

Tough Mother for You
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Sometime around 1962 a burned-out soul-singer named Esther Mae Jones was doing nickel-and-dime gigs down in Houston's Market Square. A cluster of restaurants and clubs—blues, jazz, folk—in the old heart of the city, Market Square was in its heyday: Lightnin' Hopkins was singing for tips in the street, Townes Van Zandt was soloing in the cafes. On this night, Esther Mae was performing at a place called Paul's Sidewalk Café, sharing a modest billing with another local, a recent college dropout named Kenny Rogers.

The song she was singing, the story goes, was "Don't Put No Headstone on My Grave," country music singer Charlie Rich's weary lament on useless love. Esther was hard-bitten and cagey; her career had already shot to its apogee and back. She'd left home at fourteen to tour as Little Esther with bandleader Johnny Otis, had topped the charts eight times in two years, gigged a relentless series of one-nighters at dance halls and concert halls, and begun what would be a lifelong heroin addiction.

Now living with her father in Houston, she was in and out of rehab and playing the occasional club, trying to coax her career out of its fierce decline. The future—what she could see of it—looked like a string of lousy bookings in two-bit bars. She was twenty-six, give or take a year.

Kenny Rogers, it turned out, had a brother named Lelan who wanted to break into producing. After seeing her perform, Lelan signed Esther Mae Jones as Esther Phillips, the first act on his nascent Lenox Records. In the fall of 1962 she recorded "Release Me," a country-western standard written by Eddie Miller, and it went to the top of the r&b chart, the Top 10 on the pop chart, and onto the country chart.

Unusual, since this wasn't a time of experimentation at the record labels, which still tended to tie up acts in tidy packages. There were exceptions: Ray Charles, by dint of stubbornness and clout, and recorded—and was finding success with—a few Hank Williams and country-western tunes, and singers sometimes "graduated" from one category, like r&b, to another, like pop. But the whole shebang, the Triple Crown? Nobody, really, had done what Esther was doing. In general, the public preferred their music neat.

On the strength of "Release Me," Esther recorded an album of country songs on Lenox Records, three of which were runaway hits: "Am I That Easy to Forget," "I've Forgotten More Than You'll Ever Know About Him," and a version of "Don't Put No Headstone on My Grave." Charlie Rich wrote "Headstone" sometime between 1959 and 1962, but didn't release a version until 1963.

If Esther was actually singing this song at Paul's—and let's say for a moment that she was—it's a mystery how she had gotten ahold of it. Industry policy or no, there was

camaraderie and crossover among musicians, and a healthy blurring, or at least borrowing, of styles; plenty of demo-slinging, plenty of combinations thrown half-baked at the studio wall to see what would stick. But in 1962, no one had offered Esther a demo in a long time. Charlie Rich was still splitting his time between jazz bars in Memphis and the cotton fields of the family farm in eastern Arkansas. “Headstone” was a tune he was singing to himself in the car at night, working out the rhymes as he steered his truck down the road toward home. It wasn’t possible—it would be purely apocryphal—if even Charlie’s field hands were singing that tune, let alone Esther Mae Jones, broke-down soul singer, junkie, wringing out every wrecked syllable five hundred miles away.

But say for a moment that she was.

Tracing the pedigrees of different types of music is a cherished hobby of music historians, a compulsion not unlike the one that prompted early naturalists to make a neat six-tiered system out of the unruly riot of flora and fauna that surrounded them. Musicologists will go to great lengths to extract a two-bar riff from the fuzzy wax-cylinder recording of an obscure turn-of-the-century gospel piano player, and pin it next to the opening chords of “Great Ball of Fire” like a bug on a board.

This is the desire to impose order on chaos—or, more accurately, on the chaotic mess creation makes. Life moves ahead in leaps and bounds: Genes mutate, the formula for density comes to Archimedes in the bath; Jerry Lee Lewis, his hands above the keyboard, recalls a hymn he sang as a child. Order is imposed with hindsight. To be cognizant of this is to be tortured by life’s unpredictability. It might be argued that those more keenly aware, the ones at the fore of the creative urge, are tortured more.

It’s an old idea but worth saying again that commercialism squelches creativity, that market-driven music production subverts the creative impulse, making it formulaic, in service of needs that are exploited by advertising. There are just too many unknowns in the creative process for businesses to leave these things to chance, and so they refuse to, even when the result is—and it very often is—a musical dead end filled with fluffs of dust and dried flies.

But music is less a formula than the expression of things, a whole category of things, that might otherwise go unexpressed; complex, ribald emotions that routinely get hidden or shunted to the side in normal human interactions. Normal human interactions are dependable and utilitarian, geared to the lowest ratio and the highest torque: weather, television, food. Music is where the pure, the violent, the untenable go, the kinds of ungrammatical feelings unsuited for workaday use and the smooth-operating social machine. Before it is a genre, before it is an artifact, music is a place for some of our most critical exchanges; where we say unsayable things and where we go to find them. Esther wasn’t looking for a country song, but she found what she wanted there.

By all accounts Esther Phillips had her demons, born of simmering genius as well as of baser pleasures. It is unclear—among those who know her, it is a topic delicately avoided—who first gave her heroin. She was thirteen when she first won a talent contest

at Johnny Otis' club in Watts, and fourteen when she began touring with his band. By seventeen, she had a terrible habit. Though she spent a lot of time in rehab programs throughout her career, heroin ruled her, and then it killed her. She died at forty-eight from liver failure, wasted to ninety pounds.

People who knew Esther talk about her swagger, her wit, her take-no-prisoners disposition. The phrases they find to describe her often include cuss words: “no bullshit,” “you didn't fuck with Esther.” But they say the most striking things about her performances. Her voice, remarkable in recordings, was extraordinary in person, perfectly controlled and with a “supernatural vibrato, an acrid quality,” (writer Barney Hoskyns) that intensified throughout her career.

“A taste for Esther was like a taste for a good pickle,” says Atlantic Records executive Jerry Wexler, who produced several of her albums. “She had a nasality to her voice—we called it a ‘nanny’ in the business—that put her off to the multitudes but endeared her to the hip.” Her blue-ribbon talent was inhabiting a song, singing it like she meant it. And she meant it. The emotion showed in her face and voice to an almost uncomfortable degree. She was raised on gospel, sang redneck ballads, soul with Otis, and British pop with the Beatles.

“Esther could sing anything,” says writer Mary Katherine Aldin, who knew her in Los Angeles in the '70s. “She was the only one who could.”

To return to Charlie Rich for a moment: Charlie was also raised on church music, and on the field music the farm hands sang. His hits were on the country charts, and he is remembered as a country music singer, if a reluctant one. “I don't think that's what he intended to be,” says his sister, Elizabeth Armstrong. “The family would be singing ‘I'll Fly Away’ in four-part harmony, and Charlie would be at the piano banging out ‘Flight of the Bumblebee.’”

For much of his career he performed jazz and blues, and some of his most memorable songs, his darkest and sweetest—“No Headstone on My Grave,” “Feel Like Going Home”—have a brooding gospel underpinning in which his misery found its natural voice. Uncomfortable with stardom, intensely private, and with substance abuse problems of his own, Charlie had his demons too.

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Not much is left of either Charlie or Esther. Each has a minor musical legacy: a few box sets, a few hits, and a steadily declining population of true fans. Charlie's fur-trimmed coat and one of his gold records hang in a case at the St. Francis County Museum in Forrest City, Arkansas; the white frame house he grew up in, a few miles to the north in Colt, is rented to tenants. Esther was buried in Lincoln Memorial Park in Los Angeles when she died in 1984; a month later her body was removed to nearby Forest Lawn Memorial Park, where her plot lies in the Morning Light section, between Revelations and Abiding Love. Her obits listed no survivors.

If Esther was singing “Don’t Put No Headstone on My Grave” in Houston in 1962, it probably sounded similar to the recording she made a few years later on Lenox: just her, the piano, and a bare rhythm section that might have been a foot slapping a wood floor. The opening line punches out of the silence; she gives “grave” about thirteen syllables, and then the piano comes tinkling in, the sympathetic witnessing of the crowd.

*Don't put no headstone on my grave
All my life I've been a slave
Just put me down and let me be
Away from all this misery*

She spits out the words like a mouthful of tacks. She slides out of nasty growls into tremolos. There’s an otherworldly wailing above the refrain. For all its stylistic rambling, there’s no *doubt* in this song. Not an ounce. Despair, loathing, blame, regret, the dumps: all hers.

And if she was singing it in Houston, we know that she was shaking Kenny Rogers and Paul’s Café not only in a hyperbolic sense, to the hair roots and the grimy rafters, but in a cosmic, molecular-level, realignment-of-natural-law sense, too.

Charlie wrote that song for Esther. That, we know.