

Collected S2 Ep.1 – Sidedoor Guest Feature, “To Sweat Like Beyonce”

Lizzie Peabody: Hey there Sidedoorables! Lizzie here. We've got a special episode for you today! We're listening in on a podcast from our friends over at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History called Collected.

Krystal Klingenberg: Krystal Collected is a project of the museum's African American curatorial collective. And it's an opportunity for us to tell stories out of Black history.

Lizzie: That's Krystal Klingenberg. She's a curator of music at the museum, and host and creator of the show. Which is just launching its second season.

Krystal: So our first season was about history of contemporary Black feminism. This season, we're talking about Black women in music.

[music cue]

Lizzie: Krystal is a musicologist so she thinks about music all the time. But she says historically we're in a special moment right now -

Krystal: It's kind of an unprecedented time where we see particularly black female artists in such a diversity of genres and levels of prominence.

Lizzie: Black female musicians are breaking out of niche genres, into the mainstream and all sorts of other new territories. Look at Beyonce's latest album - Cowboy Carter, which led the Grammy nominations for Best Country Album, Best Americana Performance, Best Pop Duo/Group Performance, and Best Melodic Rap Performance. If that isn't genre-bending I don't know what is.

But Beyoncé is also building on a rich history of Black female musicians that came before her.

Krystal: And kind of the fundamental question that we're working with is: how do you get a Beyoncé? And you really do need to look at these antecedents and look at the women who came before her to see how the path was trod.

Lizzie: The series takes a look at some of those musicians who have trod that path: Ella Fitzgerald, Tina Turner, Donna Summer...

Krystal: Many of these women you already know, but telling you more about them and giving you a sense of the fullness of their lives is really what we're hoping to give folks.

Lizzie: It's like a guided museum tour with art you can groove to. And the tour guide... she really knows her stuff.

Krystal: What I bring to the table as the curator is not just to make a playlist, because we can all listen to a playlist, but to narrate the connections between those things and make it even stronger. And so the hope is that people will be able to access these artists a bit more deeply as a result.

Lizzie: I cannot wait. I'm so excited for this season.

Krystal: Thanks so much - so exciting!

Lizzie: Here's the first episode of season 2 of Collected. ENJOY!

[Collected music cue]

Krystal: (Host) This is Collected, a podcast from Smithsonian's National Museum of American History with support from PRX. I'm Dr. Krystal Klingenberg, Curator of Music.

COLD OPEN

Krystal: (Host) I had been to see Beyoncé's Renaissance tour when it came through the DC area, a humid two-night engagement in August of 2023. It was an electrifying evening of music, stagecraft, and Black excellence and when the film version came to theaters, I was keen to relive it. The costumes, the choreography, Beyoncé's vocals, the overall vibe of excitement in the audience? If the film was half the blast of the live show, it was going to be a good time.

So I head out to the IMAX with one of my closest girlfriends, ready to fangirl out. Popcorn in hand, we settled in for the almost three hour film.

MUSIC UP

Krystal: (Host) I was completely captivated by not only the close up view of what Beyoncé put on stage, but also by the way the film incorporated the fans and their expressions of adoration for their diva. We bathed in the rich theater sound and sang along to hits old and new.

Part of Beyoncé's genius is the way she deploys so many different skills—singing, dancing, production, creative direction, charisma—seemingly effortlessly. Another part is that her artistry is supported by Black female geniuses who came before her and that is shown through her expert curation and historical callbacks in her music. But she is also known to be a very hard worker and it shows in the polish of what she puts on stage. So, as I watched her sing and dance her heart out, an expression of pure perfection and pop domination, I realized that she wasn't really sweating. She had her trademark stage fans blowing around her, but I was surprised she wasn't sweating, save for a little dew on around her nose, she was dry as a bone. She was moving for no less than 3 hours, and because of the lack of sweat, it looked effortless. Was this by design? If the performer of a generation can't be seen sweating on stage, who can? How perfect does Beyoncé have to present herself in order to be the "best?"

MUSIC OUT

If Beyoncé is not allowed to sweat, what chance do other Black women have, similarly laboring their hearts out?

(Transition to Office)

Krystal: (Host) I went into work at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History the next week, where I'm a curator of music in the Division of Culture and the Arts and I couldn't shake these questions at the intersection of Black female performance, sweat, perfection, and genius. And, reflecting on *Renaissance*, how Beyoncé's work is shot through with historical reference and inspiration (we would see this idea continue to be developed with the 2024 *Cowboy Carter* album).

THEME MUSIC FADES IN

Krystal: (Host) To understand her genius, you must understand the matrix of women around her, those who came before and those to come after. A lineage of practice, talent, and trailblazing that has consistently redefined the terms of American popular music for the last 100 years. Women that created that space for Beyoncé and her generation of performers and how their experiences made a way for new and different expressions of Black womanhood on stage for all to see.

On this season of *Collected*, we're taking a close look at the work of Black women in popular music to examine this web of influence – a matrix of connection – that offers context for the work of a Beyoncé and how the contributions of several women in particular created space for those who would follow. I'm Krystal Klingenberg, and this is *Collected Season 2: The Musical Genius of Black Women*.

MUSIC FADE OUT

-----[PRE ROLL BREAK]

[Timecode: 03:53]

ACT 1: STATE OF BLACK WOMEN TODAY IN MUSIC

Krystal: (Host) What do you see as the state of Black women in music today?

Daphne Brooks: You know, if you'd asked me that question, one, two, maybe two and a half years ago, I may have had a very different answer than the answer that I would give you right now, Krystal.

Krystal: (Host) This is Dr. Daphne Brooks, professor of African American studies at Yale, author of *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound*.

Daphne Brooks: The answer then would have been, with the rise and unprecedented, experimental, Black activists, Black feminist spirit and vision and aesthetics of Beyoncé, Knowles Carter, leading the way, you know amongst a really robust generation of Black women musicians of the 21st century, I would have said that this was, the greatest moment in popular music culture for kind of reckoning of their long standing impact on not just popular culture, but modern life in America.

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MUSIC UP

[Timecode: 04:58]

Daphne Brooks: What would I say now in 2024, after a year in which a thirty-something white woman, former country singer, so saturated the media, that it felt for me as a Black feminist thinker who engages in popular music culture day in and day night, it felt like a, mass silencing, a kind of cultural amnesia.

Krystal: (Host) Though Professor Brooks recognizes the success and visibility of Black woman musicians today, she notes that even the most successful among them still face unfair comparison. During the height of Beyonce's Renaissance tour, which coincided with singer and songwriter Taylor Swift's Eras tour, there was constant comparison between the two artists.

There were countless think-pieces and social media posts about the relative merits of Beyonce versus Taylor Swift. It got to the point that NPR reported on it in a segment titled, "Understanding why Beyoncé and Taylor Swift get compared." Professor Brooks sees an eclipse of Beyoncé's rich contributions in the conversation at large.

Daphne Brooks: What I'm most interested in, in discussions of Taylor Swift versus Beyonce, is just that gross, inequity in terms of how they're treated critically and also commercially. And I think on the critical front, you know, one of the most unfortunate distinctions that marks the two of them is the extent to which one is so often referred to as an artist and the other as an entertainer or performer.

Krystal: (Host) Dr. Brooks is describing a common belief among critics and fans alike that “the artist” is better than “the performer,” in part, because a performer is a worker and an artist is an inspired genius. It is a comparison that is often used to downgrade the labor of certain musicians and strip their output of intellectual rigor.

MUSIC OUT

Krystal: (Host) It's a comparison that robs laboring people of their genius. In short, the artist expresses the creativity, the entertainer labors to delight the crowd.

Part of what finds Black women's contributions overlooked, whether that be on stage or in other domains of society, is their categorization as workers.

Fath Davis Ruffins: In very, very general terms, I would say that there have always been, Black women who have largely been thought of as basically enslaved workers who did the bidding of whoever was the owner or controller of their time.

[Timecode: 7:28]

Krystal: (Host) That's Fath Davis Ruffins, cultural historian and curator for the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History for over 40 years. She takes us back to enslavement to understand this longer history of Black women's labor.

Fath Davis Ruffins: So, then the antebellum period, you don't really have a large diversity of things women can do. I mean, they can work in the field, but they can be seamstresses and they can be laundresses and they can be cooks and they can be nursemaids. But, once you begin to get recorded music, specifically, and you get the kind of changes in what we call media in the 20th century, such as film, television, things don't exist, until the 20th century. I think you see much more complex notions of African American womanhood that are enacted publicly. After that, they can be doctors or lawyers, not very many of them, but these possibilities open up.

Krystal (Host) As the diversity of opportunities for Black women's labor developed, so did the space for Black women to express their talents on stage and with that more freedom to create new forms.

Fath Davis Ruffins: Late 19th century people start traveling around and these traveling revues. Well that's kind of new because uh there were reviews before often minstrel shows but most minstrel shows were almost always all men. And when you begin to get the development of these reviews and traveling bands that eventually lead to things like jazz and recorded blues and things like this.

Krystal: (Host) Ruffins is describing the growing access to self actualization that Black women had over time. The stage provided an opportunity to express the things heretofore not possible, but barriers still existed. These barriers included preconceived notions of who Black people were and omnipresent racial discrimination including Jim Crow Laws.

[Timecode: 9:23]

The minstrel show, performed primarily by white actors in Black face paint and serving up grotesque racial stereotypes to audiences, continued to grow in popularity after the Civil War to become some of the most popular entertainments in the country. But in the early 1900s, the emergence of jazz and recorded Blues created popular genres for Black musical expression and self-actualization.

But just as music would provide a balm to the soul in times of fear and times of triumph, it would also be deployed as a rally call to resistance, which we would particularly see in Soul music during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s.

Rock would get started in the mid-1950s with Black artists. Music would also provide the sound of young America through the pop music of Motown from the 1960s to 70s. Disco would arise in the mid-1970s and offer an escape and RnB would resound throughout.

All these genres presented space for Black women to offer their gifts to society at large.

MUSIC FADE OUT

[MID ROLL BREAK]

[Timecode: 10:33]

ACT 2:WHAT WILL THE SEASON COVER

Krystal: (Host): In deciding which women to highlight for this season we had to consider a number of factors. We decided to focus on pop. And as a scholar of popular music, I very much believe in the power of pop to not just move bodies, but to move hearts and minds. So pop it is. But then, which genres to highlight? Should we pick well known artists or lesser known ones? Which time period? What kinds of Black Female Genius do we want our chosen artists to represent?

By the time our team put pen to paper, the list was miles long. And when we conducted our interviews, the list got even longer.

Dwandalyn Reece: I know a lot's been done about her, but I still find her fascinating. It's Nina Simone.

Alyia Grau: Diana Ross

Craig Seymour: Chaka Khan.

Crystal Moten: I think of India Arie.

Margo Jefferson: Samara, absolutely.

Francis Ramirez-O'Shea: Celia Cruz

Kyra Assibey-Bonsu: Mahalia Jackson

Modupe Labode: Abbey Lincoln and Alice Coltrane are two women I'd like to know more about

Daphne Brooks: The other one would be Solange.

Krystal: (Host) In the end, we decided we needed women that represented the evolution of American popular music not only through genre, but through pivotal moments in time, that stood out among their generation as leaders and innovators in their genre. Women who you might already know something about, but not the whole story. And to narrow our focus even more, specifically vocalists, a unique position on stage that we will explore over the season. So who do we pick?

Krystal: (Host) If Jazz is "America's music," who will represent the Jazz voice?

ELLA BURST - [You'll Have to Swing It \(Mr. Paganini\)](#) (2:24-2:28)

Crystal Moten: When I think about Ella Fitzgerald, I think about jazz, but I think about her being one of the most influential jazz artists of all time, not only for the sound of her voice, the range of her voice her musicality, but also her influence on other artists.

[Timecode: 12:18]

Krystal: (Host): If you recognize that voice, that's my co-host from last season Dr. Crystal Moten. You will hear her expert takes on labor throughout season two.

But returning to our women to focus on, we needed a Black woman who made a name for herself in a genre that people thought was not for her...

TINA BURST - [Simply the Best](#) (1:03-1:07)

Crystal Moten: Now, when I think about Tina Turner, I think about Tina Turner being the queen of rock, I think about her powerful performances, her athleticism in her dance, her beautiful and stunning physique, and then also her inspirational [00:12:50] story of overcoming personal pain and letting that fuel her success.

Krystal: (Host) We needed a woman who became an icon in her field, no matter how long the genre lasted...

DONNA BURST - [Hot Stuff](#) (0:48-0:52)

Crystal Moten: Donna Summer. Disco diva, but also, uh, groundbreaking in terms of, uh, being, uh, one of the first to make disco accessible, to make it mainstream. [00:13:14]

Krystal: (Host): And finally, someone who created a space not just in music, but in activism and on the museum floor.

Bernice With Sweet Honey In The Rock Burst - [Freedom in the Air](#) (0:08-0:12)

Crystal Moten: Bernice Johnson Reagon. I mean. Where can I start? She's a major cultural leader and activist, and she's a preserver of Black music.

Krystal: (Host): Ella Fitzgerald, Tina Turner Donna Summer, and Bernice Johnson Reagon, serve as examples of incredible Black female musicians who add meaningfully to the American popular music sound and broke barriers through their performance genius, blazing new paths for the women who would follow them. *So how do we get to Beyonce, a Black woman dominating and pioneering within a musical space? We look at the women who came before her.*

And while you may know something about our chosen women, we will be looking at the fullness of their lives, stage personas, and particular gifts to assess the very pathways they created. We will do this with the help of more experts in the fields of music and music criticism, and with the help of their songs, a historical record unto itself. Let's re-root ourselves in the material that these artists gave us and the lessons learned from their journeys, starting first with the voice of the American Songbook, Ella Fitzgerald.

CREDITS

Krystal: (Host) I would like to thank our guests, Daphne Brooks, Margo Jefferson, Dwandalyn Reece, Fath Davis Ruffins, Craig Seymour, and Crystal Moten for their time.

Check out **Collected's** website for more information and resources related to Black women in music and about the particular work of Ella Fitzgerald, Donna Summer, Tina Turner, and Bernice Johnson Reagon. Our podcast team is made up of Aliya Yates, Kyra Assibey-Bonsu, Francis Ramirez-O'Shea, Ann Conanan, and Modupe Labode. **FACT CHECKING BY NATALIE BOYD, ADDITIONAL EDITING BY JANA E MORRIS, AND SOUND MIXING BY TAREK FOUDA.** Credits for the music in this episode can be found on our webpage. Special thanks to Kathleen Felli, Camille Borders, and Jacqueline Hudson. *Collected* is funded by the [Smithsonian's American Women's History Museum](#) and the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History.

I'm your host, Krystal Klingenberg, we have lots in store for you this season, so stay tuned!

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