



# BACKGROUND VOCALISTS

by Maureen Mahon

Late one night in 1969, singer Merry Clayton dashed into a Los Angeles recording studio, the last-minute replacement on a session with the Rolling Stones. Digging deep into her gospel training, she sang with Mick Jagger on “Gimme Shelter,” a track the band was recording for its upcoming release *Let It Bleed*. The presence of Clayton’s powerful vocals on the haunting song was representative of a sea change in rock that had been underway for a few years: the use of African American women as background vocalists. In the late 1950s, Darlene Love’s Los Angeles–based group the Blossoms began lending background vocal support to songs by both white pop groups and black rhythm and blues acts, including “Monster Mash” (1962) by Bobby “Boris” Pickett and the Crypt Kickers, “In My Room” (1963) by the Beach Boys, and “The Shoop Shoop Song (It’s in His Kiss)” (1964) by Betty Everett. Known for their vocal flexibility, the Blossoms changed their sound depending on the race of the artists with whom they were working. They used very little vibrato and delivered a softer sound when backing white pop artists and employed vibrato, melisma, and vocal ornaments associated with gospel when singing with black rhythm and blues acts. On the East Coast at

Atlantic Records, the Sweet Inspirations—led by Cissy Houston (singer Whitney Houston’s mother)—provided gospel-infused background vocals on many of the label’s hits such as “Some Kind of Wonderful” (1961) by the Drifters, “Don’t Make Me Over” (1962) by Dionne Warwick, “Mustang Sally” (1966) by Wilson Pickett, and “Do Right Woman—Do Right Man” (1967) by Aretha Franklin. By the end of the decade, the secularized gospel sound that the Blossoms and the Sweet Inspirations brought to recordings by African American artists singing in the newly labeled “soul” style crossed over to the mainstream. White rock artists from southern rockers to blues revivalists to psychedelic experimenters to folk-tinged singer-songwriters were turning to the gospel-trained voices of African American women to enhance the vocal sound of their records.

Dusty Springfield, the English vocalist who, following the Beatles, was the second British Invasion artist to chart in the United States (with “I Only Want to Be with You” in 1964), was one of the first to latch on to the new sound. Springfield worked with Doris Troy and most frequently with Madeline Bell on many recordings, including her single “In the Middle of Nowhere” (1965). Soon, African American background vocalists were audible on a critical mass of rock releases. Former Ikette P. P. Arnold joined Steve Marriott, lead singer of the Small Faces, on “Tin Soldier” in 1967, and Doris Troy and Madeline Bell were among the voices on the Rolling Stones’ “You Can’t Always Get What You Want” (1969). The band featured Venetta Fields and Clydie King on several tracks of their classic *Exile on Main Street* (1972), including the hit single “Tumbling Dice” and the gospel-inspired “Shine a Light.” Merry Clayton, Clydie King, and Sherlie Matthews sang on Lynyrd Skynyrd’s “Sweet Home Alabama” (1974), and

Clayton, one of the most in-demand session singers, sang on recordings by Buffalo Springfield, Joe Cocker, Delaney and Bonnie Bramlett, Jerry Garcia, Carole King, Paul Butterfield Blues Band, Rare Earth, Linda Ronstadt, Leon Russell, and Neil Young. Over the course of several albums and tours, British rockers Humble Pie worked with Doris Troy, Claudia Lennear, P. P. Arnold, Madeline Bell, and the Blackberries (Clydie King, Carlena Williams, Venetta Fields, and Billie Barnum). Following suit, Pink Floyd hired the Blackberries to provide background vocal support on the band's blockbuster 1972–73 *Dark Side of the Moon* tour. Gloria Jones sang on recordings by American artists REO Speedwagon, Ry Cooder, and Little Feat before organizing a backing group known as the Sanctified Sisters to tour with Joe Cocker. Before long, she had teamed up with British glam rock superstar Marc Bolan, guitarist and lead singer of T. Rex. Jones contributed backing vocals and clavinet playing to the five T. Rex/Bolan albums on which she appeared. Patti Austin and Valerie Simpson contributed to Paul Simon's *Still Crazy after All These Years* (1975), and David Bowie relied heavily on the black background vocal ensemble of Luther Vandross, Ava Cherry, and Robin Clark to achieve the Philadelphia soul sound he was exploring on his 1975 release *Young Americans*. From 1978 to 1987, Bob Dylan worked with a veritable battalion of background vocalists, among them Clydie King, Helena Springs, and Regina Havis, on the albums *Street Legal* (1978), *Slow Train Coming* (1979), *Saved* (1980), *Shot of Love* (1981), *Infidels* (1983), *Empire Burlesque* (1985), and *Knocked Out and Loaded* (1986). The related tours featured the background vocal ensemble as an opening act performing a set of gospel music.

The majority of background vocalists were black women, but there were also white women doing background singing on rock recordings during this period. Bonnie Bramlett, an American singer known for her soulful vocals (she was the session singer originally slated to sing on "Gimme Shelter"), performed in the duo Delaney and Bonnie, but she also did session work. Liza Strike, Barry St. John, and Lesley Duncan, who sang on Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* (1973), were white British women. Doris Troy, who also appeared on the album, was the only

African American, but it was Clare Torry, another white British woman, who provided the impassioned vocals for "The Great Gig in the Sky." Whether the vocalists were white or black, their purpose when brought into rock recording sessions was to sing in a gospel-informed style that many in the business had come to consider a "black sound."

The presence of these vocalists became such a staple on so many rock songs that Lou Reed referenced the phenomenon in his 1972 single "Walk on the Wild Side" in the line "And the colored girls go 'doo doo doo doo da doo dooooo . . .'" The lyric invoked the nonsense syllables that background vocalists used to fill the sonic space dominated by the lead singers they supported; Reed sings it at the chorus, the part of the song where the background vocalists typically joined in. Rock artists were attracted to the sound of African American background vocalists in part because their gospel-drenched voices provided a black vocal sound that white rock and roll vocalists such as Elvis Presley, Janis Joplin, Joe Cocker, and Mick Jagger had long sought to produce. With the inclusion of black background vocalists, 1960s and 1970s era artists went beyond appropriation of black musical practices to collaboration with black musical practitioners who added vocal volume and variety to recordings and live performances. As the '70s drew to a close, punk and new wave energy pushed rock musicians to more stripped-down sounds, and background vocalists fell out of fashion. Still, for more than a decade, African American women contributed an essential vocal element to the sound of rock. They brought rich harmonies, vocal finesse, and soulful energy to innumerable rock recordings and helped shape the sound of what we now call "classic rock."

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