3

"Miss Rhythm" Speaks Out

Ruth Brown on R&B and Covers

Singer Ruth Brown (1928–2006), whose title of "Miss Rhythm" signified her importance to the growing R&B field in the early 1950s, was one of the first artists to bring prominence to the independent label Atlantic Records. As she discusses in these excerpts from her 1996 autobiography, black artists like herself were at a decided disadvantage in the 1950s. Not only were they limited in their access to channels of distribution, such as radio and television, but their very songs were often duplicated virtually note for note by white singers, whose versions were then promoted in wider marketplaces, and for greater sales. The flood of cover versions that floated between rhythm and blues, rock 'n' roll, and pop in the 1950s proved to be a point of serious contention for black singers like her and LaVern Baker (1929–1997), who as Brown mentions, formally complained of the inequality that she faced competing with white cover singers like Georgia Gibbs.[1] On one bitter occasion, Baker even went so far as to name Gibbs as the recipient of her flight insurance, reasoning that if any tragedy were to befall her, Gibbs would be without a source of further revenue. For all the deep resentment and pain that singers like Brown and Baker felt, at the same time Brown acknowledges that she did not view all covers as unwanted encroachments. As long as the recording "contributed" to the song, it was welcome.

Any real money I made came from touring, and I was always out there promoting the records. Back then any record by a black artist needed every ounce of help it could get. The expression "R&B chart" was another way in the later forties and early fifties to list "race and black" as well as "rhythm and blues" records. And the reason so few discs by black artists crossed over to the Billboard's mainstream chart was simple: it was compiled from white-owned radio station playlists featuring music by white artists, with our list catering to blacks. As Jerry Wexler, Herb's successor at Atlantic, put it when asked if it was difficult to get R-and-B records played on general-audience stations in the early fifties, "*Difficult* would have been easy. It was *impossible.*"[2]

It very gradually became less so, of course, as R-and-B artists broke through the barriers by the sheer strength and quality of their music. But it took time, and throughout my biggest hit-making period I was forced to stand by as white singers like Georgia Gibbs and Patti Page duplicated my records note for note and were able to plug them on top television shows like *The Ed Sullivan Show*, to which I had no access.

Chuck Willis wrote "Oh, What a Dream" especially for me, and it was my favorite song, but it was Patti Page, with an identical arrangement, who got to sing it on national television. Even topical

1 For more on LaVern Baker's reactions to the cover versions of her songs, see Chip Deffaa's chapter on her in *Blue Rhythms: Six Lives in Rhythm and Blues* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996).

2 "Herb" is Herb Abramson, the co-founder of Atlantic Records. Jerry Wexler succeeded him at Atlantic in 1953, when Abramson was drafted into the Army.

stuff like my "Mambo Baby" had a Georgia Gibbs duplicate rushed out. My labelmate and good friend LaVern Baker, who joined Atlantic in '53, suffered the same fate on her original of "Tweedle Dee"—another note-for-note copy by Her Nibs Miss Gibbs. There was no pretense, either, that they were anything but duplicates. Mercury actually called up Tommy Dowd on the day they were cutting "Tweedle Dee" and said, "Look, we've got the same arrangement, musicians and tempo, we might as well have the same sound engineer too."

It was tough enough coming up with hit sounds, therefore doubly galling to see them stolen from under our noses. Few seemed to stop and question the morality of this, least of all the publishers, to whom it was a case of the more the merrier. LaVern for one did, protesting to her congressman over her treatment at Mercury's hands, but then as now, there was no copyright protection on arrangements.

I was denied sales abroad as well, although I knew nothing of this at the time. "Abroad," as far as the feedback from Atlantic's accounting department was concerned, could have been the moon. Having made number three on Billboard's R-and-B chart in the States, and actually crossing over to their pop charts as well, reaching number twenty-five, my version of "Lucky Lips" was ignored in Britain. The number itself hit there years later in a 1963 version by Cliff Richard. Naturally the lyrics were suitably amended for him, for "When I was a little girl my curls were long and silky" sounded pretty ridiculous even for me. Cliff took the tune to number four on the British charts, well into his unprecedented run of over one hundred chart entries that continues—and deservedly so—to this day. Why he's not bigger in the U.S. I'll never know.

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My gripe would never be with legitimate covers, or subsequent versions like Cliff Richard's, but with bare-faced duplicates, with no artistic merit whatsoever. Everybody in the business accepted covers as fair game. There were umpteen versions of songs like "Hey, There," "Stranger in Paradise" and "Around the World," and you chose your favorite version based not only on the singer, but on the different treatments and arrangements on offer. I covered several songs myself, like "Be Anything (But Be Mine)," originated by Winnie Brown with the Lionel Hampton Orchestra, and Larry Darnell's "I'll Get Along Somehow," but they were never by any stretch of the imagination mere duplicates. We *contributed* to the songs.

Source: Ruth Brown with Andrew Yule, *Miss Rhythm: The Autobiography of Ruth Brown, Rhythm and Blues Legend* (New York: Donald I. Fine Books, 1996), pp. 76–78, 110.