

13. “Unlike Men, The Diamonds Linger:” Bassey and Bond Beyond the Theme Song

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Abstract

This chapter directs attention to Shirley Bassey’s voice as both constituting and contesting the white male gaze of the James Bond franchise. I consider Bassey in relation to the politics of race and gender as she sonically invokes a long tradition of racial mimicry by both black and white women singers. Bassey furthers this tradition in that her influence can be traced beyond her various theme songs for the Bond films in the more recent performances by white artists. As Bassey’s Welsh and mixed-race identity gives a different contour to our understanding of what and who constitutes “Britishness,” her synecdochal relationship to the James Bond film series also allows us to reconsider the possibilities for black women’s voices in cinema.

Keywords: theme song; Shirley Bassey; voice; race; gender; Black Atlantic

In commemorating fifty years of James Bond, the 2013 Academy Awards focused on the music of the series. The celebratory montage was later complemented by Adele’s performance of “Skyfall,” which was given an Oscar by the end of the broadcast. While the tribute was introduced by Halle Berry (Jinx, *Die Another Day* [UK/USA: Lee Tamahori, 2002]) and featured sequences from the many Bond films, Dame Shirley Bassey’s performance of “Goldfinger” (1964) stood in for the iconic James Bond of the past fifty years. In her first-ever performance at the Academy Awards, Bassey commandingly belts out the theme song. Though her voice has more of a baritone thickness to it now than it did in 1964, she sings the tune with force. Her breathing is so well hidden that the last note, which she holds for 6 seconds, surreally

emanates from her. In her almost sixty-year musical career, she is the only artist to have performed three theme songs for the Bond franchise, with “Goldfinger,” “Diamonds Are Forever” (1971) and “Moonraker” (1979). Her synecdochal relationship to the Bond film series allows us to consider the possibilities for resistance and incorporation found in black women’s voices in cinema.

In this chapter, I first situate Bassey’s performance in the cultural circulation of the Black Atlantic. Secondly, I consider Bassey’s voice within the discourses of authorship and gender that circulate around the Bond films. Finally, while Bassey certainly has iconic status, I show how the power of her voice does not necessarily amount to an enunciation of resistance to the politics exhibited in the Bond film series.

The Girl from Tiger Bay

Shirley Bassey was born on January 8, 1937 in Cardiff, Wales. Specifically, she was born and raised in the area of Tiger Bay. This neighborhood by the Cardiff docks housed many sailors that migrated from Portugal, Norway, Malaysia, Afghanistan, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Barbados, Trinidad, Jamaica, Spain, Egypt, and Greece (Little 1948, 108). Many of these sailors would then marry white Welsh women, creating a unique multiracial population (Tackley 2014, 44-47). Tiger Bay, while definitely part of Wales, had a distinct identity as both multiethnic and multiracial. Strikingly, in Ross Cameron’s history of Tiger Bay, he (1997, 87-88) notes how “racism within the community does seem to have been absent; K. Little, S. Collins and L. Bloom all speak of a racially integrated community in the decades after 1945. External racism was likewise unchanging” as the neighborhood “failed to become integrated into the wider city and remained geographically and socially isolated.” This created an insulated community that would protect their own, but it also stigmatized Tiger Bay as a poor and dangerous neighborhood in relation to the rest of Wales and the United Kingdom.

Despite this uneasy relationship with the rest of the country, the isolation of Tiger Bay produced a distinct musical culture. While jazz was part of the repertoire of many bands that played in dance halls and clubs, “music-making in Tiger Bay was dominated by plucked string instruments; banjo, guitar, mandolin, cuatro (a small four-stringed lute) and ukulele” (Tackley 2014, 47). While the presence of a Hawaiian ukulele in Cardiff may seem odd, the fact that Cardiff was a port meant that musical fashions from abroad—even oceans away—came there first. Despite the latest fashions

however, “plucked string instruments were also suitable for rendering the calypso repertoire most in demand by the community of which West Indians represented a significant proportion” (47). While there was a large West Indian population in Tiger Bay, black American soldiers came to Britain during World War II, adding to the audience for jazz music that already made up the popular music scene, while also contributing knowledge, records, and musicianship of black American musical traditions (Tackley 2014, 57; Sinclair 2003, 66; Doffman 2014, 111-32).

Writing several decades later, Paul Gilroy would remark upon this circulation of black cultural production. He (1993, 109) notes that as “a child and a young man growing up in London, I was provided by black music with a means to gain proximity to the sources of feeling from which our local conceptions of blackness were assembled. The Caribbean, Africa, Latin America, and, above all, black America contributed to our lived sense of a racial self.” While Gilroy in this instance is writing about London in the 1950s and 1960s, key to his assertion is both the specificity and hybridity of black music. It is specific in that it is produced by black artists and provides a means by which Afro-descendant people can come into an understanding of a “lived sense of racial self.” However, it is hybrid in that these black artists were from various locations in the African diaspora and also borrowed from various musical traditions. This contributed to, as Gilroy (109) notes, “local conceptions of blackness [that] were assembled,” meaning racial identity was produced through a collective combination of black cultural practices and products and not simply a direct correlation to one’s lineage, skin color, or physiognomy. Specifically, in the neighborhood of Tiger Bay, records from Paul Robeson, Lena Horne, and other black American jazz and blues artists mixed with jitterbug dancing and calypso performances to not only create a unique hybrid black musical culture but also contribute to the racial identities of its inhabitants.

While Bassey is not often put into the context of the cultural production of the Black Atlantic, this is a generative contextualization as Bassey herself cites Horne as an influence (Williams 2010, 75). Furthermore, hearing Bassey within the sonic space of black music demonstrates how Bassey’s voice came to be heard not only as powerful but also emblematic. In an analysis of various black American singers, Farah Jasmine Griffin (2004, 104) meditates on “the way the black woman’s voice can be called upon to heal a crisis in national unity as well as provoke one.” Though she is studying singers in a US context, the power of and that is culturally attributed to black women singing can be fruitful to take note of in the case of Bassey, as she has become revered as a British national treasure and a symbol aligned with

the James Bond film series—an imperial and largely white movie franchise. Ros Jennings (2012, 37) notes:

In the same way that other great Dame Commanders of the Order of the British Empire (for example, the actresses, Judi Dench and Helen Mirren), have as they have aged, gone on to play/perform the roles of great British queens (Elizabeth I, Victoria and Elizabeth II) on screen and to assume the mantles, respectively, of national treasure and one of the world's sexiest older women, Dame Shirley Bassey has come to embody both these aspects (she is a national signifier and from my perspective, still most definitely sexy).

These signifiers of nationalism, royalty, sex appeal, and Bond neatly came together when Bassey performed “Diamonds are Forever” at Queen Elizabeth II’s Diamond Jubilee Concert at Buckingham Palace in 2012. Fashion designer, former *Project Runway* (Bravo, 2004–2008; Lifetime 2009–2017; Bravo 2019–present) contestant and TV personality Nick Verreos (2012) blogged, “she looked DIVINE in an ivory gown with chiffon capelet sleeves that flowed in the London wind and made for dramatic effect as she belted out one of her iconic songs. *She looked AMAZING and the gown was a Lesson on How To Dress In Front of THOUSANDS of people!!! Go on Miss Shirley Bassey!*” The theatricality she employs in collapsing all these signifiers demonstrates how Bassey’s performance is always addressed to a mass—and often a mass that is both national and exhibited for international consumption.

Though the Diamond Jubilee aligned her with Great Britain, other media events demonstrate her pride in being Welsh. In 1999, Bassey, “draped in a Welsh flag and accompanied by a traditional harpist, took centre stage for their updated version of the rugby World Cup anthem—World in Union” (“Rugby” 1999). Despite these moments of explicit British and Welsh pride, the class, racial, and ethnic identity of Tiger Bay are effaced in these moments of national symbolism. While Bassey is framed as a “national treasure,” her race and ethnicity are unacknowledged or only understood as something that must be overcome. Jennings (2012, 37) notes, “She is of mixed race (English mother and Nigerian father) and is simultaneously black and not black in her cultural presence; she has risen above her impoverished childhood in the Docklands of Cardiff’s Tiger Bay to reside as a tax exile in that exclusive European playground of the rich, Monte Carlo.” As Monte Carlo and its casinos are pivotal to the imaginary of Bond, Bassey in her real life lives in the cinematic world of Bond, where her mixed-race identity just adds to her glamour and exoticism. She has

divorced herself from any markers of class, ethnic, and racial specificity. Part of the reason why Bassey's blackness is not often taken into account in discussions of her performance is not only her being primarily raised by her white Welsh mother but also her fraught relationship with racial identity and black liberation politics. In a profile of the singer from the March 1963 issue of *Ebony*, the article shows Bassey "at a family reunion after first triumph, Shirley gives performance for Bassey clan. Her Welsh mother (seated) divorced star's Nigerian father when Shirley was three. They had seven children" ("Shirley" 1963, 112). Bassey says, "despite initial fears, US race problem 'hasn't affected me so far'" ("Shirley" 1963, 110). While *Ebony* frames her with her family, it is clear from Bassey's interview that she has not considered why race would matter in her transatlantic debut. It is referred to merely as a hindrance. This kind of ambivalence toward race and racism continued after the dismantling of US legal segregation in the 1960s and '70s.

In 1984, she was listed on a register of performers who had ignored a cultural boycott of South Africa. This document, which was addressed to the United Nations, noted how each of these performers were being discussed "as a collaborator with a racist regime," since "South Africa is the only country left in the world where it has written segregation—where it is legal to discriminate by race" (Wilson 1985). Despite many performers—especially black artists—refusing to go to South Africa even before the register, Bassey continued to perform at the height of apartheid. In a 2009 interview, moreover, she decried the rise in immigration to the United Kingdom. "We're letting in too many people. We're an island, for God's sake. And the Britishness seems to have gawwwnnne.' She enunciates the word "gone" so poshly that it takes a while to work out what she's saying" (Hattenstone 2009). Interviewer Simon Hattenstone (2009) tried to challenge her on this perspective, but she seemed unable to see the irony. He writes, "I can't help wondering what her Nigerian father would make of her assessment of modern Britain." Despite Bassey's complicated relationship to her ethnic and racial identity, race did impact the audiences she interacted with and the kinds of opportunities she was given while trying to be a recording artist in the 1950s and '60s.

The Heat in Hot from Harlem

Bassey got her start in 1953 when she signed her first professional contract with Cliff Gordon to be a performer in the touring revues *Memories of Jolson* (1953) and *Hot from Harlem* (1954). Gordon had previous success with black

American influenced music productions, such as the successful radio show *The Kentucky Minstrels* (1950). Basse's biographer, John L. Williams (2010, 84-85) notes, however, that "while *The Black and White Minstrels* featured an all-white cast, *Memories of Jolson* was, in the parlance of the time, an almost all-coloured show." Unsurprisingly, this black-cast show had a much smaller budget than Gordon's other work. The black musical revue, especially in its British instantiation, was a hybrid entertainment form. Shane Vogel (2008, 98) notes, "These revues, with scores of cast members, showcased black performance and choreography primarily scripted, designed, and staged by white writers, composers, and directors." As indicated by titling a black musical revue *Memories of Jolson* (a reference to US blackface performer Al Jolson), black music in these contexts was always tied to white minstrel show performances of blackness. Originating in the US in the early nineteenth century, minstrel shows featured white performers in blackface makeup performing music comedy acts of black people as buffoonish. Even after emancipation and Reconstruction, the minstrel show endured in several US entertainment forms and sometimes featured black performers in blackface makeup, playing racist caricatures of black people. While Vogel focuses his analysis on black musical revues in New York in the 1930s and 1940s, Howard Rye draws attention to the longer history of trans-Atlantic travel for the black musical revue.

The first all-black musical revue to come from the United States to play in London was *In Dahomey*, which played from 16 March, 1903 at the Shaftesbury Theatre, and subsequently toured in the provinces. The tradition thus started was carried on by touring shows which were often organized by Americans, but relied in part for their casts on non-American members of the African diaspora recruited in Britain (Rye 2006, 169; Green 1983).

Here, in the British tours of black musical revues, the productions were twice-removed from black Americans but then re-appropriated and rearticulated by black British artists via the Black Atlantic. Gilroy notes how minstrel performance was the standard by which all black performers were measured, from the spirituals of the Fisk University Jubilee Singers to rock star Jimi Hendrix. Yet, while the Fisk Singers in the 1870s took great pains to distance themselves from the minstrel language that was used to market them abroad, Hendrix's "updated minstrel antics" reinvented him "as the essential image of what English audiences felt a black American performer should be: wild, sexual, hedonistic and dangerous" (Gilroy 1993,

88-93). It was in the space of the black musical revue that Bassey honed her craft, and in the larger context of Black Atlantic cultural production that she navigated remediations of blackness and minstrelsy.

These touring shows would re-present, mostly to white audiences, different musical essentialisms of US blackness. Part of this would be a display of the Harlem nightlife and jazz performances that had catered to white audiences since the 1920s. Other numbers would be minstrel performances with songs done in blackface and with backup dancers playing cotton pickers. Bassey's experience as a mixed-race Welsh Nigerian was divorced from this particular American iconography of slavery and of the various racialized remediations of minstrelsy and the Harlem cabaret. Despite this, the space of the black musical revue schooled Bassey's raw talent. Joe Collins, producer of *Hot From Harlem* (1954) commented on how he had to transform Bassey "to look feline and seductive. She's only a scrap of a kid" (Williams 2010, 96). Later, however, he was appreciative of his foresight:

You could say I got a bargain. Shirley Bassey put the heat into *Hot from Harlem* [...] fingers snapping, hips working overtime. She was a right little tease, with a seductive, growling voice. Sometimes the wolf whistles from the audience drowned her singing. Both the audience *and* the rest of the cast went wild over her (Williams 2010, 100-1; Collins 1986).

The black musical revue provided the site from which Bassey became a sexy *and* sexualized chanteuse, further enmeshing her in a transnational history of black musical production for both black and white audiences. In particular, Joe Collins' account of Bassey's performance demonstrates how the black musical revue trafficked not only in white-produced commodifications of US blackness but also a titillation, in which an always sexually available femininity was inextricable from black women performers. In writing about the Cotton Club, Vogel (2008, 18) states, "The intimacy of the segregated cabaret was predicated on the promised display and exposure of black female interiority, an expectation that informed the different but related racial discourses of primitivism and exoticism shaping representations of black performance in the 1930s and 1940s." Here, then, Bassey's "exposure" isn't just about seduction but an assumption that her "black female interiority" is being communicated through this overly sexualized performance. This navigation of sex appeal and emotional torch singing became key to her rise as a musical artist in the US and UK. In March 1963, she was on the cover of *Ebony*. Positively reviewed for her Las Vegas and New York performances as a "tawny tigress" or a "high priestess of soul

and sex," it was clear that her racialized sex appeal was integral to her act ("Shirley" 1963, 108-9).

Though playing in New York and Las Vegas was her first foray into US entertainment, her singing of the title song, "Goldfinger," for the 1964 Bond film, cemented her as a pop star with international fame. In 1963, John Barry was both scoring *Goldfinger* (UK: Guy Hamilton, 1964), his third Bond film, and conducting a 23-piece orchestra for Bassey's December 1963 concert tour (Burlingame 2012, 39). Because of their work together, Bassey was selected to sing the theme song. In the words of Barry, she had "great dramatic sense," adding that "when it came to the studio, she didn't know what the hell the song was about, but she sang it with such total conviction that she convinced the rest of the world" (Burlingame 2012, 39). From an industrial perspective, Bassey was also a well-suited choice for the film because she was then signed to United Artist (UA) Records, whose film division was handling both the film distribution and music rights and the licensing for the Bond film series (Smith 1998, 104-5, 110). Jeff Smith (1998, 110) notes how "Bassey was already a star in England and was on the verge of stateside stardom as *Goldfinger* was being produced." For the rather young film series, "Bassey's name recognition would help gain attention for the film during the buildup to its world premiere in London. For UA Records on the other hand, the film would be just the thing to propel Bassey to stardom in the States." Here, then, it is Bassey's stardom that is seen as a key asset in majorly promoting this fledgling film series.

This cross-promotion proved to be a winning combination as the film "went on to earn nearly \$50 million in domestic and foreign rentals. The soundtrack album, released by UA Records in October 1964, eventually topped both *Billboard's* and *Variety's* album charts [...] Bassey's single was issued in December 1964 and climbed to number 8 on the singles chart" (Smith 1998, 110-11). *Goldfinger*, as a film as well as a soundtrack album and single, proved to be a global hit that catalyzed a "Bondmania" that included copycat albums, film and television parodies and homages, and inspired merchandise from golf jackets to "alarm clocks that played the 'James Bond Theme'" (Smith 1998, 111; Chapman 2007, 89-122). Key, then, to the Bond franchise's global ascendance was Bassey's stardom and dramatic vocal performance. While Bassey's singing of "Goldfinger" is often credited to Barry for choosing her for the role of theme song singer, the role she played has far outlived the initial run of the film. Her iconicity over several decades as a popular artist is due to the fact that her on and off-screen performance, while it features a powerful voice, emotive face, and extravagant costuming, is also inextricable from the Bond franchise. Her most successful songs as a recording artist have been the ones for Bond soundtracks: "Goldfinger,"

“Diamonds Are Forever,” and “Moonraker.” Furthermore, she is the only artist to have performed more than one theme song.

The Voice of Bond

Before Bassegy, Bond’s sound was most associated with the musical theme composed by John Barry and Monty Norman that features in every film score of the series, beginning with *Dr. No* (UK: Terence Young, 1962). In *The Music of James Bond*, Jon Burlingame (2012, 2) notes:

The Bond sound was an accident, really: Monty Norman had a tune in mind that John Barry arranged into something that would suit a dangerous spy and also work as a pop instrumental record with both rock and jazz elements (highly unusual in 1962). Editor Peter Hunt liked it so much he kept repeating the piece throughout that first film. The success of the “James Bond Theme” both dramatically and commercially, led to future Bond movie assignments for Barry—11 in all.

This musical theme provides a strong sense of continuity and definition to the series and more largely to the espionage genre in film and television. Even the more recent Bond film scores by Thomas Newman and David Arnold reflect the “Theme.” Arnold says, “John Barry was one of the few people that created a genre of film music: He uniquely, single-handedly, created the spy genre” (Burlingame 2012, 2). While Barry’s music production is significant, Bassegy’s vocal performance must also be understood as being equally integral to sonically defining the series and genre.

Following the Bondmania of *Goldfinger*, Bassegy was also considered for the theme song to the next Bond film, *Thunderball* (UK: Terence Young, 1965). Both she and Dionne Warwick were asked to record a version of “Mr. Kiss Kiss Bang Bang,” “a nickname by which Bond was known in Japan,” and the possible new title for the film (Smith 1998, 111). However, the title reverted back to *Thunderball* with the theme song having the same name. Rather than having Bassegy’s version of “Mr. Kiss Kiss Bang Bang” for the closing credits, producers Harry Saltzman and Albert Broccoli, “decided to leave Bassegy’s number out of the film completely” as they followed the same musical template of *Goldfinger* (Smith 1998, 111). Though another Welsh singer, Tom Jones, was eventually chosen, the influence of Bassegy’s powerful vibrato can be heard as Jones crescendos to reach the last high note and hold it for a full nine seconds (Burlingame 2012, 53).

Similarly, Lulu's "The Man with the Golden Gun" (1974) and Tina Turner's "Goldeneye" (1995) recapture the bizarre dramatics of "Goldfinger." Nancy Sinatra's "You Only Live Twice" (1967) and Sam Smith's "Writing's on the Wall" (2015) are more like the wistful and oddly phrased laments of longing heard in "Diamonds Are Forever" and "Moonraker." While Gladys Knight's "Licence to Kill" (1989) directly cites the opening brass musical motif of "Goldfinger," it pushes Bassey's powerful timbre towards an R&B style. Knight's vocal flourishes recall a needling and pleading for love found in gospel music, with which she was more immediately familiar than Bassey. Significantly, even when the theme song is sung by a man such as Jones or Smith, there is a "feminine quality" to these songs, which, as Anna G. Piotrowska (2015, 172) argues, "was introduced as an aural compensation for the visual portrayal of women on screen as well as a musical counterpoint to the male themes (e.g. Bond, 007, villain)." However, as these "feminine" themes play and revise Bassey's version of "Goldfinger," they demonstrate how not only song composition but also her specific vocal performance has left an enduring impression on the series.

Despite this claim for authorship, I am hesitant to label her voice as always resistant to the sexist visuals of the various films. Jeff Smith (1998, 122) does an extensive reading of *Goldfinger's* opening, noting the lusty power of Bassey's voice. "The song appears to address an unidentified female subject, one who we might assume is any or all of the film's major women characters." She brings forth a female presence in a title sequence where women's bodies are static and rendered as screens. Catherine Haworth (2015, 162) notes, "she brings her own identifiable stardom to bear on the sequence and thereby adds weight and emphasis to the title song's tale of female experience, solidarity, and warning." While the song is explicitly about the villain Goldfinger (like other Bond theme songs, such as "Thunderball"), the lyrics could easily be construed as to why Bond is not a safe sexual partner. After all, women characters in Bond films often end up killed post-coitus.

Given this treatment of many Bond Girls, it is easy to hear Bassey's song as one of resistance. Yet, while the lyrics warn us of about the treachery of men, the powerful sensuality of her siren-like voice also lures us further into the narrative. While the gold-painted women's bodies may be rendered as screens to project the film on, the camera's caressing pans over the lines of the model's legs are designed to titillate the viewer. Here, then, Bassey's voice is not simply a contestation and alarm, but rather a complicated seduction. While her words warn pretty girls about dangerous men, her voice is what carries us into the narrative.



3. Title Credits from *Diamonds Are Forever* (UK: Guy Hamilton, 1971). Copyright of Eon Productions, United Kingdom; and Danjaq, LLC, United States of America.

A similar contradiction occurs in the opening credits for *Diamonds are Forever* (UK: Guy Hamilton, 1971). An extreme close-up of a white cat's eye is used as a graphic match to wipe to a diamond against a black background as two black silhouetted palms in a praying position appear over the diamond and slowly part. The diamond descends into the background and diminishes in size as it appears to almost be held by the two palms, but then a light-skinned hand with manicured red nails and a diamond costume jewelry cuff emerges from the upper left corner of the screen to pick up the diamond between their thumb and index finger. We then cut to two naked women's bodies silhouetted in black with accents of reddish amber light. The body closer to us is on the left and we only see her back and what appears to be a diamond belt slung on her waist. She turns her right arm into the frame as the camera appears to dolly slightly right and zoom in. Her right hand and wrist has an ornate diamond bracelet-cuff-ring combination and holds a shiny platinum gun. As we get closer to the frontally nude women in the background of the frame, she appears to put her hands up as the title "Sean Connery" appears on the screen cutting across her knees. We can see vague outlines of the curves of her breasts and shadows between her thighs. She also appears to be wearing an ornate diamond belt across her waist, in which a lattice-work of diamonds adorns her flat lower torso with a low hanging diamond pendant, appearing as if it was hanging right between the lips of her labia. As we zoom further into this pendant, the suggestion of a crotch is further obscured as parted legs just become shadowy red spots amidst a black background. The elaborate diamond waist belt now looks

more like a diamond necklace as the film's title appears in blue font right above the pendant.

Sonically, all we have heard is a minor key musical motif in a more classical film score orchestration. The only slight difference is the tambourine-heavy mix, which "gives the cue (and the theme itself) a modern, Motown-ish sound" (Smith 1998, 119). However, this more modern and current musical style is then met not with the airy falsetto of Diana Ross or the gospel-inflected voice of Martha Reeves, but rather the full-throated and rounded tones of Bassey in a lower register intimating, "Diamonds are forever." Though the song is a lament about men and love, it has a brazen sexuality in its performance. While Bassey's initial tone in this song is more slyly seductive than powerful, she still eventually crescendos to her clear and resounding vibrato. Like the credits of *Goldfinger*, visuals and sound are brought together to titillate and seduce. While the plot here is not directly projected on women's bodies, the credits collapse the Bond film into its key components: glamour, intrigue, violence, women's bodies and the double entendres they produce—we see two kinds of pussies within the first 30 seconds.

The lyrics also add to the sensuality, with lines like "touch it, stroke it, and undress it." John Barry's songwriting collaborator, Don Black, explained, "Seediness is what we wanted" (Burlingame 2012, 95). Barry advised Black to "write it as though she's thinking about a penis" (95). By substituting the word diamond with penis, the tune has a very conflicted meaning about the importance of sex, love, men, and jewelry. Despite the writer's intentionality, however, Bassey's performance, especially as it has reverberated throughout her career, carries multiple interpretations. Her voice relishes the pronunciation of "undress it." In performances, she coyly looks at the audience to suggest the original meaning of the lyrics.

On "The Christmas Show" episode of *The Morecambe & Wise Show* (BBC, December 25, 1971), in a slinky, full-length sequin gown with crystal straps and cutouts on both sides of her torso, Bassey delivers the song with the same polish of the soundtrack recording. She knowingly smirks at the camera as she sings "undress it" and then glances at her hand as she flirtatiously unfurls and presents her fingers, which all have a garish diamond ring on them. She is seductive in her visual presentation and vocal performance, but also quite literal. While the lyrics suggest a forlorn attitude towards love and time, it is interpreted in its most concrete sense and performed with humor. "This literal realization of the song's words," Vogel (1998, 99, 95) reminds us, is "in line with [the] nightclub revue's dominant aesthetic," meaning Bassey not only learned torch singing in the black musical revue

but also a way to both literalize and poke fun at songs written by white men to be most often performed by black women for white audiences.¹

Specifically, in this performance, the literalization of the lyrics occurs not by way of massive sets and props but rather via flashy costuming. Her jewel-encrusted gown carries with it, as Adele Patrick (2005, 131) notes, “a Hollywood-inspired glamorous aura using costumes freighted with signification and pleasure for female audiences.” Similarly, Bassey playfully gesturing to her bevy of large diamonds rings is in strong contrast with the solitaire diamonds dangling from a woman’s labia, which we see in the title sequence to *Diamonds Are Forever*. While Bassey is extremely hetero and femme in her presentation of sexuality, she is also excessive in her performance, giving space for feminine and queer audiences and pleasures. Like the svelte Bond Girls, Bassey is also fit but fashions her sexiness in garish costume jewelry and low-cut embellished gowns as opposed to bikinis. This meticulously constructed diva-excessiveness has contributed to her simultaneous endurance as both a national treasure and a gay camp icon—though her questionable racial and gender politics perhaps make her less queer-friendly² (Guilbert 2018, 26-29). By listening to the music in the credit sequences and by looking at subsequent performances by Bassey, it becomes clear, then, that camp and excess are integral to Bond. This is not to say that camp in Bond only occurs because of Bassey, but it demonstrates how camp is tied up in the endurance of Bond as a cultural text.

This coupling of camp and the Bond franchise as synthesized in Bassey’s voice becomes most prominent in the various knockoffs and parodies of Bond. Following the Bondmania of *Goldfinger*, Bassey sang the titular theme song for *The Liquidator* (UK: Jack Cardiff, 1965), a spy film with Rod Taylor as a multi-talented lover and man of action. While the song is more upbeat than “Goldfinger” it is equally dastardly and sung with Bassey’s usual brassiness. Even in a less direct Bond parody or knockoff, a Bassey-inspired theme song becomes key to the spy film genre. *Spy* (USA: Paul Feig, 2015), starring Melissa McCarthy as the unlikely intelligence operative who is now in the field, provides a delightful mix of action, comedy, and gender critique that is very-much its own CIA-based espionage story. In keeping with the genre, however, its opening credit sequence features a Shirley Bassey-inspired

1 “Most crucially in this tradition, Billie Holiday sonically inscribed Tin Pan Alley love songs with a blues modernism that, through her vocal performance, rewrote their commodifiable narratives of gender, sex, and romance” (Vogel 2008, 95; Davis 1998, 161-80; Denning 1996, 338-48).

2 “In an interview with the *Daily Mail* in 2015, Bassey expressed horrendous anti-feminist sentiments: she believes women should not be pilots, firefighters, policewomen or soldiers, among other appalling ideas” (Guilbert 2018, 29; Shakespeare 2015).

theme song, “Who Can You Trust” (2015) by Ivy Levan, which can be heard over an animated gunplay sequence.

Even in the absence of a film, Bond is always invoked through Bassey. In the January 7, 2001 episode of *Rock Profile* (UK Play, 1999-2000; BBC Two, 2000-2001; Funny or Die UK, 2009), a spoof of music chat shows, comedians Matt Lucas and David Walliams play the Welsh singers Shirley Bassey and Tom Jones, respectively, as they argue about who has had more success. After lustily hitting on the presenter (Jamie Theakston), Lucas as Shirley proclaims in a hilariously posh accent “Yes, I am the voice of Bond, darling,” as she flourishes a hand into the air for added emphasis and proceeds to sing the titles “Diamonds Are Forever,” “Goldfinger,” and “Moonraker”—all to the tune of “Diamonds Are Forever.” Poking fun at Bassey’s diva-excessiveness, Lucas’ Shirley is in a gold-beaded gown and white taffeta boa and reclines on a chaise behind Tom, who is seated on the ground. She then proceeds to sing the remaining Bond theme songs to the melody of “Diamonds Are Forever,” stressing that every Bond-singer from Tina Turner to Shirley Manson to Gladys Knight to Paul McCartney “doesn’t have the range.” The joke is that, as far as Lucas’s Bassey is concerned, there is only one person in the world who could be the “voice of Bond,” and that is not any man, but rather *her*.

Having the Range

While Bassey’s theatricality might lend itself to parodies of both her and the Bond franchise, her voice also provides a central nodal point for the series to return to as its more recent entries, *Skyfall* (UK/USA: Sam Mendes, 2012) and *Spectre* (UK/USA/Austria/Mexico/Italy/Morocco: Sam Mendes, 2015), strive to keep the franchise fresh, sexy, and relevant while still faithful to its 1960s imaginary of international glamour. In particular, “Skyfall” (2012), performed by Adele, is deeply indebted to Bassey’s style. The way Adele elaborates and nostalgically waxes on Bassey’s vocal performance demonstrates some of the racial and gendered tensions found in Bassey’s star text. With a detached delivery somewhere in between Shirley Bassey and Dusty Springfield, Adele’s contralto swoons. While she shows off her range, it is clear that her voice does not have the same throaty sensuality as Bassey—a fact made very apparent after the two performed at the 2013 Academy Awards.

Yet, while both Adele and Bassey are remarkably talented singers, I wonder what is lost in Adele’s detached earnestness as opposed to the sexuality that is loudly displayed in Bassey’s performances. What happens

when nostalgia is divorced from excess and becomes more sincere? Adele's blue-eyed soul performance is controlled and elegant. Her bouffant hair and winged black eyeliner pay tribute to Dusty Springfield and 1960s girl group singers by way of Amy Winehouse. In writing about this borrowing of '60s style, Daphne A. Brooks (2010, 39) notes, "Winehouse traffics in the sound as well as the look of 1960s girl group pioneers such as the Supremes and the Ronettes, as well as the vocal stylings of R&B and jazz greats—from Dinah Washington and Sarah Vaughan to across-the-pond Afro-Welsh pop legend Dame Shirley Bassey." The range of black women's artistry that these white British women singers draw from encompasses several genres and decades. Adele further effaces these citations as Winehouse's "bouffant, satin gowns, vintage cocktail dresses and little black gloves clearly reference the styles of everyone from Lena Horne to the Shirelles" (Brooks 2010, 39-40). Adele, in simple but elegant dresses, in no way indulges the costuming excesses of Winehouse and Bassey. Yet, in comparing the two and calling attention to Adele's cultural appropriations, I am cautious of equating blackness with authenticity, sexuality, emotional excess, and the body. To do so would be to follow the well-worn tradition of using the essentialisms derived from minstrelsy to measure the "authenticity" of black performers. Rather, a comparison of both performances demonstrates Bassey's ability to take these racial essentialisms and play with them and manipulate them.

Although Bassey's "Goldfinger" set the standard for all subsequent Bond theme songs—as it stands in as iconic for the heyday of the franchise—her musical style was out of step for her time. In examining both vocal styles and recording charts, Vincent Stephens (2010, 39) classifies Bassey along with Astrud Gilberto, Robert Goulet and Barbra Streisand as early 1960s rock era crooners that would appear on the adult-oriented easy listening charts as well as the general pop music charts of the time. Addressing more of an adult contemporary or easy-listening market, Bassey's work in the '50s and 60s was *not* like the pop girl group sounds (Shirelles, Supremes, Ronettes) or even the rock 'n roll or soul music of women like Tina Turner and Dusty Springfield. Adrian Daub and Charles Kronengold (2015, 96) frame Bassey's successful Bond theme songs as a "profound shift in mainstream pop: middle-of-the-road, easy listening, and adult contemporary had drifted inexorably toward black music." They (96) elaborate:

Soulful singing, grooving rhythm sections, and jazzy harmonies were now part of pop's lingua franca. This blackening of grown-up pop meant that Bassey, a showbizzy Anglo-Nigerian Welsh belter who was never associated with the soul-music tradition, fronting a bunch of British

studio hacks, could count as a soulful—yes, “black”—singer asserting African American musical authority over what was a very White film.

While Daub and Kronengold critique Bassey’s version of “Diamonds Are Forever” for its “Tin Pan Alley construction,” they (2015, 97) commend her for pushing further towards soul, “bending notes, varying her vibrato, playing with the beat, getting a bit breathy, even adding a little grit.” They (100) frame this effort of her singing “as if the song, the film, and early 70s culture at large need her to be black. But somehow the film doesn’t hear her.” What is striking in their assessment is the equation of blackness with not only Americanness but also soul music and a particular 1970s black liberation politics. Rather than seeing “black” as something fixed to a particular decade, nation, or musical style, however, listening to Bassey as the “showbizzy Anglo-Nigerian Welsh belter” reveals a different constellation of black music and cultural politics.

As Adele owes much of her success to reworking cultural nostalgia for singers like Springfield, Bassey capitalized on nostalgia for the blues, jazz, and cabaret singers of the 1920s and ’30s—a skill she honed in her beginnings in the black musical revue and cabaret. In describing black women’s musical performance in the ’20s and ’30s, Hazel V. Carby (1998, 474) notes that it “articulates a cultural and political struggle over sexual relations: a struggle that is directed against the objectification of female sexuality within a patriarchal order but which also tries to reclaim women’s bodies as the sexual and sensuous subjects of women’s song.” Carby (476) details how the songs of Clara Smith, Bessie Smith, and Ida Cox were about the frustrations of heterosexual relationships but sounded a gendered agency and autonomy. “The sound of the train whistle, a mournful signal of imminent desertion and future loneliness, was reclaimed as a sign that women too were on the move.” This being “on the move” not only brought new opportunities for autonomy and work but also lent itself to indulging in fashion and sex. As Carby (481) elucidates,

They had broken out of the boundaries of the home and taken their sensuality and sexuality out of the private into the public sphere [...]. Their physical presence was a crucial aspect of their power; the visual display of spangled dresses, of furs, of gold teeth, of diamonds, of all the sumptuous and desirable aspects of their body reclaimed female sexuality from being an objectification of male desire to a representation of female desire.

Bassey's performance, though of a different period, is conversant with a similar contradiction and struggle over sexual relations and self-involved adornment. As she imparts these politics into her vocal laments heard in the Bond theme songs, she nuances the largely patriarchal visual relations constructed in these films.

Hearing Bassey within a Black Atlantic route of black cultural production, then, complicates how we consider authorship. While she certainly defines the sound of Bond as much as John Barry, it is reductive to simply claim that she too—to borrow from David Arnold—"uniquely, single-handedly, created the spy genre" (Burlingame 2012, 2). Though her voice, like other black women's voices—as Griffin reminds us—is often called upon to represent a collective of texts and peoples—be it Bond, Wales, or Great Britain—the power performed by that voice does not necessarily generate a closed unified body. Rather, the voice carries with it the complications of migration, displacement, racial mimics, and vexed sexual relations. To challenge Daub and Kronengold's assessment of Bassey's "Diamonds Are Forever" as insufficiently soul or as "black" as it could be for the 1970s, our understanding of Bassey must account not for what "showbizzy" fails to live up to but for what it redirects our ear toward; be it different cities and sites—the cabarets of London, New York, and Las Vegas as opposed to the music studios and clubs of Detroit and Philadelphia—or different periods and genres.

Bassey's "Diamonds Are Forever" is not impressive in spite of its "Tin Pan Alley construction;" rather, it is precisely this kind of pop song that Bassey can inflect with her black music revue-honed sense of humor and seduction. In wanting to isolate all the tracks that come together to make the sound of Amy Winehouse, Brooks (2010, 48-49) implores that "the exigencies of excavating this history are crucial, especially if one considers how rarely black women are scripted as racial masqueraders of any sort," and "the extent to which popular music culture constructs and depends on black women as static nurturers who, as Farah Griffin [2004, 103-4] demonstrates, are called upon so often to 'sin[g] rather than spea[k],' to 'heal' and give 'life and love' to 'the majority culture.'" In a similar spirit, this chapter has elaborated on Shirley Bassey's vocal citations, mimics, and innovations as she moves between genres, audiences, nations, and decades of popular music, both as a black woman and as a "showbizzy" singer. To challenge the claim that "somehow the film doesn't hear her," Brooks' invocation of Griffin compels us to ask, what is it that we expect to hear when we listen to black women? At an even lower frequency, the question reverberates: Are we even fully listening? Perhaps, then, Bassey's most important contribution as an author

comes not from her enduring influence on the James Bond film series, but rather from the ways she urges us to fully listen to Bond and comprehend the transnational circulations of black musical performance enlisted in an imperfect project of both empire and patriarchy.

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