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Etta James' Impact on Rock and Music

Etta James was born Jamesetta Hawkins on January 25th, 1938 in Los Angeles, California. James was raised by her 14-year-old, sexually active mother Dorothy Hawkins. Though her father's identity is unknown, she suspects him to be pool player Minnesota Fats, due to several features she had in her mixed appearance. She was raised for a time by her mother Dorothy's friends, Lulu and James Rogers.

She sang gospel spirituals at the age of 5 outside of school in church, but she liked music outside gospel. Her diverse palette would show up in her penchant for switching sounds and genres throughout her career. Her signature huge voice came from her experience in the St. Paul's Baptist Church, being punched in the chest by the choirmaster to get her to sing from the gut. After Lulu died, Etta and Dorothy moved from LA to San Francisco and she refused to sing for a time, choosing to play bass fiddle in the school orchestra instead.

Losing a parental figure and with a single parent in their 20s at the time of her adolescence, James became a delinquent. She got into fights outside school, largely ignored her studies, and formed a street corner girl group called the Creolettes with two girls - one of which

being. Jean Mitchell - that later became the "Peaches" of Etta James and the Peaches. The other girl, Abbye Mallory, met Johnny Otis at his band's show, and Otis wanted to hear the group because of her. She sang "How Deep Is The Ocean" (first released by Paul Whiteman and His Orchestra), "For All We Know," (composed by J. Fred Coots), and "Street of Dreams" (popularized by Ella Fitzgerald). Otis wanted to record an album with James, but being underage, she needed parental consent. She forged a permission note and went to record with the girls.

"Roll With Me, Henry" came from that recording, and was written as a blatant and sexual response to "Work With Me Annie" by Hank Ballard and the Midnighters. As it was then named, the song wouldn't be allowed airplay. Though sexuality was socially accepted and popularized by black women primordial in rock like Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, "Roll" was a frowned upon word due to its sexual connotation. The song was subtitled with its initial name, and renamed "The Wallflower". Under its new name, it rose to #6 in retail sales, #3 in disc jockey charts, and #15 on jukebox plays on the Billboard R&B charts- all before Etta's 17th birthday. A sequel "Hey, Henry" was later made. As well, when Georgia Gibbs did her version the following year, it was titled "Dance With Me, Henry" to avoid the same fate. The Peaches then toured with blues guitarist Philip Walker. They also toured with and recorded with Johnny "Guitar" Watson, as they were influenced vocally by him. Not long after this, the Peaches disbanded, leaving James as a solo act.

After working primarily on blues tracks, James shifted to doo-wop through her label Modern Records providing her a backup vocal group. They first appear on her song, "Do Something Crazy". Around this time, James was dating R&B singer Harvey Fuqua, and they recorded songs together such as "I Hope You're Satisfied"

and "If I Can't Have You". James moved to Chicago with her then-partner Fuqua, as her deal

with Modern Records ended and she signed with Chess Records label. During her label transition, she sang backing vocals for Chuck Berry on "Back In The USA". Working with Berry may have indirectly aided the drive within her deli

After becoming the first major female star signed to sister label of Chess, Argo records, her sound was toned down as producer Leonard Chess toned down her energetic sound, seeing crossover pop appeal for her. She pivoted towards singing more R&B and soul. In 1965, she did a duet with fellow San Francisco native, Chess labelmate, and cousin Sugar Pie DeSanto called "In The Basement". In October 1960, James sang on "Seven Day Fool", composed by Fuqua and producer Berry Gordy. This composition was later used by Stevie Wonder in 1963 for his song "Fingertips". Gordy added orchestral instrumentation to "At Last", and "Trust In Me" that would help broaden her sound.

James and Fuqua helped break Marvin Gaye away from his abusive family - unfortunately, for a brief time. She coached his vocal techniques, influencing his phrasing of words and his scream. With his newfound skills, Gaye went on to join Harvey and the Moonglows, leading him to meet Gordy. This was their first meeting prior to working together on the famous R&B hit factory, the Motown Records label that went on to dominate charts from the 1960s through the 1980s.

The 2008 film "Cadillac Records" was centered around the life of Chess Records and a few of its musicians from decades of the 1940s through the 1960s. Some of the musicians include Chuck Berry, Muddy Waters, and Etta James; portrayed in the 2008 film by pop star Beyonce Knowles-Carter. Knowles-Carter cited James as one of her heroes during the movie's premiere, and received adulation from James herself, who was in attendance. By playing James, Knowles-Carter learned strength that followed her throughout her career to this day.

Her live performance had developed to incorporate the near conversational stage

presence of blues legends such as Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith. Her expressive and passionate delivery was inspired by Billie Holliday, an influence she had since her childhood. Holliday's delivery is what she chose to emulate in her music, and in turn, "when she effortlessly opened her mouth, you could hear the pain and triumph. Her deeply emotional way of delivering a song told her story with no filter. She was fearless, and had guts.," as told by Knowles-Carter in a 2012 interview.

James created a cultural hit by reworking a gospel song reworked for R&B, called "Something's Got A Hold Of Me". The song was produced by Leonard and Phil Chess, and was the third single from her 1962 self-titled album. Certain lyrics in the silent breaks at the song's outset were made famous through being resampled several times. It was first done by house group Doi-Oing in 1991, followed by Pretty Lights in 2006, and DJ Fedde Le Grande in 2009. It was most famously used by late Swedish DJ Avicii on his hit "Levels", and American rapper Flo Rida for his 2011 hit "Good Feeling". My first exposure to Etta James was through "Good Feeling" as it appeared as the theme to multiple WWE shows, and through my childhood research, I found her vocals were the source of that catchy hook.

Though primarily known for her pop contributions, James had influenced the rock of the 1970s and 1980s heavily. For instance, a fun fact about Elkie Brooks' 1964 rendition of "Something's Got A Hold Of Me " is Jimmy Page of Led Zeppelin fame played guitar on her track. This was five years prior to the band's debut album, making this cover one of the first places the UK could hear Jimmy's soulful playing. Brooks is also credited for contributions to the band's hit opus, "Stairway To Heaven," and that collaborative relationship started with this Etta James cover. Additionally, Janis Joplin sat in while James prepared for a show in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and that experience shaped a similarly abrasive delivery from her whiskey-strained voice.

Unfortunately, much like Joplin, James inherited the darker streaks of rock in this

era; namely, drug addiction. She had acquired a penchant for heroin in the early 1960s, which altered the direction of her career and life. She had underhandedly stole and pawned her band's instruments, and done sexual favours with men as old as 80 just to score drugs. She also had been incarcerated for heroin possession in 1972.

Unbeknownst to the public, she was admitted to a psychiatric hospital in Los Angeles several times while the titular Clarence Carter cover of her 1967 album, "Tell Mama" charted on the Billboard R&B chart that same year. The track moved Diana Ross enough for her to do a cover of it, showing James' influence on one of R&B's largest stars. James' incredible lyrical storytelling was on display on the "Tell Mama" b-side "I'd Rather Go Blind," a song described in her autobiography *Rage To Survive* as being brought on by her visit to see Ellington "Fugi" Jordan in prison. She'd given co-writing credit of this song to her then-partner Billy Foster just to protect her income from drugs. She tried methadone, but returned to heroin not long after.

She did a few little gigs around Africa whilst in recovery just to test out the waters without being on drugs. During rehab, James got a letter from Keith Richards, guitarist for The Rolling Stones, saying that when she got out, his band desired to go on tour with her. He found inspiration from her and, though James had missed out on them and Bob Dylan due to her issues, the other rehab residents were quite aware of The Rolling Stones' impact and knew them to both be a big deal. As desired, James opened for The Rolling Stones on their late 1978 tour of the US, exposing her music to burgeoning hotbeds for rock that were the club scene. They even did a rendition of her hit "I'd Rather Go Blind" with him in 1974 alongside English rockers The Faces. Though she quit heroin, she picked up a cocaine habit in its place. James left Chess records to battle drug addiction in 1978. Thankfully, by the age of 50, approximately around 1990, she had quit everything.

James was never afraid to experiment with new genres and sounds, embracing funk

with her 10th studio album in 1973 Etta James, also known as *Only A Fool*. She shifted sounds again towards disco in early 1980s with *Changes*, an album wrought with songs about lost love. She moved towards jazz in 1986, when Molly Gibbs, best known for her role as Florence on the popular sitcom *The Jeffersons*, asked James to play with an all-star group for a show at her Nightclub, Marla's Memory Lane Supper Club in Los Angeles. This performance can be heard on the live album *Blues In The Night, Vol. 1: The Early Show*, and reconnected James with the Otis family, as the group notably included Shuggie Otis, soul guitarist and the son of Johnny Otis.

In 1989, finally revitalized from recovery, James recorded her first album in 9 years called *Seven Year Itch* on her new label Island Records. She'd return to the blues properly for the first time since her genre hopping began around 1960, and with nearly 30 years of innovation to the sound, still brought her familiar powerhouse vocal presence. She also had an early hip hop collaboration with Def Jef in 1989, lending her vocals to his track, "Droppin' Rhymes on Drums". James left Island Records in 1982. She recorded an album of Billie Holliday covers she had long wanted to make, called *Mystery Lady*. From there, she moved to Private Music Records in 1997 where she released 10 more albums, including one with her sons Donto and Sametto as backing musicians in 2004 called *Blues To The Bone*. Sadly, she was diagnosed with leukemia in 2011, and at the age of 73, passed away on January 20th, 2012.

Etta James didn't have any #1 Hits or Top #10 Hits on the Billboard charts. Her issues with drug addiction and management (as evident by her repetitive label switches) had robbed her of a broader music appeal. Yet, she was a consistently driving force within music. From her distinct and enchanting voice to her ability to find a place in every genre she worked within (especially pop in the early 2010s) to her courageous efforts kicking drug addiction to the connections she fostered through her journey, she left an impact on stars with her unflinching honesty and passion.

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