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The Vocality and Criticism of Dionne Warwick
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Introduction

It is striking that the voice that belongs to Dionne Warwick, ever changing, ever wizening, has seldom been presented as a singular entity. From the outset of her storied career, with 1962's "Don't Make Me Over," Warwick dominated American airwaves as a solo artist that simultaneously worked as the public-facing third of a partnership between herself, and her writing partners, composer Burt Bacharach and lyricist Hal David. Like many of those that followed, that first single, a triumph of black female vocality, is notable for its lyrics on love, her intended holding so much power over her. Though she sings of love with resignation, she begs him, in heightened passion, to accept her for who she is. Warwick's performance, the fiery determination to retain her authentic interiority, is the first among the several reasons why "Don't Make Me Over" is regarded as a feminist classic. Later, inevitably, that voice would grow older into its interpretative gifts. But this time, assisted by the genius of Clive Davis, whose expertise and knowledge of finding the right material for Dionne's voice, the result was a strong renaissance for her, beginning in 1979 and catching the attention of Warwick's long-considered rival, Aretha Franklin.

In the midst of the cultural cachet Warwick had amassed on Twitter, for being a spokeswoman for psychics, and for telling the likes of Snoop Dogg to watch his mouth, her music has become somewhat obscured. However, first and foremost, Dionne Warwick is an artist. This retrospective intends to relive significant moments of her career with an ear to invite those who enjoy Dionne Warwick in other forums to return once again to her music. The goal is to remind listeners of Warwick's extraordinary vocal gifts, the reason why anybody ever cared about her in the first place.

Warwick's storied career noted, it is equally striking that critical evaluations of her voice and oeuvre fall short of recognizing her tremendous talent. Warwick's voice, a commanding and lithe contralto, performed a new interiority for the black female: one of sophisticated, arresting restraint. Though redolent of an aggrieved, serious young lover in song, perhaps Warwick's ditziness offstage appeared to not concord with the air of genius or of serious musicianship. More than likely, it should be noted that the critical perspective onto popular music placed hyper focus onto white rock and rollers primarily. If a black woman found critical success in the appraisal of her work, she was likely Aretha Franklin, or a traditional soul singer who, through the rawness of her vocalizations, provided a voyeuristic view into her interiority, namely through the performance of black pain. Through Warwick's markedly restrained vocalization, David's lyrics, and Bacharach's arrangements, Warwick's singles would continue to crossover from soul into pop, a complication that made it too easy for less discerning critics to regard her merely as a pop singer.

Young Dionne

During her early stardom, Dionne Warwick was described as "very tough, very cool" and self-possessed; irrepressible, some might have said. In a run-in in the segregated South while touring with Sam Cooke, Warwick's defiance and willingness to take chances against a prejudiced waitress put her feistiness on full display. Admired as a statuesque, powerful-voiced, pop and rhythm and blues singer who had formal music training in addition to a gospel church upbringing, there were too many genres to associate with Warwick's unique sound.

Comparing herself to Ella Fitzgerald and Lena Horne, Warwick had been after the same ubiquity, to maintain the utmost artistic integrity and identity. Known for her unique styling as well as her strong appeal to young as well as older audiences, both white and black, Warwick crossed over from rhythm and blues into the popular genre without alienating either audience. Her success as a crossover artist calls into question her genre categorization; from her vocalizations and intonations alone, she could be categorized as 1960s pop, gospel, rhythm-and-blues, or jazz.

The realization that Warwick borrows from but does not neatly fit into any of these traditions makes a good case for the abolishment of genre altogether. In a 1966 profile on her origins, Warwick quips that it is up to the appraiser, not the artist to assign genre, insisting to writer Lorraine Alterman, "You figure it out." Her flair for deflection makes the challenge of relating her music and interiority to a particular genre increasingly difficult, because it seemed that young Warwick would not help critics make sense of her or her music. What made sense was Warwick's immediate appeal, demonstrating her place in every market and demographic by remaining true to her foundation: her faith. The same profile would see her reject the idea of recording "white soul or hard rock songs" because she sang from "the gospel tradition."

After her first single, "Don't Make Me Over" at Scepter Records, Dionne Warwick would release eighteen albums in ten years, notching an unprecedented twenty-two Top 40 hits on the Billboard Hot 100 Chart. By the time she parted ways with Scepter in 1971 after *Very Dionne* (1970), Warwick had become an international superstar based on her viability as a recording artist, her reputation as a superior vocalist, and the magical trifecta she formed with Hal David & Burt Bacharach. In addition to her solo work, Warwick would occasionally stand in with the Sweet Inspirations and the Shirelles throughout the 1960s, most notably appearing on the 1961 classic "Will You Love Me Tomorrow," a standard she later remade with the remaining Shirelles on her live album, *Hot! Live and Otherwise* (1981).

Much praise and adulation came from Warwick's near peerless position as a live performer and the strength of her musical releases during her tenure at Scepter. Upon writing a review of Warwick's vocalization at The Regal Theater in Chicago in April 1964, writer Guy Stevens remarked that she "managed to create virtually the same sound as she gets on her records, something we're just not used to in the United Kingdom." Others have observed that Warwick's meteoric rise to critical and commercial acclaim were the result of her singing, with descriptions of her as an "extremely gifted artist" with a unique song styling. Album reviews were encouraging.

Warwick's Commercial Recession

As fortunes in American popular music go, the lush and masterful blend of pop, R&B, and show tunes that made Warwick famous in the 1960s went out of vogue in the early 1970s. Where she once found immense success, Warwick endured several hitless years, producing eight studio albums that managed only one number one hit: 1974's duet with The Spinners, "Then Came You," under the production guidance of Thom Bell, the architect of the Philadelphia Sound. Upon the release of Warwick's *just Being Myself* (1973), largely penned by former Motown writers Holland-Dozier-Holland, David Nathan writes for *Blues & Soul*, lambasting the press corps for the questions they asked of the singer, including "what makes a female feminine?" An interesting question to pose to Warwick; the brunt of praise she received for her appearance was due to her high cheekbones, slender figure, and sartorial sophistication.

In thinking through her struggles and upheavals during her time at Warner Brothers, Nathan published Warwick's candid dissatisfaction with the album's results. Nathan ends his review undeterred that Warwick would ultimately give "other contemporary soul female artists like Aretha, Diana, and Shirley Bassey a run for their money." (He was right.) Still, the culminating consensus is that save for "Then Came You," Warwick's tenure at Warner Bros. had proved quite difficult for the singer. It is also worth mentioning that tastes, genre, and formats had begun to change as Warwick left Scepter for Warner Bros. Record companies became keen on delivering music that audiences would consume, and much of Warwick's post-Scepter output did not deliver the goods.

The Return of Dionne Warwick

In the late seventies, at the nadir of her career, Dionne Warwick would meet during a shared appearance on *The Dinah Shore Show*, the record executive and music mogul Clive Davis. They discussed Dionne's possible exit from the music industry. Davis implored Warwick to stay, intimating that despite her desire to leave the music industry, he intended to show her that the music industry had not abandoned her. Davis recruited and signed Warwick to Arista Records and teamed her with singer-songwriter and producer Barry Manilow. Davis commissioned Manilow to compose a song for Dionne. The result, "I'll Never Love This Way Again," would go on to become Warwick's comeback song. Other songs were commissioned, such as a re-recording of "After You" from Cissy Drinkard Houston's solo material, and the Issac Hayes produced, "Déjà vu."

The next record, her first for Arista, *Dionne* (1979) resurrected Warwick's profile from oblivion. Hugely successful, the album became Warwick's first platinum record, with two Top 20 singles. Her comeback was established and manifested in the record-executive helmed project combined with the talent of a vocalist equipped with cultural cachet. That was the model Davis established with Warwick in 1979; the 1980s would see several revivals of soul singers, including Patti Labelle, and Warwick's rival, Aretha Franklin. The executive-guided selection and curation of recording material figures heavily into the start of careers for the likes of Mariah Carey, Whitney Houston, and Celine Dion, amongst others. Furthermore, the album returned the diminishing fortunes of Warwick's career itself. Not only did she find renewed commercial success, at the

1980 Grammy Awards Ceremony, she received two awards for Best Pop Vocal Performance, Female and Best R&B Vocal Performance, Female, for “I’ll Never Love This Way Again” and “Déjà vu,” becoming the first African American woman to win the award in both categories on the same night.

Dionne Warwick: Her Critical Evaluation

Aside from the supportive news media related to Dionne Warwick’s career and artistry, there are critical issues regarding Warwick’s aesthetic evaluation. Given the sheer amount of fanfare that critics have given her contemporaries Diana Ross and Aretha Franklin, Warwick has yet to achieve the same regard for her music, her vocal inflections, and her sheer longevity within the music industry. On the strength of her oeuvre alone, she is more than deserving of additional critical attention.

Coming to prominence first, Dionne Warwick scored major pop hits so that Aretha Franklin could cover them. Warwick, though talented, had a sophisticated sound that critics could not quickly classify; neither was she the type of black female singer that Franklin had been. The latter seemed to have been steeped in the church tradition where Warwick was thought to have merely dipped her toe. Of course, this is not the case.

Warwick’s original version of “I Say a Little Prayer” is a quiet, cool rumination said to oneself perhaps before a church service, or during every free moment the narrator can use to secure the love of her intended through the contemplative power of prayer. Warwick withholds and practices restraint in the mediation of her thoughts. She embodies this stance finely with Bacharach’s arrangement and David’s lyrics. On the other hand, though enjoyable, Franklin’s raucous interpretation makes the private public. Where Warwick keeps prayer to herself, it is Franklin who declares her prayer at the bombastic heights of Praise & Worship, into the microphone, already involving the background singers of her intention as collection plates traverse the congregation.

Side by side, the interpretative elements of both can exist for different moments in prayer, but the latter aims to outshout the stolid presence of the original in a way that somewhat misinterprets Bacharach and David’s intentions for the song. If we are to assume their intended sound was Dionne Warwick’s version, then the contemplative prayer is the aim. Franklin’s willingness to declare love in public for all the church to see, though moving, misses the opportunity that the original captures so well—the trepidation that comes with the possibility of requited love, one that cannot be guaranteed by one’s own doing.

In grounding Dionne Warwick in the music criticism of her career, I recognized that her entire career, from 1962’s “Don’t Make Me Over” through to her recent collaborations with her son Damon, and Dolly Parton, span the emergence of rock criticism and its succeeding generations. Warwick has outlived many of the writers we’ve read over the years, given her longevity in the entertainment and music industries. Her major charting years have seen the racial divisions that operated within music critical circles, which had been historically a corps of mostly white writers focusing their attentions on white rockers and raw black singers. Warwick’s longevity withstood their eventual changing of guard and now boasts a popular command over today’s multifaceted

mediascape through Twitter, now known as 'X'. This work looks to begin to address the absence of careful criticism of her music.

If we investigate, from start to present, the contours of critical opinions of Dionne Warwick's career, the principal cause for her sanction from the upper reaches of critical acclaim will reveal itself. Two of her albums, which enjoyed the deep probing analyses of on the popular online music publication *Pitchfork*, reveal the main criticism of her discography. In his review-in-hindsight of her first album, *Presenting Dionne Warwick* (1963), writer Andy Cush references Warwick's own 2010 memoir *My Life, As I See It*, where she found that as she crossed over to greater popular success in national television appearances and higher charting, "something that came as a big surprise: the decline of airplay for my records on African American radio."[1] She continues, "In fact, when I asked one of New York's premier jocks, Rocky G…why he was not playing my records on his show, he told me I was 'too white.'"

Dionne Warwick: the Vocalist and the Singer

Not one to be immune to scandal, Dionne Warwick was found to have had eleven "marijuana cigarettes" in her bag in May 2002. Though she claims to not partake in the drug, there is yet significant evidence of Warwick smoking cigarettes. Even in the promotional video for "I Say a Little Prayer," she can be seen holding a cigarette nonchalantly in the Parisienne style. Granted, she came of age in an era where smoking was more socially accepted than at present. However, I present these facts as evidence for explaining the transformation, the deepening and widening of Warwick's voice, which has been mediated by time, age, and extra-curricular activities.

As a vocalist, Warwick began her career with a light voice and versatility in range. That range would slowly shrink, as most voices do, but gain a silken quality and a masterful interpretative skill. In Warwick's documentary, Burt Bacharach shared that she had a large vocal range and versatility, which can be heard on "Don't Make Me Over" (1962) and "Anyone Who Had a Heart" (1964), both of which feature soft singing as high mezzo soprano as well as soul belting. Critic Hilton Als wrote in 2013 that earlier in Warwick's career, her "range allowed her to sing contralto low notes and to soar as high as a soprano." These assessments are apt.

Coupled with previous images of Dionne Warwick as a young woman, the simultaneous girlishness and glacial distance reveal a talented young artist who faced difficulty in sorting out her sound. Nevertheless, the warm Warwick sound was a sensation that would continue to make itself known in songs like "Alife" (1967) and "Déjà Vu" (1979) as her voice reached its matured sound in the late 1970s. In *Don't Make Me Over,* the late Olivia Newton-John mentioned that Warwick had a melancholic tone. Stevie Wonder reflected on the capacity of Warwick's voice to "allow people to see and look forward to the best part of themselves." When Warwick debuted, her voice carried a sense of agility that manifested in lilt flourishes in songs such as the refrain in 1969's "I'll Never Fall in Love Again."

Notably, between 1963 and 2023, as Warwick's voice deepened, it adapted a softer delivery that speaks to Bacharach's assessment of her voice. That said, I believe the performance of Dionne Warwick, the sophisticated madame on records such as "Déjà vu" could not have been

[1] *My Life, As I See It, Warwick*

accomplished with the same precision earlier than 1975; the fullness of her soft sound and delivery in lyrics such as, “This is insane, all you did was say hello…” make her delirium believable. Even to this day, she remains the consummate performer, knowledgeable of her voice’s capability after six decades of performance, aware of the harmonization that best suits a live 2023 performance of “Walk On By,” to name just one example.

As a singer, however, Warwick wields her instrument with a sense of subtlety, restraint, and a sensitivity toward conveying emotion. And while she performs with emotive power connected to the music, her role as interpreter stops there. Here is where Warwick is the opaquest: on stage, she is not communicating or emoting from her own interiority, but instead from the interpretation that best suits the song in performance, an interpretation of the making of Warwick herself, together with input from Bacharach and David. Nevertheless, such secular performative sensibilities led Cissy Houston to remark in *Don’t Make Me Over* that although Warwick was raised in the church, she was not really gospel and had another “spirit” in her. Perhaps Houston is speaking to Warwick’s ineffable vocal presence; unclassifiable, Warwick’s artistry—specifically her tenures at Scepter and Warner Bros.—exists in a liminal space, just beyond the traditional sounds expected in music, and relegated by racialized genre, at the time. It was her choice to join Clive Davis at Arista Records that ultimately secured her Grammy wins in Pop and R&B in 1980. By then, she cultivated a dedicated, multi-genre fanbase that settled—once and for all—that question of race. Whatever genre Dionne Warwick is, she is beloved.

Notable Performances

In response to the sudden assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in April 1968, Warwick performed a heartfelt rendition of “Battle Hymn of the Republic” on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. Her memorable performance, a somber, moving tribute to the slain Civil Rights leader, demonstrated her awareness of pertinent issues as well as her commitment to use her voice and celebrity in the advancement of worthwhile causes.

Her finest hour is hard to locate, given so many years of transcendent, powerful performances of a very rigorous repertoire. However, I nominate her live album *Hot! Live and Otherwise* (1981). Although Warwick had yet to record big hits like “Heartbreaker” and “That’s What Friends Are For,” the album was recorded right after her first reemergence, meaning that the Grammy-winning songs “I’ll Never Love This Way Again” and “Déjà vu” are present with the full strength of her 1960s catalogue. Recorded as a double album with five studio recordings, the album details a consistent artistry—by 1981, Warwick was not only talented and capable, but she had also crafted her own sound that remained throughout her newer material as well as her twenty-minute hit record medley. Her formidable and spectacular vocalization manipulates the arrangement for her to soar higher and further than studio recordings. Specifically, “I’ll Never Love This Way Again” features a piercing climax that powerfully overtakes the 1979 original. To recognize and respect the career that Warwick survived until that point, to see her sing “Don’t Make Me Over” (1962) alone, but to know of her extensive work with partners Bacharach and David, to fight genre divisions and racial backlash, to see her temporarily down but not out, and to finally hear her triumphantly come back is the culmination of a retrospective on the makings of a successful career in the music business. That is *Hot! Live and Otherwise*.

On Warwick's silken vocality alone, music audiences of all ages should return to Warwick's music. Her oeuvre proffers the masterful quality of a commanding artist. The following six songs, though not entirely my favorites, solidified my interest in Warwick as a significant vocalist of the modern rock era and prove her rightful place as a 2024 Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductee to all: "Walk on By" (1964) is marked by Warwick's quietness as a point of dismissal to her lost lover. Now, the backdrop of Doja Cat's Billboard Hot 100 #1 single, "Walk on By" undoubtedly finds new audiences within the sample-conscious black community. The teardrops running down the high cheekbones of an otherwise dignified face can be heard within the song's lyrics and Warwick's resigned delivery. With "Walk on By," Warwick also participates in Black artistry, but from an interiority of sophistication and restraint—not from a desire to bowl audiences over with gratuitous vocal gymnastics. This would be her stance in much of her work, a cultivated elegance that created a path for other black vocalists, such as Luther Vandross, to find soul through softer means.

Every live performance of "I'll Never Love This Way Again" (1979) from around 1979 till about 1982 features Warwick's smart use of lilt, the lifting and falling of her voice. However, her inflections are fitting, satisfying vocal flourishes that were deliberately not ostentatious. Rather, the way she sings adorns the song with notes that simultaneously disguise the melody she does not want to sing, and perform Warwick's interiority, the source of the totality of her personhood. "Déjà vu," the second single from *Dionne* (1979) showcases Warwick's command over delicate phrasing. Live performances test the lower limits of voice, soft and silky. Her performance on *Hot! Live and Otherwise* sees Warwick make several audacious vocal choices, showing the versatility and elastic nature of her voice at that time.

Warwick's live performance of "Battle Hymn of the Republic" (1968), mentioned earlier for its performance in honor of the death of MLK, portends a conscious Warwick, one who knows the gift of song in tragedy. With the recording of "What the World Needs Now" (1965), Warwick continued to see herself as a harbinger of messages of love, hope, and peace. The same can be said for her soul-stirring performance of Nina Simone's "To Be Young, Gifted, and Black" (1972). The latter is perhaps the cornerstone of the Dionne Warwick Institute in East Orange, New Jersey, where Warwick was born, and where over 350 young, gifted, and black students learn. Perhaps learned herself from her years within the church, Warwick would later use her music to benefit the advancement of AIDS Research. But these early performances are poignant—they show the singer's humanity, dignified and uncharacteristically transparent.

Conclusion

Celebrity and artistry are often diametric opposites. Often the adulation a celebrity receives for who they are can detract attention from what they do. The cultural products an artist produces may be eclipsed for the notoriety they may exude in-process. Dionne Warwick continually regained stature throughout her life in the spotlight, but perhaps at the cost of younger generations believing her to be synonymous with psychic grifts or Twitter beefs with Chance the Rapper before knowing of her accomplishments on the Pop Charts in the sixties, seventies and eighties. With weathered voice, Warwick the celebrity continues to perform. But in that voice is an artist's testament to resilience. For her efforts, her significant contributions made to black female vocality and to American popular music, Warwick the artist has become a perennial

favorite of many, and long deserved the Kennedy Center Honors she finally received in 2023 as well as induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2024. Though, at eighty-three, she shows no signs of stopping at all, she may rest on her laurels and tweet a link to “Anyone Who Had a Heart” (1964) or “Alfie” (1967) or maybe even “Do You Know the Way to San Jose?” (1968). Still reigning, the Queen’s adoring public waits for the next witty remark. We wouldn’t have it any other way.