

Jazz Greats: Etta James



Etta James was born Jamesetta Hawkins in 1938 in Los Angeles, California.

Her great musical gift first showed itself when, as a child, she sang in the St. Paul Baptist Church choir. The first few years of her life were not easy ones. Her mother abandoned her, and she never knew her father. Her mother's landlady, Lulu Rogers, took the baby in. Lulu took over the task of raising Jamesetta, bringing her to the the Baptist Church. Jamesetta's talent was immediately clear, and, by the age of 5, she was singing on gospel radio shows. She attracted an audience from all around L.A. who came to hear her sing.



Lulu Rogers passed away when Jamesetta was 12 years old, and Jamesetta went to live with relatives in San Francisco. She formed the singing group The Creolettes, who became The Peaches when they went on tour. It was during this period that she took the name Etta James. In the 1950s, Etta toured with famous rock 'n' roller Little Richard. Then, she sang backup on records by Marvin Gaye, Chuck Berry, and other rock and soul sensations.

Etta moved to Chicago and began to work under the Chess Records label. By 1963, she had rocketed from poverty up to the big time, having made ten chart-making hits in only three years. In 1974, James fell ill and fell on hard times. She spent months in the hospital, then barely worked for the next ten years. In 1988, however, she made *The Seven Year Itch*, her first album in seven years. She had finally gained the fame she deserved, and she kept it for the rest of her life. She continues to influence a wide range of singers, from Diana Ross to Christina Aguilera.

Directions: Answer the questions below. Use text evidence to support your answers.

Answer Sheet - Sample Answers

1. What is the main idea of Jazz Greats: Etta James? Write it in your own words.

Etta James was a gifted singer who went through difficult times and worked hard to bring herself into fame and a successful career.

Name _____

Date _____

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2. Choose a quote from the text that supports the following statement, and record it on the lines below.

Etta James had a musical gift that helped her become very successful.

“Jamesetta’s talent was immediately clear, and, by the age of 5, she was singing on gospel radio shows.”

3. What can you infer about Etta James after learning about her childhood?

Student answers will vary, but may include: I can infer that Etta James was a resilient person that reached a high level of achievement despite a difficult childhood.

4. Describe what the author means when the text says, “By 1963, she had rocketed from poverty up to the big time, having made ten chart-making hits in only three years.”

The author means that Etta James was no longer poor, and she was a well-known star. She created ten very popular songs in a short period of time.

5. How does Etta James’s legacy continue in the music community today?

Etta James’s legacy continues in the music community today as she influences a wide range of singers.

6. How did sickness affect Etta James’s career?

Sickness affected Etta James’s career because she barely worked for 10 years from the late 1970s into the 1980s.

7. What are some examples of Etta James’s success during her lifetime? Include two pieces of evidence from the passage.

a. She went on tour with famous rock ‘n’ roller Little Richard.

b. She was a backup singer on records by famous artists, like Marvin Gaye and Chuck Berry.