

Introduction

Santi White threw down the gauntlet shortly after the 2008 release of her first full-length recording under her moniker Santogold.¹ Some music critics were labeling her as an R&B singer, and she was outraged with what she viewed as inaccurate classification of her music. “It’s racist,” the singer and songwriter told a reporter. “It’s totally racist. Everyone is just so shocked that I don’t like R&B. Why does R&B keep coming into my interviews? It’s pissing me off. I didn’t grow up as a big fan of R&B, and, like, what is the big shocker? It’s stupid. In the beginning I thought that was funny. I’m an ‘MC,’ I’m a ‘soul singer,’ I’m a ‘dance hybrid artist.’”² The songs on *Santogold* feature sly and catchy meldings of ska, reggae, and rock rhythms; there are dub echoes and danceable synthesizer effects all with White’s laid-back, talk-singing vocals riding over the top. White and her producers had created musical settings that drew on everything from eighties new wave to Jamaican dancehall to electronica, but it was a stretch to hear the album as contemporary R&B. White, an African American woman, argued that commentators assigned her to the genre because of her race, while ignoring her actual sound, and she was not happy about it.

Placing *Santogold* into one of the music genre categories set aside for African American musicians did not make musical sense, but it was part of a long tradition of prioritizing racial identity over musical sound when marketing pop music. Genre categories simplify things for music business professionals, whether at record labels, music venues, or media outlets; they help identify an artist’s potential audience and determine how to promote their music. As such, genre labels have a powerful effect on the shape and direction of an artist’s career. Concerned with what she viewed as the misrepresentation of her creative work, White resisted the flawed categorization, pointing out that she was being grouped into a style of music for which she had no affinity and to which her genre-blending music was only tenuously connected. Santi White is not the first African American woman to struggle with issues of music genre and professional career. In fact, she is one in a long line of artistically

adventurous African American women whose sounds have shaped the musical and cultural terrain, but whose race and gender identities have made their impact difficult to hear and acknowledge. This has been especially true for women participating in the unruly genre of rock and roll. Since the 1950s, when they were among the rhythm and blues artists who created the music that took the name *rock and roll*, African American women have made pivotal contributions to the form as it underwent decades of stylistic and cultural changes. Stories of their involvement in rock and roll, however, have been marginal to the dominant narrative, and, like Santi White, they have been pressed into genres deemed appropriate for African American women or not talked about at all. *Black Diamond Queens: African American Women and Rock and Roll* discusses the careers of a cross-section of black women vocalists, revealing the simultaneous conditions of audibility and inaudibility, of presence and absence, that characterize their careers in order to amplify their musical, creative, and critical voices.

It may seem unusual to foreground black women in a discussion of a genre associated with white youth rebellion, the formation of male identities, and a fair amount of misogyny. Unlike the blues, jazz, or soul, rock and roll is a counterintuitive place to look for African American women. It is precisely this apparent disconnect that compels me. Ideas about what rock and roll music is and who is qualified to perform it—in short, the everyday workings of genre classification—have marginalized African American women in discussions of the history of the genre. This is troubling since black women have influenced the sound, feel, and image of the music from its beginnings. Still, their involvement is often overlooked as assumptions about music genre and social identity combine to create a narrative that is mostly male and predominantly white. In most mainstream histories of rock and roll, black women are mentioned only briefly, if at all, and the particularities of their music and experiences are rarely considered. *Black Diamond Queens* moves black women to the center of the discussion and listens to the voices of African American women in rock and roll from 1953, when blues singer Big Mama Thornton topped the R&B charts with her hit “Hound Dog,” to 1984, when the solo career of veteran performer Tina Turner took flight, and she won recognition as the “Queen of Rock and Roll.” I examine the race, gender, and genre challenges that Thornton, Turner, and a host of others encountered, and explore the interracial and cross-gender collaborations in which they engaged in order to uncover a hidden history of African American women in rock and roll.

African American Women's Voices in Rock and Roll

Black Diamond Queens is related to recent work by scholars who reframe music history and criticism to include discussion of professional women musicians and the ways gender and power shaped their experiences. Situating women's music-making in social, historical, and cultural contexts, these authors analyze "how musical activity can be reread through gender and how music likewise helps define what it means to be male or female in a given time or place."³ Among this work is research that brings black feminist perspectives to bear on contemporary popular music, highlighting the presence and influence of black women in a range of music genres. These studies examine critical discourses embedded in black women's musical practices and consider the impact of race, gender, and class on the creation and circulation of their music.⁴ While in many cases their research recovers lost or underacknowledged contributions, these scholars are also concerned with examining the ways power relations, genre categorization, and academic discourses have affected both the professional fortunes and scholarly representation of black women musicians.

The women I discuss in this book have had their singing voices recorded and circulated; yet in spite of their indisputable contributions to American popular music, they have not always been carefully listened to, and they are not always remembered. One reason it has been difficult to hear these "black female voices buried at the bottom of the rock and roll archive," as cultural critic Daphne Brooks puts it, is because vocalists have been undervalued in rock criticism, which prioritizes instrumentalists, songwriters, and producers as the significant creative forces in the field.⁵ Possibly because of assumptions that singing is a natural practice, the vocal part of rock music-making receives less sustained attention. In a study that recuperates the artistic and cultural significance of girl group music, a form centered on female vocals, musicologist Jacqueline Warwick critiques the perspective that "belittles the work of singers who breathe life into songs" and adheres to "a code of musical values that regards singing and dancing as activities that 'come naturally' to females and thus deserve scant respect."⁶ This viewpoint, which valorizes the work of artists who write the material they perform as "unmediated expressions of pure feeling," devalues the work of vocalists who do not also play an instrument and who do not write the songs they sing.⁷ Warwick notes that according to

this aesthetic system, which came into being during the 1960s, “mastery of an instrument became a badge of musical truth, while bringing music out from within the body itself was dismissed as facile and ‘inauthentic.’”⁸ Consequently, as musicologist Laurie Stras observes, “girl singers tend to get short shrift, professionally and critically.”⁹

Commenting on a parallel problem in jazz historiography, ethnomusicologist Travis Jackson observes that women singers do not fare well in historical accounts. He suggests that, “because their primary work seems to be interpreting words rather than demonstrating virtuosity, writers with an instrumental bias have difficulty fitting them into the discussion.”¹⁰ This is the case even though their work “is generally as intricate as the work of canonized male instrumentalists and composers.”¹¹ He points out, for example, that jazz singers “transform popular songs through choice of key, pronunciation, tempo, phrasing, register, and timbre,” in other words, through the use of technical skill and creative thought.¹² Playing an instrument or writing a song, practices associated with the mind, and singing, a practice associated with the body, map on to Western culture’s mind/body binary that is in turn linked to the male/female binary that elevates men’s pursuits over those of women. Warwick and Jackson challenge these gendered value systems to highlight the contributions of women vocalists and to account for women’s marginalization in music studies. Warwick goes a step further and argues, “Voices are the most important elements of a pop song.”¹³ Sociologist Simon Frith supports this contention, noting that “Voices, not songs, hold the key to our pop pleasures; musicologists may analyze the art of the Gershwins or Cole Porter, but we hear [vocalists] Bryan Ferry or Peggy Lee.”¹⁴ In short, the melody, the arrangement, and the instrumentation are in service to the voice.¹⁵ Popular music has been a primary site for the production and dissemination of both voices and ideas about which types of vocal sounds are appropriate for particular racial, classed, and gendered bodies.¹⁶ To explore the sound and significance of African American women’s voices in rock and roll, I focus on three distinct aspects of each performer’s voice: her vocal quality; her creative voice revealed through choices of material and her public image; and the critical voice through which she analyzed her experiences.¹⁷ As I listen to African American women’s voices in rock and roll, I attend to the racial and gendered ideologies of voice, considering their influence on the ways and whether people are able to participate in the form, and the ways and whether that participation is recognized.

There are numerous women whose stories I could have told in this study. I have chosen to focus on Willie Mae “Big Mama” Thornton, LaVern Baker, Betty Davis, and Tina Turner; the vocal groups the Shirelles and Labelle; background vocalists including Merry Clayton, Venetta Fields, Cissy Houston, Gloria Jones, Claudia Lennear, and Darlene Love; and Marsha Hunt and Devon Wilson, women who were denizens of the 1960s counterculture and friends and lovers of rock musicians. Although personal taste and curiosity drew me to some of my subjects, the primary motivation for my choices was a sense that their particular stories would allow me to both discuss women whose formative involvement in rock and roll has been underplayed and to analyze the ways genre serves as a mechanism for policing race, gender, and sexuality in the production and circulation of popular music. In chapters 1, 2, and 3, I discuss Big Mama Thornton, LaVern Baker, and the Shirelles, respectively, important early rock and roll figures whose sound and professional careers are glossed over in rock and roll histories that hurry to talk about the white artists they worked with or influenced: Thornton is a stepping stone to Elvis Presley and Janis Joplin and songwriters Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller; Baker, without a clear white acolyte, disappears almost completely; and the Shirelles are connected to the Beatles and songwriters Gerry Goffin and Carole King. I foreground Thornton, Baker, and the Shirelles, discussing the musical trends they launched in the 1950s and early 1960s and considering the workings of power and memory that have submerged their voices. In the wake of Bob Dylan and the Beatles in the 1960s, African Americans were increasingly displaced from the center of rock, but in chapters 4 and 5, I demonstrate that African American women had an ongoing presence in the genre. In chapter 4, a focus on the black women who worked as background vocalists on numerous rock recordings in the late 1960s and early 1970s allows me to discuss the extent to which the vocal labor of African American women propelled rock during what is now called the “classic rock era” through cross-racial, cross-gender exchanges that have been little remarked upon in histories of rock. Chapter 5 turns attention toward the racialized erotic element that underwrote these exchanges and that has shaped rock and roll imagery. I discuss the paths taken by Devon Wilson, Marsha Hunt, and Claudia Lennear, African American women who participated in the rock scene as artists and paramours of rock stars during the late 1960s and early 1970s, and examine the ways they both capitalized on and challenged the stereotypical images of black women’s sexuality in their personal and professional pursuits. In chapters 6, 7, and 8, I discuss women who self-consciously

worked within the rock idiom in the 1970s and 1980s. The trio Labelle, having formed with an explicit goal of being a female version of the Rolling Stones, operated from a women-centered ethos as they navigated the “black” and “white” sides of the popular music industry. Their challenges and successes, like those of singer and songwriter Betty Davis, discussed in chapter 7, are indicative of the ways race, gender, and genre shape African American women’s expression in the field of rock. Davis’s play with the sonic palette of rock, blues, and funk, and her frank discussion of sexual desire, were confounding to the marketplace. In notable contrast, Tina Turner found a way into rock in spite of the restrictive rules. In chapter 8, I explain how Turner, after years on the rhythm and blues circuit, recast herself as a rocker through musical choices and personal associations and made a successful crossover to the mainstream of rock.

My hope is that by discussing the rock and roll careers of these African American women—the music they made, the successes they achieved, the challenges they faced—*Black Diamond Queens* will encourage a different kind of engagement with the music. I want to invite readers to listen to rock and roll with an awareness of the presence of African American women, because if we listen to and hear the music in a different way, a way that counters the exclusionary work of racialized music genres, it will be easier to include African American women in the grand narrative of rock and roll. The book’s title lifts a lyric from “Steppin in Her I. Miller Shoes,” a song Betty Davis wrote in honor of her friend Devon Wilson, a black rock and roll woman who was, she sings, “a black diamond queen,” a woman who loved and lived rock and roll. The experiences of Wilson, Davis, and the other women I discuss played out in the cultural terrain of rock and roll, and the race, gender, and genre challenges they encountered are instructive. Obviously, there are many other women whose stories could fit into this narrative, and I recognize that some readers might wish that I had chosen different focal figures. I take this as evidence that there is much more work to be done on the subject of African American women and rock and roll.

Genre Cultures

The women I discuss in *Black Diamond Queens* crossed interpersonal, national, and ideological boundaries as they pursued their careers in music in the post-World War II era. At a time when de jure and de facto segregation

conditioned social and professional interactions in the United States, these women participated in significant cross-racial collaborations. They worked with white musicians, songwriters, managers, and producers; toured with white artists; and performed for black and white audiences, enacting the desegregation and integration that civil rights movement activists agitated for during the 1950s and 1960s. All of these women traveled internationally, and in some cases they lived outside of the United States, expanding their music's reach and gaining a respite from the race-based limitations of their homeland. These border crossings were artistically and personally liberating, enabling the women to establish a presence in the mainstream public sphere at a time when black women's voices were rarely heard there. Stereotypes of black women's sonority, intellect, and sexuality shaped their experiences in these interracial, intercultural contexts, sometimes opening doors, sometimes restricting access. These dynamics of race and gender played out in a recording industry organized according to another set of boundaries: genre categories. In the American recording industry, music genres facilitate the marketing and promotion of music, identifying artists and their perceived audiences with particular musical sounds and performance styles. Genre categories and the practices and discourses that maintained them created some of the most significant boundaries that these women confronted. One challenge was that their work combined stylistic impulses and performance practices with what were viewed as separate and distinct music genres. This, coupled with their race and gender identities, made their fit within dominant black or white genres imperfect and caused them to stand betwixt and between genres, either in their historical moment or in retrospect.

Discussing “the power as well as the limiting effect of musical labels,” musicologist Guthrie Ramsey has observed that stylistic distinctions “tell us much more than which musical qualities constitute a piece of music. They shed light on what listeners value in sound organization. Categorizing also inherently comments on the nature of power relationships in society at large—it tells us who's in charge and running the show.”¹⁸ Popular music studies scholars have demonstrated that these social factors influence the formation of music genre categories and the assignment of artists to them.¹⁹ This cultural approach to music genre recognizes that “genres are identified not only with music, but also with certain cultural values, rituals, practices, territories, traditions, and groups of people.”²⁰ Genre categories do cultural work. They place artists and listeners into and outside of meaningful categories of identity and belonging. Through debates over which artists and musical styles are included in or

excluded from a given category, recording industry professionals, critics, artists, and audience members bring pop music genres into existence. Over time and through experimentation, these parties define the sound, lyrical content, artist image, instrumentation, and target audience associated with the genre. Growing as they do out of specific cultural contexts and power relations, music genres are not objective, fixed categories; rather, they are flexible and fluid, expanding, contracting, or changing in relation to cultural shifts and the ways struggles over meaning play out. Genre categories organize the sonic world and shape what listeners hear. In his revisionist history of American popular music, Elijah Wald explains that he chose “to avoid the assumptions of genre histories, the divisions of eighty years of evolving popular styles into discrete categories like ragtime, jazz, swing, R&B, and rock . . . because when I step outside them I hear the music differently and understand things about it that I previously missed.”²¹ Indeed, if we listen beyond the boundaries of genre, it can be easier to identify lines of collaboration, influence, and connection that genre boundaries obscure.

In contemporary popular music, genre is related to commoditization. It is “a way of defining music in its market or, alternatively, the market in its music.”²² The fundamental reality of pop music is that it is produced and sold according to genre categories rooted in “distinctions made by the music industry” that “reflect both musical history and marketing categories.”²³ As my opening example of Santi White shows, decisions about how to assign an artist to a genre can underplay an artist’s sonic qualities and overemphasize social identity.²⁴ Most of the existing studies of popular music genres take into account the central role that race plays in genre categorization in the United States. They recognize that a dichotomous view of black and white underpins genre definitions and that this perspective presents challenges for artists whose musical sounds diverge from those associated with their race. Gender is also a crucial category shaping genre categorization. As Jacqueline Warwick shows in her study of girl group music of the 1960s, a process of making gendered distinctions between masculine, authentic rock and feminine, commercial pop has diminished the creative contributions of women and underplayed the commercial motivations of male performers.²⁵ One consequence of these conditions is the difficulty women have gaining inclusion in the rock canon. In an article about guitarist, singer, and songwriter Joni Mitchell’s struggle to win respect as a rock artist, cultural critic Miles Parks Grier observes that “rock’s cultural topography [is] one in which race, gender, and genre have served as regions with unequal cultural and economic capital.”²⁶ While Mitchell’s

whiteness allowed her to fit into the rock community, her gender limited her access to artistic respect and the capital that accompanied it. Similarly, Sonnet Retman's study of the wide-ranging career of African American singer and songwriter Nona Hendryx shows that her race and gender made it difficult for her to claim an identity as a rocker, even though she had been active in the rock scene for years. Hendryx participated in the kinds of musical experimentation and genre-bending practices that critics lauded in male musicians, but that had the effect of rendering a black woman "inscrutable and therefore subject to erasure."²⁷ Gendered and racialized assumptions about genre have a profound impact on African American women working in rock and roll; they experience a kind of double jeopardy as they navigate terrain in which the body presumed to be appropriate to the genre is white and male.

Genre Histories

A historical overview of the emergence of rock and roll as a genre offers an example of the confluence of musical and cultural factors that contributes to genre formation, while also providing the historical backdrop against which the women I write about pursued their careers. Reviewing this history draws attention to the fact that "genres are constantly changing—as an effect of what's happening in neighboring genres, as a result of musical contradictions, [and] in response to technological and demographic change."²⁸ Since the 1920s, when record labels began concerted efforts to sell music to African American audiences, race has played a role in the definition of music genre and the marketing of artists. Recordings made by and for African Americans were marketed as "race records" from the 1920s until 1949, when the term *rhythm and blues* came into use.²⁹ Meanwhile, working-class white southerners were the target market for hillbilly (later country and western), and middle-class whites were the audience for pop. Rock and roll, a new and fluid category that crossed and blurred sonic and racial boundaries, brought together rhythm and blues, country, and pop music. Significantly, rock and roll drew on African American musical practices rooted in West African aesthetics and the "conceptual framework" that Africans brought with them to the New World.³⁰ Retained, elaborated, and reworked during the centuries that enslaved Africans and their descendants have lived in the United States, many of "the cultural and aesthetic components that uniquely characterize music-making throughout the African diaspora" are present in rock and roll.³¹ Ethnomusicologist Portia

Maultsby explains that among these sonic, performance, and stylistic commitments are an emphasis on rhythmic intensity, percussive approaches to singing, the presence of blue notes and syncopation, the conception of music and movement as a single unit, call-and-response, audience participation, and the understanding that “music-making is a participatory group activity.”³² In the early years of rock and roll, these features differentiated the nascent form from the mainstream of European American music and attracted a multiracial, multiclass, teenage audience.

At first, rock and roll was a new name for rhythm and blues. The term was coined by Alan Freed, a white, Cleveland-based radio disc jockey, who had followed the practice of white American radio personalities such as Bill Gordon in Cleveland, Hunter Hancock in Los Angeles, Dewey Phillips in Memphis, and Hoss Allen in Nashville, who played black rhythm and blues on the radio.³³ Although intended for African American listeners, these programs developed white teen audiences, who became fans of what industry insiders called “the big beat.” Freed made his mark by repackaging the black-identified genre with the new label. The music was the same, but the linguistic shift tempered the blackness associated with the term *rhythm and blues* and opened the genre up to white teenagers. America’s youth gave themselves over to rock and roll and embraced the infectious rhythms and grooves of Fats Domino, Ruth Brown, LaVern Baker, Little Richard, Chuck Berry, and Bo Diddley. Soon, white artists came on board, performing with “the Negro Sound and Negro Feel,” to use the language of Sam Phillips, the producer who first recorded Elvis Presley at his Memphis-based Sun Studios in the mid-1950s. A white band, Bill Haley and His Comets, had the fledgling genre’s first number one record with “Rock around the Clock” in 1955, and a year later Presley’s career took off with “Hound Dog,” his jumped-up version of Big Mama Thornton’s 1953 rhythm and blues hit. Rock and roll was an only-in-America hybrid rooted in rhythm and blues, country, blues, pop, and Latin music. Along with the abovementioned musicians, rock and roll performers included white artists such as piano-thumping shouter Jerry Lee Lewis; vocal duo the Everly Brothers; and singer-guitarists Carl Perkins, Eddie Cochran, and Buddy Holly; as well as African American vocal harmony groups such as the Platters, Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers, and the Coasters. Teen consumers drove the record industry, supporting musical miscegenation at the same time that civil rights activists were working to desegregate the nation’s institutions. Rock and roll was an arena where integration was taking hold. Black and white acts shared space on the industry music charts and

concert stages, appearing together in multi-artist rock and roll shows. In the north they performed before integrated audiences; in the south, black and white concertgoers were separated into different sections of the performance spaces or forced to attend white-only or colored-only shows. The moral panic that surrounded rock and roll in its early years—with media outlets, parent groups, and white citizens' councils portraying rock and roll as an insidious threat to the sanctity of mainstream culture—was a response to white youth embracing an African American cultural form and to that form's growing prominence in a culture accustomed to marginalizing African Americans.

By the early 1960s, the sound of rock and roll was changing. The prominent rhythm was still present, but producers were sweetening the music to make it more palatable to a wider audience. Early in the decade, black vocal artists such as the Drifters, the Shirelles, the Crystals, the Marvelettes, the Ronettes, the Miracles, Ben E. King, and Mary Wells catapulted beyond the confines of rhythm and blues and gained a foothold on the pop charts. They used instrumental and vocal arrangements that drew on the same African American musical tropes that had fueled the rise of rock and roll, but sang in a smoother vocal style over musical arrangements featuring orchestral touches. The result was a more racially ambiguous sound that crossed over to non-African American audiences. By late 1963, the artists appearing on the rhythm and blues charts (understood to track black audience taste) and the pop charts (understood to track white audience taste) were so similar that *Billboard* magazine determined that the two charts were redundant and ceased publishing a rhythm and blues chart in November 1963.³⁴ By January 1965, however, the rhythm and blues chart was back in place. The 1964 arrival of the Beatles upended the short-lived period of racial integration on the charts, as the extraordinary success of the British group ushered in a phalanx of white artists from the United Kingdom. The Detroit-based Motown label, whose owner Berry Gordy made a concerted effort to produce music performed by African Americans with crossover appeal, had a steady stream of hits throughout the decade, but black artists who were not part of the Motown empire were displaced from the pop charts.³⁵

The arrival of the British groups and the experiments of musicians in San Francisco, New York, Los Angeles, and London led to changes in rock and roll during the 1960s. Musical blackness was still audible, but it often came from artists who were not black. White artists drew on African American musical practices, shaping their voices, instrumentation, and musical arrangements accordingly. They covered songs originated by African American artists, but

they also explored a range of musical styles and lyrical preoccupations. The music they created had a sound, attitude, and identity that distinguished it from the African American styles from which it derived. It also had a new name: *rock*. The abbreviated label marked off the contemporary music from its 1950s progenitor and contributed to the racial delimiting of the genre's boundaries. As it became even more associated with youth (i.e., everyone under thirty years of age) and a youth culture distinct from the mainstream, rock defined itself in opposition to musical others whose sonic practices and musical values distinguished them from rock. Through such processes, rock came to be understood as an art form (not just a commercial product) made by and for those who were young (at least when they first became involved), white, and predominantly male. Accompanying the new name was a new set of aesthetic values. Following the model of Chuck Berry, Buddy Holly, and the Beatles, bands of "self-contained" artists wrote and performed their own songs, supplanting professional songwriters from the central position they had occupied in the recording industry. These artists wrote lyrics that went beyond the dance, romance, and teen themes that animated early rock and roll; following the model of singer and songwriter Bob Dylan, who began his rise to prominence in the early 1960s, rock musicians addressed social, political, and philosophical issues. In an incisive study that examines rock ideology and the processes through which rock music came to be racialized as white during the 1960s, Jack Hamilton observes, "No black-derived musical form in American history has more assiduously moved to erase and blockade black participation than rock music. When rock ideology purged itself of (visible) blackness it was foreclosing not simply African American performers but an entire young tradition of interracial fluidity."³⁶ The resulting resegregation of popular music practice shaped both reception and perception of African American participation in rock.

While rock established its connection to white youth culture through new media such as *Crawdaddy* and *Rolling Stone* magazines and high-profile concerts such as the Monterey Pop and Woodstock music festivals, soul music emerged as the genre for African Americans. Soul had clear sonic ties to the African American gospel tradition, but artists such as James Brown, Otis Redding, and Aretha Franklin sang about secular rather than sacred subjects. Complementing the rise of black consciousness that manifested in the civil rights, black power, and black arts movements, soul music became the signal sound of African America in the 1960s and early 1970s, and most listeners, black and white, heard it as an authentic

black musical expression. Responding to these currents, in 1969 *Billboard* renamed the rhythm and blues chart with the new term of black cultural and musical currency: “soul.”³⁷ Although there were racially separate music charts, musical mixing persisted. African American artists such as Marvin Gaye, Curtis Mayfield, and Stevie Wonder brought the social awareness and expansive musical experimentation present in rock into soul and rhythm and blues. Meanwhile, white rock artists incorporated the sound of black soul into their recordings by working with African American women background vocalists who delivered a secularized gospel sound that provided a layer of audible blackness.

By the beginning of the 1970s, the recording industry was operating with categories of (white) rock and (black) soul/rhythm and blues that separated black people from rock, even as black sound remained integral to it. At this point, the recording industry’s racialized practices took a new shape as major record labels formed black music departments and began, for the first time, to work with a critical mass of African American artists performing what was defined as black music. Previously, this music had been the purview of independent labels such as Peacock, Atlantic, Scepter, Motown, and Stax. This new focus meant expanded opportunities for black artists, but it depended on a racially defined approach to marketing popular music: one that likely seemed appropriate to an era of heightened black consciousness and black pride.³⁸ With few exceptions, black men and women were expected to engage in musical practices perceived to be “black.” Still, in spite of the recording industry’s insistence on separating black people from rock, the early 1970s saw a new breed of black rock and rollers in self-contained bands that built on the sounds that James Brown, Jimi Hendrix, and Sly and the Family Stone had pioneered in the 1960s. The music was infused with both black cultural pride and the countercultural imperative of expressive freedom. Artists such as Funkadelic, the Ohio Players, Earth, Wind & Fire, Mandrill, War, Labelle, and Betty Davis contributed to this shift in black musical sound, drawing on rhythm and blues, rock, and Latin musical tropes and experimenting with high volume and distortion. Funk, the genre that resulted from this mixture, was not a good match for a segregated marketplace. The music was “too black” to fit on album-oriented rock (AOR) radio and “too rock” for black stations. The blending of “black” and “white” genres that funk bands engaged in did not afford them the mainstream career traction that this process had provided for artists such as Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, and the Rolling Stones in the previous decade.

New Genre Narratives

As this overview indicates, the definition of rock and roll has changed over time, as factors both musical and social have informed how artists, audiences, and recording industry professionals understand the music. Attention to black women's vocal presence in rock and roll highlights the fact that genre labels can underplay common threads across genres, emphasizing points of distinction rather than common ground. Rock and roll and rhythm and blues were the same thing in the 1950s, funk was black rock in the 1970s, and racially mixed audiences and cross-racial musical borrowing existed throughout rock and roll's early decades. However, these facts fade from view when race-based binaries dominate. These binaries drive critical discussions, marketing decisions, and historical representation, entrenching a vision of white versus black and a perception of separate white and black audiences. Understanding the sonic and cultural shifts that have informed the meaning of rock and roll as a music genre is integral to understanding the artists I discuss in *Black Diamond Queens*.

The music and stories of these women have slipped through the cracks of both rock and roll history and African American music studies, and their contributions to American popular culture have not received extensive critical attention. These women do not fit into commonsense notions of who constitutes a rock and roll artist, an identity understood to be white and male. Because of their connections to rock and roll, they fall outside of traditional categories of "black music," a label that embraces rhythm and blues, soul, jazz, gospel, and blues, but not rock and roll. Departing from dominant expectations of the sound and performance style associated with artists of their race and gender, these women engage in "eccentric acts," to use cultural critic Francesca Royster's term for "out of the ordinary or unconventional performances," particularly "those that are ambiguous, uncanny, or difficult to read."³⁹ These artists and their music can be challenging for the mainstreams from which they deviate to comprehend, and that which is not easily understood is easily overlooked. Still, they have had an impact on contemporary culture, suggesting a dynamic of invisibility and absorption that is similar to the conditions Jayna Brown explores in her study of the early twentieth-century black women theatrical artists whose movement vocabulary seeped into mainstream American popular dance, even as the women were erased.⁴⁰ Gayle Wald identifies a similar pattern in her discussion of midcentury gospel

artist Sister Rosetta Tharpe, a virtuosic musician “whose charismatic guitar playing and extroverted stage persona helped to establish what today we take for granted as ‘rock’ convention.”⁴¹ Working in the same vein, Kyra Gaunt explores the impact of the handclap and jump rope games that African American girls play on the learning of black musical style in black communities and, by extension, on the sound of commercial black popular music.⁴² In all of these cases, the creative work of African American women is an unrecognized source that others incorporate into their work, profiting to a much greater degree than the black female originators. My work shares with these studies a desire to tell unfamiliar stories about the cultural contributions of black women, while accounting for some of the reasons that the women and their stories are so little known.

The history that I present is, like all histories, selective and partial, reflecting the investments of the author. What distinguishes it from mainstream histories of rock is my emphasis on the presence of African American women and my assumption that their voices matter in the formation of the music. Rock history and criticism, as Daphne Brooks has observed, started from a set of cultural and musical assumptions and focused on a set of key figures that “both inscribe a particular kind of historical narrative of past musical innovations that were suffocatingly narrow and establish a lexicon of taste that would perpetuate that narrowness for years to come.”⁴³ For the most part, African American women are marginal in these standard rock histories preoccupied with the musical lineage and contributions of Rock’s Great Men. Moving beyond this focus, attending to female lines of descent and to women whose voices reverberate in rock in both subtle and overt ways, is a feminist intervention in the “rock mythologies” that Brooks argues have privileged “the slowhand axe man at the expense of the female virtuosic vocalist and musician.”⁴⁴ It is, furthermore, an effort to produce “more nuanced, heterogeneous tales” of musical collaborations across lines of race and gender and to explore the ways black women worked with, influenced, and were influenced by white artists.⁴⁵

Reckoning with this history is a challenge. Musicologist Laurie Stras notes that one of the ways feminist scholars have written women into mainstream rock history has been to “point out their influence on more prestigious male artists or repertoires” and to locate them within “the male-centered History of Rock.”⁴⁶ This is a logical move to make because “in order to have our work taken seriously, we are obliged to site it within the context of that which has gone before,” but doing so has the effect of reinscribing the very mythologies

feminist scholars hope to trouble.⁴⁷ To address this conundrum in her history of women swing band musicians, feminist music historian Sherrie Tucker goes beyond documenting underacknowledged women musicians. She approaches gender as “a field in which power is articulated.”⁴⁸ Building on the work of feminist historians and music scholars, Tucker considers the ways “notions of gender and race operate within specific musical forms” and writes a history of swing music that deconstructs the genre discourses that omit women instrumentalists.⁴⁹ Following the example of these feminist scholars, I attend to the power dynamics present in the music genre cultures in which these women participated and consider the ways the intersection of race, gender, and genre created conditions that made it difficult for African American women to maintain a position within rock.

Black Women and “Brown Sugar”

Santogold was not Santi White’s first foray into professional recording. In 2001, she had collaborated with the vocalist Res on her alternative rock and soul album *How I Do*, writing most of the material and serving as one of the project’s executive producers.⁵⁰ During this period, White also fronted a punk rock band called Stiffed, a name reputed to be a commentary on how she felt after working with a major label on the Res project. Stiffed released two albums: *Sex Sells* (2003) was produced by Darryl Jenifer, bass player for the foundational African American hardcore punk band Bad Brains; *Burned Again* (2005) was coproduced by Jenifer and Stiffed.⁵¹ These recordings departed from mainstream notions of African American women’s musical production, and White encountered responses that by the turn of the millennium had become commonplace for African Americans delving into rock. There was the surprise that she was involved in that genre of music, the culling of biographical information to explain her unusual musical digression, and the difficulty of identifying an audience for her music. These were the very issues I had explored in my research on the Black Rock Coalition, a nonprofit organization founded in 1985 to support African American musicians who broke the prevailing rules of race and genre.⁵² Once I completed that project, I continued my research by following the work of New York City–based African American women musicians such as Honeychild Coleman, Helga Davis, Neycha, Shelley Nicole, Toshi Reagon, Martha Redbone, Felice Rosser, Simi Stone, Sandra St. Victor, Tamar-kali, and Kamara Thomas, all of whom were

independently producing rock, alternative, and otherwise unconventional-for-black-women music. In addition to discussing their creative work, we kept having conversations about the African American women musicians who had come before them and the absence of information about them. I found myself thinking about the dominant rock and roll narrative and how different the story was when I took into account the involvement of African American women.⁵³ The possibility of learning more about these women and what they had accomplished was hard to resist.

My training as a cultural anthropologist and my teaching position in an ethnomusicology program in a music department inform my perspective on the historical materials with which I am working. I view music as a site of the production of meaning and identity, and as a means through which individuals shape, change, and reproduce their cultural context. I am also concerned with the ways institutions and discourses influence individuals, making it difficult for them to move beyond certain boundaries.⁵⁴ As I investigate these issues of power and the construction of meaning in rock and roll, I am doing the classic anthropological maneuver of “making the familiar strange” by revisiting the history of rock from a different point of view, one that centers African American women. This research has allowed me to write a book I wish I had been able to read years ago when I was a teenager dedicating a sizable portion of my time, energy, and cash to rock and roll.⁵⁵

Black feminist scholarship and presuppositions inform my perspective and the archival work on which this research rests. Throughout, I highlight the ways the intersection of race, gender, class, and sexuality shaped the experiences of the women at the center of my study.⁵⁶ I also consider how these artists contended with stereotypes that rendered black women as oversexed jezebels or asexual mummies, defining black women by their sexuality or lack of it.⁵⁷ These “controlling images,” as black feminist theorist Patricia Hill Collins has termed them, communicated that black women were inadequately feminine and lacking in humanity.⁵⁸ *Black Diamond Queens* examines the ways African American women negotiated the negative dominant assumptions about black women in the context of rock and roll. But what does the pairing “African American women” and “rock and roll” even bring to mind? Some people might think of Tina Turner and . . . who else? There’s one other person who immediately occurs to me: the woman in the song “Brown Sugar.” The 1971 Rolling Stones track is a rock and roll classic, a rollicking paean to the sexual wiles of an unnamed, unspeaking black woman. During my teen years of avid rock radio listenership, I heard the song frequently. While I

thought the guitar riffs were all right, the lyrics—“Brown Sugar, how come you taste so good? / Brown Sugar, just like a black girl should”—repelled me. As a young black woman I had something in common with the song’s focal figure, but I did not want to be mistaken for this racialized and sexualized addressee. I discuss “Brown Sugar” in detail in chapter 5, but mention the song at the outset because its objectifying representation of African American women’s sexuality and limited rendering of black womanhood are indicative of the treacherous ground of rock and roll, the terrain on which the women I write about here worked to represent themselves and their subjectivity, sexual and otherwise.

One of the best-known songs in rock, “Brown Sugar” celebrates a black woman’s irrepressible desirability and forced sexual availability. Its propulsive musical track features Keith Richards’s insistent guitar lines, a pounding roadhouse piano part by Ian Stewart, a sax solo by Bobby Keys, and Mick Jagger’s commanding vocals. “Brown Sugar” reached number one on the US pop charts and held the number two spot on the UK singles charts in 1971. Over the years it has become one of the most popular singles in the Rolling Stones’ catalogue and is a staple of classic rock radio.⁵⁹ Concise and evocative, the song’s lyrics refer, in short order, to West Africa’s Gold Coast, the Middle Passage, cotton fields, a New Orleans slave market, whips, drums, an English man’s cold blood running hot, and a delicious-tasting black girl.⁶⁰ The song is rooted in the imagery of the Atlantic slave trade and the sexual exploitation that enslaved women experienced. As scholarship on American slavery has made clear, sexual coercion and sexual violence were part of the everyday lives of enslaved black women.⁶¹ Historian Deborah Gray White explains, “Once slaveholders realized that the reproductive function of the female slave could yield a profit, the manipulation of procreative sexual relations became an integral part of the sexual exploitation of female slaves.”⁶² Enslaved black women lived with the reality that they could “fall prey to the licentious black and white men on the plantation.”⁶³ Historians Darlene Clark Hine and Kathleen Thompson note the following about the women:

[They] were subjected to “forcible sexual intercourse,” the legal and moral definition of rape. The amount and kind of force used varied. So, too, did the person a woman was forced to give her body to. Sometimes the white master or overseer would force her to the ground in the fields. Sometimes she was locked in a cabin with another slave whose job was to impregnate her. For another woman, the force involved might be less obvious. She was forced to

have sex in the same sense that an enslaved man was forced to plow a field, as a job. Still, it was rape, and black women experienced it every day.⁶⁴

Black feminist scholars have connected this condition of forced sexual labor to the representation of black women's sexuality, tracing the image of a hypersexual, sexually available black woman to antebellum rationalizations of the rape of enslaved black women.⁶⁵ The "construction of the black female as the embodiment of sex," which burdened black women with responsibility for the sexual attention they received from white men, developed alongside a similarly flat stereotype of white women as the ideal of femininity, innocent of the taint of the sexual.⁶⁶ African American visual artist Lorraine O'Grady has described the binary and interdependent relationship between these constructions of womanhood as follows:

The female body in the West is not a unitary sign. Rather, like a coin, it has an obverse and a reverse: on the one side, it is white; on the other, not-white or, prototypically, black. The two bodies cannot be separated, nor can one body be understood in isolation from the other in the West's metaphoric construction of "woman." White is what woman is; not-white (and the stereotypes not-white gathers in) is what she had better not be.⁶⁷

These images persisted after slavery and well into the twentieth century, fueling representations of black women like the one the Rolling Stones presented in their hit song. African American women working in rock and roll have wrestled with the sexualized image of black women in different ways. As the authors of a feminist history of women in rock observe, "Some women choose to conform to the sexual stereotypes; some choose to subvert them; others embrace them, flaunt them, and throw them back in the face of the culture that created them."⁶⁸ The women of *Black Diamond Queens* weighed these options as they pursued their careers. In the chapters that follow I consider the ways their musical and performance choices responded to the "sexualized mythology" of the Brown Sugar figure that haunts black women.⁶⁹

Black Women, Sexuality, and Rock and Roll

I am aware of the risk of overemphasizing sexuality and physical appearance in a discussion of women performers, but it is essential to examine these issues since they accompany women onto the public stage. Their impact is

heightened for black women, whose bodies, as my discussion of “Brown Sugar” demonstrates, are both sexually and racially charged. In fact, rock is “an especially hazardous terrain for women of color who may get caught between racist assumptions about the sexuality of women of color and their own desires to present themselves as sexual agents.”⁷⁰ But engagement with the sexual is part of the ethos of rock and roll, a sexually liberated space constructed in part through stereotyped ideas about black people, the genre’s sonic and symbolic foundation. And, as Santi White proclaimed in her band’s first album title, “sex sells.” In a book about the convergence of black women and rock and roll, then, there is no way around the sexual. Rock and roll’s emphasis on the sensual body is a defining part of the form and grows out of its roots in African American musical practices that included a space for expressions of sexuality. As if to underline the point, the very name *rock and roll* carries a double meaning, describing the bodily movements that respond to great rhythm and serving as a slang term for sex in mid-twentieth century African American communities.⁷¹ Binary ideas about race and sex informed the ways many white listeners understood and experienced the music they were consuming. Black music, black people, and black culture represented a respite from the strictures of white middle-class propriety that prohibited forthright engagement with bodily pleasures. This perspective, which rested on a worldview that separated the mind from the body and reason from emotion, grew from a long-standing notion that blackness was a repository of physical, spiritual, and sexual freedom. One pathway to this freedom was through music.

From nineteenth-century blackface minstrelsy to the white borrowing of black sound that defined rock and roll, a fascination with blackness has fueled white engagement with African American music. These excursions allow white musicians and fans to tap into the perceived hotness and coolness of black musical forms—from ragtime to jazz to rhythm and blues to rap—and to experience “everything but the burden” of actually being black, as cultural critic Greg Tate has put it.⁷² They can romanticize blackness and black culture, while their whiteness protects them from experiencing the racism that actual black people routinely confront. Ethnomusicologist Ingrid Monson has noted the gender dimension of these processes. Her discussion of jazz, race, and hipness in the United States in the 1950s and 1980s outlines the ways ideas about masculinity take form through practices of appropriation and projection across racial and class boundaries.⁷³ Shifting attention to rock and roll reveals a similarly loaded set of raced and gendered images

and dynamics, although as musicologist Annie Randall has observed, the ideas that black femininity and sexuality generate in the genre have received little scholarly attention.⁷⁴ The vocal sound and symbolic presence of black women, however, are important to the formation of rock and roll's ethos, to the identities of the male rock musicians whose exploits are centered in depictions of rock history and, above all, to the sound of the music. Consequently, throughout the book I attend to the interdependence of music-making, race, gender, sexuality, and power, while also tracking the processes of historical erasure and inscription, of recording industry decision-making, and of genre labeling that foregrounded white men and that involved but marginalized black women who were, in fact, artists with and sonic models for white and black male rockers.

The women I discuss in *Black Diamond Queens* also modeled sound and style for other women. Like most African American women in the post-World War II era, they worked outside of the home, a necessity to support their families.⁷⁵ Doing so at a time when the white, middle-class ideal was for women to stay at home raising children, while their breadwinning husbands worked, called their femininity into question. But African American women musicians diverged even further from standards of feminine behavior. They left the confines of their homes and communities, traveling in order to perform and displaying their bodies and voices on stage. Most of the people with whom they worked—musicians, songwriters, producers, agents, and managers—were men. Black feminist scholars have demonstrated that a perception of black women's lack of conventional femininity and sexual difference has been at the crux of the race, gender, and class systems that have marginalized and disempowered black women, historically and in the present day.⁷⁶ They further argue that the history of rape and the related image of hypersexuality, the imagery that the Rolling Stones' "Brown Sugar" invokes, have made sexuality a fraught issue for black women. In fact, the prevalent public defamation of the moral character of black women spurred the founding of the first national black women's rights organization, the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), in 1896. As Darlene Clark Hine observes, "At the core of essentially every activity of NACW's individual members was a concern with creating positive images of Black women's sexuality."⁷⁷ To counter stereotypes, Hine argues, many African American women—especially those of middle-class status or striving for it—chose to "downplay, even deny, sexual expression."⁷⁸ Scholars have labeled these practices as the "politics of respectability" and the "culture of dissemblance," behaviors through which African

American women presented a public face that demonstrated their femininity according to the expectations of European American middle-class culture.⁷⁹

This persistent denial of sexual expression has led African American women to maintain a deep silence around sexuality. As historian of science Evelyn Hammonds notes, “One of the most enduring and problematic aspects of the ‘politics of silence’ is that in choosing silence black women also lost the ability to articulate any conception of their sexuality.”⁸⁰ The black lesbian feminist poet and essayist Audre Lorde urged women to embrace the erotic, a concept she deployed to create an expansive space of women’s power that includes sexuality and is, she argued, “a considered source of power and information within our lives” that women, to their detriment, have been taught to fear and suppress.⁸¹ Even at the turn of the millennium, it was difficult for many African American women to claim sexuality as a positive and empowered space of expression, pleasurable experience, and exploration.⁸² Popular music, however, has been a means through which African American women have expressed sexual subjectivity. Starting in the 1920s with the blues, the art form that black feminist cultural critic Hazel Carby argues is the signal cultural production of working-class black women in the early twentieth century, a critical mass of African American women “constructed themselves as sexual subjects through song.”⁸³ Without the investment in the politics of respectability that dominated middle-class black women’s political organizing and social compartment, working-class blues singers, such as Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Ida Cox, and Victoria Spivey, expounded upon sexual desire, power relations between men and women, and everyday life; they asserted their personal agency while articulating issues relevant to black women.⁸⁴ *Black Diamond Queens* examines the musical productions of later generations of black women vocalists whose work echoes the bold attitude associated with blues women. Spurred by both artistic considerations and economic imperatives, these artists drew on a range of musical styles, crossing and blurring genre boundaries while doing so. Too often, however, the resulting heterogeneity of black women’s music is elided.⁸⁵ Examining these wider-ranging musical productions, ethnomusicologist Eileen Hayes argues, “has the potential to complicate monolithic notions of Americanness, womanhood, blackness, and black womanhood.”⁸⁶ I share Hayes’s interest in expanding representations of black womanhood, in part because my own musical tastes diverge from those expected of black women. Therefore, before launching my effort, I offer a personal narrative that indicates my musical priorities and encapsulates the dynamics of race, gender, and genre that are the concern of *Black Diamond Queens*.

About the Author

When I was in high school, it never would have occurred to me that I would one day write a book that required me to devote significant attention to the Rolling Stones. Although I liked some of their songs, they were not among my favorite bands. For starters, “Brown Sugar” and the band’s protruding tongue logo did not appeal to me. When the Stones came through our town on their 1981 US tour, I had no interest in joining friends who went to the concert. I was more into Queen, David Bowie, and Prince, the theatrical guys who sang wonderfully and, with their gender queerness (as we absolutely did not refer to it back then), were at once unsettling and enticing. Punk, post-punk, and new wave were what I found musically compelling during my teen years in the early 1980s. I was particularly fond of British bands like the Clash, Echo and the Bunnymen, the English Beat, the Gang of Four, the Jam, and the Psychedelic Furs. Over the course of researching this book, I was surprised to learn how prominently British artists figured in the stories of the African American women I was tracing. The Stones, the Beatles, David Bowie, and Humble Pie have a stronger presence in the text than their American counterparts, and I realize that my personal preference for British rock likely led me to focus on these connections—connections that grew out of British musicians’ well-documented fascination with African American music. As I write about these transatlantic, cross-gender exchanges, I acknowledge my own fascinated consumption of a musical and cultural Other—the music of (mostly white, mostly male) British artists—and all of the attendant romanticizing, misreading, and mishearing that such sonic encounters can bring. It may be that black or white, male or female, American or British, we think the grass is greener on the other side of the pond.

It wasn’t supposed to be this way. As a little kid, my first musical encounters were with the records my African American parents listened to. Pop was a jazz head with a cabinet full of 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ RPM albums by the likes of Miles Davis, the Modern Jazz Quartet, Dave Brubeck, and Count Basie. He supplemented this collection by recording jazz radio programs on his reel-to-reel. Mom liked to hear vocal music, especially opera stars Leontyne Price and Risë Stevens and the soulful sounds of Nina Simone and Ray Charles. Pop played records for me on the living room hi-fi, which I was Not To Touch. Sometimes I asked to hear Mongo Santamaria’s version of “Watermelon Man,” but mostly I requested Nina Simone’s *Silk and Soul* album. I thought she looked like a beautiful queen

on the cover, and when I listened to the song “The Turning Point,” a musing on school integration that she sang from the point of view of a little girl, I felt like she was speaking directly to me about what I was experiencing in my suburban kindergarten classroom.

I played my own records on my record player, a snappy portable with a solid red bottom, and a red and white candy-striped top. A lever that switched the speed from 33 to 45 to 78 RPMs made it possible for me to listen to *Hopalong Cassidy and the Singing Cowboy*, a set of 78s based on a 1950s TV series that my older brother Bobby, twenty-some years my senior, handed down from his childhood collection. My sister Diane, a couple of years younger than Bobby, gave me *A Christmas Gift for You from Phil Spector*. At first, I was reluctant to accept a “big people” record, as I thought of albums, but it didn’t take long for the Ronettes, Darlene Love, and the Crystals to sweep me away with their wall of sound versions of Christmas songs. After my persistent pleading, my father bought me a record by teen dream Bobby Sherman. He was so cute! He wore a choker! I still wonder what went through Pop’s mind as he put down his money for *Portrait of Bobby*, an album of middle-of-the-road pop tunes sung by the blue-eyed, longish-haired young man who graced its cover in a velvet jacket and lavender slacks. My brother tried to offset my foray into disposable white pop by giving me *Keeper of the Castle*, an album by Motown’s Four Tops that featured “Ain’t No Woman Like the One I Got.” I liked it, but the more transformative experience was the result of hearing a different Motown act. Diane and my other sister Lyn, who is a few years older than I, played “I Want You Back” by the Jackson Five for me—“You’ll probably like this,” they said—and set me on a path of Michael Jackson fandom. That’s about it for stories about my siblings, who are actually my half-siblings on my father’s side, debating or shaping my taste in music. Because of age difference and circumstances, we lived in the same household for only a short time when I was very young. As the years went on, music was not the center of the conversation when we got together, but it was very central to the identity I was forming.

Pop’s job in naval research brought the family from New Jersey to the Washington, DC, area when I was three. My parents decided not to live in the Chocolate City in part because of the reputed superiority of the public schools in the suburbs, so I spent my childhood and adolescence in Fairfax, Virginia, one of the middle-class bedroom communities outside of Washington. From kindergarten to high school graduation, I was one of a small number of black kids at the public schools I attended, and most of my friends were white. I didn’t see my relationships with my peers in stark racial terms, but I was aware

of my black difference. Always present, it was thrown into relief at unexpected moments like when the kids in my third grade class played *Confederates and Yankees*, or when my mother told me *The Truth*: “Your hair is not going to lay flat like the white girls’ does, Maureen.”

Fairfax was where we were living when my father died, and it’s where my mother and I stayed on. The only good thing that came out of Pop’s death when I was seven years old was unfettered access to his hi-fi. I put my favorites into heavy rotation: Michael Jackson’s *Ben*, Earth, Wind & Fire’s *Spirit*, and Stevie Wonder’s *Songs in the Key of Life* mixed in with *Endless Summer* by the Beach Boys, the soundtrack of the film *The Sound of Music*, and the Carpenters’ albums that I bought from the Columbia House mail-order record club when I was in elementary school. Pop’s turntable would not play 45s—a format for teenagers, not jazz aficionados—so when I started buying singles in junior high, I played them on the record player in my bedroom or at the homes of friends. We’d work out dance steps to Chic’s “Le Freak,” listen to the Bee Gees’ songs from the *Saturday Night Fever* soundtrack, or memorize the lyrics to Journey’s “Lovin’, Touchin’, Squeezin’.” I appropriated Diane’s battered copy of *Meet the Beatles* into my growing collection, and friends with older siblings shared the band’s later work; we’d play *Sgt. Pepper* and *Abbey Road*, while interpreting the intoxicating Paul Is Dead symbols supposedly embedded in the album covers. On the radio I listened to WPGC, a Top 40 station that carried Casey Kasem’s weekly countdown of the nation’s hits, and kept track of the chart positions of Stevie Wonder, Chic, Donna Summer, and the Bee Gees, my favorite artists. By sixth or seventh grade, under the influence of older girls in my Girl Scout troop, I started listening to DC-101, a station that played what it dubbed “kick ass rock and roll.” The DJs dosed me up with Aerosmith, the Allman Brothers, the Eagles, Journey, Led Zeppelin, Lynyrd Skynyrd, the Rolling Stones, Van Halen, and the Who. I was also watching the smattering of rock and roll available on television. There were the musical guests on the sketch comedy shows *Fridays* and *Saturday Night Live* and the Saturday afternoon trifecta: *American Bandstand* for mainstream rock and pop, *Solid Gold* for disco, and *Soul Train* for the songs topping the black music charts and a connection to the black culture that was absent from my everyday life in the vanilla suburbs.⁸⁷

By the time I graduated from high school, I had formed a habit of listening across genre, race, and gender boundaries and embracing stylistic tendencies that ranged from smooth to rough and from sweet to edgy. The thrashing vocals and guitars of the Sex Pistols and the Clash sounded an exhilarating

expression of rage and defiance. Meanwhile, Prince's euphoric celebrations of sex and God were irresistible and his 1999 was indispensable. I adored Michael Jackson's *Off the Wall*, but even before I headed off to college, David Bowie had taken over my turntable. His wide-ranging music—everything from hard rock to shimmering plastic soul to electronic experiments—enthralled me, and I felt a kinship with the alien freak who, with his made-up face and weird-colored hair, looked like he had fallen to earth from outer space, just the way I had been dropped down into white suburbia. The dedication to music continued during my four years at Northwestern. My friends and I were DJs at WNUR-FM, the campus radio station (I did a jazz show), and got on the guest lists for local concerts featuring nationally touring acts. We'd ride the "L" train from Evanston into Chicago to see the next big thing from American indie-rock-land or from the United Kingdom. We'd buy new records, we'd buy used records, we'd borrow records from each other and from WNUR. Records, records, records. The bulk of what I assembled into a record collection was music by white artists, but I was thrilled by the occasional interracial groups like British ska revivalists the English Beat, the Specials, and the Selecter; black British singer-songwriter Joan Armatrading, with her gorgeous, brooding voice, was a revelation. For the most part, though, I did not dwell on the absence of black people in the music that spoke to me. What I am aware of now (but didn't pay attention to then) is the presence of blackness in the rock I listened to, a kind of audio palimpsest in which African diaspora musical practices had been appropriated and twisted around into a new sound, whether by David Bowie, the Clash, Paul Weller in his Style Council period, or the Talking Heads.

In high school and college, I learned that my interest in what was understood as "white music" was not what people, black or white, expected. The perplexed or hostile responses my musical preferences often provoked led me to research race, identity, and music as a professional academic. Still, I cannot report that I spent much time during my teen years wondering why there weren't more women, especially black women, producing the kind of music I liked. The dominant presence of white men in rock was something I took for granted. If the group's maleness was too much to stomach (say, the Red Hot Chili Peppers, naked but for "sox on cox"), it was easy enough to find something more appealing. It was also possible to overlook the egregious. The Specials ranted out "Little Bitch," but their songs were so danceable I didn't want to resist them. It was a relief, though, to discover women artists: Pauline Black, sharp in her narrow suit, slinging herky-jerky vocals against the grooves of her

band the Selecter; Poly Styrene of X-Ray Spex haranguing sexist, consumer culture at a fevered pitch; Kate Pierson and Cindy Wilson of the B52s voicing camp quirkiness; and Tina Turner with her haughty cool in the “What’s Love Got to Do with It” video. I sought meaningful representations of black women in books much more than in music, reading the usual suspects: Maya Angelou, Gwendolyn Brooks, Nikki Giovanni, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker. A watershed was *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* by bell hooks, a book of critical analysis that put black women at the center of the discussion of race, gender, and power in the United States. In *Black Diamond Queens* I make a related move and trace the history of the music genre that I have been devoted to through a black feminist lens. Placing black women at the center of a discussion of rock and roll is not simply a self-interested endeavor. It is an effort to counter the erasure black women have experienced in the genre and to talk about the history of rock and roll in a way that marks rather than marginalizes the long-standing presence of black women. It is also a way of recognizing the African American women who paved the way for contemporary artists ranging from Toshi Reagon to Janelle Monáe to Beyoncé to Brittany Howard of the Alabama Shakes to Santi White, whose trials with race, gender, and genre opened this chapter. This is a project of recovery and inclusion, an effort to highlight a submerged history, and a consideration and critique of the workings of power and genre in the recording industry. *Black Diamond Queens* recognizes the artistic contributions of African American women to rock and roll and examines the reasons it is so difficult to hear their voices in the music they were so much a part of creating.