

“At Last”—Etta James (1961)

Added to the National Registry: 2008

Essay by Bob Gulla (guest post)*



Etta James



Original label



Original LP

When “At Last” initially hit the charts in 1942, Etta James had just turned five years old. Glen Miller’s Orchestra picked up the tune from writers Mack Gordon and Harry Warren. Miller had a golden string of hits that year. “At Last” was one of nearly a dozen. His version, sung by Ray Eberle and Lynn Bari, spent four months on the “Billboard” chart and peaked at #2.

By the time Etta cut her own version in 1961, the song was nearly 20 years old. Etta was 24. Her rendition reached number two on the R&B chart and number 47 on the “Billboard Hot 100.” While it would eventually become Etta’s signature tune, and a timeless blues ballad, it didn’t make Etta a star. That didn’t happen till much later.

James, nee Jamesetta Hawkins, had a troubled childhood. Her mother often wandered and she didn’t know her father. Etta suspected it was Rudy “Minnesota Fats” Wanderone, a man she had met once, but wasn’t sure. She began singing in a church choir at an early age. But the choir’s musical director physically abused her, as did her foster father, someone named “Sarge.” Sarge would wake Jamesetta up following one of his poker games and force her to sing for his friends. When her foster mother died, she moved in with her birth mother.

Early on, she sang doo wop and pop with a girl group, the Creolettes, named thus because of their fair skin tone. Johnny Otis, an R&B legend in the making, heard them, set them up with Modern Records, and renamed Jamesetta. Otis wrote, with Etta, “Roll With Me Henry,” which was an “answer song” to Hank Ballard’s hit “Work With Me Annie.” The tune could have been her pop breakthrough. But, as luck would have it, Georgia Gibbs, a well-known white artist, also cut the song and it was her version that ended up climbing the charts in 1955, hitting #1.

James’ version, with her group the Peaches, helped to secure a slot opening for Little Richard that same year. She would go on to share a stage with a young Elvis Presley, tour the Chitlin’ Circuit, and chum around with B.B. King who, it is said, wrote his hit “Sweet Sixteen” about her. In 1960, her record contract with Modern expired and she signed with Chess, who assigned her to record for that label’s subsidiary, Argo.

“At Last!,” the album, which included the song of the same name, featured Etta at the peak of her early years. The session showcased her ability to jump around genres, from blues and soul to jazz and pop standards. “At Last!” proved foundational in helping James carve out her vocal style and shape her artistry.

The title track would be the third single issued from the record, behind “All I Could Do Was Cry” and “My Dearest Darling.” The record also included a cover of Willie Dixon’s “I Just Want to Make Love to You” and the Harold Arlen/Ted Koehler chestnut “Stormy Weather.”

But it was the Gordon/Warren tune that floated to the surface and thrived in the decades to come. Vocal stars like Beyonce, Christina Aguilera, and Celine Dion, among many others, have all had success with the song. Beyoncé even portrayed James in the film “Cadillac Records.”

But it’s Etta who owns it. Its passion and sweep are iconic. Her sense of relief is palpable, effortless, universal. She delivers her performance with conviction but without diva-style proficiency. There is an edgy earthiness here few could equal. The song feels like the epitome of Etta’s life of pain. It is why the blues singers of old could embrace the material while many of the more privileged blues interpreters to come later frequently came up short. Etta lived a life of pain even beyond her breakthrough in music at 15. When she delivered the vocals for “At Last,” it was a cascade of suffering delivered through the song’s lyrics. While she didn’t write the tune, she lived it. You could even say that when Gordon and Warren wrote the song, they couldn’t have possibly predicted the emotional heights Etta would bring to their work.

Over the decades, “At Last” has cemented Etta’s reputation, and today it has taken on a life of its own. In fact, the song hit the UK charts for the first time in 2010 and peaked at #39 immediately after Etta’s death in January 2012. Etta was inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in 1993, the Blues Hall of Fame in 2001, and the Grammy Hall of Fame in both 1999 and 2008.

k.d. lang gave Etta’s induction speech on the occasion of her Rock Hall admission back in 1993. “Etta James can sing truth into every note,” Lang said. “For a song cannot be sung until its singer has learned, and has a grip on, both its freedom and its cage. Etta James has truly seen both sides in her life and her music.”

Bob Gulla is a Providence-based former music writer and journalist, as well as the author of several books, including “Icons of Rhythm and Blues and Soul” and “The Guitarists That Changed Rock Music” (Greenwood Press.) He is currently working on a book focused on his experiences interviewing over 500 musicians.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.