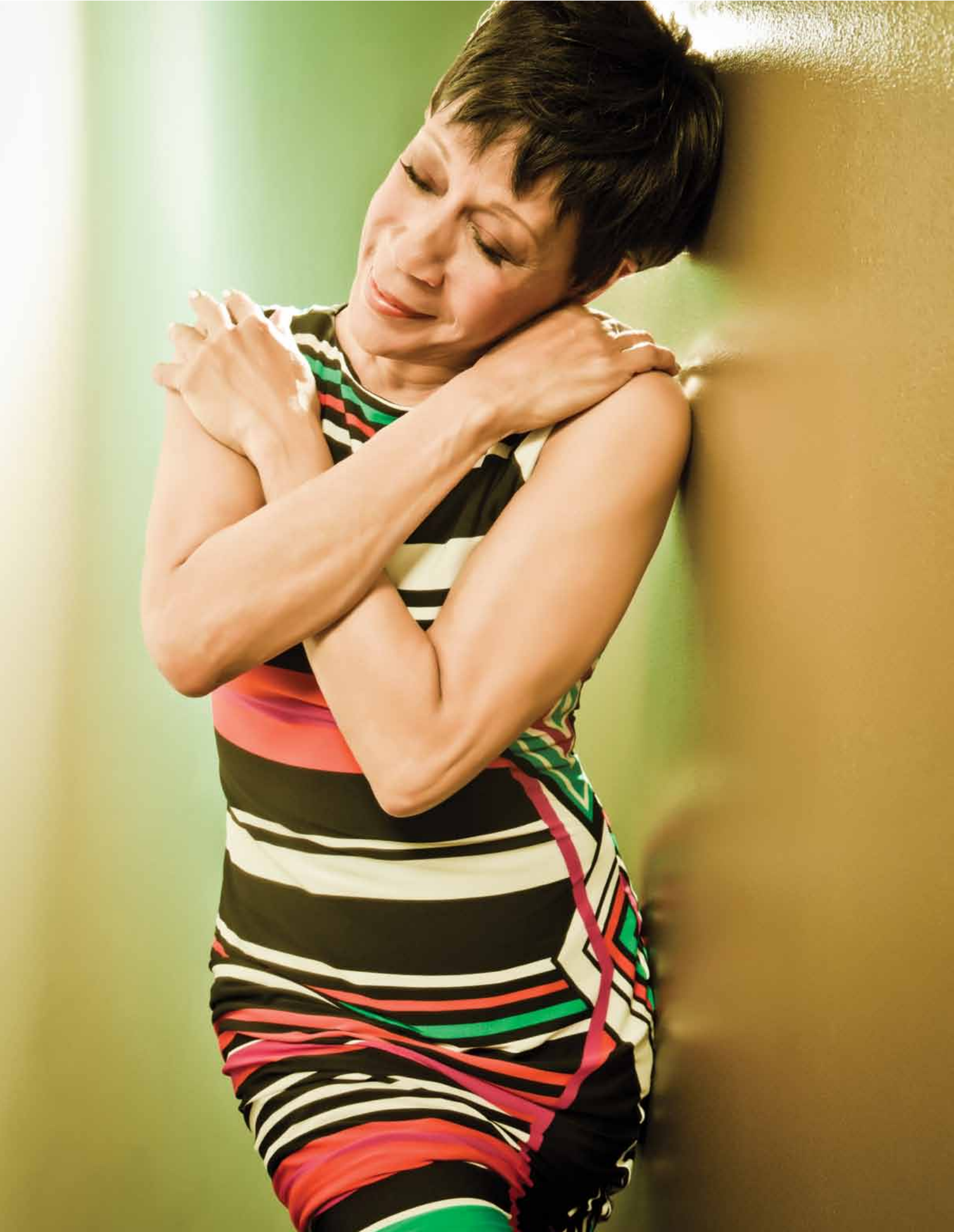


HUNGER GAMES

After a 50-year journey of near-hits, brushes with stardom and countless tales of sex, drugs and soul music, singer **Bettye LaVette** is finally getting her due

By **HOLLY GLEASON** *Photograph by* **MARINA CHAVEZ**

"My grandson is sitting out there," Bettye LaVette, the soul survivor from the wrong side of Motown, says an hour into her book signing on the third floor of Manhattan's Union Square Barnes & Noble. She's being interviewed about her life, struggles in the music business and the *real*—not airbrushed—reality of that world. "My daughter—and so many people—they all still live in Detroit. I hold out hope for Detroit."

She is a tiny woman with a frame that shouldn't be able to withstand the hard-grinding snarl that makes her voice so earth-shaking. At 66, she's seen more than most people would dare to imagine and she's not afraid to talk about any of it.

Her appearance in support of the new memoir *A Woman Like Me* is peppered with stripped-down songs from her just-released album *Thankful N' Thoughtful*, making this a double header of new product merchandising. Not that LaVette would ever make "product." The fierce woman with that torn-and-frayed alto does everything full-tilt, heart-over-head, no-holds barred.

She's setting up the night's final song and she's explaining to the 200 or so people on folding chairs about her reluctance and reasons for embracing what will be a slow-bleeding read of Ewan MacColl's "Dirty Old Town," which closes *Thankful N' Thoughtful*.

"I've seen Atlanta come back and it's not been popular since cotton," she cracks, knowing she needs to break the tension to hold the audience through the closer. The audience laughs, but they know there's more.

"Some of the areas around Detroit, they don't have their own fire departments or police departments. In Detroit, we made *cars*! We *made* a kind of music no one else *had*."

When LaVette's husband, Kevin Kiley, first played Rod Stewart's version of the song for her, she couldn't relate. The song, written in 1949, was originally set in the industrial town of Salford, England.

"Then Kevin told me, 'Why don't you make it about Detroit?'"

She lets the notion dangle, knowing she's been every bit as down-for-the-count as her hometown. She also knows she's a woman of stronger truth than most people like. Pausing, she draws the crowd—more white than African American, more NPR than street, more middle-aged than 20-something—into her web.

"The [first] version on the album is the one the record company liked," she explains. "The one I arranged is more [of] a dirge for the town I love. The places I put in the song are all Detroit—they made Detroit and every single star from there."

LaVette goes on to talk about how there are books about the city's architecture, nightlife and factories though little has been written about the realities she was a part of. "I'm talking about the dance floors and the schools where I grew up, where Diane [Diana Ross to the rest of us] and everyone else played," she waxes. "They were called record hops and you *had* to do 'em to get your record played. And now..."

The electric piano has been stacking a series of slow minor key chords—an evocative cloud of desolation and devastation.

"I met my love down by Northern High," she moans, all exhaustion and too much knowledge as she remakes the song her own, "Dreamed a dream at a Graystone dance."

Stereotypical details of such a song might be kissing a boy by the Dodge factory main gate and pining hope for the American Dream that they were promised. But in LaVette's world, the cops come prowling and the pretty, young girls make their way to do "the 12th Street stroll," where they can trade their bodies for drugs or money. Shots ring out, sirens tear through the night and people burn down what's before them.

"I can smell the stench of the smoke-filled wind," she wails—an elegy for what was. She brings dignity to the despair and church to a hopeless place.

Detroiters are hardy stock. A woman like Bettye LaVette doesn't survive as much disappointment and—as she calls it—"buzzard luck" without a serious case of dig-in-and-dig-out. In that, she embodies the resilience inherent to her hometown.

"The thing about Detroit," says Grammy-winning producer Don Was, a fellow Detroiter, "you *knew* you were gonna be there, your life was gonna be tied to the auto industry—even the white-collar jobs. And unless you hit the lottery or got big in sports or music, that was it."

Was suggests that the urban grit created an unpretentiousness and an honesty. That part of what inspired artists such as John Lee Hooker or the MC5 to make the music they did was how raw Detroit was. As opposed to trying to escape the city's realities, they embraced them and, as a result, created a unique sound.

"Bettye LaVette embodies that: she held her ground rather than adopt something that might help her get over," says the man who's produced Bob Dylan, The Rolling Stones, Willie Nelson and Bonnie Raitt though has yet to work with LaVette. "She'd rather be gritty and soulful. I think there's value in holding your ground. After all, when your back's to the wall, you might as well be as brazen about who you are as you can be.

"That's the thing with American culture: it loses track of the fact that what makes you different is your strength," he concludes. "I just hope the city can follow Bettye LaVette's example."

"I STILL FEEL LIKE I'M FROM Detroit," LaVette says firmly while in the closet-size green room at Barnes & Noble. "My band's from there. My family's there. The places I come from are there." She pauses and begins again: "I hope so much for Detroit. They can't just shut it down. But it's like watching your favorite old uncle dying."

Like Was says, they could take a lesson from LaVette's example.

Having burst onto the soul scene in 1962 at the age of 16 with "My Man–He's a Loving Man," LaVette's wrung-out voice was all want, fire and erotics. She seemed destined for the same dizzying success as Aretha Franklin, Diana Ross, Smokey Robinson and The Temptations—all kids bouncing around Detroit's North End—making music and trying to find their way in the business.

But unlike her peers, LaVette saw one record deal after another fizzle or flame out. They became superstars, while LaVette stumbled from 1965's seminal "Let Me Down Easy" on Calla Records, which many consider to be one of the great soul sides of all time, through a few lesser hits. Labels would cut records, then shelve them without explanation.

Always the scrappy woman with the voice from the depths of the earth, she followed the music wherever it took her. Sometimes to New York City, sometimes to LA, sometimes onto touring revues—and once a six-year stint in the touring company of the Broadway musical *Bubbling Brown Sugar* with the legendary Cab Calloway and Honi Coles.

Anyone who's read her scaldingly honest *A Woman Like Me*, co-written with noted biographer David Ritz, knows her living was often lean and that LaVette never buckled under what most would find dire circumstances. Whether working for producers-cum-pimps, putting in time at a sketchy sex clinic or dealing with a number of records never seeing the light of day, she learned how to endure the pain of struggle.

Yes, there was the monumental disco hit "Doin' the Best that I Can" in 1978, produced by a 17-year-old kid named Cory Robbins, who would go on to co-found Def Jam Records. There was always Europe, where the fascination with American R&B far outstrips interest here. But LaVette was mostly singing where she could, bolstered by the faith, encouragement and continual tutelage of local Musician Unions head Jim Lewis, who told her of his coaching, "You may never be a star, but you'll be a singer."

The '80s were quiet, as were most of the '90s. That's the thumbnail. A whole lotta not much. All that began to change when a French fan located the masters to her "lost" 1972 Atlantic Records album that never came out and released them as *Souvenirs* in 2000. The same year, the Dutch label Munich put out a live concert recording titled *Let Me Down Easy*, further sparking renewed interest.

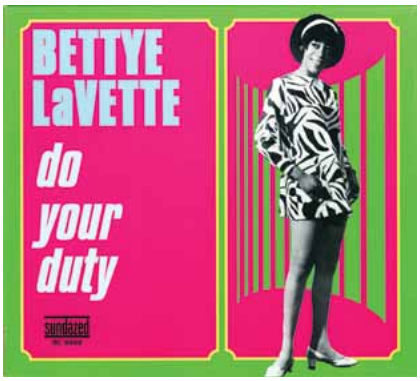
LaVette wouldn't let herself believe it, but it was the beginning of her renaissance.

A Woman Like Me, her first American album in more than two decades, came out in 2003 on the Blues Express label. Produced by Dennis Walker, it won the 2004 W.C. Handy Award for Comeback Blues Album of the Year.

Buoyed by that success, Mike Kappus of the Rosebud Agency stepped up to represent her. Kappus—who booked Muddy Waters and launched Robert Cray—brought LaVette to the attention of Anti- Records head Andy Kaulkin, who signed her to a three-album deal.

Pairing her with contemporary songwriters, ranging from Fiona Apple to Rosanne Cash, Sinead O'Connor to Aimee Mann, and producers like Joe Henry and the Drive-By Truckers' Patterson Hood, these records captured a new generation's attention.

"I'M A SEEKER OF THE TRUTH. IF YOU'RE INVOLVED WITH ME, YOU'RE GONNA GET A LOT OF TRUTH."
BETTYE LAVETTE



The cover of Sundazed's 2009 collection, Do Your Duty *which collects the 11 classic solo sides that LaVette cut for Silver Fox and SS in 1969 and 1970.*

But it was her skin-searing turn at the Kennedy Center Honors in 2008, singing The Who's "Love, Reign O'er Me," clad in a body-skimming burgundy velvet dress, where mainstream America, along with Barbra Streisand, asked "Who's *that*?"

"I'm *not* a has-been; I'm a never-was," she jokes, reaching for a glass of champagne backstage. "I'm still doing what you have to do when you're out there collecting fans. I'm at the end of an eight-year 'Who's She? Tour' and we're going right into the 50th Anniversary Tour!"

If there's bitterness, then it's now tempered with a sense of celebration. She's won a Pioneer Award from the Rhythm & Blues Foundation, been named Best Contemporary Female Blues Singer at the Blues Music Awards and been nominated for a pair of Grammys.

Her labelmates include Tom Waits, Beth Orton and Dr. Dog. She is on critics' lists and hipsters' radars. At a time when her peers are doing nostalgia tours, LaVette is astonishing The Black Keys with her version of their "I'm Not the One," transforming Patty Griffin's "Time Will Do the Talking" into a Stax/gospel hybrid and turning Gnarls Barkley's "Crazy" into a menacing song not only of need but also of recrimination.

"None of the pitfalls can happen to me now," she acknowledges of the ravages that fame causes. "Maybe David Ruffin and I would've OD'd together. I can see that so clearly now...

"I feel invincible!," she exalts. "Nothing I can't do. Nothing I'm afraid of."

THESE DAYS, BETTYE LaVette lives in West Orange, N.J., with her husband Kevin, a musician and antiques dealer. She's come a long way from the little girl rolling her stomach in time to the music and singing her lungs out while standing on top of the jukebox in the living room, where her parents sold corn liquor, as well as fish and barbeque sandwiches to much of Detroit's black population in the '50s.

"I've seen 'em all drunk, naked or broke," she laughs with the ease of a survivor-turned-thriver. "Or all three. Because if you were black and over 50, back then, there weren't a lot of places [you] could go. It was not a big thing to know the biggest minister or only black politician, because you'd see them turning up in the same places the rest of us did."

She talks about the record hops and local hot spots. She calls Diana Ross "Diane"—clearly unimpressed by the diva's pretension. She marvels that Smokey Robinson is now politically minded, explaining, "When Dr. King marched down Woodward Avenue with Reverend Franklin, I don't remember *any* of *them* being there! Aretha [Franklin] was more involved in it 'cause of her Dad. But the rest? Young black people weren't involved, and when they were, they became Black Panthers."

That witness is part of what puts the salt in LaVette's Earth. She's lived it, seen it, knows it. And, as she's said, she's not afraid—of any of it.

"Her voice is what survival sounds like," says Patterson Hood, who co-produced 2007's *The Scene of the Crime* with help of his band the Drive-By Truckers. "She's a survivor and you can hear it when she sings. The actual

LaVette performing in 2008

Kasra Ganjavi

physical voice of what that is—there are many artists from that era who lived to tell, but no one sounds like that.

"When she sings 'Talking Old Soldiers,' it's like DeNiro in a scene in a movie," he says of one of the album's many highlights. "But it's just her voice, a piano and a couple things. So stark and all her."

Craig Street, who produced the new *Thankful N' Thoughtful*, concurs. "She's just blunt," he says. "Her upfrontness is beautiful. Five minutes after meeting me, she said, 'Either you're the blackest white man I've ever met, or the whitest black man. Which is it?'

"That's Bettye," he continues. "She has opinions. She knows what she wants to do. She'll be professional if it's not her idea, [and] still have ideas about rhythms. But she *knows*..."

While protesting she didn't listen to specific music in order to come up with a list of potential covers for *Thankful N' Thoughtful*, ongoing conversations with Street yielded a playlist that her husband sent to the producer to give him a better sense of LaVette's foundations. ("We spent more talking than we did actually recording," she laughs.) At four and a half hours, it runs the gamut from Johnny Adams to The Drifters, Lyle Lovett to Bobby "Blue" Bland, original versions of "Spanish Harlem," "Let the Good Times Roll," "Fever," as well as standards like "Lushlife" and "The Bells of St. Mary."

"Hands down, she's probably the greatest living interpreter on this planet," Street enthuses. "Diana Krall or somebody like Frank Sinatra maybe—but there's nobody who can bring that much of a personal read to other people's material."

Street knows. He's produced many of the greatest singers in the world: k.d. lang, Jimmy Scott, Norah Jones, Madeleine Peyroux, Meshell Ndegeocello, Cassandra Wilson and Chris Whitley.

"I'm a seeker of the truth," she says flatly. "If you're involved with me, you're gonna get a lot of truth.

"With songs, I look for lyrical content, something I can sing," she says. "If I do a tune, it's because it didn't satisfy me. Things like 'Respect,' 'Midnight Train to Georgia'—that's exactly the way I wanted to hear them. [For] everything else I hear what *I* hear in them and I sing what they mean to me."

Though she jokes that "those country girls really know how to suffer" and that she's "never left the same man twice," her voice is a witness and her interpretations find astonishing depth.

"The thing about singing," she reasons, "is it's like putting on false eye lashes or delivering a baby: You just have to do it. You can't be taught; only *you* can do it.

"When 'My Man' came out, I heard a grown woman sing it—and it *scared* me. I thought, 'I'll never learn how to sing like that!' But all I had to do was get older. All these songs, I sing 'em better [because I] know 'em in a different way."

A listen to "The More I Search (The More I Die)" is proof. Kim McLean, one of those "Nashville chicks," according to LaVette, "came at it from heaven. I came at it from hell. But it sounds like something I woke up to one morning and wrote."

The song begins: "I'm an open book, I ain't got no secrets/ My story bleeds poetic lines/ For all my deep introspection, it's still my heart that they can't find."

It captures the reality of the world-weary, wildly visceral chanteuse that is Bettye LaVette. She does not judge or follow. She eschews gospel music because she is a non-believer. ("It would be sacrilegious," she explains.) She drinks water to temper the champagne. ("Howling Wolf and Muddy Waters had it in their riders," she confides.) She sleeps as much as she can, laughs all the time and cries when she's moved.

Mostly, she tries to understand. For all the furor over her candor in her memoir—the affairs people were having, the pimp culture around black music, the copious drug use—she's nonchalant.

"People forget it's a different culture," LaVette says. "Black men were sent to a different cabin every night, that was their *job*—then got sent away and sold. So it's deep.

"When the pimps and numbers men realized they had something [women] white men wanted, they weren't just gonna hand that over," she continues. "They were smart businessmen and nobody really thought anything of it."

THE FOLLOWING NIGHT AT THE Highline Ballroom, LaVette is onstage in a plunging red jumpsuit that's equal parts Elvis and Ann-Margaret and is working Tom Waits' "Yesterday Is Here." Slow-burning the lyric, she sways her hips like a torture dancer at one of the nearby strip clubs. The fact that she's nearing 70 doesn't have an impact on several men nearby, all staring slack-jawed at her trousersnake-charmer moves; the moan and the motion promise pleasure in the pain. The sensual in the forsaken is a recipe that LaVette understands.

"I saw her on the Santa Monica Pier," Was remembers. "It was so Detroit: the funky rock band, these raw guys in black T-shirts who're descended from Mitch Ryder with this beautiful, elegant woman in an evening dress. Very high style, very organic.

Continued on page 78

Continued from page 43

"Dylan just told *Rolling Stone* that it's not his job to stand up onstage every night and show people how he feels," Was notes. "His job is to get the audience to know how *they* feel. To me, that's what Bettye does."

Mostly, though, she's continued, in part, because there weren't any other options—but also because this is what LeVette was born to do.

"Stuff would get me down all the time," she admits. "But someone else would call, and I'd be ready to go. I have a childlike attention span, so the disappointment can be forgotten [and I can be] onto something else.

"It's why the road works," she philosophizes. "When I left a town, I didn't miss anybody at all. I look where I'm going [and] think about what I'm doing. [It's why] I know my craft better than I ever have.

"I can go onstage—anywhere—and entertain," she declares. "Back in the day, you try following me or The O'Jays, Eddie LeVert or Otis Redding, too. They'd be covered in sweat, snot coming out of their noses! When I was younger, I tried to remain somewhat cute and pretty—but I learned to simply turn myself over to the song."

Street acknowledges that they didn't want to go retro for *Thankful N' Thoughtful*, but knew that the band should celebrate her roots. "She needed a classic R&B rhythm section, so the beat is there," he says. "She wants her butt to move, to *feel* it. But we wanted to do that without doing what's been done before. 'Crazy' was literally a jam on the floor and she stayed with it. She can hang like that because [it was] five super-intense days in the studio.

"She told me when we were looking for songs: 'I have to look into the eyes of the people I'm singing to,'" Street recalls. "'I have to be able to sing these lyrics to them so they can identify with them because they deserve the truth.' She's always reaching for something more."

Something more at this point—beyond "being able to do a bus tour from town to town, rather than flying city to city"—is a one-woman show, like Lena Horne did in the years before her death.

"She's been able to do more things that she's wanted to do," Hood offers. "She still hadn't gotten all the validation she deserves when we worked with her. She deserves to hear that from people she respects. Her scratch vocals are better than most people do after a lifetime."

Was concurs: "One of the things I love about her [is] she doesn't waste a syllable. It's so lean—no technique to show you what she can do. She *knows* her voice, understands it—and she cuts through not just the speakers, but right under your skin. Every note rings true."

The woman who recorded 2010's *Interpretations*—a collection of British rock songs that she views as the very thing that took black music off pop radio in the '60s and '70s—recognizes that the journey is part of what makes her music matter. Turning the vibe down low at The Highline, she settles into "Thankful & Thoughtful."

Embracing the bad, the sad and the mad, LaVette knows easy doesn't make diamonds, or even pearls. Leaning backward, then forward, her "thaaaaaaankful" is a blues that's sanctified. She means it. This is the sum total of her existence and, if less than it could've been, she's glad to finally be recognized.

Underscoring her own phoenix-like rebirth, "Thankful" leaves the room still. People are overwhelmed by its intensity. In LaVette's hands, these songs take on almost Biblical notions, even as she makes them human. For her, the truth is in the living—and the singing. It's to be tallied when the living's done, which his something she's a long way from.

"I didn't think I'd ever write a book," she confesses. "I figured [that] after I was dead, somebody could write it then. Just like this record wasn't supposed to have a concept, but the more I listened, the more I told my husband it sounds like my book. Go figure." r