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Stevie Wonder, Christina Aguilera sing tributes at Etta James' funeral

The R&B singer is lauded for overcoming adversity and persevering long enough to see a career renaissance that included multiple Grammy Awards and induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

By Randy Lewis

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Pioneering R&B singer Etta James was saluted at her funeral service Saturday by fellow musicians, including Stevie Wonder and Christina Aguilera, and eulogized by the Rev. Al Sharpton as an artist who not only "changed the world of music [but] the cultural paradigm of the United States."

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Best known for the rapturous joy or primal ache she brought to ballads of love and heartbreak such as "At Last," "I'd Rather Go Blind" and "All I Could Do Was Cry," James, who died Jan. 20 at age 73, also was lauded for overcoming adversity and persevering long enough to see a career renaissance that included multiple Grammy Awards, induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, a hit Hollywood film based on her life and numerous other accolades.

Sharpton, who officiated at the private ceremony at the City of Refuge Church in Gardena, lauded James because she "flipped the switch on the script" that at some points in her tumultuous life veered perilously close to ending on a note of tragedy.

Instead, James held on through years during which heroin addiction or obesity made it more

difficult to get concert bookings or record company support to extend her legacy of recordings that stretched back to "The Wallflower," her first hit in 1955, when she was just 17. Her recordings in the 1950s and early '60s, Sharpton said, united listeners of different races "before the Civil Rights Act of 1964."

Sharpton preceded his own comments by reading a message sent by President Obama in which the chief executive said, "Etta will be remembered for her legendary voice and for her many contributions to our nation's musical heritage."

Her scorchingly raw vocal style also influenced successive generations of singers —male and female, black and white — including Aguilera, Janis Joplin, Bonnie Raitt, Rod Stewart, Tina Turner and the woman who had the biggest hit single and album of 2011, British soul singer Adele.

In her turn on stage, Aguilera told the audience that James was the singer she most admired and long tried to emulate, then elicited some of the same raspy, dusky tones that were James' hallmark as she sang "At Last," a song Aguilera said she includes at every performance in honor of her role model.

Wonder sang "Shelter From the Rain," accompanying himself on an electronic keyboard, and then offered an a cappella rendition of "The Lord's Prayer" in front of several hundred family members, friends, associates and fans who attended the two-hour service, after which a line of cars proceeded to her burial at Inglewood Park Cemetery.

On Friday night, a steady stream of visitors came to a public viewing at the cemetery. Recordings of James singing jazz, blues and R&B numbers such as "Sunday Kind of Love" were piped outside into the parking lot while the body that had delivered those songs years or decades earlier lay still, dressed in an elegant black suit adorned with gold embroidery.

James died of complications from chronic leukemia, and also had been struggling with the onset of dementia. She had been the focal point of a family split between her husband of 42 years, Artis Mills, and her sons, Donto and Sametto, who fought in court over control of her estate and her medical care. An agreement between Mills and James' sons left him as conservator of the estate.

Rep. Maxine Waters (D-Los Angeles), after noting how James had started her life in music as a child singing in a Los Angeles church only a few miles from where the funeral service took place, said James had won fans not only through her music but from the example of the struggles she overcame.

"Etta has always been one of my artistic heroines," Waters said. "Think about the strength of a woman who beat her addictions: her food addiction, her drug addiction ... and when times were tough, even performing from a wheelchair.... Etta is special to me because she represents the life, the trials and the tribulations of a lot of black women all over this world...."

She was a survivor, and I love her for that."

Donto James, the elder of her two sons, who along with his brother grew up to be part of their mother's backing band, spoke emotionally about the opportunities James offered to many young musicians who were struggling like she had in her youth.

Speakers also included Quint Davis, producer of the annual New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival, which he said was James' favorite event.

Davis also read a note from longtime Playboy Jazz Festival host Bill Cosby saluting James' numerous appearances at that annual gathering.

City of Refuge Church Pastor Noel Jones said that from a spiritual standpoint, "No one is indispensable, but some people are irreplaceable. Etta James was not indispensable, but she is irreplaceable."

James' band, the Roots, played several instrumental numbers in memory of the woman they had accompanied in recent years on tour.

"She reflected the times she lived in," Sharpton said. "There were times she sang the blues; she reflected the blues of the time.... The difference between her and other artists was somehow you felt she meant what she was singing. It was somehow the raw nerve feeling that came through, so that you knew deep in your heart that she was singing to your heart from her heart."

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