

## They Say She's Different: Race, Gender, Genre, and the Liberated Black Femininity of Betty Davis

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Betty Davis, the 1970s hard-rocking funk singer and songwriter known for her provocative lyrics and performance style, has recently been enjoying a revival. In 2007, her first two albums, *Betty Davis* and *They Say I'm Different*, were reissued on compact disc featuring bonus tracks and comprehensive liner notes; a reissue of *Nasty Gal*, her third album, and a previously unreleased album followed in 2009.<sup>1</sup> Her album covers feature an all-American beauty with an enormous Afro and an electric smile, but Davis, a former model, was more than another pretty face. She wrote her lyrics and music, created musical arrangements, and produced many of the tracks on the albums she released between 1973 and 1976. Davis retired at the end of the 1970s, worn out by a career marked by limited radio exposure, disappointing sales, censorship, and struggles with record label executives. Currently, she leads a quiet life in Pennsylvania and has not performed since the late 1970s. The only photographs of her that circulate are from her heyday, adding to her mystique. In the new millennium, Betty Davis has become a cult figure, one whose story holds important lessons for scholars of popular music, particularly those interested in the music of African American women.

A consistent thread in press discussions about Betty Davis is that she was too ahead of her time—too different—to have achieved mainstream success when she launched her recording career in the early 1970s. In this essay, I investigate the sources, repercussions, and significance of Davis's difference in order to offer a case study of a career that demonstrates the powerful relationship between race, gender, and genre in popular music performance and the impact of this relationship on the professional fates of commercial musicians. Drawing on press accounts of Davis's career and an interview that I conducted with her in June 2007, I sketch Betty Davis's professional biography, discuss her music, and consider the challenges of race, gender, and genre that she confronted.<sup>2</sup> A key factor in her difficulties was the fundamental reality of pop-music-genre boundaries: they are rooted in “distinctions made by the music industry” that “reflect both musical

history and marketing categories” (Frith 147), but may underplay an artist’s sonic qualities and overemphasize his or her identity, especially race and gender. Genre is about both formal and cultural properties, but culture often has the last word (Lewis).

I argue that Davis’s music advances a liberated black femininity through which she freed herself from dominant expectations of musical, lyrical, physical, and sartorial practice for black women. Her daring vision of black womanhood was at the core of her difference, and through it she explored new possibilities of sound, expression, and representation. Davis emerged alongside several signal black feminist events: ground-shifting publications by writers Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara, Ntozake Shange, and Maya Angelou; the arrival of *Essence*, a mass-market magazine founded in 1970 by and for black women; and Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm’s 1972 presidential run. In her music, Davis responded to the same set of social and political conditions that led black feminist activists and critics like Gloria Hull, Angela Davis, bell hooks, Michele Wallace, and members of the Combahee River Collective to identify and problematize patterns of belief and behavior that marginalized, demonized, and diminished black women. They countered these tendencies by placing black women and the fight for black women’s equality at the center of their work.<sup>3</sup> This critical mass of black feminist voices challenged long-standing structures and practices of race, gender, and class power, which traditionally denied black women access, mobility and freedom. Davis’s liberated black femininity grew out of a quest for a form of expression that would allow her to present and comment on her feelings and experiences by using music, lyrics, and a vocal style that resonated with her. One aspect of a black woman’s consciousness and experience that Davis emphasized in her work was the sexual—perhaps the most personal and most dangerous because it had been used so long and so effectively to dehumanize black women. The result was a representation of black womanhood that embraced the sexual side, celebrated independence, acknowledged contradictions, and spoke the unspeakable.

Davis’s liberated black femininity offered a release from dominant images of black women like the desexualized mammy, the tragic mulatto, and the vindictive sapphire.<sup>4</sup> She confronted and engaged the image of the black woman as sexually available object by presenting herself and the women she sang about as being comfortable with and in control of their sexuality. Davis’s decision to assert a black woman’s sexual agency was bold and risky. Women are rarely rewarded for declaring their sexual

subjectivity, and black women, whose bodies and sexuality have been relentlessly pathologized in US culture, contend with onerous forms of sexual oppression and suppression. Black feminist scholars have noted that African American women, particularly middle-class women, have developed a culture of silence about their sexuality in response to a long history of being characterized as overly sexual and improperly feminine.<sup>5</sup> This has made many black women wary of speaking about sexuality, sexual pleasure, and sexual desire or creating images that highlight sexuality, for fear of confirming stereotypes. Davis took pleasure in her frank and public exploration of a black woman's sexual agency, but she did so in a context that offered limited opportunities for black female-centered expressions. Consequently, Davis's liberating and transgressive music struggled to reach an audience. Davis's involvement in the writing and production of the music she performed added another dimension to the new vision of black womanhood that she represented. Beyond expressing a black woman's sexual agency, she was also enacting a black woman's creative agency, making her a compelling figure.

My research on Davis is informed by and contributes to scholarship that brings black feminist perspectives to bear on studies of contemporary popular music. This vital and growing body of literature highlights the presence and influence of black women in musical cultures perceived as exclusively male, reveals the range of musical genres in which black women participate, and analyzes critical discourses embedded in black women's musical practices.<sup>6</sup> Scholars engaged in this research explore the cultural productions, thoughts, and experiences of black women, in many cases recovering lost or underacknowledged contributions. They are not, however, simply concerned with adding black women's voices to the mix. Their studies examine the intersection of race, class, gender, genre, and power that shapes black women's musical lives. Furthermore, they expose the ways dominant power relations and academic discourses have marginalized black women musicians, offering new frameworks in which these artists are audible and visible.

In this essay, I discuss Davis's efforts to rewrite dominant cultural scripts and identify the forces that impeded her professional progress. Focusing on Davis's career trajectory demonstrates the challenges faced by black women artists whose musical productions fall outside the limited parameters of expected and accepted music by black women. While my emphasis is on the particular experiences of a black female musician, my discussion indicates the ways that all musicians must negotiate the dynamics of race, gender, and sexuality as they intersect with historical

context and questions of musical genre, artistic voice, commercial viability, and mainstream views of race- and gender-appropriate expression. These are important issues for the people who create popular music and crucial ones for the scholars who write about that work.

### Introducing Betty Davis

Betty Davis was born Elizabeth Mabry in Durham, North Carolina, on July 26, 1945. She lived in Durham until she was 12, when her family moved to Pittsburgh. At age 16, she left home for New York City to attend the Fashion Institute of Technology. Once there, she established herself as a hip young woman about town. She cofounded and managed a dance club called the Cellar;<sup>7</sup> signed with the Wilhelmina modeling agency and appeared in magazines such as *Seventeen*, *Ebony*, *Jet*, and *Glamour*; and was a guest on the TV show *The Dating Game* (Szwed 268). Davis had started to write songs as a teen, and by 1966 the Chambers Brothers, a black rock band, had recorded her song “Uptown in Harlem.” It appeared on the band’s 1967 debut album, *The Time Has Come*, securing Betty Mabry her first songwriting credit. She was 22 years old.

During this period, she met and, in 1968, married jazz trumpeter Miles Davis. She was 23; he was 42. Her influence on him was significant. She was the guiding force behind the sharp musical turn that Miles Davis took at the end of the 1960s and that culminated in the 1969 release *Bitches Brew*, a recording *Down Beat* magazine called “the most revolutionary jazz album in history” (Tingen 63). Betty introduced Miles to her friend Jimi Hendrix, turning him on to the young guitarist’s music and that of Sly Stone. She helped the jazz great update his wardrobe and took him to New York City discos and rock clubs where music was played at a high, body-shaking volume, helping him find an electric solution to acoustic issues that had been nagging him (Szwed 287). Miles acknowledged her effect on him: “Betty was a big influence on my personal life as well as my musical life . . . . 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” (M. Davis 290). Miles put Betty’s photo on the cover of his 1968 release *Filles de Kilimanjaro* and the song “Mademoiselle Mabry,” named for her, is a reworking of Hendrix’s “The Wind Cries Mary” (Szwed 271). Miles Davis biographer John Szwed reports that the song “Bitches Brew” was “a roiling, lurching piece that opened with Miles playing off of one of Betty’s own songs . . . while he looked at her”

(294). She also helped name the album. He was considering “Witches Brew” until Betty suggested alliteration would make a better title (Balloon 114).

Betty made music while serving as a muse and midwife for her husband’s work. As Miles was recording *Bitches Brew*, Betty was cutting an album for Columbia Records featuring personnel affiliated with Miles Davis and Jimi Hendrix. Wayne Shorter wrote the charts, Tony Williams and Mitch Mitchell took turns at the drums, and Billy Cox played bass (Maycock 48, 50). Teo Macero was the producer, and Miles directed the proceedings, but in the end, the project was shelved and has never been released. In 2007, Betty told a reporter, “Miles was afraid that if the record came out, I’d leave him. He thought I’d become a star. He wanted to hold me back in a way. He was very old-fashioned” (Balloon 114). In interviews, Betty references her ex-husband’s positive influence on her career, but she has also said that his jealousy and temper made it impossible to stay with him. In his autobiography, Miles confessed that he had made an error in marrying Betty: “See, Betty was too young and wild for the things I expected from a woman” (M. Davis 304).

Following the couple’s divorce, Davis wrote several songs for Lionel Richie’s group, the Commodores, then a fledgling band that needed material for a demo. They submitted their versions of Davis’s songs to Motown and received a recording contract.<sup>8</sup> Motown offered Davis a songwriting deal, but she refused to sign the contract because it required that she give up her publishing (Maycock 50). She moved to the San Francisco Bay area and signed a deal with Just Sunshine Records, a label started by Michael Lang, one of the organizers of the Woodstock Music and Art Festival (Balloon 118). On the strength of her being Miles’s ex and a recommendation from a mutual friend, former Sly and the Family Stone drummer Gregg Errico agreed to produce Davis’s first album. He assembled a band that he referred to as a “Bay Area who’s who” (Maycock 50). Ex-Family Stone bassist Larry Graham, one of the architects of funk, played on most of the tracks; Carlos Santana’s bass player Doug Rauch showed up on the rest. They were joined by Neal Schon, a guitarist who had played with Santana and went on to play in Journey; horn players from the Tower of Power; and the Pointer Sisters and future disco star Sylvester on background vocals. Davis wrote the music and lyrics and created the arrangements for all of the songs. She brought these arrangements into the studio, where the musicians riffed on the structures she had outlined, listened to her hum and verbally describe the parts, and adjusted their approach until they achieved the sound and feel she wanted.<sup>9</sup>

Betty Davis was released in 1973 and garnered media attention because of the singer-songwriter's connection to a jazz great. (Her decision to keep her married name may have been strategic.) Davis released her follow-up, *They Say I'm Different*, in 1974 and began to tour, mostly on the East Coast and in California. A conversation with her ex-husband after her debut release convinced her that she could produce herself, and she went on to produce her subsequent albums (Brown 47). 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. Davis remained on the independent Just Sunshine label for her first two recordings and then moved to Chris Blackwell's Island Records, a label with a more extensive marketing and distribution network. Blackwell bought Davis's contract with the hope that Island would be able to generate more sales for her work, but her 1975 release *Nasty Gal* disappointed in terms of units sold, and it was not a critical success. Davis continued to tour and in 1976 recorded her fourth album, *Crashin' from Passion*. Mediocre sales figures and the death of her father weighed on Davis and, by the end of the decade, she had ceased to record, perform live, or speak to the press (Maycock 51). Her disappearance from the scene was so complete that many of her fans assumed she had died.

### Betty Davis's Liberated Funk

Betty Davis fused the sounds and energies of the late 1960s and early 1970s into a musical aesthetic that foregrounded a voice that was dangerous—both in terms of how it sounded and what it said. Davis drew on rock, blues, and funk, and built songs around her raw vocal style, high-volume guitars, funky rhythm lines, and occasional horn arrangements. The songs on Davis's first release reveal the vivid presence of a woman who seems to have few illusions about romantic relationships. In "Anti-Love Song," for example, Davis voices her decision to avoid commitment, a counterintuitive stance, given that women were expected to seek monogamous unions. Davis's narrator acknowledges the man's ability to "have me shaking" and "climbing the walls," but she coyly predicts that he would fall even harder for her: "I'd have you eating your ego," she warns. "I'd make you pocket your pride." "Anti-Love Song" is a declaration of independence, a refusal to succumb to the physical enticements of a

relationship that would ultimately falter as each of the two lovers struggled to be the one in control. The song expresses a coolheaded reasoning in a musically and vocally hot arrangement. Davis's voice percolates in an intimate purr against a pulsing musical background. Piano chords punctuate the ends of verses, but rather than build to a climax, the music returns to a steady vamp that underpins the lyrics and shows off Davis's seductive, teasing side.

Davis did not consider herself a vocalist and characterized becoming a front woman as an accident. In a 1974 interview, she noted, "I was never really a singer . . . . My main thing is writing. When I went to the record company, I told them that I wasn't a singer. But they liked the way I sounded and said, 'Wow, we have an artist here,' but I didn't come to them as an artist" (Gibbs, "Entertainers" 30). She thought of herself as a musician who used her voice to convey her musical ideas. Significantly, it was a voice that defied mainstream expectations of how a black woman should sound. Unlike many of her African American contemporaries, Betty Davis did not learn to sing in a black church, and there are virtually no trappings of gospel training in her melisma-free vocal attack. She comes out of a different set of black musical traditions. In interviews, she recalls pleasurable childhood hours spent in rural North Carolina, listening to recordings from her grandmother's "huge blues collection" and learning the music of blues artists like Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker, Lightnin' Hopkins, Jimmy Reed, Muddy Waters, Big Mama Thornton, and Koko Taylor.<sup>10</sup> She identifies this time as central to her musical development.<sup>11</sup> Speaking to an interviewer in 1975, she explained, "Aretha Franklin is a singer. I consider myself more of a projector. I'm into sound. Like I'll work my voice a thousand different ways. I'm into making my voice work with the rhythm track. Whatever I feel I'm getting from the rhythm track I'll do it with my voice" (Brown 47). An acrobatic stretching and squeezing marks Davis's vocal style. She would sing in an insinuating whisper or a throaty growl while manipulating words, yelps, squeals, "whoos," and "ooows."

Her vocals on "Game Is My Middle Name," a song on her first album, exemplify Davis's "singer as projector" approach. Midway through the song, she and her background singers engage in a series of vocalizations that anticipates the raw-throated experiments of punk. Repeating the lines "Whatever you want to play, I said I'll play it with you/Game is my middle name," they rupture the song's groove in order to explore vocal sound. First, Sylvester sings the line in a low voice. Next, the Pointer Sisters take the vocals up an octave, repeating the line and increasing the volume and

intensity. Finally, Davis enters, holding notes almost to her voice's breaking point, shifting from singing to wailing to an untethered scream. All the while, the vocals intertwine with a twisting guitar solo. This song, like a number of Betty Davis compositions, breaks the "generic contract" of funk; that is to say, you can't easily dance to "Game's" midtune vocal exhibition and guitar solo.<sup>12</sup> Here and elsewhere, Davis foregrounded a form of vocalizing that did not meet expectations for singing by black women.

Arguably, she was following the impulse to experiment that characterized the work of Miles Davis, Sly Stone, and Jimi Hendrix, the artists whom she names as her primary influences. She admired Sly Stone's arrangements and she appreciated Hendrix's approach to his instrument, especially "the amount of bottom that he put on his guitar."<sup>13</sup> Like Hendrix, she had an idiosyncratic singing voice and a love for the blues. Davis's debt to the blues was evident in her lyrical content and performance attitude and, by her second and third albums, in the structure of some of her songs. In "They Say I'm Different," the title cut of her second album, Davis celebrates her southern roots and blues music. With its rhythm, cadence, and instrumentation, the song would fit on a southern rock playlist. Davis's southern accent augments the song's down-home feel as she recalls waking up early to slop the hogs, sings about a great-grandmother who spit snuff, describes a great-grandfather who would "be rockin' his moonshine to B. B. King and Jimmy Reed," and affirms her love of chitlins. Her connection to southern rural life is the thing that leads others—presumably the northern city dwellers she encountered after her family left North Carolina—to view her as "different" and "strange," as she sings. With a twanging blues guitar responding to her call throughout the tune, Davis acknowledges the musicians who shaped her sound. Among the names she calls are Muddy Waters, Sonny Terry, Big Mama Thornton, Albert King, Howlin' Wolf, Lightnin' Hopkins, Bessie Smith, Robert Johnson, Bo Diddley, and Chuck Berry. By 1974 when she recorded the track, it was unusual for young, urban African Americans to profess an interest in the blues, but this musical love was central to who Davis was as an individual and as a musician.

Davis's lyrics celebrated independent, unconventional black women. "Steppin' in Her I. Miller Shoes" is about Devon Wilson, a close friend and part of a circle of young New York City women who helped set the rock scene's style. Wilson was one of the "super groupies," a woman who rolled with the rockers, forming emotional and sexual relationships with itinerant superstar musicians. One of a handful of black groupies, Wilson had a long-standing association with Jimi Hendrix. Davis's line "music men wrote songs about her" probably refers to Hendrix's song "Dolly Dagger,"

a working through of their relationship, and Wilson's "Cop of the Year" when she left Hendrix for Mick Jagger (D. Davis 46). Whereas Hendrix's song is about a femme fatale, Davis's is a bittersweet celebration of a friend who squandered her talents. Davis's repeated lament, "She could have been anything that she wanted . . . instead she chose to be nothing," anchors the song. Part of Wilson's rock-and-roll lifestyle was a dependence on heroin, and Davis mentions the "dark marks [that] found a place on her arms" that contributed to the undoing of "a black diamond queen" who could have taken the world by storm. "Rock music played loud and clear for her," Davis intones, but "rock music took her youth and left her very dry." A propulsive tune with a reeling lead guitar, crashing drums, occasional piano flourishes, and background vocalists who repeat the song's title, this is rock music about a black woman from a black woman's perspective. Notably, the song is written in the past tense. When Davis recorded it in 1973, Wilson, like Hendrix, was already gone. She had died in February 1971 at New York's Chelsea Hotel under suspicious circumstances (Henderson 19). Wilson's death was painful for Davis, but given her friend's activities, it might have also felt inevitable. "When they told me that she had died," Davis sings, "they didn't have to tell me why or how she'd gone. I knew! I knew!" Davis, who had spent some of her time ministering to the needs of a professional musician, found a different path and focused on her own creative work. It was a choice she probably wished Wilson had been able to make. For Davis, the death of her friend was a painful loss that she processed through a musical eulogy.

Davis's melding of rock, blues, and funk was very much a product of her era, but Davis and her music were difficult to sell. Racialized practices of music marketing coupled with her identity as a black woman pushed her outside the presumed white and male arena of rock and forced her to work in the black genre of funk. But the rock and blues that melded with Davis's funky bass lines were out of fashion for a majority of the black record-buyers who were the target audience for funk. Add to this a vocal and lyrical approach that refused to be confined to the sounds and subjects deemed appropriate for black women and you have the Betty Davis package: a musician who confounded audiences—black and white.

### **Race, Gender, and Genre**

Davis was aware of the ways her sound and her identity as a black woman collided with the race- and genre-related exigencies of marketing music and shaped her career. She commented on these factors in interviews,

offering a race-, gender-, and genre-sensitive analysis of her situation, doing the work of a cultural critic to explain—to the press and to herself—the often-negative responses her unconventional work elicited.

The intersection of race and genre had profound effects on African American musicians working in the early 1970s, a period marked by the formation of black music departments at major record labels. This new focus meant expanded opportunities for black artists, but it depended on a racially defined approach to marketing popular music (Sanjek). With few exceptions, black men and women were excluded from rock, which was “white”; instead, they were expected to engage in a set of musical practices perceived as “black.” Still, in spite of recording industry practices that separated black people from rock, the early 1970s saw a new breed of black rock and rollers. Artists such as the Isley Brothers, Funkadelic, Labelle, the Ohio Players, Mandrill, War, and Betty Davis drew on the blues, rhythm and blues (R&B), and rock and experimented with high volume and distortion. Their musical output was confusing to a segregated marketplace. It was “too black” to fit on album-oriented rock (AOR) radio and “too rock” for black stations. Although sometimes referred to as “black rock,” the music produced by black bands during this period is usually categorized as *funk*, music based on the rhythm pioneered by James Brown and Larry Graham in the late 1960s. Betty Davis, like the other black rock acts of the era, was not marketed to rock audiences. This racially dictated restriction is lamentable because some rock fans might have “gotten” Davis’s unusual vocal style and hard-driving music. Commenting on the challenges of promoting Davis’s work in this context, Gregg Errico, who produced her first album, noted, “[Betty] had a hard time getting the business people who could make stuff happen to really understand what to do with her and how to do it. It was pretty aggressive stuff. There weren’t really radio formats for heavy funk like that. It was just difficult in those days” (Balloon 124). Funk historian Rickey Vincent has noted that some funk bands sweetened their sound and muted the guitar in order to receive airplay on black radio stations (119).

Beyond the music, the image Davis presented was challenging. On her album covers, Davis broke with the long-standing black-performance tradition of dressing up in elegant attire. Instead, she followed the looser rules of the rock scene. On her first album, she appears in a low-cut, midriff-baring blouse, denim shorts, and thigh-high silver platform boots. Her second album showed her in a high-collared, sleeveless leotard with a design that was one part futuristic, one part tribal. For *Nasty Gal*, she wore a lacy black teddy and high heels. The most striking element of Davis’s appearance was

her voluminous Afro. This hairstyle had increased in popularity during the 1960s, but it still signaled a level of positive identification with blackness that was often perceived as confrontational by mainstream whites and blacks who were accustomed to straightened hairstyles for African American women. In a 1976 interview, Davis speculated about the impact of her look on her career:

One thing I found out about this business, they have to be able to categorize you. If they can't bag you, you're fucked. And aesthetically they couldn't categorize me. I'm not Tina Turner. I don't wear a wig and I don't have three girls shaking it up behind me. The acts that have made it wore straight hair, earrings, and long gowns. (Richards and Weinstein 93)

Davis's provocative style led to some of her concerts being canceled because of protests by religious and civic groups, and *Melody Maker* reported that "Women's Lib organizations" had protested about her lyrics. In interviews, Davis focused on her trouble with black middle-class gatekeepers (Brown 47). Her lyrics and imagery broke the rules of black middle-class respectability that throughout the twentieth century sought integration through "proper" behavior.<sup>14</sup> This breach contributed to the controversy. The title of the first song on her first album, "If I'm in Luck I Might Get Picked Up," set off alarms. Here, Davis assumes the persona of a woman searching for a sexual good time and details her actions: "I'm wiggling my fanny/I'm raunchy dancing." Davis's narrator joyously names her "vamping, tramping" and describes herself as "crazy," "wild," and "nasty." Some listeners were so uncomfortable with this unvarnished representation of female desire that they complained when a Detroit radio station played "If I'm in Luck," leading the NAACP to join in protests against her music (Balloon 122). Commenting in 1976, Davis said,

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. I have to be honest. I didn't even know what they stood for. . . . What are they? Who are they? I thought about it. 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 93)

Here, Davis offers a gender and class analysis, explaining that going against the rules of black middle-class propriety cost her radio exposure. Her songs and her quip about the meaning of “advancement” can be understood as the kinds of “counternarratives to a black political vision largely defined and maintained by a middle-class Christian patriarchy” that cultural critic Mark Anthony Neal identifies as central to black feminist discourse of the early 1970s (73).<sup>15</sup>

Aware of the controversy, Island Records staff struggled to create a suitable image for Davis. She has said that label executives implored her to cover her legs and wear dresses, fearing—accurately it seems—that her sexy displays were turn-offs to mainstream audiences (Richards and Weinstein 94). Still, it is worth remembering that other black musicians were successfully circulating sexy material during this period. Marvin Gaye released *Let's Get It On* in 1973, the same year that *Betty Davis* came out.<sup>16</sup> Whatever outcry there was about the sexual overtones of the album, its singles received airplay, and the album went to number 2 on the *Billboard* chart. This could be because the 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. Similarly, vocalist Millie Jackson, who emerged at roughly the same time as Davis and became known for her X-rated songs and raps, developed a following in black communities and saw her singles appear on *Billboard's* R&B charts from the early 1970s to the late 1980s (Whitburn, *Hip Hop Hits* 277). Although lyrically adventurous, her music and vocal style were conventional R&B fare. Another example is “Lady Marmalade” by the black female trio Labelle. The song celebrated the sexual magnetism of a Creole prostitute and went to number 1 on *Billboard's* pop and R&B charts in 1974, 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 (Whitburn, *Top 40 Hits* 355).

Popular music has long been a site for exploring taboo subjects. In blues, R&B, rock, funk, and rap, black women, many of them from working-class backgrounds, have produced public discourses that include frank commentary about sexuality.<sup>17</sup> They have written and sung lyrics that describe romantic and sexual relationships and comment on their appetites, prowess, fears, and desires. Such musical performances—whether in 1920s blues or 1970s funk—transgress black and white middle-class norms that silence women's speech about sex. In a 1976 interview in *High Society*

magazine, Davis assessed the impact of breaking these silences and reflected on the significance of her style and identity:

There are many reasons why I turn audiences off. Number one, I'm a woman. And a black woman . . . . I look one way and people think I should be sounding another way. I work like a man. I don't really work like a woman. [Judy] Garland used her hands expressively, for example. Well, I use my body to create similar effects. I don't write about anything people don't do or think about doing . . . . I've had guys get up and walk out while I'm performing. I get more hostility from white males than I do from black males. It's that sexual thing all over again . . . . You put me in New York with a predominantly white male audience and I get a weird reaction. (Richards and Weinstein 93)

Davis's creative vision carried her outside the boundaries of proper black and proper female self-presentation and beyond mainstream comfort zones. Davis was an innovative woman, but her characterization of her performance practices as being "like a man" and not really "like a woman" reveals just how deeply entrenched notions of gender-appropriate behavior are, even for the audacious individuals who consciously work to challenge them.

In a comment that helps explain the audience responses that Davis describes, feminist historian and cultural critic Tricia Rose notes that black women's sexual agency "displaces masculine privilege—black, white, and beyond—drawing energy away from a male-empowered sexual space toward a female centered and empowered one" ("Two Inches" 320). Furthermore, she notes, it "de-objectifies black female sexuality without repressing it, which, again, troubles the entrenched notion that explicit female desire is itself vulgar" (320). Music critic Vernon Gibbs, who wrote favorably about Davis during the height of her visibility, bears out Rose's claims and corroborates Davis's description when he documents the response Davis was getting in New York. Writing in *Crawdaddy*, he observes that Davis "is a phenomenon in places like Washington, Baltimore and especially Philadelphia" but that "none of the radio stations in New York play her records with any consistency, and in her hometown Betty Davis . . . is almost unknown" ("Soul, Man" 16). Chiding New York audiences and critics for being culturally conservative, he states that "the wormy Apple is not ready for a Black Woman's brand of steaming, crotch-grabbing aggression" and

notes, “Davis left them too shocked to speak” (16). He also describes a scene at the club the Bottom Line that supports his contention:

[T]he hip New York press sat in horror as a *real* woman spread her legs in the ecstasy of the music and admitted that “I used to whip him with a turquoise chain.” . . . The horror was universal. The women were all jealous and the men felt emasculated. Davis’ group, one of the best post-Sly curdling rhythm bands, was fingered as incompetent; her act was called “disgusting,” and critics whose job it is to recognize novelty where it exists could only come up with lame lines like, “Well at least we know Miles Davis is a leg man.” (16)

Gibbs’s commentary pinpoints the ways Davis’s liberated black femininity flummoxed audiences—including New York tastemakers—who were more invested in the status quo than they realized. For Davis, staying true to her artistic voice and vision meant upsetting dominant rules of race, gender, and genre, which hindered her career.

### **Betty Davis’s Legacy**

Despite her struggles, Davis managed to create work that has had an impact, and she is an influential figure for many contemporary black musicians. Rappers Ice Cube and Talib Kweli have rhymed over her beats, and rockers Lenny Kravitz, Skin, and Joi have covered her songs. Prince seems to have lifted some of his vocal squeals and visual style from Betty Davis: the raincoat and G-string ensemble of his *Dirty Mind* period echo the raincoat and slip Davis wore during her 1976 Nasty Gal tour. Rick James, who launched his funk-rock career in the wake of Betty Davis, was an enthusiastic fan. He noted, “[She] was the only woman who was totally cutting edge. I mean, she was what funk was . . . She was funk! Rock and rolling. Doing it all . . . And she was doing it in the early ’70s. [But] she was too much for people to understand” (Balloon 122). Davis’s liberated black femininity has a special resonance for contemporary black women rock musicians. Tamar-kali, a singer, songwriter, and guitarist featured in *Afro-Punk* (Spooner), a documentary about African American punk rockers, sometimes covers Davis’s music in concert. She the following observation:

Appearances like hers are rare in this male dominated, sexist, even misogynist industry. [Davis] was a fully embodied woman, all parts

included. You saw her beauty, smelled her sex, recognized her power and respected, maybe even feared, her. These days . . . the trend for the black female artist is to become more like the video girl in her aesthetic presentation. In that regard, sex is used to trap women, treating them as accessories to their own music. Where is the ownership of one's self?<sup>18</sup>

Davis has taken credit for opening the doors for other rebellious black women musicians. Commenting in a 1975 interview, she claimed, "I made it easy for a lotta those ladies out there cos I was out there first. I'm glad they've all made it, especially Labelle cos they were out there a long time and they deserve anything they get, any of the riches. But like I'm the one that paid the dues" (Brown 47). Davis has reaped limited rewards in terms of fame and fortune, but she accomplished a great deal as a performer, songwriter, arranger, and producer who created on her own terms in an era when women in her field were simply expected to sing well, look good, and listen to the men who were in charge. Still, her trajectory serves as a reminder of the challenges black women musicians face as they struggle to maintain "ownership," as Tamar-kali puts it, over their professional and personal selves.

The albums Betty Davis released in the 1970s are vibrant documents of one woman's efforts to free herself from dominant aesthetic, social, and cultural rules for black women. They give voice to an aesthetic that crossed and blurred musical genres and centered black women's sexual and emotional lives. Her reward for introducing her version of liberated black femininity is cult-figure status among black rock aficionados and feminist fans but general obscurity in the realm of popular music. Betty Davis is barely in the funk books, not in the rock books, and absent from the books about soulful divas.<sup>19</sup> The combination of her race, gender, sound, and image caused her to fall through the cracks, between genres and audiences. She was the wrong gender and race to penetrate the boundaries of rock, and she struggled to get beyond the margins of the black music circuit. Black middle-class arbiters of propriety tried to silence her. Most white music listeners probably never heard her music because of segregated marketing. Reflecting on her career in a 2005 interview, Davis was matter-of-fact about her body of work: "I don't think I was ahead of my time," she said. "I think I was just testing the time" (Maycock 51). The musical sound, lyrical content, and visual imagery at the heart of Davis's "test" offered representations of black femininity that embraced the pleasures and contradictions of female

sexual desire and independent womanhood while valiantly challenging race-, gender-, and genre-defined expectations for black women's musical performance. Betty Davis did not capitulate to the considerable cultural, social, and economic pressures that encourage black women musicians to adhere to a prescribed look and sound. Instead, she was resolute in exploring and expressing a liberated form of black femininity. And as she did so, she rocked, she was funky, and she dared to be different.

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### Notes

1. Light in the Attic Records released Davis's fourth album, originally titled *Crashin' from Passion*, under the title *Is It Love or Desire*, in 2009.

2. I limit my discussion to Davis's recorded music because I did not have access to film of her live performances. Despite extensive searching, the Light in the Attic staff was unable to find any performance footage to include in the reissued CD package (Matt Sullivan, personal communication, 6 July 2007).

3. For examples, see Combahee River Collective; A. Davis (*Women, Race, and Class*); hooks; Hull, Scott, and Smith; and Wallace.

4. See Collins (67–90) for a discussion of these stereotypes.

5. For example, see A. Davis (*Women, Race, and Class*), Giddings, Hammonds, Hine, and Rose (*Longing to Tell*).

6. Some examples include Brooks; Dawes; Gaunt; Hayes and Williams; Johnson; Keyes; Pough; Retman; Rose ("Two Inches"); Tucker; and Wald.

7. Interview with Betty Davis, 27 June 2007.

8. Davis interview.
9. Davis interview.
10. Davis interview.
11. Davis interview.
12. Guthrie P. Ramsey Jr., personal communication, 30 Sept. 2008. See Ramsey for a discussion of genre conventions in African American music.
13. Davis interview.
14. See Gaines and Higginbotham for discussions of “the politics of respectability.”
15. I have not been able to locate commentaries on Davis written by black women. A favorable article that appeared in *Essence*, a magazine for black women, was written by a man, as was nearly all of the coverage of her career (Gibbs, “Entertainers” 1974). As I continue this research, I hope to interview women, especially black women, who were aware of Davis’s music when it was released in order to learn how they responded to her music, lyrics, and visual style.
16. I thank Mark Anthony Neal for this observation. The song “Let’s Get It On” was number 1 on the *Billboard* R&B chart for six weeks and number 1 on the Top 40 chart for two weeks. For chart positions, see Whitburn (*Top 40 Hits* 250; *Joel Whitburn Presents* 514).
17. For example, see Carby, A. Davis (*Blues Legacies*), Harrison, Johnson, and Rose (“Two Inches”).
18. Tamar-kali Brown, e-mail to the author, 7 June 2007.
19. For example, Davis is mentioned briefly in Vincent (192) and receives no entry or index listing in Thompson.

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