

# ARTFORUM

## Standard Deviation

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By Sasha Frere-Jones



Patty Waters performing at the First Unitarian Congregational Society, Brooklyn, April 5, 2018. Photo: Chris Perry. Image courtesy of Blank Forms.

How would you sing, if you wanted to sing? Would you want to sound alluring, get the kids swooning? Patty Waters, at the age of seventy-three, has her own answers to these questions, and few of them are immediately apparent. Dubbed “Priestess of the Avant-Garde” by *JazzTimes*, Waters grew up in Iowa, then moved, while in her teens, to San Francisco and eventually to New York, all to pursue her singing career. She now lives in California, as she has for decades.

Waters is best known for two albums released on ESP-Disk in 1966—*Sings*, a studio album, and *College Tour*, a compilation of live performances—but it was her thirteen-minute-long interpretation of the traditional folk ballad “Black Is the Color of My True Love’s Hair,” or, rather, the manner in which it is delivered, that made her famous. Waters doesn’t really sing it as much as she and her trio lay bare its structure. Pianist Burton Greene, bassist Steve Tintweiss, and drummer Tom Price scrape around time and harmony, landing nowhere near a consistent chord sequence. After running through two verses, Waters gets down to business and reduces the lyrics to the word *black*, which she runs with for ten minutes. She whispers, she shrieks, she sounds like she’s hugging the wall. The song disappears, and she makes all of the evacuated space her own. But Waters never sounds possessed or detached from her own will: Her decision-making is audible. The extended technique, a vocal interpretation of the ecstatic music friends such as saxophonist Albert Ayler were making at the time, is also deployed in other performances, like her versions of “Hush Little Baby” and “Wild Is the Wind” captured on *College Tour*. Waters’s name has become shorthand for these horror-movie screams, which are probably why both Diamanda Galás and Lydia Lunch have cited her as an inspiration. (Lunch is currently completing an entire album-length tribute to Waters.) Waters stopped making music for thirty years and then reappeared in 1996 with a straight-ahead, no-shrieks album of standards called *Love Songs*. Another, *Happiness Is A Thing Called Joe: Live in San Francisco 2002* (2005), is also all standards, with nary a huff nor hiss nor yowl.

Her story has holes. Why did she go away? Why abandon the style that made her famous? (I am fondest of “Song of the One (I Love) or Love, My Love” on *College Tour*, which sounds like a tea kettle and a gong duking it out.) One answer is that she was raising her son, Andrew, which is not an unusual reason for a woman artist to abandon her art form. (Andrew’s father was drummer Clifford Jarvis, with whom she remained friendly

although he was not directly parenting their child.) In the last twenty years, as Waters slowly returned to performing, she's kept to a consistent set list of standards like "Wild Is the Wind," "Lover Man," and "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry," along with the only original song she still performs, "Moon, Don't Come Out Tonight." At first, she distanced herself from her old extended vocal technique strategies, but they've been creeping back in to create a new synthetic style.

Creative streams that appear to be disparate—the desire to write new standards or sing old ones, or to empty out your soul without the use of words—are not separate, according to Waters. "I'm the same singer for both and they do sound like one person," she said in a 2018 interview. Though she understood her own blend, I didn't really, fully get it until I heard a new album, called simply *Live* (2019), recorded in April of 2018 at Brooklyn's First Unitarian Congregational Society. On this Blank Forms Editions release, the freaky has been subsumed into the not-freaky, and the result is infinitely freakier. Waters doing more or less normal music is a trip.



She performs here with Greene, the pianist from the original ESP-Disk 1966 records, as well as with bassist Mario Pavone and drummer Barry Altschul. "You've Changed" is the perfect opener, because we all have. Waters sings with a permanent fissure, a wobble that wraps around the pitches. There are no free-vocal passages now, no yips or screams—the fracture and deviation are there in the delivery, which rarely sounds like "jazz singing," whatever that means. The band does a remarkable job of mimicking her lenticular sound, its feeling of being simultaneously of two worlds. The three musicians seem like both a traditional piano trio and a deconstructed version thereof, moving between the two views. From a hundred paces, this might be cabaret; up close, it is bright and off-register, both luscious and desiccated.

Singing "I Love You, Porgy," her pleas are broken, urgent. "I wanna stay here with you, forever, I'll be glad" disintegrates like a flyer in the rain. The band finds the chords, slowly and gratefully, as if they've formed a human chain across a river and each change, like a new foothold, brings relief. At the end, everything ripples away as Waters sings "Porgyyyyy" as if she's sinking out of sight.

While the first half of the album might fool the relatives into thinking they have come to Ye Olde Jazz show, the second half complicates things. Waters approaches "Strange Fruit" like a poem; the band isn't doing anything like timekeeping. Greene worries the inside of the piano, while Altschul sends whistles and cymbals through the air. Waters conjures a sense of disoriented affect while seeming entirely present, like a steadfast witness to the fact of the songs rather than their interpreter. "Hush Little Baby" and "Wild Is the Wind" continue and solidify this method, tossing fixed melody and rhythm away in favor of an atomized series of exchanges between Waters and her musicians. Just as she did fifty-odd years ago with "Black Is the Color of My True Love's Hair," she reduces "Wild Is the Wind" to one word, wild, bouncing it off of the band until the utterance comes to a stop.

When Waters performs in Los Angeles on September 26 at Zebulon for the release of *Live*, she will play "Black Is the Color of My True Love's Hair" for the first time since its original recording. "I'd like to think I was a participant during that intense time in the mid-'60s," Waters told me recently. "I respect tradition, although I broke with it in some ways." More compelling than her screaming is how fully she now embraces her fragility—cementing her place in the tradition of singers who serve songs while making them entirely their own.

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