

OPINION

Etta James: Matriarch of the Blues

A life lesson in never giving up

BY MARC H. MORIAL

The legendary Matriarch of the Blues, Etta James, died Jan. 20 at the age of 73 in her hometown of Riverside, Calif. In a life filled with struggle, heartache and illness, Etta James was able to carve out one of the most eclectic careers in recording history and earn a place of royalty in the annals of American music.

Many young people today may only know Etta James through Beyoncé's acclaimed portrayal of her in the 2008 movie, *Cadillac Records*.

Born Jamesetta Hawkins in 1938, she began singing in church



at the age of 5. She released her first recording, *Roll with Me Henry*, at the age of 15. In 1960, she signed with Chess Records and had a long list of R & B, jazz, blues and pop hits, including "Something's Got a Hold on Me," "All I Could do was Cry," and her 1961 soulful rendition of "At Last," which became an iconic pop stan-

dard. President Obama and the First Lady appropriately chose "At Last" for their first dance at their inaugural ball in 2009.

In her 1995 autobiography, "Rage to Survive," which she co-authored with David Ritz, Etta James described her struggles as the daughter of a 14-year-old single mother, growing up in poverty, facing both sexism and racism, and

her bouts with drugs, jail and rehab that threatened several times to end her career.

Speaking of the rage she developed and that was com-



Etta James in 1965.

mon to many African Americans of her generation, she wrote, "Rage. You can hear it in my music. It's always been

there. I had it when I was a little kid. I have it now. I've been racing, raging through life as long as I can remember."

Fortunately, Etta James was able to channel that rage into her music. Her life is a lesson in overcoming adversity and never giving up. Due her range of styles and the diversity of her repertoire, she did not fit neatly into any musical category.

She was a 1993 inductee into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, joined the Grammy Hall of Fame in 1999 and entered the Blues Hall of Fame in 2001. She toured with the likes of Jackie Wilson, the Rolling Stones, and jazz flutist, Herbie Mann. And her six Grammy's include one for Best Jazz Performance, and one for Best Blues album.

Rolling Stones Magazine

ranks her 22 on its list of the 100 greatest singers of all time. She inspired generations of singers who came after her, including Bonnie Raitt, Brandy, Kelly Clarkson and, of course, Beyoncé.

In her later years, Ms. James developed several debilitating health problems, including dementia, diabetes and leukemia, which was the cause of her death. She is survived by her husband of 42 years Artis Mills and two sons, Donto and Sametto James.

Our thoughts and prayers are with the family, and we join all Americans in mourning the passing of a true musical genius, America's Matriarch of the Blues, Ms. Etta James.

Marc H. Morial is president and chief executive officer of the National Urban League.

Tough Immigration Laws Tough on Children

Alabama law rips apart families

BY MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

Alabama has passed the toughest immigration enforcement law in the country. Now children born in the U.S.A., American citizens, are living in fear. Some children are afraid to go to school.

According to Bill Lawrence, principal of Foley Elementary in Foley, Ala., most of these kids are American citizens. He said a child in fear can't learn, and the children in his school were terrified mom and dad would not be home when they got home from school.

The new state law requires people to have proof of legal status for almost every interaction in their lives, and it's already having dire consequences for many of Alabama's children. As the



Center for American Progress explains, "Alabama's new 'show me your papers' immigration law is ripping apart families in the state."

More than half of the estimated 120,000 undocumented immigrants who live in Alabama, 2.5 percent of the state's population, live in 'mixed status' families. But consider the children: 85 percent of the children of undocumented immigrants live in 'mixed status' families, often meaning the children are citizens but one or more of the parents are not. The result is that thousands of Alabama parents and children now live in constant fear of separation.

Among its many requirements, the Alabama law requires elementary and secondary schools to determine the immigration status of incoming students and their parents, and authorizes the school to report them to federal authori-

ties. As the head of the American Federation of Teachers Randi Weingarten, put it, "Educators should not be put in the position of being immigration law enforcers. Teachers should be safety nets, not snitches—guardians, not guards."

The state law requires police and some government officials to demand proof of legal status if they have "reasonable suspicion" a person may be in the country illegally, including during routine traffic stops or arrests, and criminalizes unlawful presence. It also makes it a felony for an illegal immigrant to conduct a business transaction with any governmental body in the state; nullifies any contract an undocumented person enters into, including applying for a loan or signing a lease; and makes it a crime for unauthorized immigrants to apply for or solicit work.

Advocates and community members reported that hundreds of Latinos did not report to work or attend school when the

law first passed, and hundreds of families fled the state.

The Department of Justice, civil rights and church groups all filed legal challenges after the law went into effect last summer. So far, federal courts have temporarily blocked several provisions of the law, including the provision requiring K-12 school officials to determine students' immigration status and that of their parents, and the provision that makes it a crime for immigrants to fail to complete or carry an alien registration card.

But the state of Alabama has been allowed to go forward with many other sections of the law. Now, as law enforcement agencies are clarifying procedures on what parts of the law to enforce as the law is being further reviewed in federal court, many parents and workers are not taking chances.

The Center for American Progress

continued ▼ on page 10

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