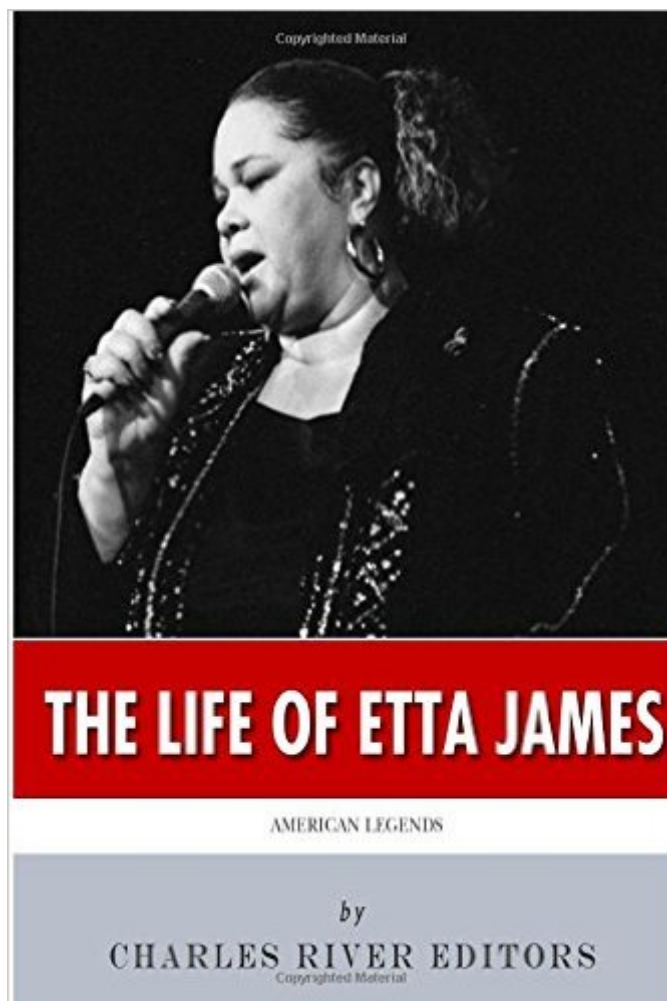


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# American Legends: The Life Of Etta James



## Synopsis

\*Includes pictures \*Includes Etta James' quotes \*Includes footnotes and a bibliography for further reading \*Includes a table of contents

“What happens is, when I perform, I’m somewhere else. I go back in time and get in touch with who I really am. I forget my troubles, my worries.” — Etta James

A lot of ink has been spilled covering the lives of history’s most influential figures, but how much of the forest is lost for the trees? In Charles River Editors’ American Legends series, readers can get caught up to speed on the lives of America’s most important men and women in the time it takes to finish a commute, while learning interesting facts long forgotten or never known.

Etta James, the legendary jazz, gospel, rhythm & blues, and soul singer, was perfectly positioned to reign as the supreme artist in the emerging soul genre of the 1940s and 1950s in America. No one ever doubted her talent, the highly distinctive and versatile nature of her voice, or her drive to succeed, and yet, she has been woefully overlooked in the history of indigenous rock and blues music in the United States. She is famous and recognized for several iconic hits with which she is eternally associated, such as “I’d Rather Go Blind” and “At Last,” but her place in the pantheon of great soul artists is unsteady and not always instantly recognizable by those outside of a knowledgeable group of devotees. For the rest of soul music’s listeners, mention of her name will result in a hasty inclusion into the inner circle of leading artists, as though James had been momentarily forgotten. Once the object of focus, however, she is revered as one of the titans of the genre, and those who had allowed her to slip from their minds are immediately reawakened to her powerful vocal and interpretive gifts. Such a vague position within the history of the form is partly due to a difficulty James experienced in crossing over to the white audience when others of the same genre were succeeding brilliantly at garnering a new, mixed race fan base. Further, her own abilities may have contributed to the phenomenon; Etta James excelled at almost everything she touched, from gospel and blues, to soul and pop. She could wound the listener with a ballad yet in the same evening “rock a house.” In her various vocal incarnations, she triumphed as a rhythm and blues belter, a blues crooner, and a rock-and-roll screamer who could tailor her voice and her stage persona to seduce or abuse the listener. James’ larger than life and highly forceful personality may have had a downside as well, as she searched for cross-over acceptance by doing everything that her colleagues were doing to make it happen but would not step far enough into the common ground where the entire spectrum of listeners could experience a sufficient level of comfort. Some of her colleagues, however, had been accused, at one time or another, of creating hybrids of themselves in order to be perceived as either partly or almost entirely white in their musical and stage craft, but outside of the prevailing musical habits of Fifties pop music, there was a

line passed that James would not, and probably could not budge. In addition, she would not admit to being weak in any musical area and moved between the genres easily and often, with the strong blues roots always at the ready for an underpinning. The steamy aspects of her personal life were followed with great interest by a fascinated public, and she was not at all subtle about traversing between the most primal and spiritualistic aspects minutes apart in any one appearance. Critic Richard Corliss of Time remarked, "Blues is the music of the church and the roadhouse, sanctity and sin; and this "soul" survivor sang with intimate knowledge of both." American Legends: The Life of Etta James looks at the life and career of one of America's most famous singers.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Her most memorable song is probably also a good title for a review since it was only toward the tale end of her career that she really turned her life around (sadly). All the drugs and later weight gain really took their toll, but I did find it interesting that her husband Artis Mills (no foreigner to serving time in jail) stuck by her all those years and even took the fall for her when she continued to have problems with drugs. A good book for learning a little something about the lady that also had me bringing up her classic "At Last" so I could give it a listen at the conclusion of finishing this short biography.

This book was brief as was expected. I developed a love of Etta James music later in life and I have

many of her albums. I knew she abuse drugs has did many of the music artists of her era. I did not realize she had so much trouble with the law. We all have to say that she lived her life to the fullest and she lived it her way. There are better books out there about this musical great; but, this book provides a decent overview of her musical career.

As a jazz singer, she was in a class of her own. Why shouldn't her personal life be the same? In her music, she was sultry, aggressive and had the odd ability to immediately switch over to a purring kitten in an instant. She will forever be missed. Fortunately, we have her music.

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