

Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee

Marion James-Majors (1934-2016)



Born Mary Agnes Childress on October 8, 1934, Nashville native Marion James, later known as the city's "Queen of the Blues," was fated to be a star. During her formative years, Marion's musically-inclined family significantly influenced what would become her legendary musical style. Her grandparents sang and played instruments, her mother served as a pianist for large local churches, her uncle played guitar and banjo, and her sister sang with gospel group the Clara Ward Singers. At the tender age of five, Marion learned to sing and began to develop her own vocal and performance styles with her mother playing piano accompaniment. She drew inspiration from her mother's record collection and Blues singers at Black vaudeville shows. By age 12, she found herself singing in churches and soon after became interested in venturing out solo to sing R&B.

Nightclub performances along Jefferson Street characterized James's early career during the 1950s and early 1960s, when the North Nashville corridor was bustling with activity from nightclubs, restaurants, shops, and other businesses built and owned by and for the local African American community. During this time, patrons could start at 6th Avenue and work their way west through entertainment venues all the way down Jefferson Street to Tennessee State University. Many talented African American Nashvillians lent their talent and spirit to this rich musical scene, including Earl Gaines, Roscoe Shelton, DeFord Bailey, Jimmy Church, Johnny Bragg, Harold and Bobby Hebb, and Memphis great Hank Crawford, who jammed at 28th and Jefferson. Bigger stars like Little Richard, Gorgeous George, Etta James, and Fats Domino also gravitated to these clubs, drawing huge crowds at their shows. Marion's lively and raucous performances earned her the moniker "House Rockin' James," and she followed an alternating pattern of being "on the road" and performances back along Jefferson Street.

James met her husband, trumpeter, songwriter, and Nashville native Jimmy "Buzzard" Stewart, after he left the band of prolific Memphis blues singer Bobby "Blue" Bland. During the early 1960s, Stewart formed and led Marion's band, an ensemble that included bassist Billy Cox and the up-and-coming guitar legend Jimi Hendrix, a former Ft. Campbell paratrooper. Notably, Hendrix got his professional start and gained a deep appreciation for gospel through this band. Though the styles of Stewart and Hendrix clashed, they played together at Club Del Morocco, and Marion considered both to be musical geniuses. By the summer of 1962, James had already attained local fame, advertised as "the Great Miss Marion James with her famous Continentals" for a show at Sunset Park in Madison. The band often played the Chitlin' Circuit at venues in Alabama or places like Lebanon, Fayetteville, Lewisburg, and Murfreesboro in Tennessee. Stewart and James often let struggling and hungry traveling Black musicians stay at their two-bedroom apartment between gigs, as they did for Gene Allison, Little Johnny Taylor, Lattimore Brown, Billy Cox, Larry Lee, and Jimi Hendrix.

James's first major commercial success came in 1966 with the Top 10 hit, "That's My Man," recorded under Nashville-based Excello Records with sidemen Stewart, Cox, and Johnny Jones, who helped write and record the song. In 1967, she went on to record "Find Out What (You Want)(Before You Lose What You Got/I'm the Woman for You" by Billy Cox and "It's a Walk Out/I'm the Woman for You" under Nashville label K & J Records. That same year, she also recorded "Don't Come Around/Hound Dog" as the first artist under J & J Records, a recording label operated by Jimmy Stewart and Johnny Terrell. In 1969, James attained membership in the American Society of Composers, Authors & Publishers (ASCAP) and recorded "Sardines

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and Turnip Greens” with Guy Moland on J & J Records. After this commercial success, she toured the U.S., Canada, and Europe performing oft-sold out live shows and at festivals. She recorded “Children Do What Children Do” and “Our Little Love Song (Don’t You Know It’s Love)” with Frankie Davis on Ma-Fra-Da Records in 1979.

In addition to her performative legacy, Marion James served as a philanthropist for Nashville’s music community. She established an annual Musicians Reunion Benefit in 1982 to help musicians in need and other causes including the American Cancer Society and the Nashville Rescue Mission. Typically held at the former Club Baron, the benefit evolved into the Marion James Aid Society, which she spearheaded for over three decades.

In the mid-1980s, James took a break from performances and chose to travel for a few years. She returned to the stage in the 1990s, when she joined up with guitarist Casey Lutton and The Hypnotics. They performed live shows together and in 1994 released an eponymous album under Italian label Appaloosa Records. James took the spotlight again in 1997 at the Nashville Music Awards, where she sang “Every Night of the Week” with Tracy Nelson and co-presented the R&B awards with Ted Jarrett. Her second CD, *Essence*, was released in 2003 and the following year, she headlined at Franklin’s Jazz, Blues & Heritage Festival. In 2005, her hit “That’s My Man” was reissued on *Night Train to Nashville: Volume Two*, and she played numerous shows at the Bourbon Street Blues & Boogie Bar in Printer’s Alley. In subsequent years, she headlined at various venues and events in Nashville, including a Tennessee Jazz and Blues Society concert at Belle Meade Plantation (2007), the Nashville Blues Awards and Nashville Spring Blues Festival (2009). James released her *Northside* album in 2012, which climbed to #10 on the *Living Blues* chart.

In 2013, James recorded her hit “Back in the Day,” which recalls the musical history of Nashville’s Jefferson Street, at the Jefferson Street Sound (JSS), a combination recording studio and history museum. Her last large-scale stage performance was at the

Metro Nashville 50th anniversary celebration; this concert included Emmylou Harris, Sam Bush, and Del McCoury and drew over ten thousand fans. She officially earned the title “Nashville’s Queen of the Blues” in 2015 and thereafter enjoyed performing in her signature rhinestone tiara.

Reflecting on her career, James recalled some of her most memorable gigs, which included shows on the road to Steven’s Rose Room in Jackson, Mississippi, and jams with Ted Taylor and Joe Hinton (“Release Me”), with Clarence Gatemouth Brown in Amsterdam, and back in Nashville with Bobby Blue Bland. She experienced most of the stories in her songs and felt that the Blues should tell the true story of one’s life. Though she achieved early stardom and international success, she never forgot to help others, including her fellow musicians. She played a show with Rufus Thomas in Memphis at the Blues Extravaganza at BB King’s on Beale Street and helped him get to Nashville. She also helped Chick Willis get into the local Blues scene and the Blues Society in Nashville. James credited Etta James, Ella Fitzgerald, and Big Maybelle as her biggest influences.

During her final years, James worked to preserve the musical heritage of Jefferson Street, which she deemed the “first Music Row,” by leading a fundraising campaign for two statues to honor Jimi Hendrix and Little Richard. She wanted to ensure that Nashville would be known as more than just the capital of country music. “Nashville’s Queen of the Blues” passed away in January 2016 at the age of 81 and is buried at Greenwood Cemetery North. Marion’s Hallet, Davis & Co. upright piano and several of her belongings are on display at JSS Museum, where her legacy lives on.

Caroline Eller
