

Labelle.

A mixtape and a memory by Daniel Alexander Jones.
(all italicized lyrics written by Nona Hendryx)

- Play the songs listed, in sequence, as though it were a mixtape.
- Explore the words while doing so.
- Where a song is listed, but there are no words, there is space for your expression.

1. Space Children.

Space Children
Universal Lovers
Space Children
Are there any others?
You better take a look if you're in doubt!

Return. Return. Return. Return. Return. Return. Some prayers come from such a deep place they elude daylight naming and slip from pinning words like shiny fish through fingers. Some prayers are such precious seeds they get tucked in a minute space between heart and ribs, deliberately forgotten so no grown folks' business can crush them, no freefall can dislodge them. Some prayers remind you of their presence only at dusk when the sky stains indigo, when Orion flickers into the firmament and catches your eyes. Some prayers must travel in that icy deep between Pluto and the Galaxy's edge, must wind their way around the sun in elliptical sweep gathering speed for their journey homeward. Some prayers must move through the center of it all, plunging into the radiant eye, to be tempered by fire, tested by immeasurable heat. Are we the ones praying? Are we prayers come home? What draws us home? Is it perhaps the same force that propels us skyward?

2. Don't Bring Me Down.

*Don't bring me down
Don't bring me down
Lift me up higher...*

I fall into home when I fall into someone's face. Most faces are firm ground. But a few are infinite yes. A face that I know better than my own although I have no name to pin its slippery silver glow, its burning brown eyes, its starshine smile. I know you, yes, but something more... made of the same stardust, we are pulled into a waking prayer, knowing the key, the tempo and the melody as though we had always been singing it and perhaps we have in a small space beside our hearts. This is the call home and home is boundless. The Ancient Egyptians believed us travelers here from the cluster of stars that make up Sirius. The Goddess Isis was herself a spacesuited time traveler with manifesting magic in her voice. Her song was the song of remembrance, her voice had the power to bind the severed pieces, to pull the atoms back together, to turn prayer to flesh.

3. Black Holes In The Sky.

4. Are You Lonely?

In the sky

Behold black holes in the sky

I'm told

A shining star dies inside

... You better keep your ears to the wind

Because the truth might sound and never be heard again.

All I know is that I come from the same planet as Labelle. One of my earliest crystal clear memories is of riding to kindergarten in my Mom's car with my friend G. sitting next to me as we sang aloud to Lady Marmalade on the radio. Another is of the warm pop of needle in groove as I lay on my belly by the record player, in the middle of winter, watching the orange EPIC label, with its white concentric circles, spin out the transcendent blend of Patti LaBelle, Nona Hendryx and Sarah Dash's voices.

Are you lonely?

Are you lonely?

Are you lonely?

Living in a city without a heart?

I am five and I am lonesome beyond my years. Labelle sings fortitude into my spine through the dusty heat of the record player. We have gone to visit my father in the hospital, where he lays bound, ribs broken, shaking with delirium tremens. I must be brave and "take care of my mother." The record spins. At the beginning of the journey. Skips and scratches and smooth groove patches ahead. They came here first. They remember the way home. They remember why we came. I promise to learn the songs, all the parts, all the drum kicks, all the finger pops, all the licks. I promise to remember. I promise to hold the prayer close. I am five and I am a space child with a strengthening spine.

5. Come Into My Life.

6. Chameleon.

The travelers stand shoulder to shoulder and face the wide blue sky. I pull the record from its sleeve and play *Chameleon* on my jury-rigged stereo, careful not to knock the speaker wire, held in delicate positive connection by electrical tape and a precariously placed book. The summer breeze sweeps in, redolent, as twilight approaches. “*You can come into my life, you can come into my life...*” C. is on his way over. I am just sixteen and I am bursting through my skins, a proto-star mix in others’ eyes of colored boy, capital B-Black artist, long-haired faggot, diligent student, white girl, dreamer and thick-skinned shape shifter. I am a chameleon. Everyone sees in me what they want to see. I become it fully from the cells out for a breath or three. And then I change. In my own eyes I am safely folded around and into myself. I keep my center hid. C. sees the center. He calls it out. He smiles and tells me that when I let my fire out nothing will be able to stop me. I’m not ready, I demur, one hand on Pluto, the other tracing ice crystals with my fingertips. I love C. and write him notes in red pen that talk around that love in so many spirals they might spin out of control were they not folded into neat tight football shapes. I invite him over. Like some caged bird courtesan I groom myself immaculately, twist every curl, wash between my toes, and then try to act as though I didn’t think at all about his arrival. C. is on his way over, to sit in the summer night room and sing Labelle with me. He is Patti. He is always Patti, hitting the high notes with her, holding his hand up in the air to trace them, his bracelets clinking. I am Nona. Her *Art of Defense* and *Nona* albums lay splayed out on the floor along with the other records. Alongside the records are the clippings, the magazines, the posters detailing the mythic history of Labelle. C. and I will retell their story, Bluebells to Labelle to the epic tragedy of the breakup and the fierce presence of their solos. We steep in the drama of it all. Isn’t it a shame? Tears rise to the surface. What would the next album have sounded like? Did Nona really break the mirror? When will they get back together? Patti’s career is taking off. She will have a new album this summer. Her hair is impossible architecture. It will be a while. But maybe? If they did, they would change the world. Guess they are not ready. But they will be someday. C. and I will stare at each other. We will not touch. We will not kiss. We will not make love. Rather we will sing these rituals of remembrance and I will touch every square inch of his body with my mind’s eye. Flames pop within. But I am not ready. *Come with me. If you believe. Come with me. If you believe.* Flames pop within. I do not look away. I will be ready.

7. I Met Him on A Sunday.

8. The Bells.

9. Nightbird.

10. Going Down Makes Me Shiver.

Free your body and your mind and free your soul...

The color green in the first week of the life of a new batch of maple leaves. That's the color between their voices as they phrase it out... "I Met Him on a Sunday"... "I Hear the Bells"... Laura Nyro and Labelle. She's another one from the home planet, Nyro is. Immediate and delicate and so raw. They flutter like my heart does today. I put both songs on the mix tape. Along with one from *Chameleon*. "Going Down Makes Me Shiver". I give it to A. He is my lover. He is an impossibly good kisser. He runs track so I don't need to say anything about his body but I will say that there were six shades of brown that shimmered atop each other and called themselves skin and that the ocean salt smell that pulled me away from his lips and down his neck and down his chest and down and down and down gave me a firsthand understanding of why Patti had to sing "so good" over and over and over. I get distracted thinking about him and have to rewind the tape to catch the fade out. I will give him the mix tape and then we will give one another our bodies, night after night for the whole summer. I am a Nightbird. I will stand over him, and remove all my layers, all my masks. I will dress myself in moonlight. I will stay the sunrise with my tongue and a prayer whispered into the nape of his neck.

11. Sunshine Woke Me Up This Morning.

Sunshine woke me up this morning. It came creeping round my door. I said could this be a dawning of something less or something more?

More, please.

I'm so glad, I'm alive today.

Dusty record bins in new-to-me towns had yielded wonderful results. Over the years, I had tracked down Labelle's early albums, and I would cart them around in my suitcase. My devotion to the ritual objects of my nomadic life bordered on the irresponsible and earned my large traveling bag the name Battle Axe when on tour with a singing group in the late 1990s. I committed the spacious groove and rolling drums of Sunday's News to body memory. I listened to the magical swirling piano break of Shades of Difference. I paid attention to the words, largely penned by Hendryx, which testified of searing presence, of an uncompromising, authentic stance in the fully-lived experience of now. Unafraid to call out joy, lust, rage, injustice, transformative love, galvanizing disagreement, fear, flight, rebirth and the power of the unfettered yes of living art. Labelle sounded like nothing else before it and nothing since, in my opinion, has captured its essential freedom. I would search the unassailably beautiful faces of the three women on the album covers. Tall in themselves, eyes wide and deep. Distinctly themselves in every gesture. Nothing shrunken. Nothing tamed. Everything amplified. Rarer and rarer, such faces. From the obvious taming of afros to the more subtle shaping of bodies to the gazes of commerce and its attendants, the images of women as free as these were fewer and fewer; and when they did appear, something about them was assimilated into the mainstream quicker than a flash. Barcoded Soul. When mentioned at all, the resilient natural beauty of Labelle was being caged among sticky words... Seventies... Disco... Wild... Retro... Then... Past... Back... The uncommon artistry of Nona Hendryx was marginalized with no major label contract. Though her singular gifts never faded, Patti LaBelle's music got softer edges, and her public image grew smoother. Sarah Dash was nowhere to be seen. As I seemed to do with so much, I carried the memory like holy water in wide vessels, tending the vinyl, mending the dust jackets with Scotch tape, tending private reverie for the sound, the sound, the sound of Patti, Nona and Sarah in flight... that sound that opened a portal between dimensions... that could carry you in an instant to the edge of the Galaxy and turn you on a sweet curve toward home...

12. I Took A Long Time

*It took a long time
To find this place
It took a long time
To see happy
It took a long time
To recognize your face
It took a long time
Running Around*

Return. Return. Return. There is no stasis, so, returns are progressions, repeating cycles in expanding time with familiar chords, but spontaneous play. I met H. in 1998. We were to sing in a group together. I was new, she had been a part for a while. I held the door for her and she mistook me for a cleaning person at the rehearsal facility. I never let her forget this. And we delight in laughing about it. In one instant I fell into her face. It took her a longer time to recognize my face. But we could see happy in one another. We quickly realized that we were what we termed “space twins.” We were from the same place. From the same planet. Something in her stance was utterly familiar. And when she opened her mouth to sing... I said... Oh. Oh, yes. The members of Labelle were the mothers of that voice, perhaps the mirrors of that soul. In our friendship, one of the most important of my existence, we have found ways to sing the song of remembrance to one another and clear away the debris of the many wars on the soul that anyone endures when seeking to stand tall. We’ve reminded one another of the prayers tucked in the quietest place. We’ve reminded one another that sometimes walking isn’t enough, sometimes you have to fly. Sometimes you have to fly out to the edge of everything you know and roll through the icy deep of the unknown in order to feel the gravitational pull toward your truth.

*It’s a Nightbird’s way.
Hear the Nightbird pray.*

13. Candlelight.

2008 has been, for me and for many, a year of true soul returns, not empty repetitions. Like many, I found myself galvanized by Barack Obama's successful Presidential Run. My own art has found a rebirth at its core; something that had been tucked in and around itself has unfolded – its edges are sharp and fierce. The soul mirror of thousands and thousands of people whose fatigue with - or tacit refusal to adopt - caging language to define their experience or their capacity to engage, build and transform relationships with one another, was truly liberating. I found myself challenged to reach down within and express something that was about the future possible, not the impossible past.

Of the many returns, the most magical and not strangely the most transcendent has been the return of Labelle. When the rumors started to bubble on blogs and listserves, I was cautiously optimistic, but then I just started to pray. And as my friend S. used to say, when you pray, move your feet. I dove back into the music, now digitized and equalized and playlisted, and joined the call of all the Space Children. Come home, Patti; come home, Nona; come home, Sarah. It's time for us to remember free like this.

The day of the release of *Back to Now*, I lay on the floor, and pressed play. With the first chords of *Candlelight*, I was in tears. Of joy. Of here. Of now. Of yes. I lay on my back, not my belly, my heart open to the coming twilight.

If you leave out your candlelight, I'll be coming for you tonight...

Last night, H. and I sat in the audience at the Apollo, among hundreds of people there to welcome Labelle home. The air full of stardust. Everybody plumped and pressed and greased and tightened up. The curtain edge parted to reveal Whoopi Goldberg who asked us to remember exactly who these women were, why we were there, how important and singular this night was! We shouted back in agreement and celebration. And then the curtain parted. Patti, Nona and Sarah strode onstage in twilight blue. The light had yet to hit their faces. The first notes had yet to leap from their mouths. The room erupted. H. began to scream. I stood. Something in the middle of this *Nightbird* began to tremble, I opened my palms, and I flew.

Labelle Albums

Labelle (1971)
Moon Shadow (1972)
Pressure Cookin' (1973)
Nightbirds (1974)
Phoenix (1975)
Chameleon (1976)
Back to Now (2008)

&

Laura Nyro & Labelle

Gonna Take A Miracle (1971)