

# R.I.P. Betty Davis

Betty Davis, the funk pioneer who was once married to Miles Davis, died age 77 on February 9th of cancer. Davis rattled the music industry establishment in the '60s and '70s when she debuted her raunchy stage show and raw funk. The former Betty Mabry had worked as a model in New York City during the '60s and became acquainted with musicians like Hugh Masekela, Jimi Hendrix and Sly Stone. She recorded her first singles on small labels during this time including "Get Ready For Betty" and "I'll Be There." Her songwriting was recognized when she wrote "Uptown (to Harlem)" for The Chambers Brother's 1967 self-titled hit album. Miles Davis was inspired by Mabry and put her on the cover of his *Filles de Killamansjaro* album. Davis tried to secure Mabry a record deal with demo recordings they made but record companies were not interested. It is Davis's association and subsequent marriage to Mabry that is credited for introducing Davis to Hendrix and Stone which led to the creation of his jazz fusion era and his *Bitches Brew* album.

Betty Davis moved to England after their marriage ended and returned to the United States a year later. She worked with members of Sly and the Family Stone, The Pointer Sisters and Sylvester on her three groundbreaking albums. She wrote all of her music and had total control over the way she presented herself. "If I'm In Luck I Might Get Picked Up" and "Shut Off The Lights" were her only two singles to enter the Billboard R&B chart in minor positions. Davis's unapologetic sexuality conveyed in her lyrics, avant-garde raspy vocals and skimpy costumes upset radio stations, the NAACP and religious groups. Many of her shows were boycotted and her music was banned from radio. She recorded one more album for Island Records which was shelved and then she was dropped from the label. Davis became a recluse after 1980 when her father died.

In 2007 and 2009 her first three albums were reissued by Light

In The Attic Records. The label also released her fourth album that was never released and titled it *Is It Love Or Desire?* In 2017, the Phillip Cox documentary *Betty Davis: They Say I'm Different* was released and for the first time she told her story with the promise that she not be filmed.

Betty Davis was never recognized at large during her lifetime but she opened the door for so many women artists to be independent and comfortable in their own self expression. Davis and Millie Jackson were contemporaries but Jackson didn't start her explicit lyric style until 1974 after Davis. Before Mary J. Blige became known and accepted for her thigh-high boots Davis made them her one of main looks and took the criticism for it. Miles Davis acknowledged Betty's blueprint for artists like Madonna in his autobiography. Singers Joi, Janelle Monae and Erykah Badu have all recognized their debt to Davis. Every woman artist after Davis especially other maverick Black women creatives have all walked a path she made easier to follow.