

# “At Last”—Etta James (1961)

Added to the National Registry: 2008

Essay by Cary O'Dell



*Etta James*



*Original label*



*Original LP*

Etta James’s legendary 1961 recording of “At Last” was one of her first releases for the Chess/Argo recording label after beginning her career with the Modern label. The change in companies also marked a change in James’s career. She recounted in her 1995 autobiography, “Rage to Survive”:

I was no longer a teenager. I was twenty-two and sophisticated. Or at least I wanted to be sophisticated. So when Harvey [Fuqua, formerly of the Moonglows, and then James’s boyfriend] got out his “Book of One Hundred Standards” and began playing through old songs, I got excited. I saw in that music the mysterious life that my mother had led when I was a little girl, the life I secretly dreamed of living myself. I wanted to escape into a world of glamour and grace and easy sin.

“At Last” was the first one to hit big.... Because of the way I phrased it, some people started calling me a jazz singer.

And it was a change. Before her switch to Chess, James (born Jamesetta Hawkins in 1938) had primarily scored as a recording artist with what she would later call “quickie teenage rockin’, humping and bumping ditties.” Indeed, her oeuvre up to that time had been marked with such titles as “Dance With Me, Henry” (her breakthrough), “All I Could Do Was Cry,” and “My Dearest Darling.”

And though “At Last” (from James’s album of the same name) was also about an endearing love, James’s soulful approach certainly bespoke of a more mature singer fully coming into her own.

“At Last” was written by Mark Gordon and Harry Warren. It was first introduced in 1941 via the film “Orchestra Wives” where it was performed by Glenn Miller and his orchestra. The Miller version of the song hit the charts in 1942, rising up to number two on the charts. Since then, “At Last” has gone on to be covered by an ample number of other singers. Besides James’s, notable versions have been done by the likes of Gene Watson, Celine Dion, Cyndi Lauper and Beyonce. Lauper made it the centerpiece of her covers LP also titled “At Last.” And Beyonce sang it amid much fanfare—and the chagrin of some others—at President Obama’s 2009 inaugural where the newly-named POTUS danced with his wife Michelle, America’s new First Lady.

Still, despite many of these memorable other performances, it is Etta James’s version that, even among James’s impressive array of recordings (including: “Tell Mama,” “Something’s Got A Hold On Me,” and “I’d Rather Go Blind”), remains the definitive version and her crowning achievement.

So iconic has James's "At Last" become that from the first seconds of the opening, the song sounds immediately recognizable, memorable and yet surprisingly modern. The opening is lush and makes generous use of a robust string arrangement, a sound previously unpursued by James on her previous recordings.

Still, for all the song's great instrumentation, when hearing it, one is most struck by James's throaty vocal. Yes, she digs deep for this recording, in only the way a singer schooled on the hits of Dinah Washington and Billie Holiday possibly can. But she never oversells the vocal. Instead, she works her voice well with the timbre of the music, interjecting just enough romantic longing.

Surprisingly, for the classic that this version of this song has become, it never charted. Though James was active well into the 2000s (she died in 2012), and was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1993, of her nine chart hits according to "Billboard," "At Last" is not among them.

It doesn't matter though, as they say, the People have spoken. James wrote of "At Last" in her autobiography, "Thirty-five years later, they're still asking for it."

"At Last" is chief among Etta James's great legacy. And no amount of time or other covers of the song, heartfelt though they may be, seem likely to ever diminish it.

*Cary O'Dell is with the Motion Picture, Broadcast and Recorded Sound division of the Library of Congress. He is the author of the books "June Cleaver Was a Feminist!" (2014) and "Women Pioneers in Television" (1997). He also served as assistant editor of "The Concise Encyclopedia of American Radio" (2009) and "The Biographical Encyclopedia of American Radio" (2010).*