

BETTE SMITH BIO

Critically acclaimed rock & soul singer Bette Smith traces elements of her life-affirming new album 'The Good, The Bad and The Bette' to her childhood in rough Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. Musically, it connects to the gospel music she heard in church and the soul music on the corners. No party host would regret putting on this platter!

She remembers, "My father was a church choir director. I was singing since I was five years old. I take it to church. I just break out, start speaking in tongues." She also heard gospel around the house every weekend. "My mother listened to nothing but gospel," she recalls, citing Mahalia Jackson and Reverend James Cleveland. "Every Sunday morning, she would get up and put on these records while dressing and praising the Lord," she says. Bed-Stuy block parties would also have revivalist-style gospel acts. "I'm steeped in it!" she adds.

This injection of soul music and gospel into rock & roll powered a breakout in 2017's 'Jetlagger,' which received raves from NPR, Paste, American Songwriter, Billboard, MOJO, and a feature in the New York Times. Not just a critics' darling, the album rose to #1 on the Roots Music Report chart and topped off a banner year with a celebrated appearance at the Montreux Jazz Festival. Billboard said, "A rugged, chugging southern soul record... Like Betty Davis or Betty Wright before her, she imbues tracks with shingly, sawtoothed texture, capable of breaking off a high note with a throaty cry or scraping so low and wide that she threatens to put her bass player out of work."

MOJO opined, "An incredible debut from the next big-voiced soul sensation out of Brooklyn."

"A batch of tunes as powerful and taut as her wonderfully craggy voice... with a debut full-length as sturdy and uncompromising as Jetlagger, she's the swaggering proof that there is nothing dated about soulful rock and roll sung with attitude, defiance, and a take-no-prisoners aesthetic," raved American Songwriter.

The Brooklyn, NY native enlisted Drive-By Truckers' Matt Patton and engineer/drummer Bronson Tew as producers at Dial Back Sound in Water Valley, MS; Patton has previously helmed projects by Jimbo Mathus and the Dexateens as well as contributed to albums with Dom Flemons, Seratones, and Candi Staton. He played bass on 'Jetlagger,' which was produced by Jimbo Mathus and the two found a kinship and shared vision. She says, "When I called on my producer Matthew Robert Patton, I told him that I wanted a southern rock soul/Aretha Franklin/'I once was lost but now I'm found' theme." He in turn enlisted guests North Mississippi Allstar Luther Dickinson (guitar on "Signs and Wonders") and fellow DBT member Patterson Hood (vocals on "Everybody Needs Love") to join him on the new album.

Patton says, "We wanted to get heavy into her rock side. Even the ballads on this record hit hard. We were pulling from Ike & Tina, Betty Wright and Betty Davis, stuff like that."

Bette also went deeper in her own songwriting, vulnerably revealing a childhood trauma. She continues, “I told Matt a little about my childhood and my relationship with my mom. We

outlined that we’d make the album about relationships, to reflect that part of my personality.” The album is sequenced to tell her story, from a present-day portrait of the strong woman she is to a flashback of her trauma and the emotional void she tried to fill with the party life, before receiving a sign and finding healing. Bette explains, “The album message is a story seen through the lens of a child, and then an adult, who still wears her scars of childhood—but also of hope, strength and optimism going forward in life. Often people think I’m very confident and strong, but they don’t know I’ve faced many obstacles and traumas I fought hard to overcome.”

Her own artistic process helped bring clarity. She enumerates, “There are no words. You’re just so small. You can’t defend yourself. It’s about finding the words to tell, the strength to forgive.”

She says a final goodbye to her mother in the ballad “Whistle Stop,” another emotional touchstone on the album. It’s based on a dream that she had right before her mother died. Bette recalls, “I was on the platform and she was at the last car on the train and she was waving me goodbye and the way I analyzed the dream was that she didn’t say goodbye to me when she abandoned me the first time but she did say goodbye the second time. I’m telling her, ‘come spend some time with me,’ because she haunts me. It’s unrequited love.”

Completing the cycle is a stretch of songs of love and gratitude. Her dog taught her a lesson that spurs on the wah-wah guitar-steeped rocking “(I Wanna Be Your) Human.” Bette says, “I never learned how to cope with stress because my mother showed me [how she did it, by saying] ‘I gotta go. I’m outta here.’ That doesn’t work in a long-term relationship. My dog taught me trust and vulnerability. ‘When your heart is in pain, I wanna be your human.’”

All the more remarkably, Bette sang her heart out on short trips to Mississippi. Patton recalls, “Bette’s performances here were incredibly clutch. The turning point for the record came early on when she figured out what the record was about. At that point it became pretty heavy. With the emotional heft, there was the fatigue of travel, times of sickness and the time constraints under which we worked. This made those wow moments that she’s so capable of vocally super dramatic. Bette was delivering during the moments we absolutely needed.”

She is in a good place today, saying. “I’m more than a survivor. I’m a thriver! I have hope, strength and optimism going forward in life. I’ve meditated twice a day every day for the past three years.”

Touring has also been redemptive as well. She opened for the Drive-By Truckers and Kenny Wayne Shepherd across the Northeast and Midwest in 2021, and performed at the Telluride Blues & Brews Festival (main stage) among others.

“It’s amazing, like a dream come true,” she says. “It’s very spiritual and I go into a trance when I’m singing. The fans are like family. I feel very loved. They are very present. I went through all of

this so I could sing and now that I can sing I'm finding the love that I've been looking for all my life. It feels like a homecoming. There's an instant feeling of family reunion. They talk to me like they met their little sister. It's the same love in New York, Nashville, or Spain. When I sing these songs, it's a connection of inner children. I'm singing to their inner child."

Those are a bunch of rockin' inner children, naturally.