

## Arts &amp; Culture

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**Betty's Back**

she brought serious funk the first time around.  
time to find out what you missed.

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Maureen Mahon



The funky, stylish, sexy, and provocative singer Betty Davis is back, having emerged from a reclusive retirement to promote the reissue of her first two albums, *Betty Davis* (1973) and *They Say I'm Different*, (1974) on Light in the Attic Records. I recently reached the funk cult heroine at her home in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, for a phone conversation about her career.

Discussions of Betty Davis typically refer to her connection to [Miles Davis](#). Their 1968 marriage was short-lived, but was a formative period for the jazz great. Under his hip young wife's tutelage, he began to explore rock, notably the music of Betty's friend Jimi Hendrix. The new sounds helped shape Davis's ground-shifting 1969 recording *Bitches Brew*, which Betty is said to have helped name. While the role of Betty Davis the muse is an undeniable part of her biography, equally important is the story of Betty Davis the musician, creative visionary, and artist in her own right.

Born in Durham, North Carolina, and raised in Pittsburgh, Davis attributes her first exposure to music to her maternal grandmother, a music lover who played her large collection of blues records for her grandchildren. Davis lists blues greats like Lightnin' Hopkins, John Lee Hooker, Big Mama Thornton, and Koko Taylor as her earliest influences. While an old-style blues attitude informs her lyrics, she also drew on the music of her contemporaries. She admired [Sly Stone's](#) arrangements (the Family Stone's drummer Gregg Errico produced her first album) and [Hendrix's](#) approach to his instrument, especially "the amount of bottom that he put on his guitar," she said. "He used his guitar almost like a bass player would use his bass."

A former model and one-time *Jet* Beauty, Davis wore an enormous Afro and an electric smile, but she was more than another pretty face. She was the rare female recording artist who wrote, performed, and produced her own music. Davis did the arrangements for Betty Davis and produced her subsequent releases, *They Say I'm Different*, *Nasty Gal* (1975), and *Crashin' From Passion* (1979). "I was just interested in keeping the sound pure," she explained. She is matter-of-fact about these accomplishments. "I've been writing music since I was 12 years old," she said. "I always thought of myself as a songwriter more so than an artist." In fact, some of her earliest material was performed by other acts. In 1967, the black rock 'n' roll group The Chambers Brothers recorded her composition "Uptown" for their *The Time Has Come* album, and in the early 1970s, she wrote material for the Commodores, helping the fledgling band secure a deal at Motown. But it was when she began to write for herself that her artistic vision came into full flower.

Davis created blues-influenced, funk-infused music, growling, wailing, and purring her way through her songs. "I knew I wasn't a great singer," she told me. "But I knew how to work my voice with the tracks that I did." She played concerts that became legendary for their high energy and their star's penchant

for appearing in slinky lingerie and platform heels. Her attire complemented her frank lyrical commentaries about the wiles and desires of young women. Davis's irrepressible sexuality and an on-stage style she describes as "physical" alarmed some. It was the era of the sexual revolution, but in 1973 song titles like "If I'm In Luck I Might Get Picked Up" and "Game Is My Middle Name" were more than the radio and television airwaves were prepared to handle. She built her audience through live performances and was especially popular in Washington, DC, and Philadelphia, but in 1979, after struggles with record labels and diminishing returns on her recordings, Davis stopped making music.

Betty Davis's powerful visual image and hard-funking rhythms were unquestionably products of her own era, but her bold attitude and unapologetic sensuality were too progressive, too different, to allow her career to fully flower. Given her energy and effervescence, it's not surprising that she has inspired contemporary artists. As Miles Davis once observed, she anticipated the sound and style of Prince and Madonna. Rappers Ice Cube and Talib Kweli have rhymed over her beats, and rockers Lenny Kravitz and Skin recently covered her "Anti-Love Song." The fact that she has neither performed nor been seen in public in almost three decades—she conducts all of her interviews by phone—only adds to her mystique. Asked what she thinks listeners in 2007 might take from her music, Davis had no particular response in mind beyond hoping "that it makes them smile."

*(Maureen Mahon is an associate professor of anthropology at UCLA. She is the author of "Right To Rock: The Black Rock Coalition and the Cultural Politics of Race" on Duke University Press.)*

**Links:**

Betty Davis and *They Say I'm Different* are available on [Light in the Attic Records](#).

[Download](#) the MP3 for "Anti-Love Song."

Photo Courtesy of Light in the Attic Records.

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