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35 Years After She Was Poised For Superstardom, Bettye LaVette Finds Deserved Recognition

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There's nothing allegorical about the title of Bettye LaVette's latest album, "The Scene of the Crime."

It's a cold case now, and some of the principles have since died, but she is certainly the victim of a musical felony committed some 35 years ago.

Her story traces its roots to Muscle Shoals, Ala. That's where LaVette, then 26 with a smattering of hit singles to her credit, spent four days in 1972 recording what became a lost classic, "Child of the Seventies." It was the album that was supposed to vault her into the upper reaches of the R&B stratosphere, alongside icons such as Aretha Franklin, Wilson Pickett and Etta James.

Instead, for no particular reason, Atlantic Records shelved the album.

"It was finished," LaVette says by phone from her home in New Jersey, before starting a tour that comes to Northampton, Mass., Wednesday and New London Jan. 24. "They had done strings in Miami and horns in Memphis. They had lined up a promotional tour, and then they said, 'We decided not to go forward with the project.' Those were the exact words."

Although "Child of the Seventies" eventually saw release in 2000 as "Souvenirs" on a French label (and was issued here on Rhino in 2006 under the original title), she never learned why Atlantic sat on the album.

"Ahmet Ertegun had the audacity to die before I could ask him," LaVette says with mock outrage, referring to the Atlantic chief who died in 2006.

Word that the label had bailed on her opus devastated LaVette, but only for a little while.

"I stayed up under the dining room table for two or three days," she says. "Really. I got up under the dining room table and stayed under there with a whole lot of wine. And then somebody else called to do something else, and I went and did that. That was how I held on: Somebody always called."

Those calls led to sporadic recording projects and a handful of minor hits, and also to a six-year stint on Broadway and in touring productions, including a star turn opposite Cab Calloway in "Bubbling Brown Sugar." In lean years, she sometimes had to rely on friends and fans to help her make the rent or a car payment. Then in 2005, seemingly out of nowhere, LaVette reappeared in a big way with "I've Got My Own Hell To Raise" (Anti), featuring her interpretations of songs by Joan Armatrading, Aimee Mann, Fiona Apple and Lucinda Williams. The album landed at No. 20 on the Village Voice's annual poll of music critics and refocused attention on LaVette and her wise, weathered voice.

Last year, LaVette, 61, had an opportunity to confront the past.

She returned to Muscle Shoals for the first time since 1972, recording "The Scene of the Crime" with help from the Drive-By Truckers, who served as her backing band, with veteran session players Spooner Oldham on keyboards and David Hood on bass. Hood had played on LaVette's 1972 album, and he was chosen for the "Crime" sessions by his son, Patterson Hood, who fronts the Truckers and co-produced the Grammy-nominated album.

LaVette rejected all 50 tunes Hood suggested, choosing instead to put a soulful spin on material by Willie Nelson, Elton John, Don Henley and John Hiatt.

"I was looking for songs that I wanted to sing," LaVette says. "It was as simple as that. It had nothing to do with the songs being good or bad; I just didn't want to sing them. I'm not a music enthusiast. I only listen to songs to sing them."

Although she made clear at the start of the project that she had no intention of writing her own songs — "I'm an interpreter," she says — LaVette relented, sort of, when Hood presented her with a song he had written based on an old saying of her mother's that LaVette had used in the studio.

"The Truckers wanted to keep recording over and over and over, and I wasn't going to do that," LaVette says. "So they kept saying, 'Oh, we're getting close.' And I said, 'Close shootin' don't kill no birds.' And Patterson said, 'See? That's the beginning of a song.' And I said, 'Then you write it.'"

He did, but she didn't like it, because the lyrics didn't sound enough like something she would say.

"To take a line that my mother quoted to me, and write what I would actually say to go with that, you would have to know me a long time, or I would have to write it," she says. "So I did. In short order."

The result is "Before the Money Came (The Battle of Bettye LaVette)," her first songwriting credit in a career stretching from 1962, when she scored a hit at age 16 with "My Man — He's a Loving Man."

All that time in the music business has left LaVette with a certain wariness, as if everything is too good to be true until it happens. Although she says she knew how "The Scene of the Crime" would sound, she didn't accept that recording an album in Muscle Shoals with the Drive-By Truckers could actually happen until the album was finished and released.

"I don't believe in anything until certain parts of it start to work, so I thought this would not work at all," she says. "That's the way I go into everything, because I've seen so much sugar turn to shit."

This time, all these years later, it's nothing but sugar.

"It's more like vindication than anything," LaVette says. "My voice is even stronger than it was in 1972, I can still wear a size 6 and I'm with a young, hip record company. It's wonderful."

BETTYE LAVETTE

performs Wednesday at the Iron Horse Music Hall, 20 Center St., Northampton, Mass. Tickets for the 7 p.m. show are \$25 in advance, \$28 at the door. Information: 800-8438425. LaVette performs Jan. 24 with Mavis Staples at the Garde Arts Center, 325 State St., New London. Tickets for the 8 p.m. show are \$58, \$48, \$38 and \$30. Information: 860-444-7373.

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