

# KIRKUS

**Black Diamond Queens**  
**African American Women and Rock and Roll**  
**Author: Maureen Mahon**

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Snapshots of some of rock 'n' roll's greatest Black female performers, underappreciated in rock's broader history.

NYU music professor Mahon argues convincingly that Black women have been pivotal to rock music's evolution. Think of Big Mama Thornton's "Hound Dog," repurposed by Elvis Presley, or Tina Turner's skill at bridging R&B, rock, and pop. But their influence, notes the author, has been stifled in a variety of complicated ways. They've often been hired as background singers to lend "authenticity" to White rock performers yet exiled from the genre when they took center stage. Patti LaBelle, for instance, came up all but anonymously in a 1960s girl group and as part of the '70s trio Labelle, considered outliers or a one-hit disco act on the basis of their song "Lady Marmalade." Mahon argues that women rockers had to cultivate "betwixt and between" genres to find a footing, even while that strategy made success fleeting for the likes of Labelle, LaVern Baker, and the Shirelles—a shame because artists like Claudia Lennear and Betty Davis made indelible, path-breaking albums. Allowing these women to be more than window dressing or provide more than a dash of vocal "blackness" was a perceived threat. The band Humble Pie got push back when it made its Black female backing singers equal partners. In one excellent chapter, Mahon explores the stereotypes exemplified by the Rolling Stones' "Brown Sugar" through three women connected to Mick Jagger. Mahon's book lacks the sweep of a fully fleshed history, effectively ending the story with Turner, though she makes mention of recent artists like Santigold and Alabama Shakes. But if the narrative arc is brief and the prose occasionally burdened by academic stiffness, Mahon has done plenty to expose how Black women rockers have been marginalized by musicians, audiences, historians, and critics.

A well-researched, sociologically savvy effort to expand the rock canon.