

“Lady Marmalade”--Labelle (1974)

Added to the National Registry: 2020

Essay by Mya (guest post)*



“Voulez-vous coucher avec moi ce soir?” This unforgettable phrase from Labelle’s “Lady Marmalade” has echoed across generations, encapsulating the song’s seductive allure, daring spirit, and bold expression of female empowerment. Having had the privilege to contribute to the 2001 remake of “Lady Marmalade” for Baz Luhrmann’s *Moulin Rouge!* film soundtrack, along with Christina Aguilera, P!nk and Lil’ Kim, produced by Missy Elliott, Rockwilder, and Ron Fair, I often reflect on the power and legacy of Labelle’s original recording and the impact it has had on music, culture, and identity. Labelle’s version is more than a hit single; it’s an anthem of resilience and a vibrant declaration of self-ownership that continues to inspire.

In the early '70s, Labelle—guided by visionary manager Vicki Wickham—transformed themselves from a traditional girl group into a force of progressive soul, embracing new sounds and topics that few Black African American female artists dared to explore at the time. The result was a bold new identity, blending soul, funk, and proto-disco with glam rock theatricality. This metamorphosis extended to their wardrobe as well, with outlandish, space-age costumes that reflected their larger-than-life sound and unapologetic attitude. The energy of this reinvention culminated in “Lady Marmalade,” a song that not only broke musical barriers but challenged societal norms, empowering women to embrace their individuality.

Produced by Allen Toussaint and featuring the legendary New Orleans band The Meters, “Lady Marmalade” is a masterclass in musical fusion. The infectious rhythm, intricate harmonies, and layered instrumentation invite listeners to move, while the daring lyrics tell the story of a woman who owns her desires and writes her own narrative. Patti LaBelle’s powerful lead vocals, supported by Nona Hendryx and Sarah Dash’s electric harmonies, create a rich tapestry of sound that feels both commanding and inviting. The iconic refrain, *“Voulez-vous coucher avec moi ce soir?”* dared audiences to confront the song’s provocative themes, even as Patti herself famously admitted she was unaware of its meaning at first. Regardless, her spirited delivery brought an energy that resonated beyond words.

Historically, “Lady Marmalade” was groundbreaking. The song became a number-one hit on the Billboard Hot 100 and solidified Labelle’s position as one of the most influential female groups of the decade. But their influence extended far beyond charts and sales. Labelle was the first African American vocal group to perform at the Metropolitan Opera House and the first all-African American pop group on the cover of “Rolling Stone.” They broke ground for future generations of artists, creating a legacy of representation, empowerment, and self-expression.

For me, participating in the 2001 remake of “Lady Marmalade” was an honor and a profound learning experience. It gave me the chance to pay tribute to Labelle’s legacy and add my voice to a song that celebrates freedom and identity. The process of reimagining such an iconic piece of music taught me about the timelessness of art—how music connects people across generations, each finding something fresh yet familiar within it. Our remake honored Labelle’s original while bringing our own perspective individual and collective flavor, reminding me us of the strength and solidarity that music can build.

One of my own personal life, and career highlights, was being able to perform “Lady Marmalade” live with the icon, Patti LaBelle, herself, at the 2002 Grammy Awards—a powerful moment where the past and present came together to honor a song and a legend that means so much to so many.

“Lady Marmalade” occupies a unique place in music history, not just as a classic hit, but as a cultural beacon of independence and artistry. Its inclusion in the National Recording Registry ensures that its impact endures, preserving the song’s boldness, brilliance, and timeless inspiration for future listeners and artists.

Mya is an American singer, songwriter, dancer, record producer, and actress. She was part of “Lady Marmalade” blockbuster remake from 2001.

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