

## At Last: A Tribute to Etta James



A vintage image of the real Etta James.

No one can bring a bio-musical to life quite like Jackie Taylor's Chicago-based Black Ensemble Theater. Teddy Pendergrass, Dionne Warwick, Marvin Gaye and Jackie Wilson are among the icons whose musical highs and personal lows were masterfully spun into infectious stage productions by Taylor, founder of the Black Ensemble and writer and director of most of its greatest hits.

"At Last: A Tribute to Etta James" is BE's National Black Theatre Festival offering this year, and, like the many productions before it, it has left audiences in Chi-Town, where it was recently restaged, wanting more.

Dubbed "The Matriarch of R&B," James was born as Jamesetta Hawkins in Los Angeles in 1938. Her childhood was not easy; there were foster homes and abuse. She first sang in the church. Her deep, rich pipes packed them in at South Central L.A.'s St. Paul Baptist Church. By the time she was 16, James was a sought-after nightclub performer and began recording and touring. Her first breakout hit was "All I Could Do Was Cry." A string of other classics, recorded for various labels, would follow over the decades; they include "Trust in Me," "Something's Got a Hold on Me," "Stop the Wedding," "Push Over," "Tell Mama," "Sunday Kind of Love" and her signature hit, "At Last."

Five singer/actresses portray James, who died in 2012, at various points in her career in the production. Taylor, who wrote and co-directs with Daryl D. Brooks, said James' labyrinth of a life could not be encapsulated by just one actress.

"As the playwright, I found it impossible to tell this story using only one person as Etta James," Taylor said. "Her life was so complex that one actress just couldn't do her justice. That is why I've chosen five Ettas to bring this play to life."

### At Last: A Tribute to Etta James

K.R. Williams Auditorium at WSSU

Wed, Aug. 5	8 p.m.
Thurs, Aug. 6	8 p.m.
Fri, Aug. 7	8 p.m.
Sat. Aug. 8	3 p.m.
Sat. Aug. 8	8 p.m.

**\$48**

Performers Yahdina Udeen, Candace Edwards, Melanie McCullough, Arzula Gardner and Alanna Taylor as Etta James.



The women of "At Last: A Tribute to Etta James."

For its Chicago revival late last year, Candace Edwards, Arzula Gardner, Melanie McCullough, Alanna Taylor and Yahdina Udeen played James, taking audiences from her teen years in the '50s to her evolving superstardom in the '60s and '70s to her struggle to take control of her life and restart her career in '80s and to her triumphant comeback in the 1990s. The actresses impressively execute dozens of James' songs along the way.

Daniel Phillips, Mark Hood and Adrian Byrd represent some of the men in her stormy life. Ms. Real, a fierce drag queen who was played by Rueben Echoles, leads the audience through the story. Robert Reddrick is the music director.

Taylor founded the Black Ensemble Theater on Chicago's South Side in 1976 with a mission "to eradicate racism and its devastating effects upon society through the theater arts." The Black Ensemble has long had a presence at the National Black Theatre Festival and is credited with bringing what was arguably the most successful production in NBTf history, "The Jackie Wilson Story (My Heart is Crying, Crying)." ■