

# “Lady Marmalade”—Labelle (1974)

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Essay by Adele Bertei (guest post)\*



*Labelle*

Labelle. Hear the name and most will immediately think of Patti LaBelle, diva supreme, but the story is far more profound than the connection suggests. Over the course of 16 years together, Nona Hendryx, Sarah Dash, and Patti LaBelle created a musical legacy unlike any other group before or since. Patti’s incredible voice led the way, undoubtedly. But it was Sarah Dash’s sweet soaring soprano, the deep resonance of Nona Hendryx’s voice and lyrical imagination, and the utopian vision of manager Vicki Wickham that would ultimately result in the creation of the Labellian cosmology--a map of sonic starlight. In 1962, Patti LaBelle and the Bluebelles were a traditional girl group with a few minor hits. Ten years later, they dropped the girl group tropes and became Labelle, reinventing the role of Black women in popular music as bona fide rock stars in 1974. The torque accelerating their ascendancy was a song called “Lady Marmalade.”

Co-written by Bob Crewe and Kenny Nolan, “Lady Marmalade” is the story of a Creole sex worker strutting a solicitation-- “*Voulez vous coucher avec moi, ce soir?*”--a phrase that became a French-language primer for every American in love with pop music. Any record company trepidation about presenting this brazen shout-out for Black women’s sexual agency to the listening world was extinguished by the undeniable brilliance of the recording. The song might not have been written by Labelle, but their delivery made it a worldwide sensation. It’s a gut-bucket New Orleans strut adorned in the glamour of maestro Allen Toussaint’s arrangements--the hermetic musical language of New Orleans--and a first for funk, which had never been topped by such a magnificent triadic gospel wail.

Labelle’s vocal combustion on “Lady Marmalade” brought a New Orleans hooker into nearly every home, club, and corner shop around the world, and it remains today as one of music’s most beloved pop songs. Americans learned to speak their first words of *français*-funk courtesy of Labelle-- “*Voulez vous coucher avec moi, c’est soir?*”--which has to be the most sexually provocative chorus in the history of high-charting pop music. A self-proclaimed anthem from the POV of a sex worker, it’s a narrative the pop-consuming public had never heard before but

were delighted to parrot. The song's narrative switches between points-of-view; storyteller, sex worker, and Joe, who appears as helpless as a fly in the mocha-milk while libertine Marmalade calls the shots. The shaken Joe pleads "*more more more!*" while Labelle snatches the plea from his chest, shakes it like a ragdoll in a lion's toothy clench, and holds it aloft for the world to see.

Racist tropes about black women's sexual voracity and looseness sprang from the hate-well of slaveholders attempting to justify rape, decrying the "Jezebel" who made them do it, thus forcing the Black female erotic underground. "Lady Marmalade" helped create a shift of perception, seducing nations into singing along to a proud, unfettered sexuality from the Black female POV. The trio channeled Lady M.'s erotic ferocity in the spirit of Ralph Ellison's "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," blowing up the racist Jezebel stereotype by flaunting their sexual agency with the roar of a three-headed lioness.

Nona, Patti, Sarah, and original fourth member Cindy Birdsong, began singing together as Patti LaBelle and the Bluebelles in 1962, breaking out with their single "I Sold My Heart to the Junkman." Birdsong quit in 1967 to join the Supremes, and the three remaining singers decided to stay locked as a trio. The spectacular girl group sound of the 1960s provided America with its first glimpse of Black girl power, and these recordings still shine as some of the very best tracks in pop music history. Think the Supremes, the Marvelettes, Martha and the Vandellas--and a time and genre where young Black women, if they wanted to make it in the commercial world of music, didn't sing about what lay beneath the chiffon dresses and bouffant hairdos. Forbidden to reveal their natural beauty or to speak truthfully of Black struggle, the singers followed the vested interests of the business, and the music business for black entertainers in the 1960s was about assimilation, with few exceptions.

When the trio reinvented as Labelle, their track "Lady Marmalade" tore up the girl group mask of assimilation, as did the LP "Nightbirds" and Labelle's space-suited theatrical stage presentations. Mothers of reinvention, they were a band of firsts: the first women to break away from the traditional girl group style of the 1960s, the first band to mix gospel and sartorial glam with electric rock, funk, and the sound of New Orleans into an utterly unique musical hybrid. They were the first contemporary music act and Black act to play New York City's Metropolitan Opera House. Their theater of musical ascension was all about rising above the persecutions and hypocrisies of American life into a compassionate world view of love-sexy liberation through the power of music.

"Lady Marmalade" was a radical song for the times. Released in November of 1974, the single shot to the #1 position on the "Billboard" pop chart, leading listeners to the LP where it appears: "Nightbirds." Both recordings certified Gold sales. "Nightbirds" brings the stomp of the gospel past into a march for a visionary future. It's a *tour de force* of gritty New Orleans-style funk and R&B with glam rock edges and soaring vocal virtuosity, all buoying lyrical themes of empowerment and transcendence. Within its grooves, we hear the beauty of three women's voices giving birth to a new sensibility of Black womanhood.

"Lady Marmalade" has been covered by dozens of artists, including Christina Aguilera, Mya, L'il Kim and P!nk for the film "Moulin Rouge," but Labelle's version will never be surpassed. In a career spanning 16 years of music and friendship, Labelle presented how music can reach an

apex of sonic power when sympathetic voices join in song. Their music moved us toward the possibilities of personal liberation through creativity unfettered; a creativity inherent to music and its most imaginative expression.

*Adele Bertei is a singer, songwriter, musician, performer, and author. This essay "Lady Marmalade" includes excerpts from her book, "Why Labelle Matters," © 2021, published by the University of Texas Press. She is also the author of a memoir called "Peter and the Wolves" on Smog Veil Books, 2020.*

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