

At Last

Celebrating the Lives of Black Women

By: Dr. Mary Weems

Conceived by: Dr. Elaine Richardson

Characters

*Original Production featured an Ensemble of three Black women:

Etta James, Bessie Smith, Mahalia Jackson, Queen Latifah – Black woman between 40
and 50

Josephine Baker Zora Neale Hurston June Jordan – Black woman between 40 and 50

Billie Holiday Nina Simone Michelle Obama – Black woman early 40s

Phyllis Hyman – All

Girl – Young Black female, Early 20s

Bartender – Black male, Early to mid-30s

Etta James

Bartender

(1920s music plays as bartender enters in the dark.)

(Lights up on bartender) Bartender is frantically waiting for Etta. Hears her address audience)

Etta:

(Offstage) Ya'll ready?

(Bartender walks to the mic to introduce Etta James)

Good evening ladies and gents! Welcome to Vel's Place, where people in the know come to hear some of the baddest singers in the business. This evening we're honored to have the amazing Miss Etta James in the house! so let's put your hands together for Etta Jaaaaames!

At Last My love has come along. My lonely days are over, and life is like a song...

When I was little girl I used to write love on everything I could get my hands on. I'd use crayons to draw on scrap pieces of manila paper that would fall out of the ugly-foster-mama's art portfolio, toilet paper when I spent time in the bathroom just sitting because I wet my pants. I was always afraid to go to sleep in that crazy bitch's house. For me *love* meant the Mystery Lady, my real mama was crazy for leaving me, love meant she really did but *that* love was somewhere down deep in her where it couldn't come out in time to keep her from leaving me like people leave babies in garbage cans. For a long time, I didn't even know who my daddy was supposed to be. I'd

heard rumors and finally while I was making music under contract with Mr. Chess, I had a chance to approach the white man who people whispered was my father and he denied I was his child. (Etta pauses to approach the bar, taps twice on the bar for a double. Bartender tries to offer her water, but she gestures for a real drink. He pours one shot, she double taps again and he pours more. She drinks entire glass in one gulp and continues) After years, and years, and years of gettin' high, I finally figured out where love lived. Not in the faces of all the men I messed with, who thought love was a good lookin', light skinned woman on they arm, or a raised skirt at the end of a long night of singin' and drinkin', or my own face night after night of looking deep into dressing room mirrors all over this country and wondering who that was looking back. Love wasn't in the brown powder I turned to day-after-day, the smack that slowed me down to a dreamy crawl, made everything okay, race hatred, *Dance with me Henry* the song that white bitch Georgia Gibbs stole and made all the money Black folks couldn't make back then. The high that made me forget for a while that I am a motherless child that not even fame made my real mother want to find me.

My Lonely Days are over...

One day I woke up and found love waiting in the palms of my hands. I'd raised them to heaven asking God one more time to stop me, to slap that taste from my head to make me want life more than dope. Suddenly, my palms got real warm and when I held them against my face I felt God's love move through me like a summer day. My prayers started coming long and hard, my tears rushing like a storm—hours and hours later I lay on my back looking up, realized that for the first time in fifteen years, I hadn't started my day with a fix.

I learned to be my best company. Got help. Practiced not being high, my head started to make its own music and songs I'd did years ago began remixing in my head, I could hear my voice singing in the morning, an odd sound in the quiet, I got excited. Took a while to convince folks that I really was finished, that I really meant what I said, that I would show up and sing my heart out like I used to.

and life is like a song...

One thing I been knowin' since I was fifteen is that if I can't do nothing else—if I can't be somebody's all time love, if I can't do the square life with the white picket fence and lies, I can sang, praise God through my music, reach out and make grown folks shout and sing along like they been childhood friends a mine . . . *(Oh yeah yeah, you smiled, Oh and then the spell was cast, and here we are in heaven, for you are mine...)*(continue At Last song to the end. Then return to the bar and double taps for another drink)

Bartender

Just one song Etta?

Etta:

You a bartender? Bartend. (Grabs bottle of liquor and exits) (Lights out.)

Josephine Baker

(Sound Cue: Song Plays throughout the scene.)

(Clarice is dancing in front of the bar)

Bartender

Now, Clarice, don't you go embarrassin' me.

Clarice

I won't.

(Josephine enters. She interacts with bartender during monologue)

Josephine Baker

I had to go to Paris to *really* make it on my own terms, to see my name in lights: Josephine, for all to see. Born in the “show me” state I learned the difference between being Black and White in America early and decided no matter what I was going to speak out and act out against racism and hatred wherever I found it. Dance was the vehicle I rode toward freedom.

Sometimes the road was long, and scary and littered with “Colored Only” and “Whites Only” signs. Segregation everywhere, ‘cept white folks always could go wherever they wanted to, so it was a one-sided arrangement and colored folks was always on the bottom. I always had a big mouth, and consequently used to get popped in it a lot, especially at church. Most times the only way I could get my feelings out of me and out into the world was to shout in church, to use my body to cuss. Not all the time though, it’s hard to stay in a rage all the time, and just like there were plenty of things to get mad about, I was also blessed a lot too. God has a way of looking out for babies and fools and I think part of me has always been both. Once I’d learned all I could about music and movement from church, I took the rest of my lessons out in the world. Vaudeville was popular back then and as long as you stayed in your place, meaning with other colored folks and went along with the way you were billed, primitive was a word folks liked to use to make the way we danced, and sang and played music seem like it was less than the way white folks do it. We knew this was all nonsense, but the desire to do work we loved for a living made dealing with that kind of mess a necessity. I used to mess with them anytime I could though—Some of the

best times in America anyway, were when I worked with Mr. Eubie Blake on Broadway in his production *Shuffle Along*. I had a chance to work with some of the best and we did all the dances that were popular back then the Charleston (Clarice joins Josephine from the bar and begins doing the dances with her as she describes them) the Black Bottom, the Mess Around, the Shimmy (Bartender comes and grabs Clarice to take her offstage as Josephine continues) the house was always packed, and Mr. Blake and his staff sure new how to treat us. Those were some really good times. Not good enough though to keep the world from rushing back in at the end of each night to remind us that we may dance freely, our minds might be freely thinking about being just as good as anybody else, but Jim Crow was always there in the background as a reminder. I even made it to the Ziegfield Follies—the big time for dancers but they still wanted white folks moves—the ballet—not the kind of movement I loved the most. Even then I found a way to break from the routine, to sneak my own Black folks dance moves in—to keep being me as best I could. Like many of us I got tired. Speaking out has its price and I became plain tired of fighting for every chance to be on stage. Plus, producers wanted dancers who could sing too and even though I could many of them thought my voice was too tiny for the stage. I heard something different was going on in Paris—that it wasn't so hard to be Black and talented there. I thought about it long and hard—leaving home and everything I've ever known to move across the ocean to a land where they spoke a language I didn't speak or understand. In the end the chance for real freedom took over like a drink I couldn't get enough of and I gathered all my stuff, told America to kiss my black bottom and left. (After Josephine exits. Bartender returns does the Black Bottom and Charleston.) (Music fades.) (Lights out)

Billie Holiday

(Billie Holiday's assistant guides her to a chair right after a performance. She's has her arm looped through Ms. Holiday's)

Assistant:

Have a seat right here Ms. Holiday, while I get security to order a cab for us. I'll be right back.

Billie

Thank you, baby. Don't rush, it's nice and warm in here, I'll be fine.

(Billie wraps her hands around herself and rocks slightly and hums Strange Fruit. Slowly takes off one glove and removes flower from her hair.)

Bartender

(Brings her a nightcap)

Billie

Day I was born, a colored man was lynched somewhere in the South. How I know? Cause white folks was lynching 'em fast, and furious whenever they felt like it, like it was a callin' like they lives depended upon it—or ours. What you supposed to do when you live with hate all around you like a ocean and you can't swim? All the music I've sang in my life, the audience screaming for Billie Holiday, all the songs that have kept me goin—the blues as much a part of me as my heart and the oxygen that keeps it pumpin' even when I can't breathe. All the songs that move on through experiences I've had and people I know have had, but the one that's number one on the request list no matter where I go North or South, no matter how many times I'm interviewed about the horror of brown bodies rotting from tree limbs

like fruit way past pickin' time---my public, my fans who I love keep askin' me to sing this song. Like I need reminding. Image sticks with me like this horse I can't stop riding. It's with me all the time. When I'm woke—I see it in the back of my eyes like a shroud I see the world through—the faces of strangers become the tree, the bodies swinging gently, the smell of death come wrong, crawls up my nose and I have to pretend like I don't see in order to move through my day. At night, it's the one dream I have, the nightmare with no release, no stop, my waking a scream, a weak moan in the dawn. It's only when I sing, when I'm on that stage anywhere—that it leaves me free to turn my soul into words, to let my peoples' experiences fly out into the world in the music. I get so caught up in the words, in that mad, mad rush my audience gives me back when they hum, and clap, and sing along, that for just a little while that day never happened, for just a little while I'm Eleanor Feagan untouched by that moment.

(Assistant enters)

Assistant

Come on Ms. Holiday, your taxi's finally here.

(Billie stands up puts flower back in her hair and puts her glove back on)

(Escorts Ms. Holiday out singing Strange Fruit) (Lights out as Billie continues to sing offstage)

Bessie Smith

(Lights up on Bartender who turns radio on.)

(Song from the era plays)

Bessie:

(Bessie enters from bathroom.)

(Bessie addresses the bartender)

Evenin' Johnny, you seen Satchmo tonight?

Bartender:

Naw, Miss Smith. not yet. Can I get you yo'—

Bessie:

Oh, so ahm Miss Smith tonight. That's not what you were callin' me after hours when I was tippin' you 5 dolla bills, then it was Miss Bessie.

Bartender:

Sorry ma'am, I was just—

Bessie:

Man, ahm just messin' with you. Get me my usual and relax, this is gon' be a good night.

(Girl enters from same bathroom and takes a seat at the table as bartender pours Bessie a drink)

(Song fades as Bessie starts to speak)

Bessie:

Satchmo used to say I was crazier than a junebug in November. And after a night of stayin' up drinkin' and jamming with him and his band I agreed with him. Louis used to say that Bessie Smith was the only woman he *know* who could drink him under the table and sing him under it too. Them was some good times, some down-home times, the blues as much a part of the lives of colored folks as anything else. Hard times makes anybody learn to improvise

at a early age. You never know what the day's gon' bring—race hatred knocking on the door of your spirit like an unwelcome visitor, somebody colored thinking they got one mo' pot than you do and decidin' it's worth doin' whatever to either get it or keep you from getting' anything else. I love the blues. Get so tired of people who think they know what they're talking about trying to put it in one tiny box by itself though. The blues is part of all the music colored folks have created since we got here. It's part slave song, music started in the fields from voices attached to backs and spirits tired of bending over and taking it. It's part gospel, cause in the end when your spirit is weary you need someone more powerful than you to turn to, and it's the musical ancestor for all music that's followed it. In fact, hard to tell when the blues started, when *jass* started cause nobody who was makin' the music was standin' around with a note pad writing this kinda shit down. I was one of the first to get recorded though and that made a big difference in the kind of play colored women singers got out in the world where the real money was. Always wondered why men think they supposed to run everything including the music business. How it's always okay for a man to mess around with other women, to go to church on Sunday, and be drinkin' and cussin' before he finished his Sunday meal, how it's okay for a man to do whatever a man want to do, but we only supposed to do what they let us. I ain't never believed in that shit and my music says so. When I'm on stage it's just me, the band, the music and the folks who came to listen. Every time I take my brown self out on that stage it feels like I'm meant to be there, it's like singin' in my bathroom—that's how right I feel. I give every vocal note all I got, my deep voice, all my breath, and the blues I carry around like a child—always with me, loving me while it makes me cry.

(Girl stands, gives Bessie a stare down and exits to the bathroom. Bessie returns the glass to the bar. Acknowledges the bartender's thoughts)

Bessie

Un-huh.

(She and bartender share a heavy laugh, then follows girl back to the bathroom. Bartender quickly follows to listen at the door.)

Bartender

Aww shit. (Lights out)

Nina Simone

(Lights up on Nina at the piano. She plays a few notes then sings) Alabama's got me so upset, Tennessee's made me lose my rest, and everybody knows about Mississippi Goddamn.

Nina

(Nina plays a short riff) That's it.

Bartender

Nina.

(Sings) Eunice Kathleen Waymon...been so long since I used that name mama gave me when she brought me into this world it feels odd on my tongue like a new song does when I try it for the first time. Time, that thing poets make into a person on New Year's Eve has a way of catching up with you, even if you running fast as your body can carry you. Always been my enemy. Even when I was little I used to tell mama that it passed too fast. She'd sit me down in the tall chair in the kitchen she kept so I could eat with her and daddy, look at me long and slow, then give me a cookie and call one of her sisters in the church to talk about me. She'd always be surprised that a child could be so into time, would say I was a old soul, been here before. Mama taught me to pray before I could talk. She'd take my hands and put them together when I was a toddler, say the words for me and pretend that whatever sounds came out of my mouth was me trying to repeat God's words. We went to church a lot, but instead of listening to what mama was saying at the pulpit, I'd be sitting with the other children watching the piano and waiting for my favorite part of church, when Ms. Lacy got up to play and lead the choir in song. When that happened, I'd ease out of my chair any time I could and get as close to Ms. Lacy as possible. I'd watch every

move she made over the keyboard, I'd try to remember what each key in each song sounded like, then I'd go home and practice on our piano—learning by ear all the favorite songs of our church by the time I was 6. I was born at the ass end of the Depression. Daddy had his own business, so up till the crash they'd lived pretty good. Afterwards, like everything else—it was harder for Black people to do anything—get jobs, keep they businesses, live each day with race hatred bumping they heels like the hogs Claude McKay wrote about in that poem I love. All white folks weren't like that though. Hell, if not for the white people who stepped up to mama and daddy to help me, I never would have had a chance to spend my life doing what God put me here for—bless them, bless their children. Private, integrated high school, then Julliard, the dessert. The experience like working at love all day long, sweating in the sun of the teachers who kept on your behind like a July day with no shade, then eating a huge, chocolate, ice cream sundae with a cherry on top. Music, Music, Music—my life, happy as a Black girl could be in segregation right up to the day white folks killed those little girls, right up to the day they murdered Medgar Evers in Mississippi. After that everything changed. My music turned to misery, *Mississippi Goddamn* my protest turned into lyrics.

(Nina sings entire song)

Nina:

So much hurt, so much hate, some days I'd stay in the house all day and just sit with myself, trying to find some peace I didn't have, and couldn't have long as my people are being treated like this. Over time my favorite song has shifted, one year it's *Porgy*, the next it's *Goddamn*, the next *Black is the Color of my True Love's Hair* but right about now when I'm feeling more proud than ever of what I'm seeing in young Black folks today, I find myself

singing (She sings) To Be Young Gifted and Black, to be young gifted and Black over and over again—even in my sleep.

(Sound Cue. News report of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King. Nina reacts to sad news and exits. Bartender reacts to the sad news. (Lights out.)

Mahalia

(Lights up) (Mahalia enters. Begins singing “Precious Lord”)

I used to tell mama and anybody else who'd listen to a chile, that I came into this world with the arms of God wrapped around me, my birth a baptism, I didn't have to learn to be a good Christian, I was born with a little of him inside me. Come to think of it I've always thought God had to be a woman. Now that may sound crazy but every time I try to imagine God as a man, something gets stuck in my mind—this image of that rib that's supposed to have come from a man and that question no pastor's been able to answer to my satisfaction: Why don't men have the babies? Growing up with daddy and mama both being in the church, daddy's preaching often the only thing that kept the folks in our neighborhood goin' when hate came to visit like a white-hot flame, the word *nigra* spat in our faces like it was our name. Mama used to always tell the sisters who came to her *honey give it to God* too heavy to try to carry around---pain ain't like a baby—carry it for 9 months and let it out into the world to find its own place---it stays with you chipping on your spirit, makin' life even harder than it already is, turns everything you do into some kind of lie. You got to let it go—in a prayer, in pieces of paper where you write it out in pencil then light a match to it talking to God all the while, asking him to take it, to give you some peace, to allow you to get one day behind you so you can wake up and live the best you can through another one. People like to ask me questions. What's my favorite gospel song? Why do I think women should have the same rights as men? Why do I risk my life working with Martin, and anybody else who thinks race hatred is wrong, who want change? Most times I don't answer all their questions at once. I take my time, look them in the eye and figure out

why they askin'. Is it cause they really care, or cause they just want me to say somethin' I ain't said before so they can write it up and use it. This morning I woke up thinking about sparrows, of how small and innocent they are—the birds God loves the most and realized for the first time that even though my body's a lot bigger than that little bird's, we have a lot in common---Like them I understand my place in God's world, like them I fly through my music, through this big voice She gave me, like them, I know God is waiting . . . (Mahalia peers up proudly to the sky as if she is seeing God.) (Sound cue. Mahalia Jackson singing His Eye is on the Sparrow)
(Lights Out)
(Mahalia exits in the dark)

Zora Neale Hurston

(Lights up on Zora writing in her journal)

“I want a just mind, a busy life, and a timely death.” For me, life is about doing all I can to record the world of my people. The way we talk to each other a cadence that mixes Africa, with the South or the North, the way we sing combining slave song rhythms, with blues, and jazz, our souls in the music. The way we love each other, and the other shit too. How some of our men think women are less than them, think they own us. How we disagree, and fall out, betray each other some time, just like all other kinds of people. All of it important, so in the future when folk wanta know what it was like to be Black “now” they’ll have my stories, poems, letters, plays, and novels to look at, plus the work of a whole buncha other folks including Langston. When I travel I don’t use white folks’ terms like cultural anthropologist—anthropologist sounds like something you’d have to go to the doctor for—

I'm just myself, as at home amongst my people as I am when I'm alone in my house. 'Nother thing we talk about a lot is race hatred, lynching's, how most white people think they better than us, that we one half step above animals—Ain't that crazy? Me I've been 'round plenty-a white folks, had my share of white men—all that, and I've never understood what the big deal was—Why should we go out of our way to fight to be around people who don't want to be bothered with us? Every other group that's managed to make their way in this country—the Irish, the Italians, the Chinese, have done it by sticking together. By segregating themselves. I think Negroes should keep doing this too—but so many of the Head Negroes in Charge believe integration is the way to go—force white folks to go to school with us, drink with us, eat with us, work with us—Me I want to be around people who want to be around me—As for God, all these years I've been praying, been keeping my eyes peeled.

One evening right after me and Langston fell out over that play, I can still hear his mouth now “Zora, you got some goddamn nerve, taking that play we worked on together and claiming it as your own,” and blah, blah, blah...I'd stopped to rest by the side of the road. The sky was especially clear and the moon so blue it looked like an eye. Right next to where the sun was setting, I saw this huge hand reach over like it was pulling the horizon over the sun's head like a blanket—the hand was brown as me—the fingers curved and narrow, and when I blinked my eyes the sun disappeared all of a sudden and I was left with a feelin' . . .

ACTOR (Poem about Phyllis Hyman):

(Sound Cue: Thunderstorm)

(Girl enters wearing wet jacket and carrying a suitcase, then bartender enters from behind bar. She and the bartender are lovers and interact silently.

They're obviously breaking up. They embrace lovingly. She pushes him away then exits, bumping into woman entering in green dress. Woman takes a seat at the table and the bartender greets her)

Bartender

Good evening, how you doin'?

Woman

Hi.

Bartender

Waitin' on somebody special?

Woman

I sure am.

Bartender

Can I get you something to drink?

Woman

Yes, something special.

(Bartender brings her a drink.)

Bartender

It's on the house.

Woman

Thank you. (She takes a sip.)

(Actor in Black who sings "Here's that Rainy Day" enters and flirts with bartender, then goes to the mic as bartender exits. The actor in red reciting

the poem enters and stands beside the piano. Actor in Black begins singing while actor in red finds places to intertwine the poem with the song. Piece ends on last verse of song)

Her image on my friend's wall,
flower perched in her hair like Lady Day
takes me back to a star-dark night,
an oval revolving stage, West African queen
illuminated by lights that kiss her feet
like man in love

My head's stuck in an upturn, breathing
a rote response, all energy directed
to ears riding on melodious wave

In between songs she talks of life
and love as if she believes,
takes each of us up, a plateau
of blues, jazz, soul
strong as an elder's hands

I've always wanted to sing like Hyman,
open, easy, free, sound of lyrics
born in a body, composer God,
teacher the universe

There's a lesson here, woman who took

my breath away, magnificence
each of us could see

A gift she could not imagine.
Several days later she ended
a life I would have sworn was just beginning

like a virgin who chooses
escape before man
breaks her hymen.

(Actor in red removes red scarf, drops it and exits. Actor in Black picks up scarf puts it around her neck and exits.)

(Girl returns upset. She slowly paces around the bar, spends time touching the ring the bartender gave her trying to decide whether or not to return it. She finally decides, carefully removes and leaves the ring on the bar, takes a bottle of liquor and exits. Bartender returns, sees ring and lights out on him and the lady in green.)

June Jordan

(Student enters. Goes to the mic recites June Jordan poem “These Poems)

Student:

“These poems” by: June Jordan

They are things that I do

in the dark

reaching for you

whoever you are

And

Are you ready?

These words

they are stones in the water

running away

These skeletal lines

they are desperate arms for my

longing and love.

I am a stranger

learning to worship the strangers

around me

whoever you are

whoever I may become.

Good afternoon. I'm honored to introduce one of my heroes. Please give

Ms. June Jordan a warm welcome.

(June Jordan enters quickly)

June Jordan:

Can somebody tell me something? What is a some-timey activist? I mean how do you go from making a conscious decision to have a conscience about people, that you don't give a damn what color, gender, sexual preference, or anything else a person is—they are a person and deserving of everything anybody else gets. To well, um, I don't know if I can er uh think about, talk about, write about, march about this or that? I mean how can folk who want justice only care if they think it directly affects their particular flavor of oppression? I can't do that shit. Not that I'm holding myself up as any big deal. Took me a long time to convince some people in my life including my students of that---this ain't about me, don't hold up Ms. Jordan as some kinda somebody to be put up on a pedestal. What I've been trying to say is

that we're *all* special. Red, Black, White, Brown, Yellow, lesbian, elders—all of us. Growing up I said *I don't believe that* a lot—not always when I meant that exactly either. And there were plenty of opportunities racism, war, sexism, homophobia, religious persecution being what they've always been—popular, unjust, and anti-human. I come from a long line of Black people who've been saying what they think since we've been here, who create art to say what can't be put into a letter to someone, it's either too big and hurtful, or too big and joyful—something. I realized a long time ago that even if I couldn't change the world, I can at least add my voice to the millions who came before me, came up with me, and are coming up behind me, to say when we believe something is unjust. Right now, for me it's what's happening to the Palestinians in the Middle East. This doesn't mean I'm against Jewish people---it's means I'm *for* justice for everyone on both sides of this. Not very popular in this country right about now to point out that Palestinians deserve human rights too, that compromise could be accomplished if there was more support in the states for coming together to work things out, rather than always making it clear that the U.S. is on Israel's side. Shouldn't be *no* sides for us. America for once needs to be for Peace, needs to work harder to bring the two sides to the table and help to keep them there. I mean every time I hear about another breakdown in talks, another escalation of the violence on one side or the other I say *I don't believe that*.

A little while ago, when James Byrd, Jr. was dragged behind those white dudes' car so long his head came off—I said *I don't believe that* when what I meant was I did believe it, that I was sorry I didn't stop to doubt it even for a moment. Sorry that this happened in the 1990s as if the Civil Rights Movement happened in a dream. I believe in peace and that war is a waste

of everything. Peoples' lives, everybody's time, dollars much needed everywhere doing something else like fighting AIDS, hunger, global warming, child trafficking. This means when we were in Vietnam I had something to say, when we did Dessert Storm I had something to say, and I've said so much about this ridiculous War on so-called Terror, I had to take a break to let my whole damn body re-group to even have the energy to write one more word. There's lots of folklore about wishes. One wish, as many as you want, as long as something good continues to happen, and then my favorite option—three wishes. If I had three wishes I'd wish for health and long life for everyone alive at this moment, I'd wish for unending human love for one another, and I'd wish for peace. Enjoy the music.
(Song about Peace plays)

Queen Latifah

(Young reporter waits in the green room to interview Ms. Latifah. Ms. Latifah enters)

Interviewer

(Stands)

Good evening Ms. Latifah, It's such an honor to meet you ma'am, I know all of your songs by heart, I've seen your movies so many times, mama won't let me watch them any more at the house. Thanks, so much for agreeing to let me interview you.

Queen Latifah

Calm down sweetheart. It's my pleasure. I always make time for the press and I appreciate the props. Thanks, so much for your support. Now, I know you have a job to do, so what's your first question?

Interviewer

What would you like our readers to know about you?

Queen Latifah

I came up in the rap scene so young, I had to invent an alter ego to deal with all the rush. The drama of breaking new ground for Black female MC's, the excitement and sometimes danger of hip hop concerts when shit gets hot and heavy, the rhymes bringing the real world a bit too close like a match that burns to the fingertips. So, I couldn't just be Dana Owens back then, I mean I was—but not all out front like that. When people hear “Queen” I think they stop there and let that one word and its dictionary meaning with the Black flava added of course, tell them everything they think they need to know about me. That in addition to this mammy bullshit that still makes too many see us as not emotional, as wearing the pants, as always being the head of the household. I wonder if anybody takes the time to look at the second part, to think about why I chose the nickname my Muslim cousin gave me?

Because it means sensitive—my brother Lance knew it. We were like two parts of the same path that diverged. I loved him, I wanted to protect him and I couldn't tell him much of nothing he'd really listen too—you know the usual man thang, what do women know mess. I still can't believe he died on the motorcycle I bought him. I remember how good it felt to be able to buy him something I knew he wanted more than anything. How much time I took to make certain it was just right. The look on his face the day I gave it to him. The backwards glance just before he rode off leaving my face dusty from the dirt the tires spread, and me laughing happy in the middle of the road saying a prayer he'd be alright. I remember his death. How at first, I cussed everybody out. I kept hearing it repeat in my head like a badly delivered news report. The woman telling the sound bite that ended his life

shifting quickly to another about the county fare—each time this made up voice ended in laughter—a macabre sound—me waking up crying. I was 23 when I came out with *Black Reign* my brother’s eulogy. Every song a reminder of how much he nurtured my life, like water does earth. My soul planted with seeds he believed in before I did. I grew up the day I lost my brother. Keep the key to his motorcycle with me always. All the old-time sayings about loss I ever heard started to make sense like a complicated musical arrangement I never wanted to hear again, and I got busier to stop me from just standing still. This country is so crazy about being gay—I kept that part of me secret too. My love life, like my real name held back so I could maintain my sanity, keep some private in a life that’s so public I have to think about every move. Deciding to come out just happened. I realized that I wasn’t being fair to my lady, that no matter what the response was I was financially secure, and more importantly finally cool with letting my fans know more about the real me Dana Owens a.k.a. Queen Latifah.

(Sound Cue. Song Plays)

(Lights out)

Michelle Obama

(Make up artist prepares to do Mrs. Obama’s makeup. (Song stops playing when she puts in her ear plugs) She’s listening to music and dancing a bit. She stops as Mrs. Obama enters)

Makeup Artist

Good evening Mrs. Obama. It’s an honor to meet you. I’m Candace and I’ll be doing your makeup.

Mrs. Obama

Nice to meet you Candace. This has been a non-stop busy day, it will be nice to have some quiet time, while you make these bags under my eyes disappear.

Makeup Artist

Well, I sure don't see anything even close to bags, but I'll do my best. Do you have any particular shade of lipstick or blush in mind?

Mrs. Obama

I sure don't. I trust, work your magic.

(A few moments pass while she prepares her face)

Mrs. Obama

Who are you listening to?

Makeup Artist

I'm listening to Luther, Dance with my father. Want to hear a little?

Mrs. Obama

Yes, I'd love to.

(Song plays briefly. Candace takes a selfie of the two of them. She finishes Mrs. Obama's makeup and leaves)

Mrs. Obama

Every time I hear Luther Vandross sing *Dance with my father*, I remember mine. My father taught me to dance in the front room of our house—slow 45's that pre-dated Luther on the record player, my patent leather shoed feet on top of daddy's. He was always so patient with me, almost as if he'd been a little girl too, and knew all about it. The love Luther shares in that song is so real it makes it hard to breathe some times because I have moments I want daddy back so badly, I want time to do what it never does—turn

around like a lonely daughter, rewind yesterday. But I don't stay in that space long. Daddy also taught me how to be practical, to make plans, set goals and then work long and hard not only to have dreams, but make them come true. Daddy and mama raised me on the South side of Chicago, the largest Black neighborhood in the country. That's where I learned what it means to have a village raise a child. It's where mama, who stayed at home to care for me and my brother while daddy worked at the water plant, taught me the importance of being a mother to my children. Today so many of us have it twisted. People think there's something wrong with a woman who stays home to raise her babies. The story's always told as if something important's missing. That's always struck me as crazy. Our children *are* the future. Cliché yes, but so true that when I hear folks talk about a lost generation of youth, I ask them—and you think they're lost why? Me and Barack are partners in the best sense. When I realized he was going to be president, I started spending even more time with him and our daughters. And at night I'm on my knees with God. Not because I doubt for a moment that my man will be a fine president, that we will be a committed, compassionate and loving First Family. Because even though I know our whole lives have prepared us for this, I know that everything I've experienced including my father and mother's love, my brother's support, the love between me and my husband, between us and our children will not get us through this next four years without God's everlasting loving arms around us. I know that I will always be part of the South side where I was born and raised, that the root of community is "unity" and I'll never forget where I've come from.

Makeup Artist:

Okay, Mrs. Obama, I mean First Lady Obama, we're ready for you.

(First Lady Obama stops to take a selfie before she exits)

The end