

**This interview with
NONA HENDRYX
was conducted by the Library of Congress
on May 14, 2021**



Library of Congress: When the song “Lady Marmalade” was presented to you, how much of it was complete? Was it all there from the French question to the “*Go sisters*”?

Nona Hendryx: Yes, but different. The “*Go sister*” was a part added to The Eleventh Hour remix version, we changed the melody and rearranged the intro to our version, making it a more soulful version.

LOC: Did you know from the get-go that this was a song that was right for Labelle?

NH: Yes. I/we thought “Lady Marmalade” was a good song and that it could possibly be a single release. It felt prophetic or the right song at the right time because we were headed to New Orleans to record our “Nightbirds” album with Allan Toussaint.

LOC: Patti has often said she didn’t know, at first, what the French question in the song meant—did you?

NH: Well, yes, I had a one semester of French in High School and Vicki Wickham, Labelles’ manager and one of the producers of the “Nightbirds” album, is from England and spoke a little French. Patti may not have understood the French language or heard the translation of the title but the lyrics in the verses are self-explanatory.

LOC: Sarah Dash told me that Allen Toussaint was not (or ever!) physically in the studio during the recording. Is that true? What was that like? Was “Lady” recorded in one session?

NH: Allan was in the studio but sometimes he would step away, leaving us to continue with the musicians. I don’t know why, maybe it was to think about the production or the arrangement or [to have the] space to think. Allan played piano on “Lady Marmalade.”

LOC: By this time Labelle was almost a strong force in fashion as they were in music (and that's sayin' something!). Did you ever encounter a proposed stage look that made you pause?

NH: There were designs, sketches by Larry Legaspi, Norma Kamali and other designers that didn't work for each of us and were never made. Some that were made that we wore once and would never wear again in life!

LOC: Why do you think "Lady Marmalade" has spoken to so many people, for so many generations?

NH: It is the combination of the many elements coming together in a time and place to create a singular musical record. Notably, three young, R&B/Soul identified, Black American women singing in French, not your usual American recording combination except Josephine Baker or Eartha Kitt.

Specifically, the unique features of the recording to me are: "Lady Marmalade's" opening, the organ glissando into and over the beat in the first hook of the recording, heralding the vocal chant, "Hey sister"; the 2nd hook over the melodic arrangement of the musical instruments in the first eight measures of the song; the continuation of the instrumental hooks under a strong verse melody with Patti's lead vocal straight into Sarah and I joining in for a pre-chorus (hook #3) before a suspenseful two-bar "horn part" leading to the "main hook," #5, a French phrase "*Voulez vous coucher Avec Moi c'est soir*" known in Europe or by French speaking people but a foreign curiosity for Americans, especially African Americans.