
Book Review: *Black Diamond Queens: African American Women and Rock and Roll*

Maureen Mahon. *Black Diamond Queens: African American Women and Rock and Roll*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020. 408 pp.

It seems that Maureen Mahon and I share something in common.

We both grew up as Black girls, and eventually young Black women, loving rock music and navigating a genre that historically, and in our lived experiences, erased us.

For me, growing up in 1970s and 1980s Brooklyn, rock stars were White. The women they celebrated and derided in song were, for the most part, also White. And rock music itself was White. The music I loved the most was not for me. Sure, I was free to listen to it, but I was constantly reminded when I read *Creem* and *Rolling Stone*, and later when I started going to rock shows, that I was an interloper.

Eventually I learned that rock music is Black music. And in Mahon's rich, engrossing, and profoundly important new book *Black Diamond Queens: African American Women and Rock and Roll*, she shows us that Black women, in particular, played a vital role in the development of 1950s and early 1960s rock and roll, as well as the rock music of the late 1960s and beyond. As Mahon states, "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" (27). Mahon expands the narrow boundaries of rock and roll and rock predicated on notions of rock authenticity constructed largely by White men. In a chapter about mid-twentieth-century blues legend Big Mama Thornton, she suggests that "If we listen beyond the race, gender, and genre assumptions that inform mainstream presentations of rock and roll history, we can hear what she shared. Listen and hear her contribution to the sound, feel, and attitude of rock and roll" (51).

It is this sort of careful listening that is foregrounded in *Black Diamond Queens*. In the opening chapter, Mahon makes a case for Elvis Presley and Janis Joplin adopting Big Mama Thornton's gender-fluid self-presentation in her embodied and musical performance styles. In chapter two, we learn about 1950s vocalist LaVern Baker, "the first Queen of Rock and Roll," whose influence on White singer Johnnie Ray and her touring with White artists while sometimes playing for integrated audiences serve as examples of

the “interracial musical exchanges that shaped rock and roll and black women’s influence on the vocal style of white male singers” (75, 58). In chapter three, about the early 1960s all-female group the Shirelles, Mahon shifts the focus away from a version of rock authenticity that privileges the guitar and songwriting to acknowledge the importance of Black women’s vocals, and their considerable impact on the history of rock and roll and rock. In subsequent chapters, the importance of the Black woman’s voice in rock is echoed in discussions about Black backup singers, such as Merry Clayton, Gloria Jones, and Venetta Fields, who recorded and toured with White rock artists the Rolling Stones, Joe Cocker, Pink Floyd, and many others; 1970s rockers Labelle and Betty Davis; and legendary R&B/rock and roll singer Tina Turner’s reinvention as a highly-successful 1980s solo rock performer.

A particularly illuminating chapter is the fifth one, “Negotiating ‘Brown Sugar,’” in which Mahon has a complicated and necessary conversation about engagements with Black women’s sexuality (including the predictable lazy stereotypes) in rock songs, and in the experiences of three Black women who were part of the predominantly White, transatlantic, late 1960s and early 1970s rock scene, Marsha Hunt, Claudia Lennear, and Devon Wilson. All three women had sexual/romantic connections to Mick Jagger, and thus might be the inspiration for the 1971 Rolling Stones hit “Brown Sugar.” But more important than that, Mahon, bearing her book’s subtitle in mind, uses this chapter to powerfully demonstrate that Black women affected rock’s trajectory as vocalists, performers, songwriters, and musicians, and also as fans, groupies, and prominent rock scenesters. As Mahon puts it, “black women and ideas about black women have done much to shape rock and roll music and culture” (143). While I was already familiar with Hunt and Lennear, I was introduced for the first time to “Super Groupie” Wilson, who had a love affair with Jimi Hendrix in addition to dalliances with Jagger and others (151). After reading about her I wanted to learn more.

In the epilogue, Mahon brings her narrative into the twenty-first century, with a discussion about singer-songwriter and guitarist Brittany Howard of the Alabama Shakes. Mahon reads Howard’s music and performance style through the lens of the Black Diamond Queens in her book who, across time and space, make Howard’s work and successful career in rock possible. As Mahon suggests, “Howard’s songwriting and her position as a woman creating an artistic vision on stage and behind the scenes linked her to the women of Labelle and to Betty Davis. Her lyrics include unfiltered expressions of longing and desire. She admits devotion and tells her love interest (whose gender is not specified) that she is present, available, and entirely worth it. Howard’s exploration of the farthest reaches of her vocal range and her play with sound remind me of the singing experiments of Betty Davis and Marsha Hunt” (280). This is a fitting ending, as it shows the reach of the Black Diamond Queens beyond White male rockers. Their music, personae, and performance styles influence, and create a space for, Black women rock musicians in the twenty-first century.

Black Diamond Queens is more than a recovery project, though of course that work is needed greatly. Mahon demonstrates quite convincingly that the Black women innovators in her book were rock stars in their own right, who also happened to influence, inform,

support, and pave the way for the Black, White, female, male, and nonbinary rock and roll and rock performers from the 1950s through today. And most impressively of all, these artists accomplished this in spite of the persistent “race, gender, and genre challenges” they faced (2). Because of these ever-present power dynamics, in many cases, Black women’s complete stories and rich legacies in rock have been muted or excised entirely. *Black Diamond Queens* offers a long-overdue correction of the rock and roll historical record. And the final verdict? Black women *rock*.

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