



Generic Variations In The Post-Classic Musical *Lady Sings the Blues*

This essay is drawn from David E. James's Rock 'N' Film: Cinema's Dance With Popular Music (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming, November 2015).

The first rock 'n' roll musical film, *Rock Around the Clock* (Fred F. Sears, 1956), proposed that the new musical style originated in the vernacular folk practice of rural, socially marginal, youthful amateurs, here played by Bill Haley and his Comets, in a white rural community free from generational or racial conflict. But its narrative centres on an adult professional agent, Steve Hollis (played by Johnny Johnston, himself a singer and veteran of 1940s Hollywood musicals), who discovers the combo. "Talent," he tells them, "is something you can sell for big money." Taking over the Comets' management, he develops them successfully, and the film ends with a nationally-broadcast televised "Hollywood Jamboree," featuring them, along with the Platters, the most successful African American doo-wop cross-over group. Subsequent rock 'n' roll films, most notably *Monterey Pop* (D.A. Pennebaker, 1968), *Woodstock* (Michael Wadleigh, 1970), and other counter-culture documentaries, would attempt to assert not only rock's folk origins, but also its ability to create a biracial, eventually Anglo-American, music that united performers and fans together in an unalienated quasi-folk commonality.

Three months after the opening of *Super Fly* (Gordon Parks, Jr., 1972), the best of the blaxploitation films, and the only one to feature musicians in the narrative, another African American musical film re-engaged its generic themes of the devastation caused by drugs, but it did so in an inverted form and from the underside. It

starred the most successful singer of the time, Diana Ross, in her film debut, playing neither a drug-dealer nor a bad blaxploitation chick like Coffy or Cleopatra Jones who would take their revenge on the ghetto pushers; rather she portrayed a victim, a revered singer whose career and life were destroyed by drugs, dealers, and pandemic racism: Billie Holiday, Lady Day.

Lady Sings the Blues (1972) was loosely based on Holiday's ghostwritten autobiography, itself similarly loosely based on her life.¹ Credited to Sidney J. Furie, it revived and combined two Hollywood genres, biographies of swing-era musicians such as *The Glenn Miller Story* (Anthony Mann, 1954), and *The Benny Goodman Story* (Valentine Davies, 1956), and melodramas about women who bring destruction on themselves, such as *In This Our Life* (John Huston, 1942) or *Leave Her to Heaven* (John M. Stahl, 1945). Nominated for five Academy Awards, it also returned over nine million dollars in the next year, while the soundtrack album, containing both music and dialogue from the film, became Ross's only solo album to top the charts and eventually sold over two million copies. Her talent was sold for big money, and *Lady Sings the Blues* was the first and most successful film from Motown, the record company founded in 1959 by Berry Gordy, Jr., who eventually controlled all aspects of its production.

Descended from a white plantation owner and his slave, Gordy was the seventh child of parents who had left Georgia in the 1920s to find work in the Detroit automotive factories. He began writing songs, most successfully for Jackie Wilson, before founding Motown, and signing the Miracles, Mary Wells, the Supremes, and other local

1. Of Holiday biographies, Robert O'Meally's *Lady Day: The Many Faces Of Billie Holiday* valuably emphasizes Holiday's artistry.



artists. Soon he had sufficient local and then national hits to justify converting a house into a recording studio and assembling an extensive stable of artists, a studio orchestra of accomplished instrumental accompanists known as the Funk Brothers and songwriting and record production teams, including Holland–Dozier–Holland, who wrote most of the Supremes' hits. An Artist Development department ensured that all his acts were impeccably dressed, groomed, and provided with coordinated dance routines to maximize their crossover audience appeal. Similarly, Gordy's control over their careers and daily lives quickly made their production of hit records as efficient as Detroit's assembly lines, over a hundred of them in the 1960s, more than justifying the mainstream aspiration of the label's slogan, "The Sound of Young America."

The Supremes were the most successful of Gordy's groups. Formed as a doo-wop quartet in Detroit's Brewster-Douglass Housing Projects, they were signed to Motown in 1961 as a trio consisting of Mary Wilson, Florence Ballard, and Diana Ross. Their releases failed until 1964, when Gordy established Ross as the lead singer, and "Where Did Our Love Go?" topped the US charts. For the next two years, the Supremes traded places at the top of the US singles charts with the Beatles, the only group in the world who could compete with them, and by mid-decade they were global superstars, having recorded a dozen number-one hits. While retaining their identity as Motown artists, Gordy constantly extended the Supremes' repertoire; their second and third albums, both released in 1964, were *A Bit of Liverpool* and *The Supremes Sing Country, Western and Pop*, and in 1967 they released *The Supremes Sing Rodgers & Hart*. That year, Gordy changed the group's name to "Diana Ross and the Supremes," and their second album in the new configuration in 1968 was

Diana Ross & the Supremes Sing and Perform "Funny Girl."

Two years later he split his star from the group, and in May 1970, Ross released her first solo album, *Diana Ross*, the single from which, "Ain't No Mountain High Enough," topped both the pop and rhythm and blues charts, and confirmed her ongoing crossover appeal.

In a decade, Gordy had made Motown one of the most successful record labels in the world and the largest black-owned business in the US, while his success in appealing to both black and white audiences made it one of the most progressive of popular cultural forces on both sides of the Atlantic. The Beatles' inclusion of three of Motown's most important songs on their second album, *With the Beatles* (1963), and Bob Dylan's often-cited observation that Smokey Robinson was "America's best living poet" evidence Motown's place in the heart of rock 'n' roll, even as their music crossed virtually all social boundaries.² Diana Ross's distinctive voice was at the center of his conquest of the music industry, and when Gordy began moving part of his operations to Los Angeles in 1969, and to direct his attention to another medium, film, she accompanied him.

In 1969, Jay Weston, co-producer of *For Love of Ivy* (Daniel Mann, 1968), a romantic comedy starring Sidney Poitier and Abbey Lincoln, proposed to Berry that Ross, rather than Lincoln who had been his first choice, star in a film about Holiday (whom Berry had in fact known).³ Ross had demonstrated acting abilities in an ABC television special in which she played Charlie Chaplin, Harpo Marx, and W.C. Fields, and "My Man," a song associated

2. Dylan's remark has no authoritative source, but it occurs in, for example, Gulla (258).

3. Most production details for *Lady Sings the Blues* are derived from Taraborrelli.



with Holiday, had been part of her repertoire since her final concert with the Supremes, though her interest in it was focused on outdoing Barbra Streisand's cover in *Funny Girl* (William Wyler 1968). Nevertheless, the decision was a huge risk. Gordy was initially reluctant, concerned about Ross's suitability for the part and about the lack of crossover success for films with predominantly black casts, but he eventually agreed and financed a screenplay. He attracted no studio interest until Frank Yablans, a new president at Paramount, noted the money being made by recent blaxploitation releases, and agreed to finance the film with two million dollars. Weston signed Furie, veteran of two Cliff Richard musicals, *The Young Ones* (1961) and *Wonderful Life* (1964), and, more recently, *The Ipccress File* (1965) and *Little Fauss and Big Halsy* (1970), to direct. Very enthusiastic about Ross, Furie also found Gordy entirely in accord with his intentions: "I didn't want to make a serious, deep important movie. I wanted to make a piece of entertainment that would make big money for all of us" (qtd. in Taraborrelli 258).

Unfamiliar with Holiday's music, Ross was able to immerse herself in it while pregnant with Gordy's child, studying especially the eighteen songs that Gil Askey, musical director of the Supremes and many other top Motown acts, had selected as most appropriate for her voice. Several musicians who had worked with Holiday were recruited for the recording sessions. Dissatisfied with the script, Gordy had it rewritten by Motown staffers, and, dissatisfied with the wardrobe, Ross had new gowns made by Bob Mackie and Ray Aghayan. Shooting began on December 6th, 1971, and, despite Gordy and Furie vying for control, it was almost completed by early February. Gordy's insistence on repeated takes so infuriated Yablans that he threatened to close down production; in response,

Gordy repaid Paramount's two million and invested another two million of his own, ending Paramount's involvement except as distributor.

With the tagline derived from Ralph Gleason's *Rolling Stone* review, "Diana Ross is Billie Holiday," *Lady Sings the Blues* opened in New York on October 12, 1972, to rave reviews, especially for Ross's performance.⁴ Leonard Feather, a renowned jazz critic and personal friend of Holiday, spoke for the cognoscenti: "Miss Ross brought to her portrayal a sense of total immersion in the character. Dramatically, this is a tour de force. . . . Musically, there was no attempt at direct imitation of Billie's timbre, but the nuances and phrasing were emulated with surprising success" (51). The project Gordy described as "not a Black film but a film with Black stars" crossed over to the white market as easily as "Baby Love" (qtd. in Hutson). With it, Gordy himself crossed over from music to cinema, and, disarming even those who had most criticized the project, Ross herself became a film star. Where Gordy's previous insistence on broadening her range had involved assimilating the Beatles, Rogers and Hart, and *Funny Girl*, in this she laid claim to classical black music, to jazz, and to a singer considered by many to be one of the century's greatest. Conversely, the narrative also endowed Ross with the biographical misery the white mainstream demanded of a black artist, as well as with the addiction to narcotics that Hollywood insistently ascribes to black musicians of genius.⁵ In her first role, she became the first black woman

4. Gleason was astonished at Ross's performance: "In this film the face and the figure and the sound of Diana Ross have become Billie Holiday. I do not know how it was possible for her to get the kind of feeling she did into her singing" (22).

5. See, for example, *Round Midnight* (Bertrand Tavernier, 1986), *Bird* (Clint Eastwood, 1988), *Theonious Monk: Straight, No Chaser* (Charlotte Zwerin, 1988), *Ray* (Taylor Hackford, 2004). *What's Love*



to win a Golden Globe award and the first since Dorothy Dandridge to be nominated for an Oscar as Best Actress.⁶ Having struck gold in music, television, and now in cinema, she was only steps away from her 1976 Billboard Award as “Female Entertainer of the Century.”

The degree to which Diana Ross could play, let alone *be*, Billie Holiday had been questioned when the project was announced. Slightly built and often appearing almost anorexic, Ross was physically the opposite of Holiday, a self-described “big fat healthy broad” “with big breasts, big bones” (Holiday and Dufty 9). The adequacy of her experience to Holiday’s calamitous life was also doubted; but even though she had not suffered as horribly, as a working-class black woman, she had experienced prejudice enough. A Motown Revue tour of the South in late 1962 had exposed her to segregated public faculties, and just before work on *Lady* began, two of her brothers were brutalized by the police. Other achievements linked the two, notably Ross’s recapitulation of Holiday’s success in crossing over to a white audience while maintaining the affection of her initial black public; one had wanted to play the Café Society, and the other, the Copacabana, and both fulfilled their ambitions. But differences in their voices precipitated most scorn, with Ross’s teenage breathiness deemed inadequate to Holiday’s biting authority. In fact, Holiday had a limited vocal range, hardly more than an octave, and even if her style derived from the blues and Ross’s from doo-wop, both had thin, nasal voices, quite unlike the powerhouses of their respective eras—Bessie Smith and Aretha Franklin, for example. Likewise, though Ross did not attempt to imitate Holiday’s timbre, Feather was correct in noting that she had learned the nuances of her phrasing, her practice of bend-

Got to Do With It (Brian Gibson, 1993) only appears to be an exception, for though Tina is not addicted to drugs, she is addicted to Ike Turner—who is addicted to cocaine.

6. In 1973, Ross was nominated for two Golden Globes awards, “Best Motion Picture Actress” and “Most Promising Newcomer - Female,” winning the later. She lost the Oscar to Liza Minnelli.

ing pitch, for example, or hesitating over a note rather than immediately hitting it on pitch. But while emphasizing the interconnected itineraries of her musical career and addiction, Berry’s final script had many inaccuracies and omissions. The sketchy biography excludes her life among jazz musicians and other artists, if her close friend, Lester Young, who coined the sobriquet, “Lady Day,” appears at all, it is only in the displaced form of the entirely fictitious Piano Man, and the film even gives an incorrect date for her imprisonment, placing it, not in 1947, but in 1936. Similarly, the triumph of her life was shifted to the film’s narrative conclusion at Carnegie Hall. Instead of allowing Holiday to descend into poverty and die under arrest in a hospital bed, Berry reimagined her demise as Ross’s triumph.

The musical differences between Holiday and Ross are most marked in two areas, the former’s interaction with her fellow musicians and her double-consciousness. A distinctive facet of Holiday’s genius as a jazz singer was her weaving of her voice among other elements in a collective improvisatory ensemble and her phrasing of her vocal lines in response to her instrumental accompaniment. This may be heard in her recordings, but films show her listening closely the other musicians and constructing her improvisation as a dialogue with theirs, while they similarly react to her. In the only visual record of her singing live, a performance of “Fine and Mellow” in the television program, *The Sound of Jazz* (1957), her attention to Lester Young and her replies to his improvisations are palpably intimate.⁷ Conversely, in *Lady Sings the Blues*, she of course sings within other musicians’ orchestration, but not in any reciprocal collaboration. Musically as much as narratively, they are merely a backdrop, props for her star performance.

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7. Her creative interaction with her instrumentalists is also clear in the several songs in which she is paired with Louis Armstrong in *New Orleans* (Arthur Lubin, 1947) where, much to her disgust, she played a maid; her account of the filming appears in Holiday and Dufty (119–22). Her only other film appearance was in a short, *Symphony in Black: A Rhapsody of Negro Life* (Fred Waller, 1935), in which Duke Ellington is seen composing music based on vignettes of African American life; already playing a spurned lover, she sings “Saddest Tale.”

Though in her 1930s performances and recordings, Holiday had been an exuberant jazz singer, in the post-war years, she narrowed her focus almost exclusively to torch songs, establishing a consistent persona as an abandoned or abused woman. "Strange Fruit," the only major exception, generalized her personal victimization into the situation of African Americans as a whole. The rhythmic and tonal consistency of her songs and their largely unvaried dramatic situations allowed her to inhabit her post-war persona with an extraordinarily expressive conviction. But at the same time, the strength of her voice sustained a distance from her victimhood, as if she were quoting it in a fashion that has often been likened to a Du Boisian "double-consciousness." Ross's characterization lacked this complexity. James Baldwin, for example, justifiably faulted the film for failing to portray Holiday's readiness to confront white police, managers, and other authority figures, arguing, first that "She was much stronger than this film can have any interest in indicating, and, as a victim, infinitely more complex," and then, that a "victim who is able to articulate the situation of the victim has ceased to be a victim: he, or she, has become a threat" (114-115).⁸ Ross, however, is never a threat, and never displays any autonomous power and, apart from one moment in the extremity of her addiction when she attacks him, she is psychically and emotionally dependent on Louis McKay.

If *Lady Sings the Blues* contains any interpretative issue, it is not the relation between Ross and Holiday, but the relation between McKay and Gordy. Whether consciously or not, Gordy made the film a self-congratulatory allegory of Ross's career under his direction and control. The real-life McKay was a mob enforcer and sometime pimp who, like many of Holiday's other lovers, abused her. Married to her in 1957, he outlived her and when the film was in production, his threats were taken sufficiently seriously that he was hired as a consultant (Taraborrelli 261). He need not have been concerned, for the film's McKay, though a composite of Holiday's three husbands, is impossibly idealized. Physically gorgeous, impeccably tailored, unfailingly generous, and possessed of endless unexplained wealth that allows him to move effortlessly among all echelons of white society, he is simultaneously Prince Charming and Svengali. Saving her from ridicule at her debut, he takes her downtown to dance all night,

8. In the same essay, Baldwin did, however, apologize that his cynicism about Ross's casting "could not have possibly been more wrong" (106).

then to his luxurious apartment and his bed. Under his tutelage, her musical career soars, and when he is absent she succumbs to drugs and other calamities that take her lower and lower until he comes to her rescue. The ballad of her dependency on him is counterpointed by the white music industry's exploitation. The blond devil, Harry, who ensures her drug addiction for the advantage of his own career and then abandons her at the radio broadcast and withdraws her supplies, personifies the musical and chemical vulnerability from which only McKay can save her. To ensure that the lesson is learned, Gordy has the film tell it twice: first by financing her stay in the sanatorium and second by securing her Carnegie Hall performance. Just before that, in California at her second nadir, terrified, drugged, and confined with Piano Man's bloody body, she phones him, crying, "We can't do everything by ourselves." McKay/Gordy again comes to save her. "I knew you'd come, I've been waiting for you," she greets him, and he transports her magically to Carnegie Hall, where she reiterates her dependency by singing, with a full orchestra rather than history's trio, "My Man." "My Man" is the only song addressed to McKay, but their relationship is isolated from the drama of her music with, as Drew Casper notes, "their seven romantic scenes accorded a lush underscoring absent from the rest of the film" (Casper 268). By transmogrifying Billie Holiday into Diana Ross, Gordy represented himself as McKay and her savior. *Lady Sings the Blues*, then, abandons the dominant 1960's model of music as spontaneous self expression and reverts, if allegorically, to the 1950's model established in *Rock Around the Clock* of the priority of the manager and by implication of popular music as an industrially manufactured commodity.

To ensure that the world would know that he, not the Ross whom he managed so brilliantly, was the real star of Motown, Gordy told the story again three years later in *Mahogany* (1975), also produced by Motown. Equally, to ensure it was told correctly, Gordy took over direction, firing Tony Richardson whom he had initially

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hired. Ross's recording of the film's title song, "Do You Know Where You're Going To?," topped the *Billboard* Hot 100 and Easy Listening charts as well as being nominated for an Academy Award, but in the film she played a dress designer rather than a musician. The theme song articulated and accompanied Ross's recurrent choices of directions between an independent career and subordination to her man, between individual fulfillment and social responsibility. Though the independent career leads to professional success, making her the toast of the Rome fashion world, there she descends into emotional and sexual misery among wealthy but effete and impotent whites. On the other hand, again as Gordy's surrogate, Billy Dee Williams appears as a community leader and an aspiring politician determined to serve the black community. Returning home from European decadence, she finds him addressing a political rally and from the crowd she proclaims, "I want you to get me my old man back!" In return he offers her the chance "to stand by him when the going's gettin' rough," and to "love and cherish him for the rest of [her] life." Only when she promises to do so does he guarantee, "I'll get you your old man back." Even Billie Holiday never had to promise so much.

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