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Michael Giltz

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# HuffPo Exclusive: Labelle's Nona Hendryx Speaks Out!



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The genre-bending, musically adventurous ladies of Labelle (of "Lady Marmalade" fame) launch their **first tour in 30 years** on Friday, December 19 at the **Apollo in New York City** before heading out across the country in 2009. It comes hard on the heels of Labelle's new *Back To Now* CD, easily the comeback album of the year thanks to new songs like "Candlelight," "Superlover" and "Tears For The World," not to mention a raucous, earth-shaking cover of Cole Porter's "Miss Otis Regrets" which brings the trio back full circle to their early days when they performed

adventurous, unlikely tunes like "Danny Boy" and "Over The Rainbow" alongside r&b originals.

It would be a shame to reduce Labelle to "Voulez vous coucher avec moi?" since the group was such a titanic creative force thanks to **albums like *Nightbird*, *Phoenix* and *Chameleon***. They performed at the Metropolitan Opera, saw the Alvin Ailey dance troupe create pieces set to their music and taught David Bowie and Queen and everyone else a thing or two about showmanship. (You can listen to **a terrific 1975 concert streamed on the website Wolfgang's Vault**.) And each woman has made her mark as a solo artist. **Sarah Dash** enjoyed a fruitful collaboration with the Rolling Stones and has explored gospel, soul and other genres. **Patti LaBelle** of course hit a commercial peak in the 80s with hits like "New Attitude" and "On My Own." And **Nona Hendryx** dove into rock, punk, and even New Age when not collaborating with the likes of Talking Heads and Peter Gabriel.

Hendryx -- always the most outspoken and political of the group (though all of them have been active in donating their time to social and political causes over the years) -- talked exclusively with Huffington Post about the group, their legacy and the new CD.

**HuffPo:** During a 1975 live concert, Labelle performed a song called "System" that you promised would be on the group's next album. It took 33 years, but you finally did it. I know the System is

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still in place, but I wonder if you ever imagined that by the time you released the song on an album that a black man would be the President-elect.

**Hendryx:** I was very into science fiction and futuristic ways of thinking but it didn't take me *that* far. [laughs] It is wonderful and amazing. No matter who is in that particular seat, still the System exists. It's a thing in and of itself that controls or tries to control human behavior. I would have thought by now the system would have learned that you can't.

**HuffPo:** All three of you have shone a spotlight on New Orleans and other causes. And you spoke openly to The Advocate about your bisexuality in 2001. Nothing could dim the excitement of Obama's win on election night, but it was bittersweet to see some anti-gay initiatives win in California and elsewhere.

**Hendryx:** Human beings are who they are and you cannot legislate who someone's going to fall in love with or care for or want to be with. Now, I don't particularly believe in the concept of marriage. That's never been my belief in how and why people are together. The legal side of it is very important because I've seen friends have horrible experiences. So I understand that. But I don't want to emulate someone and take on anything of them that is really handcuffing me in any way. Because it's about oh you want to be like heterosexuals - one man and one woman. That's crap, bullshit anyway. [laughs] I'm not aspiring to that. What I'm aspiring to are my rights as a human being.

**HuffPo:** When a group stops working together -- especially a group of women -- people like to imagine egos and catfights. But Labelle collaborated together for 17 years and you've all been friends since then. Still, you're three strong women and none of you wanted to record an album unless it could live up to the body of work you had created. What was it like really working with each other again?

**Hendryx:** It's great and...frustrating at the same time. [said fondly] It's like family getting together again which can be absolutely horrendous at moments and at other times a love fest.

**HuffPo:** Did you really all have a sleepover at Patti's house?

**Hendryx:** We ended up all three of us in the bathroom putting on makeup and getting ready to go out somewhere.

**HuffPo:** If it were a movie, you would have all broken out into song.

**Hendryx:** We were! We were singing the parts of "Superlover" because we were going to do it that morning. Pat of course always puts on her makeup and then she puts on the same makeup that you've put on, on her, again. So she has on makeup for three. Like everything it has its challenges. We are individuals and we have our individual issues we deal with. But like a family, you rise above it. We've grown and we are stronger.

**HuffPo:** How is Sarah stronger?

**Hendryx:** She's much more confident in her place within Labelle. I was the writer, Patti was the lead singer and Sarah was the pretty one. Today, she's much more confident that she's integral to the group. Without one of those voices, it's not Labelle. And Sarah's very acute. She'll hear something and bring it to our attention that isn't working. We all listen differently and she listens in a different way that's very helpful. She's very into making sure that we are making the Labelle sound. She's pinpointed what that is vocally.

**HuffPo:** How is Patti stronger?

**Hendryx:** Patti is stronger in her choices. Her choices in the past were -- to me -- a lot of the time driven by a need to please other people. Yes, she loves and cares about people but she's much stronger about what she wants to do and the music she chooses. Even if she likes somebody and they have a song, she doesn't have to do it. She's much more focused in the studio. That's not her favorite place to be; she just wants to sing and get out. She's much more present there now and she'll take the time.

**HuffPo:** And how are you stronger?

**Hendryx:** How am I stronger? I think I'm much more of a team player than I used to be. And not

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because I didn't want to be. It just wasn't so much a part of my way of approaching things. I did most of the writing, so I would pretty much write alone. This time it was much more inclusive and it was great. I had other people to bounce off of and know what my strengths were as far as what I bring to Labelle.

**HuffPo:** Labelle is legendary for its amazing live shows and the Apollo is about as historic as it gets. Do you remember the first time you played there?

**Hendryx:** It was 1961 or 1962. I don't know the exact date but I remember what we wore and what we performed. I was so naïve that in a way I wasn't impressed but once I walked out on stage...I was impressed. We walked onstage after Brook Benton and the headliner was Dinah Washington. And I think the Drifters were on that show. By the end of that show, I was like, "Oh my God, this is real." We were wearing sailor outfits and singing "I Sold My Heart To The Junkman" and "Danny Boy" and "Down The Aisle."

**HuffPo:** Did you kill?

**Hendryx:** We did kill it. What really was the defining moment was when the drag queens and the boxers at the Saturday night late show stood up and applauded.

**HuffPo:** You know you're doing alright if you win them over.

**Hendryx:** Believe me, you're not doing alright. You have a *career*.

For more info, go to:

[Labelle's official website](#)

[Nona Hendryx's website](#)

[Patti LaBelle's website](#) and [MySpace page](#)

[Sarah Dash's website](#) (which has great clips of Labelle in action)

[Wolfgang Vault's 1975 Labelle concert](#)

[The Apollo's website](#)

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I was lucky enough to work with Nona and her manager while at Razor & Tie when we released a cross-label collection titled "Transformation." I was amazed at how talented Nona was, and surprised she never was able to turn the corner on a super solo career. Hope she has the best of luck on her tour and it enables her to relaunch more solo works!

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Thanks for reading. Hendryx went into so many different genres that she never got her due.

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