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LaVern Baker

BY LEO SACKS

LAVERN BAKER REACHED DEEP down in her chesty contralto for the phrase that made her fabulous fill on "Tweedlee Dee" so memorable in 1954: "Hompy-om-bom-bom!" That warmth of spirit, nurtured by the Baptist church, brought out the best in the robust Baker—one of the first women to capture the essence of rock & roll and, as the kids would say, *a real gone gal*.

She was born in Chicago on November 11, 1929, days after the crash on Wall Street. The hardship of the Great Depression was indescribable. "I imagine what my poor mother went through, raising us without any government assistance because my stepfather wouldn't have it," Baker says. "My grandmother was a runaway slave and she was good with a needle. So we all wore the same clothes, but we never *looked* the same."

Show business was in her blood: Her aunt was Merline Baker, the celebrated Memphis Minnie. LaVern made her professional debut at age 17 at the local Club De Lisa . Performing as "Little Miss Sharecropper," wearing a big straw hat and a dress made of patches, she was the urban counterpart of Mildred Cummings, who was raising rafters on the chitlin' circuit as "Little Miss Cornshucks." "I was flashier, slicker," Baker reveals. "She had the bloomers and the basket."

In the late 1940s her family moved to Detroit, and Baker started singing at the Flame Show Bar. She cut her first sides for RCA Victor with the Eddie Penigar Band in 1949, then recorded "Sharecropper's Boogie" with Hot Lips Page and Red Saunders for Columbia in 1950. In 1951, Okeh issued three sides pairing "Bea Baker" with Maurice King & His Wolverines; later that year she appeared on National as "Little Miss Sharecropper," perfecting her presence and tone on light blues and greasy shouters.

Working a different city every night, Baker shed her "Little Miss" persona as her popularity soared across the Midwest. Teamed with the Todd Rhodes Orchestra, Baker cut four sides for King in 1953. Back in the States following a European tour, she was scooped by the upstart Atlantic label, where she experimented with a number of styles including Bessie Smith's. "Ahmet Ertegun said, 'Here's a lady you sound like.' When you're scuffling, you'll trying anything. Then he played Bessie for me and I said 'Wow!'"

On October 20, 1954, Baker—backed by the Atlantic house band featuring Sam "The Man" Taylor on tenor sax and the Cues on background vocals—finally hit on the sound that would catapult her to the forefront of the fledgling rock era. Her producers had to prod her into singing the playful "Tweedlee Dee," but the song tore up the R&B charts and even made an eleven-week run on the pop chart, peaking at Number Fourteen. But a white singer, Georgia Gibbs, transformed both "Tweedlee Dee" and the follow-up, "Tra La La," into million-sellers for Mercury—robbing Baker of revenue and recognition.

The tenor of her Atlantic sessions toughened as her material improved. Baker turned out the rough-and-tumble "Jim Dandy" and "Jim Dandy Got Married." With "I Cried A Tear," she scored her biggest pop hit (Number Six) in 1959, riding a stirring sax solo by King Curtis. She cut a Bessie Smith tribute LP with a swinging band starring Buck Clayton, and she continued to score minor hits through the early '60s including "Shake A Hand," "See See Rider," and "Saved," a witty song of salvation penned by Lieber and Stoller. Public interest in her work waned when she switched to Brunswick in 1963, but Baker's later years would be filled with honors.

In 1990, she sang at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C., where she was among the eight recipients of the first Career Achievement Awards given by the Rhythm & Blues Foundation. It was also her first American appearance in more than 25 years (not counting her special performance at Atlantic Records' 40th anniversary concert at Madison Square Garden in 1988).

"As we say in church, I look back on a job well done," says Baker, whose self-imposed exile from the U.S. began in 1970 when she traveled to Vietnam to entertain American troops. "It's like when God takes you away. You deserve your pedestal, and I've earned this award."

BLACK & BLUE

LA VERN BAKER sang the blues to segregated audiences for most of her life. "You played to the rope," she said in the parlance of the day. "White folks on the left, colored on the right." Restrooms and water fountains were marked "Niggers Only." Touring the black vaudeville circuit in the Midwest, she managed to hold her head with pride in a skin-tight dress, her hair delicately coiffed, her eyes sparkling with a wicked humor and a touch of pain as she sidestepped mounds of horse and cow manure. "The rodeo stagehands were bigots," she said. "Things have happened to me that I didn't always deserve, but I'm not bitter."

When it comes to her career, Baker—currently starring in the Broadway musical *Black And Blue*—has always been a fighter. Bedeviled by the cover syndrome, Baker was one of the first artists to speak out against the blatant racist trend of white acts copying R&B originals. First, Georgia Gibbs, buoyed by hundreds of pop stations that would not touch Baker's "Tweedlee Dee," appropriated the song in 1954. Gibbs went to the well a second time in 1956, turning Baker's "Tra La La" into her second million-seller. But Baker battled back, urging her congressman to support a bill strengthening the U.S. copyright law. The publicity had a positive effect: soon after, DJs like Alan Freed refused to plug white covers of R&B hits on their playlists.

From his sharpened perspective, Atlantic chairman Ahmet Ertegun tells a story about Baker's gifts of style and sensibility. "We were at the airport, on our way to a record convention," he says. "LaVern stopped at one of those machines you get flight insurance from. She was a comedienne, you know, and she had that look in her eyes. She said, 'In case something happens, do I make my beneficiary Georgia Gibbs?'"