lover Just turned me on

Romantic Rythms plays
when young feelings fade away
Romantic Rythms play
a Samba a Tango
we'll dance good-by away

A Little bit Hot tonight
mm Hot
A Little bit Hot tonight
mn Hot

Lyrics by Betty Davis

Figure 69. Lyrics to "A Little Bit Hot Tonight" written by Betty Davis, Pittsburgh, PA, 2019.

"Here is your song," she slyly said with a smile. I was speechless; truly at a loss. Although Betty had mentioned her interest in writing me a song for the past several months, she failed to mention that she was actively working on it. Her demeanor was calm and joyful. In fact, she seemed quite pleased with herself.

I knew Betty had continued writing song lyrics in her notebook after her on-stage career ended, but the lyrics in front of me were different. She intended to teach someone else these lyrics and have them recorded with a band. Most remarkably, and for the first time in forty years, she intended to go back in the recording studio to oversee the song's production. "Now," she commanded, "We'll wait until after the New Year to start learning the song." With the holidays

approaching, Betty knew I would be busy finishing the school semester and traveling to see family. She instructed me to simply read the lyrics in order to “live with the song,” as she put it. The next step, she told me, would be to “get the melody down on tape.” Just as Betty had done with the documentary, she set her own timeframe in motion, and I spent the next two months reading the lyrics and “living” with the song.

I returned to visit Betty during the first week of January in 2019 and we began our musical collaboration process. I previously scanned the original lyrics—they were, after all, a new artifact for pop music history—and prior to my visit I printed out a copy so that I could mark it up with notes. Betty and I sat across from each other at her kitchen table and entered into a new realm of our relationship—that of teacher and student, producer and singer. Before Betty broke the song down line by line, she sang the song once through on her own, prefacing that the song is “bluesy with a Latin flare,” and that it needed to be sung “*very sexy*.” She was particular about how I inflected the words with meaning and stressed that “the H in hot needs to be really ha-ha-ha,” which she overemphasized with her own voice. “I’ll sing it through once so you can get the feel,” she told me. The song is a simple ABC format (verse 1, chorus, verse 2, chorus, bridge, chorus, outro). She tapped her aged fingers on the top of her thigh to keep the rhythm.

The first verse begins to tell a story of a someone who had once loved deeply (“*I was a shooting star*”) but was then rejected (“*forever rained never, goodbye was said to me*”). The first chorus depicts this individual fantasizing about the lost love and attempting to heal (“*A little bit hot tonight, taking the blues for a walk, a little bit hot tonight, an ice cold lover just turned me off*”). The second verse suggests the reclusion of the broken hearted individual who rediscovers love once again (“*So I decided to live alone, talk to myself, then I looked into your pretty eyes and decided something else*”). The second chorus then fantasizes about the new love generated from this discovery (“*A little bit hot tonight, taking my heart for a walk, a little bit hot tonight, a real good lover just turned me on*”). The bridge then celebrates the possibilities that emerge once love matures (“*romantic rhythms play, when young feelings fade away, romantic rhythms play, a samba, a tango, we’ll dance goodbye away*”).

Just as I experienced Jessica Care Moore performing her poem for the first time, hearing Betty sing her lyrics felt like a ritual performance. I sat in disbelief while listening to her, knowing that I was the only person to hear her sing an entire song in roughly four decades. Once she got to the final chorus, she abruptly stopped and said, “we’ll fade it out at the end.” Based on what I knew

about Betty personally, and after careful textual analysis, I interpreted the song as being about the longing for sensuality, and how the absence and presence of sensuality structures our individual experience with self-care. Never one to over-intellectualize or interpret her own lyrics, Betty simply explained to me that she originally conceived of the song while living and performing in Tokyo in 1983, and that the song was inspired by her relationship with Japanese musician, Itsuroh Shimoda. Betty had planned on writing this song when she returned to America (which signaled her official departure from musical performance), but circumstances did not allow for it. Once Betty told me this, I felt confident in my interpretation of the lyrics.

Next, Betty taught me the melody via call and response, line by line. She would sing a line and I would respond, learning the rhythm and melody by ear. Initially, when Betty sang the song it was in a lower key to suit her older and more fragile voice. I suggested we bring the key up to C minor where I felt my voice was most comfortable, and where I could “live” in the song. Besides that initial key change, there was (and would not be) any room for improvisation or interpretation. Betty expected me to deliver the song’s vocal line the way she wrote it, and not to take any liberties with the lyrics, melody, or inflection.

During that same visit, Betty instructed me to record my voice singing a cappella and burn it on a CD for her so she could listen to it and arrange the instrumentation around my vocal line. That night I went home, listened to our recorded lesson, and perfected what she had taught me—making sure every breath and accent was exactly where she wanted it. I recorded two versions of the song: one exactly how she taught me, and the other with some added vocal ornamentation that felt natural in my voice. When I returned the following Saturday, I brought her a burned CD of both versions. She insisted we listen in the car so that it could be played loud and she could “get a feel of it.” We drove around her neighborhood listening to my voice sing Betty’s song a cappella. To no surprise, she preferred the version that was true to her original vision. She was pleased with my rough a cappella version and felt she had what she needed to begin the arranging process.

Betty spent the end of January, and all of February and March, coming up with arrangements for the song. Singing into her 1996 Sony cassette tape recorder, she would use her voice to mimic the various instrumental parts.¹¹⁴ In early March, she tasked me with putting

¹¹⁴ I had previously replaced her old tape recorder the year before when it broke down. She insisted on having the exact same 1996 model, which I needed to find on eBay since it was no longer in production. When I finally found it and delivered it to Betty, she handed me the old, broken tape recorder and said, “Here, Danielle, you keep it.”

together a group of musicians for the song. “We’re going to need bass, guitar, piano, drums, and a female backup singer to harmonize with you on the chorus,” she instructed. A few weeks after her initial request, and upon further work with the arrangement, she decided that we would also need hand drums to deliver the “Latin feel” she wanted, especially during the bridge. By the end of March, I had reached out to my friends and colleagues who I thought would be right for this project. I knew I needed highly skilled musicians who could learn music via head arrangements and also communicate with each other, and with Betty, efficiently. More importantly, however, I needed professional musicians who would respect Betty’s privacy and create a safe space in which she could be enveloped. I enlisted Dr. Matt Aelmore on bass, Dr. John Bagnato on guitar, Nick DeAngelo on drums, Samuel Okoh-Boateng on piano and Brian Riordan on percussion. All besides Nick DeAngelo were fellow graduate students of mine in the Department of Music at The University of Pittsburgh, and all of them were professional working musicians. I then asked Morgan Hawkins to do backup vocals. Hawkins had sung “Nasty Gal” on stage with Funk House for the Pittsburgh premier in 2018, was newly claimed as a Daughter of Betty at the Black Women Rock concert in Pittsburgh in 2019, and was an all-around incredible vocalist and musician who was perfect for the song.

Once the musicians were secured, I scheduled studio time at Plus Minus Recording in the South Side neighborhood of Pittsburgh. Next, I needed to schedule a rehearsal time and find a location for the band to come together so that Betty could teach them the arrangements. I invited the band over to my house for dinner, prior to our rehearsal with Betty, in order to brief them on Betty’s expectations and limitations. DeAngelo offered to hold our first band rehearsal in his band’s practice space, which is in a large storage facility in the South Side. I had never seen Betty interact with those outside of her small inner circle before—not outside of public dining and shopping, at least—and I was admittedly anxious about how the rehearsal would go. Would Betty’s ability to lead via bodily and vocal cues still translate after all these decades away from the process? Would the musicians be able to interpret her unorthodox instruction? Would she feel comfortable around six complete strangers?

I arrived at Betty’s apartment on March 30, 2019 to pick her up for our first rehearsal. As we were about to leave, Betty went into her room and returned wearing something I had never seen before: a glorious, vintage, full-length jacket made entirely of silk. Its thick, luxurious floral designed fabric was handsewn in gold, black, white, blues, and pinks. Genuinely taken back by

the artistry of the design, I told her she looked incredible. She casually but proudly responded, “Thank you. Jimi Hendrix gave me this coat.” She decided to wear the coat (which is, sadly, one of the only remaining pieces of clothing from her iconic collection) on this day because it had “great energy,” as she put it. This was a momentous occasion, for this was not only her first time working with musicians in almost forty years, but also her first time engaging with new people outside of her inner circle since meeting me in 2016. Jimi Hendrix’s coat was, indeed, befitting for the occasion.

8.1.1 Rehearsing with Betty Davis

We arrived at the warehouse storage building in the early evening. The band was already set up by the time we arrived, which we had planned so that Betty would not be waiting around in the tiny space for equipment to be loaded or for the musicians to warm up. I opened the door that led into the rehearsal space for Betty and watched as the musicians’ faces lit up at the sight of her. Betty introduced herself personally to all the musicians by shaking hands and making sure to say everyone’s names out loud so that she could remember them. As an offering of respect, the band collectively gifted Betty a scarf they bought while recently touring in Indonesia as part of the Dangdut Cowboys.¹¹⁵ Betty was delighted by the gesture. After pleasantries were exchanged, the rehearsal process began.

“Now this is very rough,” Betty warned the giddy musicians before she played them her pre-recorded arrangements on her cherished 1996 Sony Cassette player. “That’s how we like it,” joked drummer Nick DeAngelo to lighten the mood. Betty giggled. “We’ll start with bass,” she firmly said. Bassist Matt Aelmore perked up as Betty held the cassette player up to the live microphone the band set up for her. We listened vigorously in absolute silence as her recorded voice came through the grainy tape machine, mimicking the bass part (“dom-dom-dom-dom...”). After getting the line in his ear, Aelmore started playing along, on top of Betty’s recorded voice. “Like that?” Aelmore gently asked. “Yeah, like that,” Betty replied.

¹¹⁵ The Dangdut Cowboys are a Pittsburgh-based band that was formed by Dr. Andrew Weintraub in 2007. Dangdut is the most popular genre of music in Indonesia. The Dangdut Cowboys cross musical borders by mixing Indonesian dangdut songs with country, blues, rock, and reggae. With the exception of Nick DeAngelo and Morgan Hawkins, all of the musicians toured with The Dangdut Cowboys in Indonesia during Spring 2019.

It was not long before Betty ditched the tape recorder all together and commanded the rehearsal with her live vocal and bodily cues, a process of hers that I had read and thought about for several years but was now witnessing firsthand. Through various forms of vocality and hand gestures, Betty mimicked the sound she wanted from each instrument: “John, make like a *chunk - chunk - chunk* sound,” she said to guitarist John Bagnato. She used a stiff hand gesture in a chopping motion to indicate the rhythm or the interaction of instrument parts. She also pantomimed the playing of the instrument while teaching the rhythm to the musicians, including strumming her hand like she would a guitar, or acting as if she was playing piano with her two hands pressing down firmly in the air.

We took each section of the song one at a time. After each run-through, Betty stopped to explain how each musician’s part interacted with the others: “Sam, what I want you to do is *talk* to the guitar, *talk* to the bass,” she said to pianist Samuel Okoh-Boateng. Throughout rehearsal, she actively involved the musicians as collaborators, asking them for their opinion and taking a genuine interest in their ideas: “What do you think? Should there be a break down after the bridge?,” she asked Okoh-Boateng. “I think we could hold it there before we get back into the chorus,” he responded. “Do you think we should go back to the chorus after the bridge, or do you think we should do a hard end there?,” Betty asked the whole band. “I like going back to the chorus because that’s the meat and potatoes of the song and we shouldn’t shy away from it,” drummer DeAngelo responded. “Yeah, and we have room to swing on the fade out,” added Okoh-Boateng.

The highly skilled and technically trained musicians rarely translated Betty’s oral direction into music theory beyond counting the measures. However, on a few occasions, the musicians cunningly took time out—making sure not to direct their language at Betty—to flush out the head arrangements amongst themselves: “How many dotted figures are you playing?” percussionist Riordan asked drummer DeAngelo. When the musicians did have questions for Betty, she was able to make arrangement decisions in the moment: “How do we get into the bridge?” Riordan asked her. Betty paused, thought deeply about the question, and then responded confidently, “I think we should go right into the congas.”

After an hour of rehearsal, the song was more or less locked in. We did one last run through so that I could record a solid final rehearsal take for Betty (and the musicians) to hear after the session. After our final take, Betty praised our work: “That’s it. It sounds really good. Thank you all so much.” Betty and I left first while the musicians stayed to break down and load out. We got

into the car, taking extra care to make sure her vintage Hendrix coat did not touch the dirty street or get caught in the car door. Once we were settled in, I asked her, “How do you feel?” She said, “I feel exuberant.”

That night I listened to and transcribed our rehearsal tape. I edited out the last take as a single track and burned it onto a CD for Betty to hear the next time I visited her, which would be sooner than usual in order to keep up the momentum of the process. I went to Betty’s apartment two days later and we listened to the audio recording several times together, during which Betty gave me verbal notes that I wrote down. “I’m thinking we should add some *mmm hmms* in the intro,” she said. “You and Morgan should sing them together.” She taught me the new intro part in the same call and response style: she sang it and I echoed it back. Betty was keen to point out where in the recorded rehearsal take I strayed from the original melody, making it clear that she was actively listening to my vocal line along with the rest of the musicians. I left the CD with her and arranged to pick her up for our second rehearsal a few days later.

Our second rehearsal took place on Wednesday, April 4, 2019. This time we added backing vocalist, Morgan Hawkins, who Betty waited to bring into the mix until after the band got comfortable with the song. When I picked Betty up for rehearsal, she was wearing the scarf the musicians gave her from Indonesia. Having spent time with the rehearsal track, Betty had specific instructions on how to enhance the sound and feel of the song. “Nick,” she said, “do you think in the beginning, for those four bars, we can have a cow bell?” Betty inquired. “Sure thing,” DeAngelo replied. “I just want to see how it sounds,” Betty explained. “I don’t know if it will be good for the end, but for the first four bars it will be good.” DeAngelo then grabbed his cow bell and affixed it to his drum set. We ran the song with the added instrument and awaited Betty’s response. “I like it,” she declared. “You don’t really need it at the end. But I like it in the beginning.” DeAngelo concurred, “Yeah, there’s all the room for it in the beginning.”

Betty suggested ornamentation for the musicians based on affect and genre references. She instructed me to sing the line in the song “about the blues.” I obliged. “John,” she said to guitarist Bagnato, “when Danielle sings that, do a blues riff.” We ran the verse “about the blues” with Bagnato’s new improvised guitar riff. Betty took time out to talk to Bagnato, getting closer to him than usual in order to emphasize the importance of this particular part. She requested that he do two improvised guitar riffs for each verse: “The first verse is ‘*takin the blues for a walk*’ and that riff can be rough, and the second verse is ‘*takin my heart for a walk*’ and that can be smooth. The

heart can be smooth, but the blues can be rough,” she explained. “Ain’t that the way it always is,” Bagnato coolly responded. Betty laughed louder than she had throughout the entire rehearsal process.

Betty spent time giving backing vocalist Morgan Hawkins the same type of instruction on pronunciation and inflection as she did with me. “Morgan,” she said, “really hit the ‘hot’—*hhhot hhhhot*.” Over emphasizing the breathiness of the “H” sound. She requested that Hawkins layer a lower harmony over my voice on the chorus. For the “oohs” in the beginning of the song, Betty insisted we be in unison, even after Hawkins and I showcased a few harmony options for her. “It sounds better in unison,” she stated. We then did a few run-throughs until Betty was satisfied. Then, as a group, we briefly discussed studio time, when to load in, how we want to track, and so on. The next time we would see each other would be in the studio to record.

8.1.2 Recording with Betty Davis

On Saturday, April 13th, 2019, Betty Davis entered a recording studio for the first time in forty years. And, once again, she was wearing her epic Hendrix-gifted coat. The band had already loaded in upon our arrival and Hawkins was on call to either come down later that day, or on Sunday, depending on how much we got done. I escorted Betty into the building and introduced her to sound engineer, Jason Jouver. With the instruments and microphones set up, we all gathered in the engineering booth to begin. Betty took a moment to take in the forty-inch monitor screen that served as the sound board. This would have been intimidating to anyone who had not been in a studio for decades, let alone someone who has never owned a computer or a cell phone. “The last time I was in the studio,” Betty proceeded to tell the group, “there was a board and there were levers, everything was manual, so this is a new experience for me.” We all encouraged her honesty and vulnerability and made sure to give her as much time as she needed to acclimate herself to the large monitor where Jouver ran a digital audio workstation and MIDI sequencer software called Reaper. Once Betty was situated, she instructed the drums to go first (as is typical in band recordings) so that she could start building the foundation for her song.

Betty listened to Riordan and DeAngelo lay the percussion down while seated alongside Jouver. Every now and then, she allowed the music to permeate her body as she tapped her fingers on her leg or bobbed her head ever so slightly. But for the majority of the session, she was stoic in

her concentration. The song evolved in the studio, building off of the foundation we set up in rehearsals. Once the drums were tracked, Betty next decided it was time to record the bass. Aelmore stepped into the booth joking that he was going to channel his “inner Larry Graham,” referencing Sly and the Family Stone’s bassist who Betty used on her 1973 debut album. Betty giggled and said, “You just have to channel your inner self, Matt.” Aelmore silently shook his head in affirmation as a large grin washed over his face. Once Aelmore started to track the bass line, Betty instructed me to move her chair so that she could watch him track through the glass window that separates the booth from the large room where each musician’s equipment is set up. It was almost as if she wanted to give Aelmore support by watching him and checking to make sure he was not too much in his head or unable to connect with the present moment. He played the bass part perfectly and afterward he and Betty listened together in the engineer booth. “That’s great,” she said. “Jason, we have to turn that up for the rest of the musicians to record over.”

After the bass part was done, Betty decided it was time to track piano. When Samuel Okoh-Boateng was finished recording his initial scratch take on top of the drums and bass, he came into the engineering booth to get notes. Betty told Okoh-Boateng, who is a highly skilled jazz pianist and improviser, that he needed “more space.” He then recorded his part again, taking Betty’s notes into consideration. Betty listened back with Okoh-Boateng and was pleased with the adjustments he made: “It leaves more room for John [on guitar] and it gives it more of a groove,” she explained. By this point in the recording process, Betty was fully immersed in her role as producer. She asked sound engineer Jouver to replay certain parts when she wanted it done, and she occasionally broke her stoic silence during recording takes to comment over the tracks. Okoh-Boateng went back into the recording room a few more times for variation and tweaked his part ever so slightly after hearing Betty’s notes. “That was much better,” she finally said to him. “I think that’s it.”

She then moved on to guitar. John Bagnato initially went into the recording room with a hollow bodied electric guitar to begin his session. While he was playing, Betty said to Jouver, “After he’s finished with this track, I’d like to hear him do another one with more of a Wes Montgomery sound.” John Leslie “Wes” Montgomery was an influential American jazz guitarist known for his unique sound that he achieved by plucking the strings with the side of his thumb, and Betty used him as a reference to indicate the kind of feel she desired from the hollow bodied guitar. Bagnato, who is highly knowledgeable about American blues and jazz guitarists, was thrilled to hear this reference when he came back in the engineering booth. “Yeah, yeah,” he said,

“I can do that.” With his new inspiration, Bagnato went back into the recording room. While she was listening and watching Bagnato, Betty turned to Jouver and said, “That’s it.” Betty would go on to dub Bagnato’s hollow bodied guitar the “Wes Montgomery” for the duration of the recording and mixing.

Bagnato then went in to record with an acoustic slide guitar, which he used to improvise on top of the drums and bass to give Betty some variation. After a few takes, Bagnato requested that we do “one more, for the ancestors,” which made Betty smile. While listening to the “Wes Montgomery” and slide guitar parts together, Betty remembered that the improvised riffs she requested during rehearsal needed to be done with the electric guitar. Bagnato went back into the recording booth with an electric guitar to lay down the bluesy riffs that play off of Betty’s lyrics. “Don’t forget,” Betty said to him before he went back to record, “the heart is smooth, but the blues are rough.” After locking in the riffs and experimenting with the electric guitar, at times adding a wah-wah pedal effect, Betty began to make some decisions: “I like the electric for that [last] section where him and Sam are jamming. And I like the Wes Montgomery guitar for the rest of the song. John, how do you feel about using the electric guitar on the end and using the Wes Montgomery guitar for the rest of the song?” John replied, “Yeah. I think it blends nicely.” “You know,” Betty then said to Jouver, “we have enough stuff on John for him to blend with Sam. Because Sam is playing really jazzy and John is playing like blues-rock n’ roll. We need to blend the two. So, it’s good that he recorded all those guitar parts.”

We then took a break for lunch. During our down time, Betty shared a few personal stories about her time performing with other musicians. One such story involved her dear friend, and former lover/collaborator, Hugh Masakela, who smuggled records out of apartheid South Africa that Betty would later get to hear. “They were incredible,” she told her captivated audience. “But he couldn’t bring the tapes into the country legally, so he had to smuggle them out. You heard where James Brown and everybody got their ‘thing’ from. It came from the rhythms of Africa.”

Back from lunch, Betty decided she wanted to start layering percussive ornamentation over the track. “Brian,” she said, “I want you to play the shaker during the Latin part,” which is how she referred to the bridge. “And then,” she went on, “on the line ‘*I’ll dance goodbye away*,’ I want the music to cut out and it will just be Danielle’s voice, and you can do the wind chimes.” Excited by Betty’s new ideas, Riordan began to set up his wind chimes. By the time we record the percussive ornamentation, it was clear Betty was getting more comfortable with the ease of digital

recording: “Jason, can I just hear Danielle’s voice with the chimes?” Jouver quickly pared away all other tracks and played back my voice (a quick scratch vocal we laid down right before Bagnato recorded the electric guitar riffs) with just the wind chimes, to Betty’s absolute delight.

After six hours of tracking, we completed day one in the studio. Betty requested a “tape” of what was recorded at the end of the day. Jouver burned the unfinished track on a CD so she could listen at home before coming back in the studio for day two.

The next morning, on Sunday, April 14th, 2019, I picked Betty up at her apartment and we headed to the studio to record the vocals over the un-mixed instrumental tracks. Backing singer Morgan Hawkins joined us, along with Jouver at the helm of the sound board. This was my first time in a recording studio, and I was singing a song that was written and arranged by an icon, who was one of my musical heroes. I was suddenly transported to that moment in the car when I played Betty an iPhone recording of me singing for the first time. I wanted to deliver Betty the performance she heard in her mind when she decided to see this project through—the performance she deserved after forty years away from the music industry.

After taking a few minutes to get comfortable with the headphones and microphone, I nervously began. After each verse, Betty provided notes that largely focused on pronunciation and attitude. “Just say all the lyrics clearly,” she demanded. She also focused on the lyrical content with me and emphasized how important it was for me to sing “sultry,” and to inject that feeling into the words: “That way you hit ‘lover’ was really good,” she said as an indicator of when I performed to her satisfaction.

I was definitely intimidated by such strict guidelines on how to phrase and pronounce the lyrics. If left up to my own devices, I would have added more of an R&B inflection to my pronunciation, as I typically do. Perhaps by manipulating my mouth to attain closed vowels at the ends of phrases or muting the hard consonants in my mouth with less of a clear pronunciation to achieve a more playful feel. I also would have liked to play around more with timbre, by allowing my bottom notes to open up into a scratchy growl, or breathily scooping notes in certain places. Broadly speaking, I would have liked more freedom to experiment or enhance the melodic line, to adlib some improvised riffs or dialogue. However, Betty was adamant that I stay true to her melody. Unlike the other musicians, myself and Hawkins were not given room to improvise or add ornamentation to the song. Betty’s role as a producer-in-charge was fully realized when I was behind that microphone.

I found myself so fixated on saying all the lyrics “clearly” that I felt out of touch with my body and voice. I felt I was not living in the song, as Betty instructed me to do when she first gave me her handwritten lyrics back in November of 2018. Betty must have sensed my nerves mounting after our first few takes, because right before we cued up to record again, her voice came through my headphones and said: “Relax, Danielle. Be sexy. Just let it flow.” Hearing Betty’s supportive voice through my headphones was exactly the affirmation that I needed. The next take we recorded was the one we used in the final mix. After it was played back in the engineering booth, Betty nodded her head in approval, smiled, and said: “Good, Danielle. Really good.” We moved forward with Hawkins’ backing vocals. She first sang in unison with the “*mmm hmms*” during the intro and then added her lower harmony on the chorus. Hawkins’ deep, warm timbre solidified the sultry feeling that Betty sought after. “You really add a lot to the song,” Betty told her before she left the studio. “Thank you,” Hawkins replied. “That means a lot coming from you.”

Once Hawkins left and all the musicians had recorded their parts, Betty refocused her energy on organizing the track with Jouver for pre-production. She began by parsing through the multiple takes of the four different guitar parts that Bagnato recorded: the electric, the electric with wah wah pedal, the hollow body “Wes Montgomery” electric, and the acoustic slide. “Jason,” Betty interjected, “can I hear that Wes Montgomery part with Danielle’s vocals, and just drums and bass?” Jouver played back Betty’s request and her producer ear became highly attuned. “It sounds good up until the ending,” she said. “You don’t need it on that last section.” Betty went on to build the track: “Let’s add Sam to that now,” she directed Jouver. “I figure,” she went on, “we can bring the piano up towards the end.” Since our first rehearsal, Betty had focused on how the piano and guitar would interact or “talk” with each other. “Try it with the wah now,” she instructed Jouver. After hearing it back she quickly decided that the wah-wah effect was not right for the song: “It gives it a whole different feel,” Betty said, opting for the bluesy resonating timbres of the hollow body electric and the acoustic slide. “What I’m going to do when we mix,” Betty told Jouver, “is I’m going to have Sam carry it and have the guitar in the back. Because Sam’s doing some really nice things in relationship to the lyrics that Danielle is singing, he was like playing off the lyrics, more so than doing rhythm.”

Once the guitar tracks were organized, Betty moved on to fading out the vocal outro. From the first moment Betty taught me the song back in January at her kitchen table, she knew she wanted the track to fade out. “When Sam starts doing his jazzy riffs and everything toward the

end,” she said, “you can pull Danielle and Morgan out and then pull them back in, and then pull them out, all the way through the fade.” Betty remained still and silent while Jason used his mouse to click and drag the tracks and automation on his monitor. “Is this what you were thinking?” Jason asked, “I did four off and two on.” Betty listened intently and replied: “I think it should be two off and two on,” she said. Jouver obliged. Once Betty figured out the vocal line on the outro, she had her final arrangement. “The main thing when we mix,” she prepared Jason, “is for the track to be clean, not congested.” “Right,” Jouver conferred, “because there’s a lot going on.” Throughout this process of deciding which takes to use, Betty never looked confused or overwhelmed by the multiple instruments, or the digital setup in the booth, or the various ways that the instruments could interact with each other. Rather, she was calm, composed, and confident in her communication. Jouver burned a CD copy of the roughly mixed final arrangement for Betty and our second full day in the studio was finished.

8.1.3 Betty Davis as Producer

While Betty exceeded my expectations in the rehearsal and recording processes, watching her mix the album with Jouver on April 19 was where I really saw her come alive. Betty’s first order of business once we were back in the studio was fixing something she heard while listening to the rough mix at her apartment the previous week. She felt Okoh-Boateng’s piano part in the first verse was not right, and that we needed to find a different take: “We need to find Sam’s track that is less busy for the first verse,” she explained. “The second verse, the chorus, and the end are perfect, it’s just the first verse is too busy. It seems like it conflicts with Danielle’s vocal in the first verse.” Jouver spent some time finding all of the piano parts and played them back for Betty, who seemed dissatisfied. “The other option we have,” Jouver explained, “is we can copy and paste Sam’s part on the second verse and put it on the first verse, we could do an edit.” “Oh yeah?” Betty’s voice inflected up, indicating she was intrigued by this option. “Let’s try that,” she said. With a few clicks and drags of his mouse, Jouver delivered Betty the edit. She was pleased and quite amused by the ease of Jouver’s technology.

Once the piano track was sorted out, she moved on to managing the many guitar tracks. “Now,” she said, “let’s hear that Wes Montgomery guitar because it seems to get in the way on the end during the jam.” After figuring out the guitar part for the end, Jouver played the whole

track back for Betty. The moment the track ended Betty began to finely comb through what she heard: “Let’s hear more treble on the bass,” she said. Jouver singled out the bass line and began to manipulate it for Betty. “That sounds much better,” she said. “Now,” she continued without hesitation, “we need to bring up John’s blues riffs.” Jouver played with the levels on the electric guitar riffs, at first presuming they were too loud for Betty, but then finding out, to his surprise, that she thought they should come up even higher in the mix.

Once the blues riffs were loud enough to cut through the track, Betty moved on to the drums, again with clear intention in the way she listened. “It needs the snare to hit down so you can hear it,” she told Jouver. She then mimicked the snare with her syncopated voice: “bah-bah-bah.” “Let’s just listen to the drums,” Jouver suggested. As we listened, Betty interjected: “The snare and the vocals should be on a similar level.” Jouver clicked and dragged to Betty’s liking. “Maybe I should put a little more body in that snare?” Jouver suggested. “Yeah,” Betty responded, “so it will sound woody; earthy.” Jouver then manipulated the drums and played it back for Betty. “That sounds better,” Betty said while listening to the playback. “I think the bass drum could come up a little toward the end,” she added. Jouver played it back for us one final time. “I’m happy,” Betty affirmed, and they moved forward.

Once the levels were set, Jouver played back the whole song again. “Two things, Jason,” Betty said immediately after the playback was over, “I think the Wes Montgomery part should appear a little sooner and, also, we need to do a fade.” Jouver dutifully began shaping the track per Betty’s requests. After deciding on the exact moment in the song where the guitar part should come in, Betty moved on to shaping the fade out: “After the jam session, after he plays the Wes Montgomery, let it play all the way out, and then start to fade,” Betty explained. Jouver played Betty his first fade out edit. After listening, Betty responded: “It should come sooner, it’s really right after that Wes Montgomery part.” Jouver clicked and dragged his mouse to shape the fade out for Betty and played it back for her. While listening to the ending she pointed out to Jouver exactly when she wanted the fade to begin. “Right *here*,” she said, while emphasizing the moment with her pointer finger in the air.

Betty then moved on to my vocals after the levels on the instruments were situated. “Danielle needs more reverb on her voice,” Betty instructed. Jouver then added a considerable amount of reverb to my voice and revamped it with a wet sounding compression. “How’s that?” he asked. “That’s better. But on the ‘*mm hms*’ in the beginning, can we have it flat, a little reverb

but not that much, because it takes away from the congas and the bongos,” she requested. Betty spent ample time listening to Jouver bring the levels up and down and manipulate the reverb on both my and Morgan’s vocals. For the first time during the mixing session, Betty turned to me and asked how I was feeling. “It’s a lot to take in,” I told her. “There are a lot of elements to listen to.” “Just listen to your voice,” she told me. In that moment, Betty confirmed my singular role as lead vocalist in this experience and she reminded me to live in the song. It was clear that she would take care of the rest, and she absolutely did.

After four straight hours of mixing alongside Jouver, Betty was pleased with the final result: “I’m happy,” she said after our final playback. Betty was eager to learn about the mastering process, which would be done by Garrett Haines at Tree Lady Studios just outside of Pittsburgh. Jouver suggested Betty take a week to listen to the mixed track and then make a decision as to whether she was ready to send it over for mastering. He told her that once Betty signed off on the final mix, he would then send it over to Haines and the mastering process would begin. Betty (and I) would not be present for the mastering, as is standard, but she would give notes after listening to the mastered versions that I would be in charge of giving to Haines.

A week passed before I visited Betty in her apartment. She told me she was happy with the final mix and felt it was ready to be mastered. We gave the signal to Jouver and he sent the file over to Haines at Tree Lady Studios. Haines did an initial mastered version and then sent the file over to me. I burned the mastered song on a CD and brought it to Betty for her to hear. While seated at her kitchen table, Betty listened as I took notes. She was quite pleased with what she heard and only had two notes that I was asked to pass along to Haines: (1) the bass should sound a bit more “crispier” and needed “more highs,” and (2) Hawkins’ backing vocals should have more “texture” and needed “more lows.” I communicated Betty’s notes to Haines, and he sent us back the second mastered version. After burning it to a CD, I headed over to Betty where we listened to it on her home CD player, then on my phone through headphones, and then in the car, per Haines and Jouver’s recommendation. After a few trips around the neighborhood in my car, with the song blasting at full volume, we parked back at Betty’s apartment. “That’s it,” she said. “It’s really good.” After four months of work and collaboration, Betty’s song—our song—was complete. The end result was “A Little Bit Hot Tonight”: a sultry pop-hybrid of soul, blues, Latin, and jazz that speaks to the musical spirit of fusion that defines Betty as a songwriter.

Although Betty had not been in a studio since 1979, and had only ever recording on analog tape with all bandmembers gathered in the same room together, she commanded the studio in 2019, as sound engineer Jouver later described to me:

She totally ran it! The entire time she was completely focused and obviously had a very clear vision of how she wanted things to take shape with her song. She was so involved and seemingly comfortable in the studio that it was hard to believe the stories and rumors of her being out of the game for so long. It seemed as if she had never stopped writing and producing and that this was where she belonged. (Jouver, personal communication, July 23, 2019)

As early as 1974, she told a journalist, “I love [producing]. If I were a millionaire, I’d still want to produce. You know, I’m into that quiet end of the business” (Burger 1974: 27). Again, in 1976, she told a journalist that “the technical end is what really interests me, and I want to produce other performers” (Toepfer 1976: 79). After witnessing Betty thrive in the role of producer, I could not help but wonder how Betty’s career and life might have been different had she been able to lean into the role that she so enjoyed, in which she clearly thrived.

8.2 Releasing Music with Betty Davis

Betty was not simply satisfied with having the final product, she wanted to “release it.” While Betty is an artist on Light In The Attic Records, they are a reissue label that focuses on rare artists and older recordings, and I have never been signed to a label or released any music online. Unsure of how best to proceed and deliver Betty what she wanted, I reached out to the musicians who played on the song for advice, all of whom had released music both physically and digitally. The best option, they believed, was to use Bandcamp, an American music streaming and purchasing website founded in 2008. On Bandcamp, artists and labels can upload music and control the sale of it, setting their own prices and providing their own graphics and written information.

Neither Betty nor I had ever used the website before, so we began by familiarizing ourselves with it. I first created an artist profile and explained our options to Betty. Uninterested in issues related to money or downloads, Betty’s focus was on providing accompanying artwork

to go along with the song. I suggested we hire a collage artist to take some of Betty's old photos and manipulate them with other recent images of myself and the musicians, possibly even using the pictures I took in the studio. However, her role as producer was not over yet. "The picture has to be of you, Danielle," she demanded. "You're the singer." Just as Betty directed my voice, the rehearsal sessions, and the mixing sessions, she also set out to artistically direct the accompanying artwork for "A Little Bit Hot Tonight," which was something I had not even considered during this entire process. "It should be a picture of you with something flowy on, like a sexy dress, standing in front of a big fan, sort of leaning against it like you're cooling off," she told me. Once again, Betty shocked me. I was still getting comfortable with being the lead vocalist on a Betty Davis song, and now she expected me to model and pose?

Betty's suggestion for me to be shot leaning over a large fan was a play on the lyrics of the song ("*A little bit hot tonight, better turn up the fan*"). As she described her vision, I could not help but think that this was the photo shoot Betty would have done for the song, had she been the lead vocalist. The last thing I was interested in doing was imitating Betty's aesthetic, but I also wanted to be true to her vision for the look and feel of the song. I needed to be at Betty's disposal, regardless of my personal opinion. Betty and I spent days discussing possible photo concept options, over the phone and in person. A personal fan of collage, I continually suggested the idea of having my image manipulated by a collage artist who could turn the photo into a layered artwork. I showed Betty the artwork of New York-based musician, Sean Smith (@pariahinthesky), with whom I am friends. She liked his work and agreed to let him manipulate my photo into a collage. I then showed Betty the photography of Sarah Huny Young, a local queer Black DJ, designer, and photographer who had participated in the "Industry Women – Empowering Future Voices & Visions" panel for the Pittsburgh premier of the documentary film in 2018. Once Betty agreed on both artists, I set up the photography session with Young. Betty was still insisting I have my picture taken in front of a large, industrial fan, which we did not have and could not find. I picked out a flowy wraparound robe that had long bell sleeves with black lace going down the arms. Betty approved of my outfit, and though disappointed about the lack of fan, she signaled that it was ok for me to have the pictures taken.

On June 3, 2019 I arrived at Young's studio for my first professional photo shoot. Young used a beautiful purplish pink light and guided me through the process in a way that eased my nerves. I posed in ways that I thought highlighted the design of the robe, by extending my arms

out, and tried to look “sultry” enough to please Betty. After picking my top three photos, I headed back to Betty’s to show her the outcome, hoping she would also like the photos I chose. To my absolute relief, Betty loved the photos and told me I could pick which one to use. I then sent the final photo to Sean Smith who began to create a collage using found print materials. The completed product was a retro-looking collage of me against a deep pink and red galaxy background, with two crystals protruding from my arms, a golden disc behind my back, and a large golden arch framing my upper body (Figure 70).



Figure 70. Artwork for "A Little Bit Hot Tonight" featuring the author. Photography by Sarah Huny Young. Collage artwork by Sean Smith (@pariahinthesky), 2019.

With the artwork finished, we had everything we needed to release our song on Bandcamp.

8.2.1 The Betty Davis Scholarship

The entire time Betty and I had been working on the song, I was also working with a local organization called The Battle of Homestead Foundation (BHF) that wanted to honor Betty on her upcoming 75th birthday on July 26, 2019. The idea was to hold a screening of the documentary film at the local AMC Lowes Waterfront Theatre in Homestead, Pennsylvania, followed by an audience discussion with myself and an after-party event. Members of BHF had attended one of the premier screenings and after-parties in 2018 and reached out to me in early 2019 with an expressed interest in hiring me to organize an event similar to what I had done with the premier. I agreed and went to work figuring out how this event could benefit both BHF and Betty herself. Working with BHF, we decided that ticket revenue from the screening and after-party would go directly to BHF, as part of their annual fundraising efforts, and all of the merchandise sales from the after-party (supplied by Light In The Attic Records and Shana M. Griffin) would go to Betty (Figure 71).



Figure 71. Flyer for Betty's 75th Birthday film screening in collaboration with The Battle of Homestead Foundation, Pittsburgh, PA, created by author, 2019.

Every Wednesday morning, beginning in March, I met with the BHF at a local restaurant in Homestead to plan the event and discuss how we could bring attention to Betty at the local level, specifically in the Homestead/Munhall area where she grew up and currently resides. On top of my work producing, promoting, and eventually hosting the event, I began discussions with members of BHF who were on the school board of Steel Valley High School (formerly Homestead High School), Betty's alma mater. During one of our brainstorming sessions, they explained to me that every year graduating seniors participated in a scholarship banquet to help finance their plans after graduation. Scholarships were sponsored by organizations or individuals and ranged anywhere between \$75 and \$300. Together, we decided to establish a Betty Davis Scholarship for a graduating senior who is pursuing music. BHF would sponsor the scholarship in Betty's name and would provide \$200 every year for the scholarship winner. I would choose the winner based

on essays submissions from students who describe what music means to them and how they plan on pursuing music after graduation.

Betty was largely disinterested in the documentary screening and fundraising party that was being planned, but she gravitated toward the scholarship idea when I brought it up. “To be involved in music puts you on a high energy level and it’s good for the youth to have that,” she told me. Like I often did when dealing with business decisions involving Betty, I emailed BHF from Betty’s apartment to confirm her approval. After I sent the email, Betty calmly said to me: “And the money we get for the song will go toward the scholarship.” And, just like that, Betty selflessly offered up the funds she would accumulate from Bandcamp downloads, which would have otherwise gone to help reimburse the money she personally spent on hiring musicians, studio time, and mastering. We decided to set the minimum purchase price of the song at \$2, while giving people the option to pay more.

We decided to release the song on the same day that a *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* article was coming out on Betty. Music journalist, Scott Mervis, had interviewed Betty by phone a few weeks prior and he also requested to interview me after Betty mentioned our song to him. While Mervis was initially interested in asking Betty about her upcoming 75th birthday screening and fundraiser with BHF, his interest quickly shifted to this new song that Betty was promoting. Mervis titled the article: “Betty Davis, a Funk Icon Living in Homestead, Releases First Song in Nearly 40 Years.” Mervis described “A Little Bit Hot Tonight” as “a much smoother Betty Davis song, more in the fusion-y vein of Sade” (Mervis 2019). The article and the song both came out on July 22, 2019.

8.2.2 “A Little Bit Hot Tonight”

Betty’s invitation for me to sing her song provided me the opportunity to observe the retired musician in action. It also gave me the chance to engage with her outside of our familiar settings. No longer in the comfort of her home, my car, or distracted by the public activities of dining or shopping, I wondered how Betty would fare in the recording studio, which was an important site for her innovations that she had not inhabited since 1979.¹¹⁶ Using the work of ethnomusicologist

¹¹⁶ Ethnomusicologist Shalini Ayyagari’s work on the important role recording studios have in the lives of modern Manganiyar musicians provided meaningful information on conducting ethnography within the specific context of the recording studio, as well as engaging with research participants outside their familiar settings and working to interpret

Louise Meintjes (2003), who explores how studio spaces become “non-places” and lose their connection with the “local,” ethnomusicologist Shalini Ayyagari observes the recording studio as an environment where “musical identities can be re-imagined, processed, and projected out into the global marketplace” (2014: 259). In recent years, Betty’s identity as a recluse has begun to be “reimagined, processed, and projected” due to her reissues with Light In The Attic Records and her participation in the 2017 documentary film. While such cultural production tends to focus largely on the questioning of such reclusivity, *Black Women Rock* reframe Betty’s reclusivity through the lens of Black women’s pioneering cultural work. However, the way in which “A Little Bit Hot Tonight” was projected on a global scale (almost immediately) has allowed for significant progress in reimagining Betty on her own terms.

Within twenty-four hours of *The Post-Gazette* article being published (which included an embedded link to the Bandcamp release), news of Betty’s return to the studio spread “along a global circuit of rapid communication,” (ibid.: 264) that extended to music websites like *Pitchfork*, *The Wire*, *Afropunk*, *Rolling Stone* and a plethora of other national and international publications.¹¹⁷

how “the recording studio experience” impacted their participants, especially in regard to “musical innovation” (Ayyagari 2014: 257).

¹¹⁷ As of this writing, “A Little Bit Hot Tonight” has been written about in Brazil, Turkey, France, Spain, Chile, Venezuela, Mexico, The United Kingdom, The Netherlands, Western Samoa, Indonesia, Ukraine, Japan, and Georgia. As of November 21, 2020, “A Little Bit Hot Tonight” has been played a total of 17,471 times on Bandcamp, and has earned \$298.60 in sales, all of which was gifted by Betty to the Betty Davis Scholarship (“A Little Bit Hot Tonight, by Betty Davis Performed by Danielle Maggio”).

The slow-burning, keyboard-driven song is about romance and flirtation—familiar territory for Davis who electrified listeners in the '70s with her larger-than-life stage presence and overt sexuality. (Aku 2019)

Against all the odds though, this week sees the release of a song written by Davis for the first time since her halcyon days of the 1970s. (Corcoran 2019)

‘A Little Bit Hot Tonight’—a smoldering soul number with a Latin breakdown that popped up on Bandcamp last month [...] For a world still getting up to speed on Betty Davis’ brilliance, even this tentative step back into the limelight is cause for celebration. (Richards 2019: 4-5)

The funk songwriter and vocalist breaks her 40 year silence with ‘A Little Bit Hot Tonight.’ (The Wire 2019)

Davis released her first new song in 40 years through Bandcamp: the sultry and smooth ‘A Little Bit Hot Tonight,’ which is just as sexy and brilliant as any of her early recordings. (Spanos 2020)

While the technology of the recording studio was new to Betty, the studio as a site of performance and musical innovation was not. When I later asked Betty what the experience was like to record and produce music in a digital context, she said: “There’s a definite difference in the sound. There are more highs on the computer. I think everything is so technical. But if you’re making good music it’s going to turn out whether you’re doing it digital or analog” (Davis, interview by author, June 29, 2019).

Betty’s life has largely been structured around the desire to maintain an unwavering commitment to artistic control—turning down deals from Motown and EMI, and famously refusing Eric Clapton’s proposal to produce her album. Betty was one of the very few women in the 1970s who retained full artistic control of her music, and she honors her legacy by returning to the studio (at age 75) in full control. This time, Betty presented herself without any strings attached. From the moment she placed her handwritten lyrics in front of me, to the moment I uploaded the art design to Bandcamp’s webpage, Betty was in full control. This song—our song—allowed her to remain private (and local), setting her own limits and desires, while sharing with the world what is most important to her: her musical identity. When I asked Betty how it felt to return to the studio and work with musicians again, she said:

It was a period of my life that really just stopped creatively. And this song that we’ve done is the first song I’ve recorded in 40 years. So, it’s very exciting for me

to be making some music after all this time. The last time I was in the studio there was an actual sound board and everything was manual, so this was a new experience for me. But it was one of the best experiences of my life. (Davis, interview by author, June 29, 2019)

Four days after Betty and I released “A Little Bit Hot Tonight,” I prepared to co-host what would be my final screening event for the documentary *Betty – They Say I’m Different*. Working with The Battle of Homestead Foundation (BHF) enabled me to continue the work of canonizing Betty on a local level that I began back in February 2018 at the City County Building’s Black History Month exhibit. On July 26, 2019, I was at the helm of Betty’s 75th birthday screening, which doubled as the BHF annual fundraiser. Outside the theatre entrance an original painting by local artist Jennifer Rempel was displayed. In the painting, Rempel positions Betty’s image in front of identifiable landmarks of Homestead, including The Homestead Grays Bridge, smokestacks from steel mills, houses on a steep incline, and a tugboat pushing barges of coal up the Monongahela River (Figure 72).



Figure 72. Painting of Betty Davis by Jennifer Rempel, AMC Lowes Waterfront Theatre, Homestead, PA, July 26, 2019.

Once the sold out theatre was full, I addressed the crowd, alongside the leadership of BHF. We announced the beginning of the Betty Davis Scholarship, as well as information on where to listen and purchase “A Little Bit Hot Tonight.” After all announcements were made, the President of BHF read a Proclamation from Betty Esper, Mayor of Homestead, which officially designated July 26th as Betty Mabry Davis Day (Keleschenyi 2019).

Earlier in the day, before I headed to the theatre to begin the event, I stopped by Betty’s house to drop off a card, a birthday cake that my sister made for her, and a copy of the Mayor’s Proclamation that I framed for her. As with past events honoring Betty, she would not be in attendance. Rather, she would simply enjoy seeing pictures and videos that I took after the fact and hearing my accounts of the event. “I’m going to meditate on all the positive things that are happening today,” she told me during our visit. She would later tell me that she could “feel the energy” all the way from the theatre, and that it was “incredible.”

9.0 “It’s My Life”: Conclusion

how did she do it? how did she survive?
outwit a young rock & roll death
choosing life, being fully awake
can be lonely

Jessica Care Moore “Betty – They Say I’m Different”

In February 2020, I was sitting across from Betty Davis at her kitchen table, where we patiently waited to drink the fresh pot of green tea she just brewed. I had my laptop in tote so that we could access YouTube and listen to music in the admittedly inelegant format that is still somewhat foreign to her. Listening to music together in Betty’s apartment, and in the car (where she prefers it *loud*), has been a mainstay of our relationship that has its own eclectic soundtrack. This day’s playlist is special, though, because we are listening to her fifth and final album, *Crashin’ From Passion*, which she has not heard since 1979. “I don’t remember anything about that album,” Betty told me a few months back when we learned that it would have its first proper release in forty-one years on Betty’s reissue label, Light In The Attic Records (LITA).

A few weeks prior to our listening session, I was asked by LITA to write the liner notes for the album, which is slated to come out sometime in Spring 2021. I had, like so many Betty Davis fans, been fascinated by and grateful for the extensive liner notes that accompanied her reissued records (Wang 2007a, 2007b, 2009; Ballon 2009, 2016). Indeed, it is fair to say that the label’s work on Betty is part of what set me on this path in the first place. Now I had the great responsibility of crafting the written accompaniment for her last album that would provide so many others with context for Betty Davis and the music featured on her final studio release.

I began the research process for my liner notes the same way I began my research process with Betty in 2016: by listening to music together. “Are you ready?” I asked her. She bowed her beautiful face in silence and grasped a ceramic teacup between aged hands adorned with vintage turquoise rings. I pressed play and the memories began to reveal themselves.

9.1 Advocacy and Purpose in Ethnomusicology

Anthony Seeger (2006) outlines multiple ways that ethnomusicologists can help advocate for musicians and musical communities through what is called “applied” or “public” ethnomusicology. Amongst these are (1) “teaching, performing and interpreting”; (2) “writing for a wide variety of audiences through general market”; (3) “assisting musicians with issues of copyright, publication, and dissemination”; (4) “bringing musicians to tour and helping them professionally”; (5) “creating music education programs or services”; and (6) “producing and disseminating recordings.”

When I began my dissertation research, the only form of advocacy in which I was involved, or had anticipated doing, was that of “teaching, performing and interpreting.” However, through an organic, collaborative methodology, other forms of advocacy presented themselves. As a result, this project transformed into what I believe is a successful attempt at doing applied ethnomusicology, inasmuch as I have (1) taught about and discussed Betty’s music extensively in college courses, public lectures, film-related events, and press interviews (Welsh 2016; Mulkerin 2017; Shanley 2018; Mervis 2019; Richards 2019); (2) written for wider audiences through the publication of zines (Maggio 2016) and, most recently, album liner notes (Maggio forthcoming); (3) worked with LITA to legally license photographs that will be used for upcoming projects; (4) organized a Funk House reunion concert that featured numerous local artists; (5) co-established the Betty Davis Scholarship with the Battle of Homestead Foundation at Steel Valley High School; and perhaps most significantly, (6) collaborated with Betty Davis on the first new song that she recorded and released in over forty years.

Jeff Tilton (1992) contends that the connective thread amongst work labeled applied ethnomusicology (at various times also labeled “public sector” or “active”), is the *purpose* of one’s research as it relates to ethnomusicologists’ engaging with the publics beyond the university. After four years, I now realize the purpose of my research and work with Betty has been three-fold: (1) to better understand Betty’s life and music and how they inform each other, (2) to help build and interact in a critical, collaborative ethnographic network—what I have called the “lifeworld” of Betty Davis, and (3) to apply a “type of ethnomusicological narrative repair” (Mackinlay 2010: 112) to Betty’s story in service of better situating her work in the history of popular music.

9.2 Reflections

I have suggested throughout this project that Betty composed her music with an affective intensity that she harnessed unlike any other performer did during her heyday. Vocally, there is a live action quality to her voice; a sense that she is experimenting with herself in a way that transcends conventional ideas about vocal quality and skill. She pushed her voice to extremes in practically every song, whether through high-pitched shrieking screams, or via shaky, purring, breathy stanzas. Textually, Betty formulated “autoethnographic” (Barnett 2012) songs that told stories of desire, vulnerability, celebration, warning, and respect. She explicitly addressed taboo subjects that deviated from her era’s established popular musical culture and produced a catalogue of music that documented an expansive vision of Black feminist consciousness and performance. Physically, she perfected her pre-punk, funk-blues-rock fusion on the road, performing in front of shocked audiences who had never seen a woman command a stage quite like she did. Through an intentional and innovative combination of vocality, textuality, and physicality, Betty articulated an erotic “cultural logic” (Lordi 2020: 10) that had yet to be normalized in mainstream society, feminist discourses, or Black expressive culture. As a “sound projector,” she communicated, documented, and performed a pleasure-centered poetics of artistic power that envisioned more liberated, inclusive, and intersectional audiences (that, incidentally, would emerge decades later).

While Betty was never affiliated with any political movement, and often dismissed questions about feminism in both interviews with the music press and in our own conversations in recent years, there is no question that Betty Davis was and is considered a ‘political’ musician in the broader sense of the word. Her lyrical content often challenged the status quo, and the politically charged nature of her music is also conveyed through the vocal rendering and performance of her songs. As Matt Dobkin explains when discussing the inherently political nature of Aretha Franklin, “the music and the emotion behind it is the message” (2004: 200). It was a cultural politics—a politics of everyday life—that was influential to the way people think about themselves and their identities as political subjects. It was also a “pleasure politics” (Morgan 2015) that was located in the body and the ways in which she projected it. In her masterful analysis of Betty as a projector of “feminist funk power,” Nikki A. Green contends that:

Davis projected a self-assured, sexually charged, musically creative singer-songwriter that resulted in a more limited audience and less commercial success. She never saw herself as an agent for women's liberation or race politics, but the persona of Betty Davis, vis-à-vis her image and her music, has taken on a life of its own as a symbol of sexual liberation. (2013: 58)

The persona of “Betty Davis” has indeed taken on a life of its own in recent decades through her album reissues, the documentary film, and *Black Women Rock*. Both the discography and persona of Betty Davis projects the sound and image of an autonomous, empowered, and erotic Black woman who wields both a powerful voice and a powerful body in an unapologetic fashion that few musicians have come close to replicating.

While Betty Davis’ status as a popular figure has transformed drastically since LITA began reissuing her music in 2007, there has always been a strong fan base for her music, whether amongst DC-area “funk heads” of the 1970s like Ronald “Stozo” Edwards, or within the circles of record collectors and self-proclaimed music “nerds” like Matt Sullivan, John Ballon, Damon Smith, and Joost Berger. And there has certainly been a vital community of Black women artists and musicians like Jessica Care Moore, Joi Gillam, and Erykah Badu who have long sung Betty’s praises and spread the word about her music. Over the past four years, I have helped to shape and make sense of the “lifeworld” of Betty Davis—this network of individuals and organizations who cherish Betty’s creativity, social consciousness, and resilience as much as they do her music. Collectively, we are a group of scholars, researchers, writers, DJs, record collectors, musicians, producers, poets, activists, and fans. Together, we have produced a kind of critical collaborative ethnography that places Betty’s well-being, security, and musical legacy at the forefront of our work about her.

As a cult icon, Black feminist icon, and a retired performer who only engages with media on her own terms, Betty has been historicized and re-historicized from outside parties with diverging perspectives. This study has suggested that the common narrative about Betty vanishing or “disappearing” is the product of a particular male gaze on her career that is fundamentally false. Cheryl Keyes speaks to this in her brilliant discussion of Betty’s absence, which she rightly sees as Betty’s intentional commitment to self-definition and self-respect:

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. (Keyes 2013: 52)

The cultivation of a “mystery” around Betty’s absence from the public or the music industry does not account for either the cultural gatekeeping Betty endured or the intentionality of Betty’s artistic control. Indeed, there is no mystique about it. Betty’s absence clearly points to both the indignities that Black women have suffered in a white, male-controlled music industry, as well as the vulnerabilities of visionary artists who suffer them. Betty’s metaphorical daughters know, all too well, what drives a Black woman visionary away from the public. The pressing question is thus not why it happened but, rather, how do we stop it from happening again? The community of support that the Daughters of Betty have built—one that Betty was never “blessed” to have—points to one of the most significant ways that Black women artists can find new ways to perform, and to rock, that will prevent their own “disappearance” from the public eye.

So what does Betty’s burgeoning popularity tell us? If we look at it through the “prism of the present” (Davis 1998) it points to a certain social consciousness that has been newly articulated in recent years. It is a sex positive, queer, anti-racist, and otherwise unapologetic consciousness that embraces the erotic as a vital source of power and knowledge. I once asked Betty if she felt that she was ahead of her time, like so many have claimed about her over the years. She responded by saying, “Well, now I realize that I was.” She continued, “You know, Danielle, I’m like an amoeba. I don’t really think about any of this. It happened, and I’m fortunate that I was able to express myself. I’m really fortunate” (Davis, interview by author, Aug 31, 2018). At first, when Betty described herself this way to me, I did not understand what she meant. But it made sense when I thought about the idea of Betty as an “amoeba” in a cultural context: a unique individual in a larger system who has the ability to shape-shift by extending and retracting herself of her volition. I was fascinated by this definition and how oddly befitting it was for her. And, once again, I was moved by the intentionality of her words, her thoughts, and her feelings.

For far too long, Betty’s music and life have been characterized by masculinist perceptions, such as the binary of her being a “nasty gal” on stage and a sensitive introvert off-stage, or her simply being a muse for Miles Davis’ transition into his fusion period. Betty is, of course, all of these things and so much more. She is an extremely humble and compassionate person, and she is also one of the most assertive and focused individuals I have ever been around. She is both deliberate and specific, and also quite imaginative and whimsical. She is a deep, intuitive, brave,

spiritual, and incredibly complex person whose thoughts, ideas, and feelings exist in the present day. And every moment we have spent together—every cup of tea, every song, every second of silence—revealed yet another facet of the woman now rightfully acknowledged as the Queen of Funk.

In 1974, Betty told *The Washington Post* that, “the only thing that counts in this business, man, the only thing that’s going to pull you through alive, is the degree of control you’ve got.” She said, “it’s knowing where to draw the line in your life between what’s real and not real, what you are and what they want you to be” (Fisher 1974: F2). In some ways, she was answering the questions that Jessica Care Moore would later ask in her 2004 poem when she wrote: “*how did she do it? how did she survive?*” After four remarkable years with Betty—researching, analyzing, and experiencing her full humanity on a deeply intimate level—I realize that Betty survived unspeakable hardships (some of which I have documented here, and many that I have not) by remaining in control. Control over her sound. Control over her look. Control over her message. Control over the production of her music. Control over her privacy. And, most importantly, control over her own self-definition and “sense of self-respect.”

Just as that *New York Times* reviewer professed in 1974, Betty’s recognition would be “a long time coming,” because Western society “rarely recognizes the Bessie’s or the Betty’s until they’re gone” (Ledbetter 1974: 28). Luckily for us, Betty is not gone. Betty survived.

Selected Interviews and Communication

Akpem, Denenge. Personal communication. Post-film audience discussion. Chicago, IL. August 19, 2018.

Ballon, John. Interview by author. In person. Los Angeles, CA. November 2, 2018.

———. Interview by author. Phone. January 7, 2019.

———. Personal communication. Text message. March 10, 2020.

Band rehearsal. Pittsburgh, PA. March 30, 2019.

Banerjee, Shayontani. Personal communication. Email. May 3, 2019.

Banks, Patryce “Choc’let.” Interview by author. Phone. February 5, 2019.

Berger, Joost. Personal communication. Email. May 21, 2019.

Calvo, Rudy. Interview by author. Phone. February 3, 2020.

Colby, Liza. Personal communication. “Daughters of Betty Speak!” panel. Detroit, March 17, 2019.

Contrares, Ayana. Interview by author. In person. Chicago, IL. August 21, 2018.

Cooper, Jocelyn. Personal communication. “Industry Women – Empowering Future Voices & Visions” panel. March 3, 2018.

Cox, Phil. Personal communication. Post-film audience discussion. Amsterdam, Netherlands. November 18, 2017.

———. Personal communication. Post-film audience discussion. Amsterdam, Netherlands. November 23, 2017.

———. Personal communication. Email. May 9, 2019.

Davis, Betty. Personal communication. In person. Pittsburgh, PA. May 16, 2016.

———. Personal communication. In person. Pittsburgh, PA. June, 2 2016.

———. Personal communication. In person. Pittsburgh, PA. August 20, 2016.

———. Personal communication. In person. Pittsburgh, PA. November 19, 2016.

———. Personal communication. In person. Pittsburgh, PA. February 2, 2017

- . Personal communication. Pittsburgh, PA. July 29, 2017.
- . Interview by author. In person. Pittsburgh, PA. February 10, 2018.
- . Personal communication. In person. Pittsburgh, PA. April 26, 2018.
- . Personal communication. In person. Pittsburgh, PA. May 22, 2018.
- . Personal communication. In person. Pittsburgh, PA. July 21, 2018.
- . Interview by author. In person. Pittsburgh, PA. August 31, 2018.
- . Personal communication. In person. Pittsburgh, PA. December 8, 2018.
- . Interview by author. In person. Pittsburgh, PA. June 29, 2019.
- . Interview by author. In person. Pittsburgh, PA. July 19, 2019.
- . Personal communication. In person. Pittsburgh, PA. August 24, 2019.
- . Interview by author. In person. Pittsburgh, PA. September 7, 2019.
- . Interview by author. In person. Pittsburgh, PA. October 5, 2019.
- . Personal communication. In person. Pittsburgh, PA. November 2, 2019.
- . Personal communication. In person. Pittsburgh, PA. December 7, 2019.
- Dyson, Kat. Personal communication. “Daughters of Betty Speak!” panel. Detroit, March 17, 2019.
- Edwards, Ronald “Stozo.” Interview by author. Phone. February 15, 2019.
- Errico, Greg. Interview by author. Skype. February 14, 2019.
- Fancher, Lisa. Interview by author. In person. Los Angeles, CA. October 28, 2018.
- Giles, Davis. Personal communication. Post-film audience discussion. Los Angeles, CA. November 3, 2018.
- Harron, Colette. Interview by Damon Smith. Phone. May 16, 2013.
- Hawkins, Morgan. Personal communication. Email. June 7, 2019.
- Hendryx, Nona. Personal communication. “Daughters of Betty Speak!” panel. Pittsburgh, PA. June 23, 2019.
- Ideeyah. Personal communication. “Daughters of Betty Speak!” panel. Detroit, March 17, 2019.

Jouver, Jason. Personal communication. Email. July 23, 2019.

M.A.D.U.S.A., Blak Rapp. Personal communication. “Industry Women – Empowering Future Voices & Visions” panel. March 3, 2018.

Mills, Fred. Interview by Oliver Wang. August 26, 2006.

Moore, Jessica Care. Interview by author. Phone. January 19, 2019.

———. Personal communication. “Daughters of Betty Speak!” panel. Detroit, March 17, 2019.

———. Personal communication. “Daughters of Betty Speak!” panel. Pittsburgh, PA. June 23, 2019.

Neal, Nicky. Interview by Oliver Wang. Aug 23, 2006.

Okun, Mark. Interview by John Ballon. Phone. November 20, 2004.

Olday, Jacquea Mae. Personal communication. Email. June 13, 2020.

Oliver-Velez, Denise. Interview by John Ballon. Phone. December 7, 2004.

Pawelski, Cheryl. Interview by author. In person. Los Angeles, CA. October 30, 2018.

Pointer, Anita. Personal communication. Email. February 25, 2020.

Powell, Duane E.. Interview by author. In person. Chicago, IL. August 24, 2018.

Rainey, Chuck. Interview by author. Phone. September 4, 2019.

Reeves, Martha. Interview by author. Phone. March 6, 2019.

Sabol, Blaire. Interview by Damon Smith. Phone. May 21, 2013.

SATE. Personal communication. “Industry Women – Empowering Future Voices & Visions” panel. March 3, 2018.

———. Interview by author. In person. Pittsburgh, PA. June 22, 2019.

Sevier, Rob. Interview by author. In person. Chicago, IL. August 25, 2018.

Shrieve, Michael. Interview by John Ballon. Phone. December 17, 2004.

Smith, Damon. Interview by author. In person. New York, NY. September 14, 2019.

Stout, Renée. Personal communication. Book inscription. Washington, D.C.. November 12, 2016.

Strickland, Shanyse. Personal communication. Email. May 10, 2019.

Studio Day 1. Pittsburgh, PA. April 13, 2019.

Studio Day 2. Pittsburgh, PA. April 14, 2019.

Studio Day 3. Pittsburgh, PA. April 19, 2019.

Sullivan, Matt. Interview by author. In person. Los Angeles, CA. November 2, 2018.

———. Personal communication. Phone. January 4, 2019.

Tamar-kali. Interview by author. Skype. September 23, 2019.

Uyarra, Esteban. Personal communication. Post-film audience discussion. Amsterdam, Netherlands. November 18, 2017.

Vonner, Leslie. Personal communication. “Daughters of Betty Speak!” panel. Detroit, March 17, 2019.

Vox, Militia. Personal communication. “Daughters of Betty Speak!” panel. Detroit, March 17, 2019.

Wang, Oliver. Interview by author. In person. Los Angeles, CA. October 30, 2018.

Webber, Melissa. Personal communication. New Orleans, LA. March 24, 2019.

Williams, Winona. Interview by Damon Smith. Phone. September 9, 2013.

Young, Sarah Huny. Personal communication. “Industry Women – Empowering Future Voices & Visions” panel. March 3, 2018.

References Cited

- “1970s Black Women Producers???” n.d. *Discogs Forum*.
<https://www.discogs.com/forum/thread/829059>.
- “A Little Bit Hot Tonight, by Betty Davis Performed by Danielle Maggio.” 2019. Bandcamp. June 22, 2019. <https://daniellemaggio.bandcamp.com/album/a-little-bit-hot-tonight>.
- Abbey, John. 1975. “Betty Davis: Filthy But Funky.” *Blues & Soul*, 1975.
- “About.” n.d. Light In The Attic Records. Accessed October 18, 2020.
<https://lightintheattic.net/about>.
- “About Native Voice.” n.d. Native Voice Films. Accessed October 18, 2020.
<http://www.nativevoicefilms.com/about/>.
- Aku, Timmhotep. 2019. “Betty Davis Drops Her First Song in 40 Years.” *Afropunk*. July 30, 2019.
<https://afropunk.com/2019/07/betty-davis-drops-her-first-song-in-40-years/>.
- Anderson, Benedict R. 1983. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Anderson, Stacey. 2019. “Jamila Woods Breaks Down Every Song on Her New Album, LEGACY! LEGACY!” *Pitchfork*. May 10, 2019. <https://pitchfork.com/features/song-by-song/jamila-woods-legacy-legacy-interview/>.
- “Animated Music Sequences for Feature Documentary About the Life of Cult Funk Singer Betty Davis.” n.d. KASH. Accessed October 24, 2020. <https://www.kash.london/film#/betty-davis/>
- Arditi, David. 2017. “Digital Subscriptions: The Unending Consumption of Music in the Digital Era.” *Popular Music and Society* 41 (3): 302–18.
- Aregood, Rich. 1974. “Shock and Schlock At Bijou.” *Philadelphia Daily News*, August 23, 1974.

- Assmann, Aleida. 2006. "Memory, Individual and Collective." In *The Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis*, edited by Robert E. Goodin and Charles Tilly. Oxford: New York: Oxford University Press: 210-225.
- Austin, J. L. 1965. *How To Do Things with Words*, vol. GB-132, Oxford University Press, New York.
- Ayyagari, Shalini. 2014. "At Home in the Studio." In *More Than Bollywood: Studies in Indian Popular Music*, edited by Gregory D. Booth and Bradley Shope. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 257–76.
- B., Markie. 2019. "The Far-Out Futuristic Fashions of Designer Larry LeGaspi." Red Bull Music Academy. April 30, 2019. <https://daily.redbullmusicacademy.com/2019/04/larry-legaspi-feature>.
- Baker, Houston A. 1984. *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ballon, John. 2003. "Betty Davis: Betty Davis: Betty Davis Album Review." All About Jazz. <https://www.allaboutjazz.com/betty-davis-betty-davis-by-john-ballon.php>.
- . 2007. "Liberated Funk - Betty Davis." *Wax Poetics*, May 2007: 112-124.
- . 2009. Liner notes to *Nasty Gal*. Betty Davis. Light In The Attic Records LITA 046. CD.
- . 2016. Liner notes to *Betty Davis – The Columbia Years 1968-1969*. Betty Davis. Light In The Attic Records LITA 135, Columbia 88843048152, Sony Music Commercial Music Group – 88843048152. Vinyl LP.
- Baraka, Amiri. 1963. *Blues People Negro Music in White America*. Black Thought and Culture. New York: W. Morrow.
- Barnett, LaShonda Katrice. 2012. "Learning How To Listen: Analyzing Style and Meaning in the Music of Abbey Lincoln, Nina Simone and Cassandra Wilson." PhD diss., Sarah Lawrence College.

- Bayton, Mavis. 1988. *Frock Rock: Women Performing Popular Music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- “Behind The Numbers.” n.d. The Numero Group. Accessed October 23, 2020. <https://numerogroup.com/pages/behind-the-numbers>.
- Bendjelloul, Malik. 2012. *Searching for Sugarman*. Documentary. Red Box Films.
- Benjamin, Walter. 1968 [1931]. *Illuminations*. [1st ed.]. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.
- . 1936. “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” Marxists Internet Archive. Retrieved from <https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm>
- Berkman, Franya J. 2010. *Monument Eternal: The Music of Alice Coltrane*. Music Culture. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Berlant, Lauren, and Michael Warner. 1988. “Sex in Public.” *Critical inquiry* 24 (2): 547–566.
- Berger, John. 1992. *Ways of Seeing*. London: British Broadcasting Corporation.
- Beta, Andy. 2007. “Davis’ Blueprint For Urban Music.” *The New York Sun*. May 22, 2007. <https://www.nysun.com/arts/daviss-blueprint-for-urban-music/54952/>.
- “Betty Davis.” 2007. Light In The Attic Records. 2007. <https://lightintheattic.net/artists/6-betty-davis>.
- “Betty Davis.” n.d. Who Sampled. Accessed October 25, 2020. <https://www.whosampled.com/Betty-Davis/>
- “Betty Davis: Hard And Course.” *New Pittsburgh Courier*. October 12, 1974: 18.
- “Betty Davis Releases First New Song since 1979.” 2019. The Wire. July 24, 2019. <https://www.thewire.co.uk/news/55837/betty-davis-releases-first-song-in-40-years>.
- Black Stars*. October 1974: 32-35.

- Blecha, Peter. 2005. "Rock And Roll Archaeologist: How I Chased Down Kurt's Stratocaster, the 'Layla' Guitar, And Janis's Boa." Seattle: Sasquatch Books.
- Bobo, Jacqueline. 1995. *Black Women as Cultural Readers*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Bolden, Tony. 2013. "Groove Theory: A Vamp on the Epistemology of Funk." *American Studies* 52 (4): 9–34.
- Bottomley, Andrew J. 2016. "Play It Again: Rock Music Reissues and the Production of the Past for the Present." *Popular Music and Society* 39 (2): 151–74.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Bowsher, Andrew. 2015. "Legitimising Strategies in the Field of Independent Cultural Production: The Case of Reissue Record Labels in the USA." *International Review of Social Research* 5 (2): 102–12.
- Brackett, David. 2005. "Questions of Genre in Black Popular Music." *Black Music Research Journal* 25 (1–2): 73–92.
- Brooks, Daphne. 2006. *Bodies in Dissent : Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- . 2008. "The Write to Rock: Racial Mythologies, Feminist Theory, and the Pleasures of Rock Music Criticism." *Women & Music* 12 (1): 54–62.
- . 2018. "Betty Davis, Grace Jones, and the Art of Anti-Confessional Cinema." Los Angeles Review of Books. July 29, 2018. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/betty-davis-grace-jones-and-the-art-of-anti-confessional-cinema/>.
- Brown, Geoff. 1975. "Betty, First Lady of Funk." *Melody Maker*. September 27, 1975: 47.
- Brown, Jayna. 2008. *Babylon Girls : Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern*. Durham: Duke University Press.

- Buckland, Fiona. 2002. *Impossible Dance Club Culture and Queer World-Making*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Budofsky, Adam. 2010. "Blood. Sugar. Sex. Magic." *Modern Drummer*, August 2010.
- Burger, Jeff. 1974. "Betty Davis." *Zoo World*. July 18, 1974: 27-28.
- Burnim, Mellonee. 1985. "Culture Bearer and Tradition Bearer: An Ethnomusicologist's Research on Gospel Music." *Ethnomusicology* 29 (3): 432-47.
- Burnim, Mellonee V., and Portia K. Maultsby. 2006. *African American Music: An Introduction*. New York: London: Routledge.
- Burns, Kephra. 1995. "Word from the Motherland: Rap, the Dozens, and African Griots." In *Rap on Rap: Straight-up Talk on Hip-Hop Culture*, edited by Adam Sexton. New York: Delta Books: 30-38.
- Butler, Judith. 1993. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* New York: Routledge.
- . 1997. *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. New York: Routledge.
- . 2011. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Carby, Hazel V. 1990. "'It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime': The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues." In *Unequal Sisters: A Multicultural Reader in U.S. Women's History*, edited by Ellen Carol DuBois and Vicki L. Ruiz. London: Routledge: 238-49.
- . 1990b. *Reconstructing Womanhood The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- . 1992. "Policing the Black Woman's Body in an Urban Context." *Critical Inquiry* 18 (4): 738-55.

- Chang, Jeff. 2017. "A Funk Queen Steps Out of the Shadows." San Francisco Gate. May 18, 2017.
<https://www.sfgate.com/entertainment/article/A-FUNK-QUEEN-STEPS-OUT-OF-THE-SHADOWS-Betty-2593729.php>.
- Charles, RuPaul, and Michelle Visage. 2017. "RuPaul: What's The Tee? W/ Michelle Visage." Episode 122: Frances Davis. October 25, 2017.
<http://www.rupaulpodcast.com/episodes/2017/10/25/episode-122-frances-davis>.
- Chatman, Priscilla. 1977. "I'm as Bad as Stevie Wonder." *Soul*. March 28, 1977: 12.
- Chen, Emma. 2016. "Black Face, Queer Space: The Influence of Black Lesbian & Transgender Blues Women of the Harlem Renaissance on Emerging Queer Communities." *Historical Perspectives: Santa Clara University Undergraduate Journal of History, Series II*: 21 (8).
- Chick, Stevie. 2016. "Cult Heroes: Betty Davis – Blistering Funk Pioneer and Fearless Female Artist." The Guardian. July 26, 2016.
<https://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2016/jul/26/cult-heroes-betty-davis-blistering-funk-pioneer-and-fearless-female-artist>.
- Coleman, Nancy. 2020. "Why We're Capitalizing Black." *The New York Times*. July 5, 2020.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/05/insider/capitalized-black.html>.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. 1989. "The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 14 (4): 745–73.
- . 2000. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge.
- Connerton, Paul. 1989. *How Societies Remember*. Themes in the Social Sciences. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Connor, Steven. 2000. *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism*. Cultural History of Ventriloquism. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Corbett, John, and Terri Kapsalis. 1996. "Aural Sex: The Female Orgasm in Popular Sound." *TDR : Drama Review* 40 (3): 102–11.
- Corcoran, Patrick. 2019. "NEW MUSIC WE LOVE: Betty Davis & Danielle Maggio's 'A Little Bit Hot Tonight.'" *Albumism*. July 30, 2019. <https://www.albumism.com/new-music/betty-davis-and-danielle-maggio-a-little-bit-hot-tonight>.
- Cox, Phil. 2017. *Betty - They Say I'm Different*. Documentary. Native Voice Films.
- Cox, Timothy. 1983. "Miles Davis' 'Other Wife.'" *New Pittsburgh Courier*. November 13, 1983: 2.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 2018. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics [1989]." *University of Chicago Legal Forum*. 1989 (1): 57–80.
- Danielsen, Anne. 2006. *Presence and Pleasure the Funk Grooves of James Brown and Parliament*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Davis, Angela Y. 1989. *Women, Culture, & Politics*. New York: Random House.
- . 1997. "Afro Images: Politics, Fashion, and Nostalgia." In *Soul: Black Power, Politics, and Pleasure*, edited by Monique Guillory and Richard C. Green. New York: London: New York University Press: 23-31.
- . 1998. *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism : Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Davis, Miles and Quincy Troupe. 1989. *Miles, the Autobiography*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- DeFrantz, Thomas F. 2004. "The Black Beat Made Visible: Hip Hop Dance and Body Power." In *Of the Presence of the Body: Essays on Dance and Performance Theory*, edited by André Lepecki. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press: 66.
- Derrida, Jacque. 1992. "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority.'" In *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, edited by Drucilla Cornell,

Michel Rosenfeld, and David Gray Carlson. New York: Routledge.

Dery, Mark. 1995. "Black to the Future: Afro-Futurism 1.0"
<http://www.detritus.net/contact/rumori/200211/0319.html>.

Dobkin, Matt. 2004. *I Never Loved a Man the Way I Love You : Aretha Franklin, Respect, and the Making of a Soul Music Masterpiece*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Dougan, John. 2006. "Objects of Desire: Canon Formation and Blues Record Collecting." *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 18 (1): 40–65.

Douglas, Ann. 1995. *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

Dunks, Glenn. 2019. "Same Old Tune: Mythologisation and the Music Documentary." *Metro (Melbourne)*, no. 202: 94–99.

Eidsheim, Nina. 2008. "Voice as a Technology of Selfhood: Towards an Analysis of Racialized Timbre and Vocal Performance." PhD diss., University of California, San Diego.

———. 2018. "The Triumph of Jimmy Scott: A Voice Beyond Category." In *The Relentless Pursuit of Tone: Timbre in Popular Music*, edited by Robert Fink, Melinda Latour, and Zachary Wallmark. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 141–58.

———. 2019. *The Race of Sound : Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music*. Refiguring American Music. Durham: Duke University Press.

Elwood, Phillip. 1975. "Strange Act at Boarding House." *The San Francisco Examiner*, October 9, 1975.

Feliz, Roberta Nin. 2017. "Reverberations: History and Legacies of Resistance in Black Women's Music." *Bitch Media*. February 17, 2017.
<https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/reverberations/history-and-legacies-resistance-black-women's-music>.

- Fiander, Matthew. 2016. "Betty Davis: The Columbia Years 1968-1969." PopMatters. August 19, 2016. <https://www.popmatters.com/betty-davis-the-columbia-years-1968-1969-2495421013.html>.
- Filene, Benjamin. 1991. "'Our Singing Country': John and Alan Lomax, Leadbelly, and the Construction of an American Past." *American Quarterly* 43 (4): 602–24.
- Fisher, Emily. 1974. "The Devil in Betty Davis: A Mix of Screen and Funk." *The Washington Post*, June 30, 1974.
- Floyd, Samuel A. 1995. *The Power of Black Music : Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Fonville, Althea. 1974. "A Taste of Betty Davis." *New Pittsburgh Courier*, December 28, 1974.
- Ford, Tanisha C. 2015. *Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style, and the Global Politics of Soul*. Gender and American Culture. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Forrest, R. 2010. "Mud Shark: Groupies and the Construction of the Heavy Metal Rock God." In *The Metal Void: First Gatherings*, edited by N. W. R. Scott and I. Von Helden. Oxford: Interdisciplinary Press: 135–46.
- Foucault, Michel. 1980. *Power/Knowledge : Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Fournet, Adele. 2019. "Women Music Producers: Sonic Innovation from the Periphery of a Male-Dominated Industry." PhD diss., New York University.
- Frechette, Dave. 1974. "Bold Soul Sister." *Black Music*, November 1974: 46-48.
- Fuchs, Ellise. 2018. "'Betty Davis' Documentary 'Betty: They Say I'm Different' Tries a Different Approach." PopMatters. August 7, 2018. <https://www.popmatters.com/betty-they-say-im-different-film-interview-2593326412.html>.
- Furness, Zack. 2015. "The Wu-Tang Clan's Failed Experiment." Souciant. December 16, 2015. <http://souciant.com/2015/12/the-wu-tang-clans-failed-experiment/>

- Gallagher, Robert. 1976. "Nasty Betty's Funkhouse." *Black Music*, February 1976.
- Gamson, Joshua. 2005. *The Fabulous Sylvester: The Legend, the Music, the Seventies in San Francisco*. New York: H. Holt.
- Gaunt, Kyra D. 2006. *The Games Black Girls Play Learning the Ropes from Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop*. New York: New York University Press.
- Geertz, Clifford. 2000. *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Gibbs, Vernon. 1974a. "Betty Davis—Singin' To The Max." *Essence*, July 1974: 30.
- . 1974b. "Betty Davis: The Bottom Line, New York, NY." *Soul & Jazz Record*, August 1974.
- . 1976. "Betty Davis: The Put-On Who Puts Out." *Penthouse*, March 1976: 51-52.
- Gilroy, Paul. 1987. *"There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack": The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation*. London: Hutchinson.
- . 1993. *The Black Atlantic : Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Giovanni, Nikki. 1970. *Re:Creation*. [1st ed.]. Detroit: Broadside Press.
- Glass, Roger S. 1974. "Graham Central and Betty Davis Wrap It Up." *The Hilltop*, November 1, 1974.
- Goldman, Vivian. 2004. "Blues For Betty Davis' Smile: The Betty Davis Lacuna." In *Rip It Up: The Black Experience in Rock 'n Roll*, edited by Kandia Crazy Horse and Pan Macmillan. Gordonsville: Palgrave Macmillan: 53–58.
- . 2019. *Revenge of the She-Punks: A Feminist Music History from Poly Styrene to Pussy Riot*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

- Gould, Deborah B. 2009. *Moving Politics: Emotion and Act up's Fight against AIDS*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Gramsci, Antonio, Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. 1971. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. New York: International Publishers.
- Greene, Nikki A. 2013. "The Feminist Funk Power of Betty Davis and Renée Stout." *American Studies (Lawrence)* 52 (4): 57–76.
- Greenman, Ben. 2007. "BACK-SEAT BETTY; Pop Notes." *The New Yorker* 83 (16): 32.
- Griffin, Farah Jasmine. 2001. *If You Can't Be Free, Be a Mystery: In Search of Billie Holiday*. New York: Free Press.
- Gussow, Adam. 2013. "Sold It to the Blues-Devil: The Great Migration, Lost Generations, and the Perils of the Urban Dance Hall." *Popular Music and Society* 36 (5): 615–36.
- Guy-Sheftall, Beverly. 2011. *Words of Fire An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*. Words of Fire. New York: New Press.
- Haenfler, Ross. 2006. *Straight Edge: Hardcore Punk, Clean Living Youth, and Social Change*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Hall, Stuart. 1973. *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse*. Birmingham: University of Birmingham.
- Hammonds, Evelyn. 1994. "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality." *Differences: Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 6.2–3: 126–45.
- . 1997. "Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence." In *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, edited by M Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty. New York: Routledge: 170-81.
- Hanni, Carl. 2010. "Reviews: Albums - 'Nasty Gal'/Is It Love or Desire." *Goldmine*, February 26, 2010: 34.

- Harper, Paula. 2019. "BEYONCÉ : Viral Techniques and the Visual Album." *Popular Music and Society* 42 (1): 61–81.
- Harrison, Daphne Duval. 2006. "Women in African American Music: Blues." In *African American Music: An Introduction*, edited by Mellonee V. Burnim and Portia K. Maultsby. New York: Routledge: 508–28.
- Harvey Young. 2010. *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Hayes, David. 2006. "'Take Those Old Records Off the Shelf': Youth and Music Consumption in the Postmodern Age." *Popular Music and Society* 29 (1): 51–68.
- Hayes, Jesse. 2013. "The Beautiful Dichotomy of Betty Davis: A Rare Conversation with the Elusive Mistress of Funk." *Black Renaissance* 13 (2/3): 32–182.
- Hendricks, Jerome M. 2016. "Curating Value in Changing Markets: Independent Record Stores and the Vinyl Record Revival." *Sociological Perspectives* 59 (2): 479–97.
- Higginbotham, Evelyn Brooks. 1993. *Righteous Discontent : The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Hine, Darlene Clark. 1994. *Hine Sight: Black Women and the Re-Construction of American History*. Bloomington.
- Hirsch, Marianne, and Valerie Smith. 2002. "Feminism and Cultural Memory: An Introduction." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28 (1): 1–19.
- Hoeven, Arno van der. 2018. "Narratives of Popular Music Heritage and Cultural Identity: The Affordances and Constraints of Popular Music Memories." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 21 (2): 207–22.
- Hooper, Lisa. 2011. "Underwriting History: The Role of Sound Recording Collectors in Shaping the Historical Record." *ARSC Journal* 42 (1): 43–49.

- Horton-Stallings, LaMonda. 2007. *Mutha' Is Half a Word: Intersections of Folklore, Vernacular, Myth, and Queerness in Black Female Culture*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.
- . 2015. *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures*. The New Black Studies Series. Baltimore: University of Illinois Press.
- Hull, Akasha Gloria, Patricia Bell-Scott, and Barbara Smith. 1982. *But Some of Us Are Brave: All the Women Are White, and All the Blacks Are Men*. Old Westbury, N.Y: Feminist Press.
- Hundley, Jessica. 2014. "Nasty gal: Betty Davis." *Dazed*. June 15, 2014. <https://www.dazeddigital.com/music/article/20269/1/nasty-gal-betty-davis>.
- Hunter, Tera W. 1997. *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- "Iggy Pop & Zig Zags - Light In The Attic 10 Year Anniversary: Betty Davis 'If I'm In Luck I Might Get Picked Up.'" 2012. *Light In The Attic Records*. 2012. <https://lightintheattic.net/releases/767-light-in-the-attic-10-year-anniversary-betty-davis-if-i-m-in-luck-i-might-get-picked-up>.
- Impey, Angela. 2002. "Culture, Conservation and Community Reconstruction: Explorations in Advocacy Ethnomusicology and Participatory Action Research in Northern KwaZulu Natal." *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 34: 9–24.
- Iton, Richard. 2008. *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ivey, William. 1976. "Issues and Reissues in Country Music Recordings." *Western Folklore* 35 (2): 162–72.
- Izadi, Elahe. 2020. "Why Hundreds of American Newsrooms Have Started Capitalizing the 'b' in 'Black.'" *Washington Post*, June 18, 2020. https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/media/why-hundreds-of-american-newsrooms-have-started-capitalizing-the-b-in-black/2020/06/18/7687a7a8-b16e-11ea-8f56-63f38c990077_story.html.

- Jackson, Linda Susan. 2007. *What Yellow Sounds Like*. Northeastern University Press.
- Jensen, Sune Qvotrup. 2011. "Othering, Identity Formation and Agency." *Qualitative Studies* 2 (2): 63–78.
- "Jessica Care Moore's Black Women Rock!" n.d. Jessica Care Moore's Black WOMEN Rock! Accessed October 18, 2020. <https://blackwomenrock.com/>.
- Jha, Meeta. 2015. *The Global Beauty Industry: Colorism, Racism, and the National Body*. London: Routledge.
- Johnson, Amber. 2014. "Confessions of a Video Vixen: My Autocritography of Sexuality, Desire, and Memory." *Text and Performance Quarterly* 34 (2): 182–200.
- Jones, Kellie. 1998. "In the Thick of It: David Hammons and Hair Culture in the 1970s." *Third Text* 12 (44): 17-24.
- Jones, Meta DuEwa. 2011. *The Muse Is Music : Jazz Poetry from the Harlem Renaissance to Spoken Word*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Kariisa, Jessica. 2018. "Erykah Badu and Joi: Betty Davis interview." Red Bull. October 26, 2018. <https://www.redbull.com/us-en/betty-davis-feature>.
- Katz, Mark. 2006. "Men, Women, and Turntables: Gender and the DJ Battle." *The Musical Quarterly* 89 (4): 580–99.
- Katz, Robin. 1975. "Betty Davis: Game Is Her Middle Name." *Sounds*, 1975.
- Kehrer, Lauron. 2019. "Who Slays? Queer Resonances in Beyoncé's Lemonade." *Popular Music and Society: Special Issue on Beyoncé* 42 (1): 82–98.
- Keleschenyi, Kristen. 2019. "Homestead Mayor Declares Betty Davis Day At Council Meeting." *The Valley Mirror*, July 18, 2019.
- Kelley, Robin D. G. 2002. *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*. Boston: Beacon Press.

- Kennedy, Rick, and Randy McNutt. 1999. *Little Labels—Big Sound: Small Record Companies and the Rise of American Music*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Kernodle, Tammy L. 2004. *Soul on Soul : The Life and Music of Mary Lou Williams*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.
- . 2014. “Black Women Working Together: Jazz, Gender, and the Politics of Validation.” *Black Music Research Journal* 34 (1): 27–55.
- Kershaw, Miriam. 1997. “Postcolonialism and Androgyny: The Performance Art of Grace Jones.” *Art Journal* 56 (4): 19–27.
- Keyes, Cheryl L. 1996. “At the Crossroads: Rap Music and Its African Nexus.” *Ethnomusicology* 40 (2): 223–48.
- . 2000. “Empowering Self, Making Choices, Creating Spaces: Black Female Identity via Rap Music Performance.” *The Journal of American Folklore* 113 (449): 255–69.
- . 2013. “‘She Was Too Black for Rock and Too Hard for Soul’: (Re)Discovering the Musical Career of Betty Mabry Davis.” *American Studies* 52 (4): 35–55.
- Klein, Joshua. 2007. “Betty Davis: Betty Davis / They Say I’m Different Album Review.” Pitchfork. May 22, 2007. <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/11903-betty-davis-they-say-im-different/>.
- Klinger, Barbara. 2006. *Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies, and the Home*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Krouse-Dismukes, Ondra. 2008. “Cultural Memory in Zora Neal Hurston’s Mules and Men.” In *The Funk Era and Beyond: New Perspectives on Black Popular Culture*, edited by Tony Bolden. New York: Palgrave MacMillan: 193–209.
- Kulkarni, Neil. 2018. “Betty: They Say I’m Different.” *The Wire*, March 2018.

- Kushner, Scott. 2020. "Collecting and Media Change, or: Listening to Phish via App." *Convergence* 26 (4): 969–89.
- LaBelle, Patti, and Laura B. Randolph. 1996. *Don't Block the Blessings: Revelations of a Lifetime*. New York: Riverhead Books.
- Lambert, Molly. 2016. "Betty Davis: A Cult Genius Revealed, Once Again." MTV News. July 25, 2016. <http://www.mtv.com/news/2909818/betty-davis-a-cult-genius-revealed-once-again/>.
- Lancefield, Robert C. 1998. "Musical Traces' Retraceable Paths: The Repatriation of Recorded Sound." *Journal of Folklore Research* 35 (1): 47–68.
- Larsen, Gretchen. 2017. "'It's a Man's Man's Man's World': Music Groupies and the Othering of Women in the World of Rock." *Organization* 24 (3): 397–417.
- Lassiter, Luke E. 2005. *The Chicago Guide to Collaborative Ethnography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ledbetter, Les. "Mood Isn't Candlelight in Betty Davis' Songs." *The New York Times*, June 21, 1974: 28.
- Lee, Shayne. 2010. *Erotic Revolutionaries: Black Women, Sexuality, and Popular Culture*. Lanham, MD: The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group.
- Lipsitz, George. 1990. *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture*. American Culture; 4. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Lorde, Audre. 1984. *Sister Outsider Essays and Speeches*. The Crossing Press Feminist Series. Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press.
- Lordi, Emily J. 2013. *Black Resonance: Iconic Women Singers and African American Literature*. American Literatures Initiative. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- . 2016a. "Souls Intact: The Soul Performances of Audre Lorde, Aretha Franklin, and Nina Simone." *Women & Performance* 26 (1): 55–71.

- . 2016b. “Beyoncé’s Other Women: Considering The Soul Muses Of Lemonade.” *Fader*. May 6, 2016. <https://www.thefader.com/2016/05/06/beyonce-lemonade-women-soul-muses>.
- . 2018. “The Artful, Erotic, and Still Misunderstood Funk of Betty Davis.” *The New Yorker*. May 2, 2018. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-artful-erotic-and-still-misunderstood-funk-of-betty-davis>.
- . 2020. *The Meaning of Soul: Black Music and Resilience since the 1960s*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Maalsen, Sophia, and Jessica McLean. 2018. “Record Collections as Musical Archives: Gender, Record Collecting, and Whose Music Is Heard.” *Journal of Material Culture* 23 (1): 39–57.
- Mabry, Betty. 1958. “Boys! Boys! Boys!” *Homestead Junior High School*, November 25, 1958, Vol. XIX No. 3 edition.
- Mackinlay, Elizabeth. 2010. “‘Big Women from Burrulula’ An Approach to Advocacy and Applied Ethnomusicology with the Yanyuwa Aboriginal Community in the Northern Territory, Australia.” In *Applied Ethnomusicology: Historical and Contemporary Approaches*, edited by Klisala Harrison, Elizabeth Mackinlay, and Svanibor Pettan. UK: Cambridge Scholars Publisher: 96–115.
- Maggio, Danielle. 2016. “The Genius of Betty Davis.” *Women In Sound*, 2016.
- . 2017. “Gospel Mime: Anointed Ministry, Afrocentrism, and Gender in Black Gospel Performance.” Thesis, The University of Pittsburgh.
- . Forthcoming. Liner notes for *Crashin’ From Passion*. Light In The Attic.
- Mahon, Maureen. 2004. *Right to Rock: The Black Rock Coalition and the Cultural Politics of Race*. Durham: Duke University Press.

- . 2006. “Rock.” In *African American Music: An Introduction*, edited by Mellonee V. Burnim and Portia K. Maultsby. New York: London: Routledge: 558–84.
- . 2011. “They Say She’s Different: Race, Gender, Genre, and the Liberated Black Femininity of Betty Davis: Race, Gender, Genre, and Liberated Black Femininity.” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 23 (2): 146–65.
- . 2014. “Music, Power, and Practice.” *Ethnomusicology* 58 (2): 327–33.
- . 2020. *Black Diamond Queens: African American Women and Rock and Roll*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Malawey, Victoria. 2014. “‘Find out What It Means to Me’: Aretha Franklin’s Gendered Re-Authoring of Otis Redding’s ‘Respect.’” *Popular Music* 33 (2): 185–207.
- Marshall, Lee. 2003. “For and against the Record Industry: An Introduction to Bootleg Collectors and Tape Traders.” *Popular Music* 22 (1): 57–72.
- Maultsby, Portia K. 1975. “Music of Northern Independent Black Churches during the Antebellum Period.” *Ethnomusicology* 19 (3): 401–20.
- Maycock, James. 2005. “Betty Davis: She’s Gotta Have It.” *MOJO*.
- McClintock, Anne. 1995. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. London: Routledge.
- McCormick, Neil. 2016. “Betty Davis: Rediscovering a Forgotten Funk Masterpiece – Review.” The Telegraph. July 25, 2016. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/music/what-to-listen-to/betty-davis-rediscovering-a-forgotten-funk-masterpiece--review/>.
- McEwen, Joe. 1975. “Betty Davis: Nasty Gal.” *Rolling Stone*, December 18, 1975.
- McGraw, Andrew. 2016. “Atmosphere as a Concept for Ethnomusicology: Comparing the Gamelatron and Gamelan.” *Ethnomusicology* 60 (1): 125–47.

- Medovoi, Leerom. 1991. "Mapping the Rebel Image: Postmodernism and the Masculinist Politics of Rock in the U. S. A." *Cultural Critique*, no. 20: 153–88.
- Meintjes, Louise. 2003. *Sound of Africa: Making Music Zulu in a South African Studio*. North Carolina: Duke University Press.
- Mervis, Scott. 2019. "Betty Davis, a Funk Icon Living in Homestead, Releases First Song in Nearly 40 Years." *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. July 22, 2019. <https://www.post-gazette.com/ae/music/2019/07/22/Betty-Davis-interview-funk-legend-Homestead-Miles-A-Little-Bit-Hot-Tonight/stories/201907220086>.
- Metz, Nina. 2018. "Black Harvest Preview: Documentaries on Muhammad Ali, Funk Singer Betty Davis and Detroit through the Eyes of a Mailman." *Chicago Tribune*. August 2, 2018. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/movies/ct-ent-black-harvest-documentaries-0803-story.html>.
- "Miles Davis' Wife Leaves." 1969. *Jet*, October 30, 1969.
- Millard, Andre. 2005. *America On Record*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Miller, Karl Hagstrom. 2010. *Segregating Sound : Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Misztal, Barbara A. 2003. *Theories of Social Remembering*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Mitchell, Cleo, and Brian C Imrie. 2011. "Consumer Tribes: Membership, Consumption and Building Loyalty." *Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics* 23 (1): 39–56.
- Momoniati, Yunus. 2020. "Miles Davis and Jimi Hendrix: What might have been." *Maverick Life: Music*. September 21, 2020. <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-09-21-miles-davis-and-jimi-hendrix-what-might-have-been/>.
- Moore, Jessica Care. 2020. *We Want Our Bodies Back: Poems*. New York: Amistad.
- Moore, Marie. 1975. "Miles Davis' Ex Wife Is A Real 'Nasty Gal'." *New York Amsterdam News*. December 13, 1975: D4.

- Moraga, Cherríe, and Gloria Anzaldúa. 1983. *This Bridge Called My Back : Writings by Radical Women of Color*. 2nd ed. New York: Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press.
- Morgan, Joan. 2015. "Why We Get Off: Moving Towards a Black Feminist Politics of Pleasure." *The Black Scholar: On the Future of Black Feminism* 45 (4): 36–46.
- Mulkerin, Andy. 2017. "Betty Davis: An Artist Too Bold for Her Time." *Anthony Bourdain Parts Unknown* (CNN). October 18, 2017.
- Mulvey, Laura. 1993. "Some Thoughts on Theories of Fetishism in the Context of Contemporary Culture." *October* 65: 3–20.
- Muñoz, José Esteban. 1999. *Disidentifications : Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- . 2009. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York: New York University Press.
- Murray, Albert. 2017. *Stomping the Blues*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Nannyonga-Tamusuza, Sylvia, and Weintraub, Andrew. 2012. "The Audible Future: Reimagining the Role of Sound Archives and Sound Repatriation in Uganda." *Ethnomusicology* 56 (2): 206–33.
- Nash, Jennifer C. 2014. *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography*. Duke University Press.
- "NASTY GAL The Many Lives of Funk Queen Betty Davis." n.d. Indiegogo. Accessed October 19, 2020. <https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/nasty-gal-the-many-lives-of-funk-queen-betty-davis#/>.
- Nguyen, Ann Thuy, and Maya Pendelton. 2020. "Recognizing Race in Language: Why We Capitalize 'Black' and 'White.'" Center for the Study of Social Policy. March 23, 2020. <https://cssp.org/2020/03/recognizing-race-in-language-why-we-capitalize-black-and-white/>.

- Nichols, Bill. 2017. *Introduction to Documentary*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Nora, Pierre. 1989. "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire." *Representations* (Berkeley, Calif.), no. 26: 7–24.
- Norfleet, Dawn M. 2006. "Hip-Hop and Rap." In *African American Music: An Introduction*, edited by Mellonee V. Burnim and Portia K. Maultsby. New York: London: Routledge: 353–89.
- O'Connor, Alan. 2008. *Punk Record Labels and the Struggle for Autonomy: the Emergence of DIY*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Oehler, Susan. 2006. "The Blues In Transcultural Contexts." In *African American Music: An Introduction*, edited by Mellonee V. Burnim and Portia K. Maultsby. New York: London: Routledge: 96–126.
- Olutola, Sarah. 2019. "I Ain't Sorry: Beyoncé, Serena, and Hegemonic Hierarchies in Lemonade." *Popular Music and Society: Special Issue on Beyoncé* 42 (1): 99–117.
- Ortner, Sherry B. 1972. "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?" *Feminist Studies* 1 (2): 5–31.
- Orzeck, Kurt. 2016. "White Zombie, 'It Came From N.Y.C.'" FLOOD. June 10, 2016. <https://floodmagazine.com/37156/white-zombie-it-came-from-n-y-c/>.
- Osumare, Kalifu. 2005. "Global Hip-Hop and the African Diaspora." In *Black Cultural Traffic: Crossroads in Global Performance and Popular Culture*, edited by Harry J. Elam Jr. and Kennell Jackson. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press: 266–88.
- Pareles, Jon. 2018. "Betty Davis Was a Raw Funk Pioneer. Her Decades of Silence Are Over." *The New York Times*. May 22, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/22/arts/music/betty-davis-they-say-im-different-documentary.html>.
- Paz, Eilon. 2015. *Dust & Grooves: Adventures in Record Collecting*. New York: Ten Speed Press.
- Peck, Patrice. 2018. "Singer Jamila Woods Cut Her Signature Afro To Remind Herself There's More To Love Than Her Hair." BuzzFeed. November 7, 2018.

- <https://www.buzzfeed.com/patricepeck/jamila-woods-singer-interview-black-hair-chicago>.
- Penier, Izabella, and Anna Suwalska KołECKa. 2015. *Muses, Mistresses and Mates: Creative Collaborations in Literature, Art and Life*. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publisher.
- Perry, Imani. 2004. *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Peters, Alexa. 2018. "Betty Davis Changed the Face of Funk. It's Time to Celebrate Her on Her Own Terms." INDY Week. June 27, 2018. <https://indyweek.com/api/content/670eb849-626f-507c-8297-538ef94f409e/>.
- Phelps, Carmen. 2008. "Living The Funk: Lifestyle, Lyricism, and Lessons in Modern and Contemporary Art of Black Women." In *The Funk Era and Beyond: New Perspectives on Black Popular Culture*, edited by Tony Bolden. New York: Palgrave Macmillan: 183–91.
- "Prince Q's for Betty." 2012. Personal email. May 19, 2012.
- Proctor, Brittnay Louise. 2018. "'They Say I'm Different': Theories of Black Gender and the Grammatologies of Funk." PhD diss., Northwestern University.
- Provenzano, Catherine. 2018. "Auto-Tune, Labor, and the Pop-Music Voice." In *The Relentless Pursuit of Tone: Timbre in Popular Music*, edited by Robert Fink, Melinda Latour, and Zachary Wallmark. New York: Oxford University Press: 159–81.
- Radano, Ronald Michael., and Philip V. Bohlman. 2000. *Music and the Racial Imagination*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ramsey, Guthrie P. 2003. *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- "Reclaimed Soul (Thurs 8-10PM + Sundays 8-10AM CST)." n.d. Accessed October 18, 2020. <https://vocaloreclaimedsoul.tumblr.com/?og=1>.

- Redmond, Shana L. 2014. *Anthem: Social Movements and the Sound of Solidarity in the African Diaspora*. New York: New York University Press.
- Reighley, Kurt B. 2007. "She Was a Big Freak." *The Stranger*. May 10, 2007. <https://www.thestranger.com/seattle/she-was-a-big-freak/Content?oid=219279>.
- Reynolds, Simon, 1963. 2011. *Retromania : Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Richards, Sam. 2019. "Betty's Back." *Uncut*, 2019: 4-5.
- Richards, Sue, and Robert Weinstein. 1976. "Ballsy Betty Davis: Bawdy Bombshell Talks with Sue Richards and Robert Weinstein." *High Society*, October 1976.
- Riemer, Matthew, and Leighton Brown. 2019. *We Are Everywhere: Protest, Power, and Pride in the History of Queer Liberation*. Berkeley: Ten Speed Press.
- Ritz, David. 2014. *Respect : The Life of Aretha Franklin*. New York: Little, Brown and Company.
- Robinson, Zandria F. 2016. "How Beyonce's 'Lemonade' Exposes Inner Lives of Black Women." *Rolling Stone*. April 28, 2016. <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/how-beyonces-lemonade-exposes-inner-lives-of-black-women-36868/>.
- Rodger, Gillian. 2004. "Drag, Camp and Gender Subversion in the Music and Videos of Annie Lennox." *Popular Music* 23 (1): 17–29.
- "Ronald Edwards." n.d. Discogs. Accessed October 24, 2020. <https://www.discogs.com/artist/1830558-Ronald-Edwards-2>.
- Rose, Tricia. 1994. *Black Noise : Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press.
- Roy, Elodie A. 2015. *Media, Materiality and Memory: Grounding the Groove*. Farnham: Routledge.

- Roy, William G. 2004. "'Race Records' and 'Hillbilly Music': Institutional Origins of Racial Categories in the American Commercial Recording Industry." *Poetics (Amsterdam)* 32 (3): 265–79.
- Royster, Francesca T. 2013a. "Labelle: Funk, Feminism, and the Politics of Flight and Fight." *American Studies* 52 (4): 77–98.
- . 2013b. *Sounding like a No-No? Queer Sounds and Eccentric Acts in the Post-Soul Era*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Sabol, Blaire. 1969. "Outside Fashion – Betty Davis." *The Village Voice*, October 16, 1969.
- Sakakeeny, Matt. 2013. *Roll with It: Brass Bands in the Streets of New Orleans*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- SATE. 2018. "SATE on Betty Davis: 'Finding her gave me permission to be bold.'" A.Side. October 1, 2018. <https://ontheaside.com/artists-tribune/sate-betty-davis-artist-tribune/>.
- Schloss, Joseph Glenn. 2004. *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hop*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Scott, Joan W. 1986. "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis." *The American Historical Review* 91 (5): 1053–75.
- Seeger, Anthony. 2006. "Lost Lineages and Neglected Peers: Ethnomusicologists Outside Academia." *Ethnomusicology* 50 (2): 214–35.
- Segal, Dave. 2018. "One of Funk's Biggest Freaks Comes Out of Hiding." *The Stranger*. August 29, 2018. <https://www.thestranger.com/film/2018/08/29/31440473/one-of-funks-biggest-freaks-comes-out-of-hiding>.
- Shaar, Murray. 1975. "Betty Davis: Nasty Gal." *New Musical Express*, November 8, 1975.
- "Shana M. Griffin." n.d. Shana M. Griffin. <https://www.shanamgriffin.com/>

- Shanley, Mike. 2018. "Betty: They Say I'm Different premiers at the Black Bottom Film Festival, Sun., Feb. 25." *Pittsburgh City Paper*, February 21, 2018.
- Shonekan, Stephanie. 2003. "One Life, Two Voices: The Exploration, Examination, and Exposition of the Life of Camilla Williams, Soprano." PhD diss., Indiana University.
- Shuker, Roy. 2004. "Beyond the 'High Fidelity' Stereotype: Defining the (Contemporary) Record Collector." *Popular Music* 23 (3): 311–30.
- Skinner, Katherine. 2006. "'Must Be Born Again': Resurrecting the Anthology of American Folk Music." *Popular Music* 25 (1): 57–75..
- Small, Christopher. 1987. *Music and the Common Tongue: Survival and Celebration in African American Music*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Smith, Damon. 2012. "First notes to Phil ab Betty." Personal email.
- Smith, Jeremy A. 2010. "'Sell It Black': Race and Marketing in Miles Davis' Early Fusion Jazz." *Jazz Perspectives* 4 (1): 7–33.
- Southern, Eileen. 1971. *The Music of Black Americans: A History*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Spady, James G. 2013. "Mapping and Re-Membering Hip Hop History, Hiphopography and African Diasporic History." *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 37 (2): 126–57.
- Spanos, Brittany. 2020. "Juneteenth on Bandcamp: Music Recommendations." Rolling Stone. June 18, 2020. <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/juneteenth-bandcamp-list-1016276/>.
- Spencer, Neil. 2010. "Miles Davis: The Heady Brew That Rewrote Jazz." The Guardian. September 4, 2010. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2010/sep/05/miles-davis-bitches-brew-reissue>.
- Stout, Renée. 2013. *Tales of the Conjure Woman*. Produced by the Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art, College of Charleston and coorganized with Spelman College Museum of Fine Art and the Ruth and Elmer Wellin Museum of Art, Hamilton College.

- Stradford, Michael. 2020. *Miles Style: The Fashion of Miles Davis*.
- Straw, Will. 1997. "Sizing Up Record Collections: Gender and Connoisseurship in Rock Music culture." *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender*, edited by Sheila Whiteley. New York: Routledge: 3-16.
- Stinson, Elizabeth. 2012. "Means of Detection: A Critical Archiving of Black Feminism and Punk Performance." *Women & Performance* 22 (2-3): 275–311.
- Sundberg, Johan. 1987. *The Science of the Singing Voice*. DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press.
- Svorinich, Victor. 2015. *Listen to This: Miles Davis and Bitches Brew*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Szwed, John F. 2002. *So What: The Life of Miles Davis*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Taylor, Diana. 2003. *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. North Carolina: Duke University Press.
- Taylor, Timothy Dean. 2001. *Strange Sounds: Music, Technology & Culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Thomas, Valorie D. 2018. "Unenslaveable Rapture: Afrxfuturism and Diasporic Vertigo in Beyoncé's Lemonade." *Topia (Montreal)* 39: 48–69.
- Tingen, Paul. 2001. *Miles Beyond: The Electric Explorations of Miles Davis, 1967-1991*. New York: Billboard Books.
- Titon, Jeff. 1992. "Music, the Public Interest, and the Practice of Ethnomusicology." *Ethnomusicology* 36 (3): 315–22.
- . 2012. "Authenticity and Authentication: Mike Seeger, the New Lost City Ramblers, and the Old-Time Music Revival." *Journal of Folklore Research: An International Journal of Folklore and Ethnomusicology* 49 (2): 227–45.

- Titze, Ingo R. 1994. *Principles of Voice Production*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice Hall.
- Toenes, Chris. 2008. "Bold Betty Davis - INDY Week." March 19, 2008. <https://indyweek.com/music/features/bold-betty-davis/>.
- Toepfer, Susan. 1976. "Betty Davis Is A Nasty Gal." *New Dawn*: 61-110.
- Toop, David. 1984. *The Rap Attack: African Jive to New York Hip Hop*. Boston: South End Press.
- "Trouser Press." n.d. Trouser Press. Accessed October 18, 2020. <https://trouserpress.com/>.
- Tucker, Sherrie. 2002. "When Subjects Don't Come Out." *Queer Episodes in Music and Modern Identity*, edited by Sophie Fuller and Lloyd Whitesell. Urbana: University of Illinois Press: 293.
- Turino, Thomas. 1990. "Structure, Context, and Strategy in Musical Ethnography." *Ethnomusicology* 34 (3): 399–412.
- Ugwu, Reggie. 2017. "Jackie Shane, a Transgender Soul Pioneer, Re-Emerges After Four Decades." *The New York Times*, October 15, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/15/arts/music/jackie-shane-transgender-soul-pioneer.html>.
- Vincent, Rickey. 1996. *Funk: The Music, the People, and the Rhythm of the One*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin.
- . 2013. *Party Music : The inside Story of the Black Panthers' Band and How Black Power Transformed Soul Music*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books.
- Wald, Gayle. 2007. *Shout, Sister, Shout!: The Untold Story of Rock-and-Roll Trailblazer Sister Rosetta Tharpe*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- . 2015. *It's Been Beautiful : Soul! And Black Power Television*. Durham: Duke University Press.

- Wang, Oliver. 2007a. Liner notes to *Betty Davis*. Betty Davis. Light In The Attic Records LITA 026. Vinyl LP.
- . 2007b. Liner notes to *They Say I'm Different*. Betty Davis. Light In The Attic Records LITA 027. Vinyl LP.
- . 2009. Liner notes to *Is It Love Or Desire*. Light In The Attic Records LITA 047. Vinyl LP.
- . 2016. "Behind The Black Power Goddess: Betty Davis' Early Demos Released." NPR. July 6, 2016. <https://www.npr.org/2016/07/06/484808335/behind-the-black-power-goddess-betty-davis-early-demos-released>.
- Wong, Deborah. 2015. "Ethnomusicology Without Erotics." *Women & Music* 19 (1): 178–185.
- Welsh, Margaret. 2016. "In its seventh year, the VIA Festival returns to East Liberty and finds fresh ways to facilitate conversations and community through new art, music and media." *Pittsburgh City Paper*, September 26, 2016.
- Wickman, Vicki. 1974. "Betty Davis." *Melody Maker*. June 29, 1974.
- Willoughby, Vanessa. 2015. "Subversive Sensuality of Betty Davis." *Quaint Magazine*, 2015.
- Zajko, Vanda, and Leonard, Miriam. 2008. *Laughing with Medusa: Classical Myth and Feminist Thought*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Selected Discography

- Beyoncé. 2016. *Lemonade*. Parkwood Entertainment 88985 33682 2, Columbia 88985 33682 2. CD, album, DVD, visual album.
- Coasters, The. 1959. "Down In Mexico." Track A3 on *The Coasters' Greatest Hits*. Atco Records 33-111. Vinyl LP, compilation.
- Coltrane, Alice. 1968. *Alice Coltrane – A Monastic Trio*. Impulse! A-9156. Vinyl LP, album.
- Chambers Brothers, The. 1967. "Uptown to Harlem." Track B1 on *The Time Has Come*. Columbia Records CS 9522. Vinyl LP, album.
- Davis, Betty. 1973. *Betty Davis*. Light In The Attic ITA 026, Just Sunshine Records – JSS-5 2007. Vinyl LP, album, reissue.
- . 1974 . *They Say I'm Different*. Light In The Attic LITA 027, Just Sunshine Records JSS-3500, 2007. Vinyl LP, album, reissue.
- . 1975. *Nasty Gal*. Light In The Attic LITA 046, Island Records ILPS-9329, 2009. CD, album, reissue.
- . 1976. *Is It Love Or Desire*. Light In The Attic LITA 047, 2009. Vinyl LP, album.
- . 1968-1969. Betty Davis – *The Columbia Years 1968-1969*. Light In The Attic LITA 135, Columbia 88843048152, Sony Music Commercial Music Group 88843048152, 2016. Vinyl LP, compilation.
- . 1979. *Crashin' From Passion*. P-Vine Records PCD-1993, 1995. CD, album.
- . 1979. *Crashin' From Passion*. Razor & Tie RE 2044-2, 1996. CD, album.
- . 1979. *Hanin' Out In Hollywood*. Charly Records CPCD 8148, 1996. CD, album.

- Davis, Betty and Danielle Maggio. 2019. "A Little Bit Hot Tonight." Independent. Bandcamp. MP3 Single.
- Davis, Miles. 1969. "Mademoiselle Mabry (Miss Mabry)." Track B2 on *Filles de Kilimanjaro*. Columbia Records CS 9750. Vinyl LP, album.
- . 1970. *Bitches Brew*. Columbia Records GP 26. Vinyl LP, album.
- . 1982. "Back Seat Betty." Columbia Records C2 38005. Vinyl LP, album.
- Flack, Roberta. 1975. *Feel Like Makin' Love*. Atlantic Records SD 18131. Vinyl LP, album.
- Franklin, Aretha. 1972. *Amazing Grace*. With James Cleveland & The Southern California Community Choir. Atlantic Records SD 2-906. Vinyl LP, album.
- Ibeyi. 2015. *Ibeyi*. XL Recordings XLCD665. CD, album.
- James, Etta. 1963. "Baby, What You Want Me To Do?" Track A2 on *Rocks The House*. Argo 4032. Vinyl LP, album.
- LaBelle. 1974. "Lady Marmalade." Track A1 on *Nightbirds*. Epic KE 33075. Vinyl LP, album.
- Lewis. 1983. *L'Amour*. Light In The Attic LITA 117, 2014. Vinyl LP, album, reissue.
- Mabry, Betty. 1964. "Get Ready For Betty." Track A. DCP International DCP 1109. 45 RPM Single.
- . 1968. "Live, Love, Learn / It's My Life." Columbia Records 4-44469. 45 RPM Single.
- Moore, Jessica Care. 2015. *Black Tea: The Legend of Jessi James*. Javotti Media JAV004. Vinyl LP, album.
- .Paak, Anderson. 2016. *Malibu*. OBE – ERE218. CD, album.
- Rainey, Gertrude "Ma." 1926. "Trust No Man." Paramount Records 12395. 78 RPM Single.
- . 1928. "Prove It On Me." Paramount Records 12668. 78 RPM Single.

- Rodriguez. 1970. *Cold Fact*. Light In The Attic LITA 036, Sussex LITA036, 2013. Vinyl LP, album, reissue.
- Simone, Nina. 1974. *Is It Finished*. RCA APL1-0241. Vinyl LP, album.
- Smith, Mamie. 1920. "Crazy Blues." Okeh Records 4169-A. 78 RPM Single.
- . 1926. "Young Woman's Blues." Columbia Records 14179 D. 78 RPM Single.
- . "Lock and Key." Columbia Records 14232 D. 78 RPM Single.
- Staton, Candi. 1972. "Sure As Sin." Track 19 on *Candi Staton*. Honest Jon's Records HJRCDDJ6, Capitol Records HJRCDDJ6, 2003. CD, compilation.
- Sylvester. 1978. "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)." Track A. Fantasy 846. 45 RPM Single.
- Various. 1952. *Harry Smith – Anthology Of American Folk Music*. Smithsonian Folkways SFW 40090, 1997. CD, compilation, reissue.
- Various. 1965-1975. *Wheedle's Groove: Seattle's' Finest In Funk & Soul 1965-1975*. Light In The Attic LITA 009, 2004. Vinyl LP, compilation.
- Williams, Mary Lou. 1975. *Mary Lou's Mass*. Mary Records M 102. Vinyl LP, album.
- Woods, Jamila. 2019. "BETTY." Track 1 on *Legacy! Legacy!*. Jagjaguwar JAG342. CD, album.