

**This interview with  
PATTI LABELLE  
was conducted by the Library of Congress  
on April 27, 2021**



**Library of Congress:** Before you were the three-member group Labelle, you were of course Patti LaBelle and the Bluebells and Cindy Birdsong was a member of the group. When Cindy left was there any hesitation about carrying on as a trio?

Patti LaBelle: No, it was easy. Well, it wasn't easy when she actually *left* the group. I kept praying that she made the right decision but I figured she did. I do wish she had let us know before the show though. I mean we were ready to go on and Cindy wasn't there. We found out the next day that she had left [the group]. Now, that was *deep*.

But I couldn't blame her for wanting to have that opportunity.

**LOC:** As Labelle, the three of you were ALMOST as famous for your outrageous on-stage get-ups as for your music. Where did that come from? When did it start?

PB: We thought it was necessary: for audiences to see us before they heard us. We came out like space cadets, exotic creatures, or whatever we were--we got your attention. So, it was to get attention; it was kind of a gimmick, but it did work: Sarah showing her beautiful body—before many others did! And Nona wearing the wildest things. Yeah, we did it first!

**LOC:** Did you ever encounter an outfit that you thought was just too much?

PB: Oh, yes. But I wore it anyway. It was this burnt yellow jumpsuit thing--I don't know what you'd call it. With these big platform shoes. I looked like Big Bird. But it's all we had so I

wore it, I had to.

**LOC: When you first heard “Lady Marmalade” what sold you on the song as something Labelle should record?**

PB: We were in Los Angeles about to go to New Orleans to make our new record and, on the way to the airport, [the songwriter] Bob Crewe called our manager, Vicki Wickham, and asked for the ladies to stop by his house before we got on the flight. We had time. He wanted us to listen to “Lady Marmalade”...

We knew immediately. The hook gets you. When we got to New Orleans, to record with our producer, Allen Toussaint, I said, “We got to do this first! This is a hit!” We were OVERJOYED to do it!

**LOC: Was the song fully formed already the first time you heard it--from the “Hey Sisters!” to the “Voulez-vous coucher avec moi?”?**

PB: Yes, it was ALL there. Every part, including the French, even if I had no idea what it meant.

**LOC: Considering the suggestiveness of the song, did you get any pushback from audiences when it first came out?**

PB: We got pushback from the nuns! *[Laughs]* It was about three weeks or a month after its release, and these three nuns didn't like us singing about a hooker. Of course, I didn't know what it meant—

**LOC: When did you find out what it meant?**

PB: When the nuns started talking! I was like, “Let me see what we're singing?” It just meant that a hooker had to make a living. It didn't bother us. Everyone has the right to make a living. Besides, with the beat and the sound—you don't question it if it feels right!

**LOC: Do you remember where/when you first performed the song live? What was the audience's reaction?**

PB: You know, I have no clue when we first did it live. I don't remember. I would assume the reaction was good because people want to have fun, people love to dance.

Of course, early on, we had to change it in places. We changed “*Do you want to sleep with me?*” to “*Do you want to dance with me?*” because some people couldn't handle the thought of a hooker making money. I don't remember where we had to change it but we did have to change it up from time to time in the beginning.

**LOC: “Lady Marmalade” is still a part of your live shows, of course. Do you sing it or approach it differently now than you did back in 1974?**

PB: No. Not really. I have different arrangements for it depending if we're doing a 90-minute show or a longer show. If it's longer, I like to bring up audience members to sing it with me. Sometimes men, sometimes the ladies. They look forward to it and now it's always like "Pick me! Pick me!" It's now all audience participation!