

THE VINYL *District*

Graded on a Curve: Patty Waters, Live

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By Joseph Neff



No discussion of the 1960s avant-garde is complete without touching upon the work of singer Patty Waters, as she predated such vocal iconoclasts as Yoko Ono and Linda Sharrock. Additionally, she was a prime influence on Patti Smith and perhaps most pertinently, Diamanda Galas. Live, her latest and first new release on vinyl since 1966, was captured in performance at the First Unitarian Congregational Society in Brooklyn on April 5, 2018 with the pianist from her debut Burton Greene, bassist Mario Pavone, and percussionist Barry Altschul. Dedicated to the great pianist Cecil Taylor on the day of his passing, its run of 1,000 LPs and 750 CDs is out September 20 via Blank Forms.

“People ask me (about) my influences, I would have to say Patty Waters. They say other people and I say, nahh, Patty Waters, listen to Patty Waters. I listened to her twice. That’s all it took for some grain of inextricable influence” —Diamanda Galas

Patty Waters’ two greatest albums, *Sings* from 1965 and *College Tour* from the following year, combine to secure her reputation as an avant vocal priestess of the first order. They were cut for the storied label ESP Disk, an enterprise known for its stable of fringe ’60s artifacts ranging from the proto out-rock of The Godz and Cromagnon, assorted strains of folk including The Fugs, Pearls Before Swine, The Holy Modal Rounders, Erica Pomerance, and Ed Askew, and most prominently, a ton of the era’s avant jazz; in fact, it was saxophonist Albert Ayler who introduced Waters to ESP’s owner-operator Bernard Stollman.

Instead of its deceptively plain title, her debut for the label could’ve been called *The Vocal Extremities of Patty Waters*, for its first side offered seven short tracks of hushed and isolated intensity, with Waters’ accompanying herself on piano, while the second held one side-long dive into the emotional abyss, with Waters working herself into a wailing screaming frenzy as Burton Greene plays piano and piano harp, Steve Tintweiss works the bass, and Tom Price delivers percussion.

Like many ESP Disk titles, the back cover stated, “You never heard such sounds in your life.” This was no exaggeration. Her detonation of “Black is the Color of My True Love’s Hair” still has the power to unnerve a room. While *Sings* has much in common with the ’60s free jazz movement, to simply label it as an out-jazz record does it and Waters a disservice. It’s undeniably an avant-garde experience, and I rate it as one of the decade’s very best.

Her follow-up for ESP does deepen the jazz connection, as pianists Dave Burrell and Ran Blake plus saxophonist Giuseppi Logan (although playing flute here) contribute. It also lessens the two-a.m. desperation of loneliness vibe dominating *Sings*’ first side (understandably, as *College Tour* documents live performance) and doesn’t sustain the mayhem of her debut’s side two, though she still travels far beyond the comfort zone of squares: “Hush Little Baby With Ba Ha Bad,” “Wild is the Wind,” and “Song of the One (I Love) or Love, My Love” are the prime examples.

And for decades, with the exception of a vital (but out of print and expensive) contribution to The Marzette Watts Ensemble's self-titled 1969 entry into Savoy Records' Bill Dixon-curated New Jazz Series (more on this one below), that was the entirety of Waters' discography. She didn't disappear from the world, but rather simply traveled to California to raise her son. It was in 1996 that she reemerged artistically with *Love Songs*, a CD of tunes thoroughly in the vocal jazz tradition.

Love Songs paired her with pianist Jessica Williams (who also played synth on the closing track), and for those enamored with Waters' prior work, it might've seemed a major backslide into normalcy. However, in 2004 the Water label issued *You Thrill Me: A Musical Odyssey 1960-1979*, its contents illuminating how Waters, heavily impacted by the greatness of Billie Holiday, began in trad mode (Blank Forms mentions that she performed with Bill Evans, Mingus, Chick Corea, and Herbie Hancock) before traveling (to swipe an Eric Dolphy album title) *Out There* (notably, most of *You Thrill Me* postdates *College Tour*).

Opening with Waters singing a commercial for Jax beer, *You Thrill Me* has much to recommend it, as does her Holiday tribute *Happiness Is A Thing Called Joe: Live In San Francisco 2002* for the DBK Works label (again CD/ digital-only), but after time well spent with her newest record I'm prepared to call it her finest since *College Tour*, in large part for how it encompasses the totality of her musical experiences up to now.

Live is very much constructed like her debut, with the ballads on side one and the avant excursions on the flip, though there are some major differences. The first seven tracks on *Sings* were all Waters originals that cohered into a concentrated splat of *Dark Night of the Soul*, but on *Live*, the first Waters composition, "Moon, Don't Come Up Tonight," doesn't arrive until the end of side one (it was track one on *Sings*).

They are preceded by two songs associated with Holiday, record opener "You've Changed" and "Lover Man," along with a superb jazz rendering of Hank Williams' "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry" (reminding me of her version of "Georgia on My Mind" from *You Thrill Me*) and a solid take of "I Love You, Porgy" nicely reinforcing Waters' inside vocal jazz bona fides.

Altogether, side one of *Live* recalls her more recent output as much as *Sings*, though the playing of Greene, Pavone and Altschul transcends mere backing. And as said, side two moves considerably beyond standard jazz singer mode, though Waters and the band do so gradually, beginning with an excursion into another staple from Holiday's career, the anti-lynching tune "Strange Fruit," which segues into "Nature Boy," a standard first recorded by Nat King Cole.

Instrumentally, the opening of side two does suggest the initial seconds of "Black is the Color of My True Love's Hair," so the connection to *Sings* is reinforced. But it's really her lyrical-vocal interpretation of Ornette Coleman's "Lonely Woman," the second time she's recorded it (the first was on that Marzette Watts Ensemble LP) that strengthens *Live*'s shift into an avant-garde dynamic.

Even as "Hush Little Baby With Ba Ha Bad" and "Wild is the Wind" close side two, it is the Waters of 2018 that's performing them, and that's fantastic. That means they don't unwind as wildly as they did in '65-'66, but for that, we have *Sings* and *College Tour*, two inexhaustible records of ever any were. As Greene, Pavone and Altschul are in top form, the Waters of *Live* is as robust as she was back then, but with palpable maturity and grace.

The loss of Cecil Taylor on that day surely stung (frankly, it still does), but this performance in tribute is heartening as it documents the breadth of Waters' enduring uniqueness. *Live* is a record to be cherished.

GRADED ON A CURVE: A

<http://www.thevinylidistrict.com/storefront/2019/09/graded-on-a-curve-patty-waters-live/>