**Famed and Fierce: An Examination of Iconic Black Women Artists Who Transformed Soul Music and the Sociopolitical Landscape**

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Soul Music has experienced a wealth of expansion over the last century. An innumerable host of artists have shaped the genre into one that not only serves as one of the most visible platforms for black expression but has also proven to be one of the most sought-after genres to soundtrack social movements. This study aims to examine the role that prominent black women artists have played in transforming soul music into the powerhouse it is. Aretha Franklin, Janet Jackson, Mary J. Blige, and Beyoncé Knowles-Carter will be the center of focus. Building on existing work that emphasizes the necessity of Black culture in Americana, this examination will strengthen those efforts by analyzing how these four women affirmed marginalized groups of people and served as a catalyst for social change. This will be done through analysis of their lives and discographies. Although there are numerous black women artists that fit this bill, these women carry a distinctness that allows for them to stand out amongst their contemporaries. For instance, each of them revolutionized the R&B sound and broke records in awards and album sales in ways that I had not been attained previously.

Black women have held space in soul music since its conception. Their influence within it has evolved tremendously over time. Icons such as Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Mahalia Jackson, and Sarah Vaughan were some of the earliest to not only master soul music, but also its various subcategories such as Jazz and Gospel. They were integral in laying the groundwork for future generations of black women artists. Franklin, Jackson, Blige, and Knowles-Carter stand out particularly over their predecessors, because they each carry a distinguishable precedence over the eras in which they emerged and pushed the envelope in previously uncharted ways. Franklin and Blige are noted for their haunting vocals that can sway even the coldest of hearts, whilst Jackson and Knowles-Carter have demonstrated an ability to sing and command attention with dance numbers. This quartet took the torch from their forebears and managed to continue the mission of shattering stigmas in society and glass ceilings within the music industry. Their collective discographies display the versatility of black women, which has enabled them to connect on a deeper level with every archetype of this demographic.

Reflecting on the latter half of the 20th Century, the Motown record label was critical in pushing African American artists into the mainstream, abetted by their crossover appeal. Berry Gordy, the founder of Motown, established the label with the intent that it would produce records that caught the ear of white listeners. Achieving such a feat would prove beneficial in breaking down racial barriers, whilst simultaneously increasing the album sales, chart positions, and global recognition of black talent. “Hit records meant to Gordy records that the emerging audience of young, suburban white people would want to hear over and over. Motown did indeed work out a sophisticated and highly successful formula for the production of music aimed at white American teenagers."1 Some resisted this plan, arguing that the songs he produced were too “bubble gum pop” oriented and were not an authentic representation of the soulful expression that black singers had been known for. Fears of the “black sound” becoming too alloyed were soon quelled by the rise of artists such as Aretha Franklin, who had paired up with Columbia (and later Atlantic) Records. Her ascent to stardom was matched by a voice that seemed to be an act of divination – just one listen could eviscerate anyone’s deepest wounds and birth a renewed contract on hope in this life. Franklin, having had experienced a series of tumultuous events in her own young life, was well-received by listeners because they knew she sang from a place of sincerity and understanding. She served as a spectator to her parents’ contentious marriage, lost her mother at the age of ten, birthed two children before

turning 15 and ended up a high school dropout. Her inimitable voice, relatability and regular involvement in the Civil Rights Movement would inevitably earn her the title of “Queen of Soul.”

Long before superstardom, Franklin was mentored by gospel great Mahalia Jackson. Their paring couldn’t have been anymore congruous – they both experienced tremendous loss, similar disarray in their childhood, grew up singing in the Baptist church and had strong ties to the Civil Rights Movement. Both had lost their mothers at a very young age, resulting in grandmothers and aunts stepping in to sustain the matriarchal influence in their lives. Franklin and Jackson’s singing voices meant so much to their congregations, that they wanted others to experience their healing power as well. Thus, Jackson accompanied gospel groups on church tours, whilst Franklin accompanied her father – the Reverend C.L. Franklin. Through his friendship with Jackson, her mentorship over the budding songstress was made possible. “Settling with her father in Detroit, she received just about as formal a training in gospel music as was possible back then, singing in her father’s church and on revival tours, and learning from Mahalia Jackson, who stopped in to check on the Franklin household at times.”2 Jackson wasn’t the only famous figure who befriended this family – they also had the friendship of Martin Luther King, Jr. and other civil rights leaders. In fact, C.L had organized the 1963 ‘Walk to Freedom’ in Detroit, which he subsequently marched in alongside Dr. King. Just a few short years later, Dr. King’s family would handpick Aretha to sing at his funeral. Though Mahalia had long been hailed the “voice of the Civil Rights Movement”, this decade had proven that her protégé had already grasped the torch.

“Franklin sang “Take My Hand, Precious Lord” at King’s funeral in 1968, a song which Jackson had popularized. That same year, Franklin also sang the national anthem at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, during a tumultuous political campaign and a year marked by civil unrest, protests, police violence and assassinations. Much like her mentor, Franklin provided the soundtrack of an era.”3

Prior to that year, her single “Respect” (originally recorded by Otis Redding) had skyrocketed to the top of the music charts. It was quite confounding for many folks outside of the black community to be in witness to a black woman being uncompromising about her human dignity through song on the world’s stage. Although it was a women’s empowerment anthem, other groups advocating for progressive change also adopted the song as a guiding light for their cause – most famously the Civil Rights Movement. “Respect” was played all over – at political fundraisers, protests, marches, and family functions. There had been songs of this caliber by black women in previous years, such as “Don’t Let Me Be Misunderstood” by Nina Simone, though it was a certain magnitude in her voice that gave Franklin preeminence.

“What distinguishes her is not merely the breadth of her catalogue or the cataract force of her vocal instrument; it’s her musical intelligence, her way of singing behind the beat, of spraying a wash of notes over a single word or syllable, of constructing, moment by moment, the emotional power of a three-minute song. “Respect” is as precise an artifact as a Ming vase.”4

Franklin’s resulting epic album sales and Grammy award wins would prove transformative for what was already a near-decade long career. Most of her earlier albums, produced by Columbia Records, had seen a modicum of success. The label’s executives had been pushing for Aretha to adhere strictly to the Jazz and Gospel sound championed by artists such as her mentor Mahalia Jackson, Dinah Washington, and Billie Holiday. They had been successful both at home and abroad, and Columbia was very hesitant in letting her sing modern-day R&B, as this would be steering away from what was already proven to be fruitful both musically and financially. However, Franklin had keen foresight and knew that this plan was not sustainable. The soul sound was expanding rapidly, and she was confident about reigning in the changing times with her R&B vocals. Finally, after years of low placement on the music charts and dismal album sales, Franklin exited the label in exchange for Atlantic Records. The prime of her career was reached at Atlantic, and to this day many consider the albums she created there as the best in her extensive catalog. Many artists who came about in later years have cited her catalog as a key factor in what motivated them to pursue singing as a career. Amidst the Queen of Soul’s immense fame, she remained an activist and never took the black community’s support for granted. In 1970, when Angela Davis was arrested for her role in an armed takeover of a California courtroom, Aretha Franklin stood in solidarity with her and offered to post her bail. “I have the money; I got it from Black people ― they’ve made me financially able to have it ― and I want to use it in ways that will help our people.”5

She certainly followed through on that commitment, as she continued to support black liberation causes (and other miscellaneous humanitarian efforts) throughout the remainder of her life. Franklin’s self-confidence and handling of matters within her personal life also proved to be a blueprint for liberation – specifically the liberation of black women who’d felt that the

totality of their experiences had not yet been unmasked in mainstream music. Aretha, having had gone through two rocky marriages and divorces, rendered them with gut-wrenching, unfiltered honesty. She effortlessly contrasted these themes by singing also of triumph, sensuality, freedom fighting, and everything in between.

“She dared to voice and make public the nuanced, emotionally heterogeneous interiority of black womanhood, becoming a conduit for articulating the beauty and sensuousness, the rage and the despair, the sadness as well as the joy of black life transduced through African American female musicianship. She turned the “vocal run” itself into a thousand miles of freedom.”6

In doing so, she was helping to normalize the idea that black women can be gentle and vulnerable, contrary to long-standing stereotypes that suggested these traits were not inherent to them. The fruits of Franklin’s undertakings consistently proved generous to her. She earned a grand total of 18 Grammy Awards, among others, and was the first woman to be inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. She also headlined three presidential inaugurations (Carter, Clinton, and Obama). In 2005, Franklin received the highest civilian honor when President Bush awarded her with the Presidential Medal of Freedom. It’s no wonder that her transition from this life, in August 2018, hurt millions of people to their core. Her life and legacy will forever be an integral part of our understanding of black life and black womanhood in America and even across the globe. Former President Obama stated, “Aretha helped define the American experience. In her voice, we could feel our history, all of it and in every shade—our power and our pain, our darkness and our light, our quest for redemption and our hard-won respect. May the Queen of Soul rest in eternal peace.”7 Franklin was a formidable presence and a legend whose throne is hers and hers alone and will continue to be one of our northern stars as an ancestor.

Like Ms. Franklin, Janet Jackson also had a star-studded coming of age story. As the youngest sibling of the famous Jackson family, she grew up watching her brothers take the music world by storm as ‘The Jackson 5’. At the age of seven, Janet made her debut when she performed with the group at MGM Studios in Las Vegas. By the time she was 11, she had found fame independent of her siblings when she landed a starring role on the sitcom ‘Good Times’ and later ‘Diff’rent Strokes’. Her roles on these shows helped her ramp up a steady fanbase amongst young black girls across the nation, as they were able to see themselves represented in someone who looks like them. Despite the glitz and glam of fame, Janet and her siblings had a contentious home life. Their father was noted for very strict and often abusive behaviors towards them. His realization of the bastion of talent his children possessed inspired such behaviors, because in his estimation, he believed it necessary if they were to perfect their craft and dominate the entertainment industry. “But the discovery that his offspring had musical talent turned him from merely cold and violent into a despot. He would beat them with a belt buckle or the cord of an electric kettle or make them spend hours carrying cinder blocks from one side of their garden to the other when they incurred his wrath.”8 Not to mention, their mother was a devout Jehovah’s Witness who also had very meticulous standards of which she expected her children to abide by. Though she was not extreme to the extent that her husband was, her ways still had a psychological impact on her family. “Their mother was a devout Jehovah’s Witness, fond of getting her kids to pore over the Watchtower’s illustrations of the imminent Armageddon. She was also said to swab her children with rubbing alcohol – part of an obsession with cleanliness so extreme it turned her children into germophobes – and smear their faces with Vaseline on the grounds that it made them look “nice and shiny”.9 As they each ascended into their adult lives, they drew further and further away from the confines of their upbringing. For Janet, that moment came in 1986 when she released her third album ‘Control’. ‘Control’ was the steppingstone into the sound she had always envisioned herself creating, as well as a recalibration of her public persona – much like Aretha Franklin with ‘I Never Loved a Man the Way I Love You’. By this point, she had severed her business relationship with her family which allowed for the boon in creativity to flourish. Her previous two albums, heavy on the bubblegum pop sound and aimed towards teenage audiences, were not as successful as her family had anticipated them to be. Even with the help of her father and brothers Marlon and Michael on the production end, her debut and sophomore explorations were simply not career defining. With ‘Control’, Janet transitioned into her trademark sound of fusing pop with R&B.

She accompanied these songs with impressive dance moves both in music videos and in concerts, demonstrating that she was multifaceted like her brother Michael. Whilst other black women in the industry had also danced in those two mediums, none had yet done so with the agility and elaborate dance numbers the way Janet did. In this way, she was a pioneer and many artists have since followed in her footsteps. She also began singing more mature songs than she had previously. Lyrics like “Sittin' in the movie show, thinkin' nasty thoughts, huh, Better be a gentleman, or you turn me off, huh, Thats right”10 showed a demand for respect and evidence of her bodily autonomy. Jackson was no longer the little girl that America knew from innocent roles on sitcoms – she was a grown woman now taking the world by storm.

“In hindsight, Control is both evolutionary and revolutionary. As Jackson’s first album to land atop the Billboard 200, it marked professional and personal breakthroughs. Distancing herself from the immense Jackson family shadow, she created one of the most influential projects across contemporary R&B and pop music. And not only was Jackson’s maiden voyage with producers Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis at the forefront of R&B, pop and hip-hop’s intersection, it birthed a novel sound in the process. Above all, Control represented Jackson becoming a star by embracing and announcing her womanhood.”11

The album was largely autobiographical, as Jackson not only addressed her bodily autonomy, but also her newfound independence from her domineering parents. In the song “What Have You Done for Me Lately”, she took to the task of addressing the complications that occurred during her brief marriage to James DeBarge. Within two months of the album’s release, it had sold over one million copies. Jackson was resonating with people cross-culturally, and especially with young black women. Many of those women had been longtime fans, as they had followed her career since she was little “Penny” on *Good Times*, while others were new to her tribe. Collectively, they were drawn to Jackson because she was navigating the ups and downs of young adulthood just as they were doing also. When speaking of Jackson and her contemporaries, Oprah Winfrey noted, “What you're seeing in all the areas of arts and entertainment is black women internalizing the idea of black power and pride ... Black women started listening to their inner cues, rather than society or even the black community's idea of what they are supposed to be and can be.”12Jackson’s success with ‘Control’ had initially been a shock to some people, because her brother Michael had long been the ‘star’ of the family. Thus, it was difficult at first for her to break from her brother’s shadow. Though people enjoyed and respected her as an artist, the possibility of her career failing to reach Michael’s level was not particularly unfounded. ‘Thriller’, released just four years prior, was (and remains) the world’s

best-selling album of all time. Additionally, he was the first black artist to have a music video on MTV with “Billie Jean”, which paved the way for other black artists’ music videos to appear on the station. In 1989, Janet made waves once again with the release of ‘Rhythm Nation: 1814’. It was with this album that solidified that she and her big brother were powerhouses of their own accord. Continuing her exploration of self-identity and sexuality, *Nation* also addressed the HIV/AIDS epidemic, racism, and other crises that were ravaging the world. Political messaging had not been part of the original plan for the album, but Jackson and her producers changed course as they were moved to respond to the world’s chaos. “As Jam tells Billboard, no one went into Rhythm Nation looking to make a political record. The concept emerged as he, Lewis and Jackson watched CNN during breaks in the recording and found themselves shocked by the homelessness, violence, drug abuse, racism and general craziness plaguing America.”13 Meanwhile, Michael’s music was still largely apolitical. *Nation* was a daring move for an artist who had only recently earned significant traction in the music industry, as it’s not uncommon for artists to wait for their career to level out before making any political statements. It’s clear that Jackson was unafraid of the risk, acknowledging that she had a unique responsibility in raising awareness. “I want people to realize the urgency. I want to grab their attention. Music is my way of doing that.” Pop stars, she recognized, had unprecedented multimedia platforms— and she was determined to use hers to do more than simply entertain. “I wanted to reflect, not just react,” she said. 14

Through Janet, marginalized people felt seen, heard, and understood – the trifecta of affirmation. Her activism via music was not the first of its kind, as it was done before with albums such as “That’s the Way of the World” by Earth, Wind, and Fire, and “What’s Going On?” by Marvin Gaye. However, “Rhythm Nation” was different in that it dared to address taboo topics. Not only did she affirm a new generation, but she also mobilized them as they were in a major political transition. The Reagan presidency had ended, many cultural ‘norms’ were being challenged, and other countries were also shifting politically. “Rhythm Nation was a transformative work that arrived at a transformative moment. Released in 1989—the year of Spike Lee’s Do the Right Thing, protests at Tiananmen Square, and the fall of the Berlin Wall— its sounds, its visuals, its messaging spoke to a generation in transition, at once empowered and restless. The Reagan Era was over.”15 With a new decade on the horizon, these significant transformations were unsurprising, as such occurrences are common at a decade’s end. As with every decade that preceded it, the 1990’s also signaled a wave of changes in mainstream music production. Hip-Hop was now beginning to permeate every corner of the music industry, despite having been around since the late 1970’s. R&B artists were now beginning to collaborate with Hip-Hop artists more frequently, as this was important to do to continue having one’s music stand out amongst the crowd. Janet and her team adapted to the change with prowess, as did others. Although, there was one singer who took this brilliant fusion of genres and made it her own. That singer’s name is Mary J. Blige.

In the summer of 1992, Mary J. Blige introduced herself to the world with the album ‘What’s The 411?’. With major hits like “Real Love”, “You Remind Me”, and “Love No Limit”, Blige was an overnight success and her album blossomed on the music charts. She had a host of talented producers that helped make it all possible, including Sean Combs, who would become a lifelong friend and collaborator. “What's the 411?" executive-produced by Sean " Puff Daddy” Combs, spent seven weeks at No. 1 on the Top R&B/Hip-Hop Albums chart and has sold 3.4 million in the U.S., according to Nielsen SoundScan. It has also spawned two Hot R&B/Hip-Hop Songs No. 1s: "You Remind Me" and "Real Love.”16 Even as her career began to soar, Blige’s private life was at a tumultuous standstill. Her story was certainly not an outlier. Other black women in the industry had endured similar – including of course Aretha Franklin and Janet Jackson. A few generations before, it was artists like Mahalia Jackson and Billie Holiday that mirrored Blige’s tangled life.

Following the release of ‘What’s The 411?’, Mary was still living with her family in the housing projects she was raised in. Her home life had consistently been rife with toxicity, and her newfound fame seemed to only attract more of it. Whilst colleagues and complete strangers were enthusiastic for Blige, her family was not. Even her mother acted this way towards her, causing an ongoing feud that did not fully dissolve until many years later. “No, this was her dream. She wanted to do this. It might be that she's living vicariously through me, but I believe she's gotten really bitter about it. It's probably why we've never really got along.”17 Being at war with her mother *and* struggling to process childhood trauma didn’t make matters any better. It was as though a heavy rain cloud had hovered over her life and refused to go away. Her father had left the family when she was a child, leaving her to be raised by her mother and aunts. In those early years, she was also victim to sexual assault by a family friend and witnessed domestic abuse being brought upon her matriarchs by their significant others. It’s no surprise that these issues took an overwhelming toll on her mental health over time, which led to drug abuse and dropping out of high school. Though the public had initially been widely uninformed on Blige’s personal life, that quickly changed in 1994. It was in that year that her autobiographical sophomore album ‘My Life’ was released, which is widely considered to be her magnum opus. This era was one teeming with romantic heartbreak and continued drug abuse, all of which were addressed directly or metaphorically in the albums’ contents.

“Blige started using drugs as a teenager. As her star rose, her substance abuse intensified. Many chalked it up to Blige making good on her reputation for being a hard partying superstar—until her 2011 Behind the Music special, in which Blige revealed that she had been sexually abused by a family friend as a child and had started to drink and use drugs as a teenager as a way to “kill the visual of what happened to me when I was five.”18

The breaking point that ultimately led to ‘My Life’, was when her partner K-Ci (of K-Ci and JoJo) humiliated her on live television. The couple had been engaged, though when K-Ci was questioned about it during an interview, he denied this and even encouraged his fans to vie for a chance at his affections. "I was engaged to [Jodeci singer K-Ci], and I actually went on a talk show overseas and that person had just done that talk show about a week before me. I was telling the interviewer that I was getting married, and the week before he was saying that it was a rumor. He wasn't marrying me. It was a disaster that really embarrassed me."19 Song after song, Blige poured her heart out over her complicated life. The unabashed honesty, impeccable production and haunting vocals solidified her status as royalty in the R&B world. The title “Queen of Soul” had already of course been allotted to Aretha Franklin decades prior, though Blige was dubbed with a title that was just as poignant – the “Queen of Hip-Hop Soul”. The seventeen track “My Life” is a gem not just for its execution and autobiographical nature, but also in that it’s a story being told chronologically. The songs “You Bring Me Joy” and “Mary Jane (All Night Long) denote a happier time in Blige’s union with K-Ci, but there is soon a drastic turn with “I’m Going Down” and “I Never Wanna Live Without You” – both pleas for K-Ci to stay with her. But by the conclusion of the final track “Be Happy”, Blige was ready to move forward by committing to self-love. By today’s standards of feminism, many might argue that Blige’s ‘begging and pleading’ to a man does little to empower women. This notion couldn’t be anymore false. Blige empowered women, because she displayed difficult realities that are true for so many – being in love with someone but with a multitude of issues (both individual and as a couple) that pollute that love. “Wishing your man would change for you isn't exactly the stuff of feminist anthems but Blige was telling the truth. For a generation raised on hip-hop -- one that had put a premium on keeping it very real -- the raw honesty resonated.”20 Black women especially adored her, as they now had another artist whom they could see themselves reflected in. An unfortunate reality for black women is that they have historically been thrown under the bus both personally and professionally. Far too often, the stereotype “Angry Black Woman” is placed upon them for doing so much as having any emotional response to their adverse circumstances. Blige’s vulnerability encouraged black women to ignore the stereotype by embracing their own vulnerabilities. This mammoth wave of self-acceptance amongst this demographic did its part in altering sociopolitical conversations, in that it once again forced the public to challenge its notions about the role of black women within society. Some of Blige’s contemporaries were accomplishing this as well on their albums, such as with the album “Soul of A Woman” by Kelly Price. In 1997, the Queen of Hip-Hop Soul delivered once again with “Share My World”. This album, riddled with songs about positivity and the upside of love, was proof that Blige had carried out her self-love pledge. She had found God, tossed the drugs, and was looking toward her future with a renewed sense of optimism. Her fans were feeling it too, and excited to be evolving alongside her.

“For 16 years she has been the unofficial commiserate and confidante to a generation of R&B fans. This, she feels, is far more significant than having invented the most commercially successful musical style of the past decade. "My music is definitely therapy for them," she agrees, "and I also feel like I'm getting therapy through me, when I listen back to it. Sometimes I just need it to live. When someone comes up to me and says, 'Mary, you helped save my marriage', or 'Mary, you helped me get out of this abusive relationship', I'm in it, really in their lives. And I'm so passionate about my feelings, but also about showing people the way through theirs."21

Blige has also demonstrated solidarity with people in other ways. In 2009, in partnership with Westchester Jewish Community Services in Yonkers, N.Y, she founded the Mary J. Blige Center for Women. The center provides GED and life skills classes, childcare, and self-empowerment programs for women who come from disadvantageous backgrounds. This of course meant a lot to Blige on a personal level, given that she was once in the position where she would have urgently needed those services also. The timing of the centers’ debut could not have been more acute, given that the years leading up to that moment was a long and successful recovery journey for Blige. She knew that if she could make it out from under, so could other women – and she wanted to do all that she could to support those efforts. “I've seen so many women suffer is the sad part, and the very place that I suffered is the sad part. But the happy part is I'm back to help.”22

In the years that followed, Blige hit another series of roadblocks when her husband’s infidelity came to light. It was as if the lyrics to her 1995 song “Not Gon’ Cry” had manifested into her reality, verbatim. “Eleven years of sacrifice, and you can leave at the drop of a dime. Swallowed my fears, stood by your side, I shoulda left your ass a thousand times.”23 There were noticeable differences in the way she handled heartbreak this time around. She didn’t turn her back on her recovery process by returning to drugs and alcohol. Instead, Blige wielded sorrow into joy through the 2017 “Strength of a Woman” album and speaking openly in interviews about self-empowerment and mental health. Once again, her core audience embraced her sincerity and ability to connect with them so personally on issues present in their own lives. There was another album of that time that was also taking to this task – “Lemonade*”* by Beyoncé Knowles-Carter. However, unlike Blige, openly autobiographical albums had not always been an integral part of her repertoire. Nonetheless, Beyoncé is not too far removed from her contemporaries regarding her coming-of-age and later adult life. Although, the notably private superstar was not always as forthcoming about her personal matters as they had been. Rather, she has done so in installments over the course of her iconic career.

Music was always an intrinsic part of Beyoncé’s life. At eight years old, she and her friend Kelly Rowland formed a girl group called ‘Girl’s Tyme’ with three other girls. When the group fell short of mainstream success following an appearance on *Star Search*, Knowles’ father Mathew decided to commit to the group’s success by quitting his job and managing them full time. By 1996, the group was known as ‘Destiny’s Child’ and was touring the United States as the opening act for SWV. Within three years, Destiny’s Child had achieved multiplatinum status with the releases of their debut and sophomore albums. After many years of highs and lows, the group ended on a positive note in 2004. Together, the group had sung numerous songs about women’s empowerment, such as with ‘Independent Women, Pt. 1’ and ‘Girl’. So, it’s no surprise that Beyoncé continued that trend when she embarked on her solo career. In hindsight, the timing of Destiny’s Child’s dissolution could not have been anymore impeccable. The arena of multi-genre black women solo artists who could dance, sing, *and* achieve crossover appeal, was in seeming disarray. Three years prior, Aaliyah had lost her life in a tragic plane crash. Janet Jackson was still performing, although she had already long prevailed over this corner of the music industry. There was a desire for a Janet Jackson-like talent who could appeal to and inspire a new generation. Ashanti was struggling to meet that goal, because many believed that she was not nearly as gifted as her cohorts. In 2002, over 20,000 people petitioned against her receiving the ‘Aretha Franklin Entertainer of the Year Award’. "A petition that circulated on the internet maintained that she was not experienced and accomplished enough to deserve the honor.”24 Meanwhile, Amerie was producing successful singles, but her albums collectively lacked a remarkable generational impact. Beyoncé had the advantage of already having years of proven talent and global success behind her, which she capitalized on with ease. Her soulful debut ‘Dangerously in Love’ featured an impressive mixture of R&B, funk, hip-hop, pop, and reggae, demonstrating Knowles’ versatility beyond the traditional soul sound. The album earned her six Grammy nominations, of which she was awarded five. Additionally, her knack for coupling her vocals with exquisite dance moves led people to believe her to be next in line to Tina Turner *and* Janet Jackson. Knowles’ viability as the next ‘black woman R&B/Pop icon’ was now set-in stone, and Michael Jackson and Prince’ support of her substantiated that. Jackson made a surprise visit to a party she was attending because he wanted to meet and dance with her, in what was considered a rare move for the oft shy King of Pop. At the 2004 Grammy Awards, Beyoncé accompanied Prince for a classic performance of his song “Purple Rain”. In the succeeding years, Knowles’ continued to dominate with more multi-platinum selling albums and sold-out tours. Through it all, she guarded her personal life fiercely. Thus, the answer to the question of who her lyrics were about were left to a multitude of interpretations. Regardless, her fanbase did not seem to mind, as they appreciated her singing about subjects they could relate to. This, coupled with her refrain from being overtly political, allotted her universal appeal with people of all races and creeds. Knowles’ used this to her benefit. Her later albums are decorated with political messages that are impossible to ignore. She is one of the greatest and most accomplished artists in history – all her projects have captured the attention of millions who ensure that her work is a constant conversation piece.

“Beyoncé has been playing the long game. She’s used her universal appeal to gain the kind of success that results in access and power. She’s situated herself so firmly at the top of the mainstream music food chain that no criticism (not even from Rudy Giuliani), can stop her from making music that’s more blatantly black and blatantly political than ever. With this power comes a much wider reach, as her white fans, lured in by the gospel of the “Independent Woman,” are being forced to engage with her blackness and black issues in a real way.”25

In 2016, the day after releasing her feminist and pro-black anthem ‘Formation’, Knowles performed the halftime show at the 50th Superbowl. Her and her dancers’ wardrobe was culturally significant in that it paid homage to Malcolm X and the Black Panther Party. In any other given year, one might have concluded that such a song and outfits were a run of the mill Black History Month tribute. But 2016 was no ordinary year. Police brutality was surging, the intersectional feminist movement was picking up steam, Donald Trump was running a highly polarizing presidential campaign, and Flint, Michigan was at the center of a clean water crisis. ‘Formation’ was an obvious response to watershed moment in history. Knowles’ performance was also significant in that she went against the tradition of halftime shows being apolitical. “Beyoncé performing "Formation" at the Super Bowl is a huge, purposeful statement. Putting black America center stage smack dab in the middle of Coldplay's set was a significant move right from the start, but it is especially poignant in the context of the song's defiant social commentary…”26 Two months later, she released the most political and autobiographical album of her career (so far) – *Lemonade.* It was autobiographical in the sense that she addressed her complicated relationship with her father Mathew Knowles, as well as her husband Jay-Z’s infidelity. Whether or not that was her original vision for the album is uncertain. Though it seems reasonable to conclude that the viral video of Beyoncé looking on as her sister Solange berated Jay-Z in an elevator, left her no choice but to but to release a tell-all album. Not only was this a brilliant damage control tactic, but also cathartic and healing for star who was accustomed to handling her adversities privately. It was as though she had taken Blige’s *My Life,* Jackson’s *Rhythm Nation 1814,* Franklin’s *I Never Loved A Man the Way I Love You*, and even Brandy’s *Never Say Never* and combined them to make a super-album for black women of the modern era. “The culmination of this evolution came with 2016’s Lemonade, an album and hour-long HBO film that connected a story of surviving infidelity to generations of black female struggle.”27 The song “Hold Up” is a trenchant riposte to her husband’s unfaithfulness, along with “Don’t Hurt Yourself”. The remaining songs are filled with similar sentiment, including songs acknowledging the disrespect that black women face in general, and “Daddy Lessons” which highlights the ebbs and flows of her and her father’s relationship. In fact, Knowles’ sampled a recording of Malcolm X’s famous speech where he proclaims that black women are the ‘most disrespected, neglected, and unprotected’. It’s also notable that Beyoncé built upon her track record of versatility by exploring the pop, country, jazz, blues, and rock genres. All of which have Southern roots and are (in many ways), extensions of soul music. In this sense, Knowles was reminding the world of this truth. This was transformational for its time, given that it had been years since a prominent black artist had done so. At a time when mainstream R&B/Pop stars were by and large funneling out regurgitated sounds, the range on *Lemonade* was much needed.

Amidst her pain, she finds healing and liberation – calling upon black women to consider making room for those two elements in their own lives. “Through the metaphor of lemonade — the South’s other cold drink, sweet tea’s antithesis and sometimes nemesis, but perhaps its best collaborator — Beyoncé insists on alternative forms of inner magic that demand emotional disclosure for healing, wholeness and a freer kind of freedom.”28 It’s important to note though that the topics of family and marriage was not all that *Lemonade* was beloved for. The accompanying film also addressed the long recovery journey in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina and systemic racial oppression. In this way, she was making it clear that although her overarching theme was the empowerment of black women, she was also speaking to the amalgamation of the black experience. “Formation’ isn’t just about police brutality—it’s about the entirety of the black experience in America in 2016, which includes standards of beauty, (dis)empowerment, culture and the shared parts of our history…”29 This landmark album was successful in that it not only mobilized the black community during a gruesome political transition, but also because it breathed new life into social justice movements. In the years before, Beyoncé had already had a hand in social justice activism in countless ways. In 2005, she teamed up with her parents and Kelly Rowland to help establish the “Survivor Foundation” to provide transitional assistance to people who were upended by Hurricane Katrina. Five years later, at the Phoenix House in Brooklyn, N.Y, she and her mother opened a cosmetology center that offers training courses. What’s especially significant about this is that the Phoenix House is an organization that serves communities affected by substance abuse. Their programs, along with the Knowles’ cosmetology courses, provide ways for Phoenix House attendees to learn new life skills as they adjust to sobriety. In recent years, Beyoncé has done everything from working with Michelle Obama on initiatives to end childhood obesity, cosigning a bipartisan effort to strengthen gun control laws, to donating money to HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities). Her charitable actions are plentiful, and there are many of which she keeps under the radar as to draw more attention to the cause and not herself. The totality of her artistry and philanthropy seems to only just be getting started, as she appears to show no signs of retreating any time soon.

Together, each of these four women have transformed soul music and shifted the sociopolitical landscape in unique ways. Whether it was through deeply engaging albums or through social justice work, they have each inspired and healed the lives of millions of people in America and across the globe. There are numerous black women who have accomplished this feat, though these four women stood out because of their unique talents, memorable projects, award wins, and so much more. Together, they have a combined 52 Grammy Awards, 28 American Music Awards, and countless contributions to various charitable causes. Each has remained just as popular as they were when they debuted and are continuing to be influential in people’s lives. They will forever be lauded as shining examples of black artists championing on the world stage the voices of their community. Not only is the music industry forever indebted to the contributions of these artists, but everyday fans will forever be thankful to their musical heroes for representing their interests and helping them get through their days, one album at a time. The latter half of the 20th Century was a pillar of joy and success for black music collectively, and the 21st Century has proven so far to bode well in upholding that achievement.

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