

**This interview with
SARAH DASH
was conducted by the Library of Congress
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Library of Congress: How was the song “Lady Marmalade,” as something to record, first presented to you and the other ladies of Labelle? Was it in the studio? Who brought it to your attention?

Sarah Dash: Bob Crewe [the co-songwriter] lived in California during this time and we had just been signed to Epic Records which is now part of CBS, which is now called CBS/Sony.

During that time, he had had a conversation with all of us about this new song he wanted to show us. Nona and Vicki [Wickham, Labelle’s manager] and Patti and her husband were about to take their vacation in California because we were set to be introduced at the record company convention out there. Back in those days, the record labels had company conventions. Well, I had gone down to the islands for my vacation but Nona and Patti went to California [before the convention] and Bob invited them to his home for dinner. He was like, “I have a song for you and it’s a KILLER!” Later, they told me how Bob presented it to them--it was so funny the way he performed the song, strutting across the floor, singing partially in French....

Of course, Patti didn’t know what the French part meant....

The day after the convention we were flying to New Orleans to record our first album for Epic Records [“Nightbirds”]. Allen Toussaint was producing and we had already chosen the songs but we now wanted THIS song. A meeting took place and we said, “Alan, this is something we want to do!”

Then it was the morning of the convention... And, since we were new to the label, they booked us at a 10am morning slot to perform for the A&R and promotion people...entre of what to come. We freaked a lot of people out! They were probably all hung over from the night before, and out came this three-member girl group in the space suits and we blasted away! I’m sure they were like “Are we in the right place?! Have we been taken over by aliens?” Our presentation worked.

LOC: You recorded the song in New Orleans? How did that come about?

SD: That's where Allen's studio was. Since we had just been signed to a new label, they wanted to place us with someone who was sensitive to our sound and could really identify with us. That was Allen. It's ironic that we were there since "Lady Marmalade" has French Creole feel to it.

When we got to New Orleans, we were kind of nervous. We were kind of nervous to see if he'd *really* let us record "Lady Marmalade" even though everyone already agreed. We were in the studio the first day and we're waiting for him and we started talking about where was he--"Is he late?!" Then we hear this VOG—the Voice of God—"Hello Ladies!" He was listening in on us from his upstairs office. That's how he controlled everything in the studio. Then he said, "We are going to start with 'Lady Marmalade.'" "

And "Lady Marmalade" was the first song we recorded for the album.

LOC: Over the years, Patti LaBelle has famously said that when she recorded the song, she never knew what that saucy, central question in it meant. Did you know?

SD: Being as inquisitive as I am, I had to ask! Vicki was fluent in French and so I asked her. I think Patti was out of earshot. I knew some Italian so I could make out "Will you..." and then Vicki gave me the full translation and...WOW!

But it was great; it was the surprise of the element of the song, I felt. People had to figure out what it meant or what it meant to them.

LOC: Because of the suggestiveness of the song, do you recall any pushback from radio or the public?

SD: Yes! How wise of you to ask. *[laughs]*

I mean television at that time!--censorship was awfully tight. When we went on Mike or Dinah, we had to change the lyrics. So, instead of "sleep" it became "Will you *dance* with me?" America was always different from Europe. I mean, over in Europe, you could probably drop your pants on the air!

We were appearing in Seattle, Washington, and the Nuns of ... Nuns of Anchor or something... I know, well they were like, "How indecent!" Well, the ticket sales were not going that well and when the nuns protested, it helped us. Ticket sales flew out the box office we had a sell-out night in Seattle, Washington!

Meanwhile, radio stations were getting involved, the local DJ's had contest and were having people call in: "If you're the fifth caller and you can tell us what this song is saying..."

All that PR had made "Lady Marmalade" a sensation! By the time we hit Seattle, the song was in the top ten! We took lemons and made lemonade! Thank you, nuns!

LOC: How were the vocal parts of the song worked out?

SD: Patti was our lead singer on most of the songs. Nona and I sang backups; I had been sort of in charge of the harmonies for many years. And somehow, that all gelled into what we were supposed to sound like.

I've been a stickler for harmony...*all my life*. It'd been inside of me always. God gifted me with that. I had a five octave range—about four and half now.

Now, in our individual [solo] concerts, Patti and Nona and I all do “Lady Marmalade” our own way--we all have our own and individual arrangements and take on it--but, it’s not a problem when anyone of us appear at, or all three of us are together, we go back to how we original recording, with an improvised ending, we invite folks on the stage, to sing along and dance...audiences love it.

LOC: Earlier, you mentioned Vicki Wickham. She is listed as a producer of the song. Was she involved with its production?

SD: Yes, she was in charge of the strategic and administrative part of Labelle. I don’t think I ever saw her pick up an instrument. Though she had the ears of life, and instinctive, intuitive vibes with our sound. She was like our Simon Cowell.

LOC: What did Allen Toussaint bring to the recording as its actual producer?

SD: EVERYTHING! That album changed our lives! His production changed our entire being! It was also wonderful [in New Orleans] to have access to so many great musicians like the Neville Brothers. And what Herman [Ernest] did with the playing of the drums on that record— George Porter and the breakdown in “Lady Marmalade”!

Allen brought what we needed. We had been playing a crucial part and partially producing our own earlier albums but, when we landed in New Orleans, we knew this was something different.

Of course, he already knew he had *singers*. And he wanted to really utilize our voices. He really melded the voices together with the music, with Nona’s writing, with the musicians.... Patti and my interpretive sounds, Allan did that on the “Nightbirds” album.

LOC: Why do you think “Lady Marmalade” caught on so at that time?

SD: I think there was a renaissance going on. The height of Civil Rights was still going on, Women’s Rights were coming to power... In New York, gay people, gay rights were emerging, and it was a big creative force. You know, word of mouth goes further than any newspaper.

The song was the beginning of disco and the first song that was promoted in discos to the DJ’s . We’d all gone to the clubs before and we’d party all night. The Garage and The Continental Baths. It was like a communal gravity, a movement!

People have a need to have controversy, too. “Lady Marmalade” was that. You’d hear of people at \$500-a-plate dinners talking about the song. And TV shows began to have their characters reference the song.

LOC: In 2001, Missy Elliot did a remake of the song featuring Pink, Lil’ Kim, Mya and Christina Aguilera. When did you become aware of the remake?

SD: It was when “Moulin Rouge” came out and I saw the video [for the song]. Of course, Labelle never did a video for the song--believe it or not! I saw Christina Aguilera in it and I was like, “That girl can sing!” and then three other great voices came on!

I think it’s an honor when someone revisits your work like that.

It was fun. I thought their version was very seductive. And it brought a lot of attention to Labelle with people debating “Who did it best?”

It also inspired the record companies to reissue the Labelle albums.

LOC: Why do you think that the first version, your version, has had such endurance?

SD: Well, it's three black women singing French about the world's oldest profession! It won't be swept under the table! And it's the quality of the music—the way it was produced, *the voices*.