



etta james

Behind every lady who sings the blues is a story of survival, and Etta James is no exception. James's voice is the full-bodied rasp behind the achingly beautiful "At Last," which is still a wedding staple 42 years after she recorded it. She has been nominated for 17 Grammys, winning for Best Jazz Vocal Performance in 1994. But beneath the glitter, Etta has battled drug abuse and serious weight problems. By age 62 she hit 398 pounds and could barely walk. For some singers that would spell the end of a career, but at 65 Etta James is drug-free, has shed 170 pounds and has released the self-produced rocking CD *Let's Roll*.

She said

I didn't want to be fat anymore. I couldn't walk, and my doctor couldn't operate on my knee until I lost some weight. I was thinking that pretty soon they were going to have to bring me onstage with one of those harnesses they use for horses. Then Roseanne Barr told me about a doctor who performs gastric-bypass surgery. I went to see him, read his literature, and had the surgery a few days later. Now I can wear leather pants. That makes me feel good.

I have four grandchildren, and two have been staying with me the last couple of days. When they all come to my house—oh my gosh!—I don't know what makes me say things like "Why don't you come visit?" The little one woke me up at 6:00 A.M. yesterday and said, "Grandma, it's light outside. Wake up." I wanted to say, "I'm not getting up. I don't care if the sun's in this room." But I didn't. With these little kids, you somehow just become a sucker.

When Malcolm X was assassinated I was working at the Apollo. They brought his body to the Unity Funeral Home, which was around the corner. Honi Coles, a tap dancer and manager at the Apollo, came upstairs and said, "Etta, we just got these phone calls to the theater saying anyone who was a follower of Islam is going to be assassinated." He was worried because I was a follower of Malcolm. Honi said, "Etta, I don't want you to take a chance going onstage." But I had to because I had hot records at that time. So Honi said, "I'll tell you what. You sing and I'll dance in front of you." Do you know this man danced in front of me? Wherever I moved he would move. He did that for two days. Honi Coles was really something.

I'm not a braggart, but when I was a little girl people used to come from all over Hollywood to hear me sing. Here was this 5-year-old sounding like a grown woman. People were shouting all over the place. It's the same thing now. When I go onstage the young people scream and holler as much as the older generation. But even so, I still get nervous before I go onstage.

When I was growing up, I wanted to be a hobo. I liked the way they would get on those railroad trains and ride. They had those sticks with the round little package filled with a potato, a piece of garlic and maybe a piece of meat. When they got to the next stop, there would be a hobo village and they'd have a meal. I told that to a friend and he said, "Etta, you're a glorified hobo now." I thought about it and realized it's true. I go to every town, hang around, meet people and eat all kinds of different foods. □

INTERVIEWED BY JEANNINE AMBER