

# REPURPOSING, LAYERING,



A REVIEW OF *BITCHIN'*:  
THE SOUND AND FURY OF RICK JAMES

# AND CLOSE LISTENING



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The usual names that surface in a conversation about Little Richard's heirs are Jimi Hendrix, Sly Stone, Prince, and, depending on who you're asking, Andre 3000. But when Little Richard made his interview rounds in the 1980s, having retired from the music industry as a Christian minister of clean and sober (non-gay) believers, I added Rick James to that list—though he was none of those things. A deeper dive into Little Richard's story will surface the fatal pleasures attached to Black life in the making of rock 'n' roll. With Black glam flair, Rick James co-witnessed the additional taxes one must pay (segregated genres, white music executives, erasure of originality, and addiction) as a Black musician. A well-done telling of this story requires special consideration and a lens that rejects the allure of trauma-ridden biography, even when the biography is trauma-ridden.

Sacha Jenkins's new documentary *BITCHIN': the Sound and Fury of Rick James* (2021) is a layered exploration of one of the most complex and controversial figures in Black music history, one whose genius is also his darkest magic. *BITCHIN'* is a righteous integration of multiple selves. As a co-writer and co-producer, Jenkins the music journalist, tastemaker, informal historian, editor, and curator of the underground arts creates an interdisciplinary investigation of Rick James's life in cinematic form. Jenkins's directorial debut, *Fresh Dressed* (2015), and the *Wu-Tang Clan: of Mics and Men* docuseries (2019) were homecomings for Black folk who watch these films with the hope that it's us behind the camera. His work stands in contrast to a long history of white directors such as Ken Burns and Martin Scorsese, who've become synonymous with documentaries about genre-based Black music—documentaries that replicate centuries of symbolic and material imbalance between Black performers and white industry men.

In the spirit of his Black American father, the late Howard University professor and filmmaker Horace B. Jenkins, and with the eye of his Haitian mother, visual artist Monart Renaud, Jenkins understands how the storytelling of music—be it an era, artist, or decade—can inspire a diasporic imagining. He knows that compassion and a politic of care are necessary to understand how the music sounds artistically and how it can be heard beyond its entertainment value. It's a delicate balance that requires close listening. *Mass Appeal*, the record label turned online magazine turned production company where Jenkins helms as chief creative director, has now fashioned

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a filmic brand specializing in the presentation and the performance of rare archives using a hip hop aesthetic. Jenkins approaches the documentary as a DJ or producer would approach the art of sampling: repurposing found objects, images, and ideas to build on what's already there. It's an intentional layering that calls for dexterity and soulful orchestration.

*BITCHIN'* opens with Rick's daughter Ty James driving through Cali to a storage space where artifacts from his Buffalo and Woodland Hills homes are held. She's blasting "Mary Jane," a song her father wrote about his romantic relationship with weed for his first album, *Come Get It!* (1978). Before opening the boxes and shuffling through ephemera, she's met by the crew who oversees the storage facility. They greet each other, guess how long it's been since she's visited, and agree on twelve years. This choreographed reunion at the Rick James vault is the portal to the chorus of family, friends, fellow musicians, lawyers, and ex-lovers who fill in the archival gaps with intimate testimony. Ty picks up items that strike emotion, and she shares memories that become explanations about his journey through the industry and his relevance to the lives of his fanbase. Before the discussion about his music, we learn about some

Rick James. Photo by Mark Weiss. Image courtesy of SHOWTIME.



of his things. A framed poster of Tupac on the cover of *Vibe* magazine, an antique couch with removable pillows, and a life-size African sculpture are indeed part of the story of James's music. The man who wrote, produced, and brought a new level of nasty to Motown was privately and publicly audacious and flashy. An heir to the Little Richard dynasty.

Rick James was born James Ambrose Johnson in 1948. He grew up in 1950s Buffalo, New York. His mother, Betty Gladden, was the first hustler Rick encountered. Like the great Stephanie St. Clair, a woman whose stunning criminal legacy gets lost in the respectable translation of Harlem Renaissance greats, Betty Gladden ran numbers. Her son James was responsible for picking up payments and debt. Gladden took a young James with her to jazz and blues clubs and had a record collection that stood in as a co-parent in the absence of Rick's father. The pivot to James's early life illuminates his discography, as well as his complicated relationship with women. Within the first few minutes of the film, abuse and its proximity to music become a theme. "My mother," Rick says, "was a strong disciplinarian, and we used to get a lot of whippings. . . . So I guess you could say I was an abused child, but I had a lot of love in my family."

His candid discussion about being sexually abused by a babysitter around the age of eight is also a clue for anyone to understand the sadistic nature of his relationship to sex and power and the way that shaped his brand of funk. Jenkins's approach allows James's honesty and frankness in discussing these experiences in rare interviews to guide the conversation. James speaks about enjoying the sexual experience, citing





Rick James. Photo by Mark Weiss. Image courtesy of SHOWTIME.

the woman's age and his visceral enjoyment. This all came to an end when his mother returned home early, caught the woman in the act, and then beat her up on the spot. There's a book to be written about this moment in the film by someone interested in the music yielded from sexual trauma in the afterlife of slavery and on the silent history of women who sexually abuse children. This, in conversation with the many references to James's desire for underage women, is messy, to say the least, and Jenkins doesn't shy away from pointing it out. Rick James is part of a long list of soul men who openly discussed their desire for underage girls—from BB King ("Sweet 16") to Marvin Gaye ("I Want You") to R. Kelly ("Age Ain't Nothing but a Number")—with Rick's song "17" among them. The *fury* suggested in the film's title is unavoidable and is explained in the film as being an equal force to his *sound*.

The team of cinematographers for *Bitchin'* includes Hans Charles, a professor and filmmaker from the school of Bradford Young and Arthur Jafa, who's worked with prominent directors from Ava DuVernay to Spike Lee. Charles is also a bass guitarist, which might explain the composition-like quality of how *Bitchin'* is filmed. It blends a collage of stories using intentionally seedy animation, and original music in *Bitchin'* is scored by Ali Shaheed Muhammad and Adrian Younge. Jenkins's crew captures an amazing display of perfectly placed curse words to describe Rick's rise to freak fame from the people who knew him best. Most impressive was the range of characters who spoke to Rick's unique evolution. Standout voices were Roxanne Shanté, who was the guest rapper in his 1988 song "Loosey's Rap," Big Daddy Kane, members of the Stone City Band, Nile Rogers of Chic, and the white Black music journalist David Ritz who cowrote Rick's biography *Glow* (and curiously, the biographies and liner notes for at least twenty other Black musicians or groups).

The much-anticipated discussion about Rick James's tense relationship with a young artist by the name of Prince who toured with him in 1981 could have been more robust considering that the tension was more about their similarities than their differences. Like Rick, Prince was a multi-instrumentalist, songwriter, singer, and producer. They both incorporated rock elements and were among the artists who ushered in the new wave sound. They added a Black punk sensibility to gender exploration in their work, creating new voices (and alter egos!) for themselves through their production of girl groups and women singers. Last but certainly not least, performative cockiness was a key part of their acts.



Rick James. Photo by Mark Weiss. Image courtesy of SHOWTIME.

Jenkins understands the importance of the Black geographies and roots of the subject matter he tackles. His stories center place. In *Burn Mothaf\*cka, Burn!* (2017), he used narrative as a tool to address ahistorical conversations about multigenerational state violence in Los Angeles—all while presenting the secret rhythm in rioting as a kind of cultural work. Equally impressive is his handling of the musical mapping of Rick’s music and legacy in *Bitchin’*. I hadn’t considered the interior lifeworld of Rick James, and not until I learned that Buffalo, New York, was his hometown did I check for the history of Blackness in that small city. The film shows how Buffalo’s proximity to Canada was critical to James’s artistic trajectory. Prior to commercial success, he was a local gig musician in Toronto. After being drafted for the Vietnam War, he went AWOL to Canada and changed his name to Ricky James Johnson to live under the radar of the American government. He spent the 1960s in community and conversation with folk artists like Richie Havens and Joni Mitchell. Rick was also central to several bands—most famously, The Mynah Birds, which Neil Young was invited to join. An exploration of the Caribbean diaspora in Toronto would have been an exciting place to unpack reggae-inflected songs like “Mr. Policeman.” But pinning Rick to folk does the work of demonstrating his range.

Eventually, Rick was deported back to his mama Betty Gladden’s house after being reported to authorities by a disgruntled former band manager. He spent years there writing and adjusting to home life and taking up the philosophical musings of neighborhood Black nationalists. Found footage of early Black communities in Buffalo helps to support the picture painted by rapper Conway the Machine, who also hails from there. Conway breaks down city demographics and Rick’s status and impact as a local hero representing a new generation of Buffalo rude boys. He’s a credible source that explains Rick as a local legend and an artist.

By the late 1970s and after years of hustling demo tapes, Rick James landed a recording and production contract with Motown Records. He capitalized on the label’s cultural shift that accompanied its move from Detroit to Los Angeles. Rick represented a label that was finding its way in the gray area between the Motor City and Hollywood films. Here James became the official king of freak rock, a prince of the (newly coined) punk-funk genre. This, of course, complicated

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Rick James. Photo by Mark Weiss. Image courtesy of SHOWTIME.

the squeaky-clean image of Motown Records. While he lyrically disclaimed all possibilities of being gay, Rick's stage show during this era was nothing less than an adventure in Black queer poetics. Rock journalists hate to admit to, and often actively downplay, the proximity between late 1970s funk, rock, and disco. But Rick James's genre-blending draws on a four-to-the-floor dance music tradition among others, which is to say that punk-funk was a queering of Motown and Black musical masculinity.

Rick James created and performed a gender and then produced a soundtrack for it, and *Bitchin'* gives you the context you need. He inspired those who loved his music to live in and question the world between his leather thigh-high boots and his proclivity for dangerous emotions. Those signature braids, which he required the entire band to wear once they got signed, became a trademark after Rick met a Maasai woman on a flight, and she showed him a book of braiding patterns from Kenya. He fell in love with her designs and patterns and asked her to braid his hair. In Little Richard fashion and to the chagrin of their respective musicians, Rick added glitter to his braids and poured glitter on the heads of everyone in the band.

The small slot reserved in the film for Teena Marie and the Mary Jane Girls left me wanting more. Teena Marie, also a staff writer for Motown, was produced by Rick James, but it's important to note that she was

not discovered and developed by Rick James. Rick was attracted to *her* sound, *her* production, and *her* skills as a writer. Following the duo's professional and romantic breakup, Teena Marie went on to produce thirteen solo studio albums. She was a peer to Rick James, not a protégé. Their collaboration "Fire and Desire" from Rick's *Street Songs* album (1981) is one of the most essential songs in the quiet storm radio format and genre. It was also the last song they performed together during a BET Awards show in 2004. Rick, visibly winded and worn from his high-risk life, passed later that same year. The Mary Jane Girls, like Prince's Vanity 6, disappeared into obscurity after two albums, though songs like "All Night Long" and "Nasty Girl" are Black cookout and dance floor classics. Rick James also produced the Temptations' "Standing on the Top" in 1982 and co-produced "Ebony Eyes" with Smokey Robinson in 1983.

*Bitchin'* isn't a cautionary tale about sex, drugs, and rock n' roll. If anything, it shows how during specific eras, cocaine and other substances were partly responsible for creating much of the music we love. But the period where Rick "busted out" of his industry cell was in the 1980s. The place of entry to the Rick James story for many is the 1980s, and for those who saw the power of sampling with Hammer's use of "Super Freak" for "U Can't Touch This," the entry point is the 1990s. Importantly, *Bitchin'* surveys how the music industry and specifically the rise of video culture blocked the visual representation of Black music. Both Rick James and Little Richard called out MTV for the racist practices that were common in the industry at that time. In *The Life and Times of Little Richard*, his 1983 authorized biography, Little Richard said of MTV, "The videos are ninety percent white groups . . . mediocre at best. Even a star like Michael Jackson has trouble getting airplay unless he teams up with Paul McCartney." And when Rick James presented his music videos to MTV in the 1980s, they rejected them, claiming they did not fit the format intended for the network's viewers. His offense grew into the strategic public shaming of the new video channel, which ironically, as pointed to in the film, opened the space for Michael Jackson, who was notably less edgy, to break MTV's racial barrier. Prince's videos on MTV further inflamed Rick's rage against the machine.

Rick James epitomizes the sound and fury of the crack era, and yes, his public decline is part of the film. What he represents is best captured in an interview

with Norwood Fisher of Fishbone, who describes funk and the world that Rick created around it as being "Black excellence and nigga shit, the worst made beautiful." Rick's career is a time capsule that we peek into and must deal with everything that surfaces, from the thousands of people who were disappeared under Reagan's regime to all the families who struggled as loved ones battled addiction. I consider myself a survivor of the 1980s, and most clear to me, as I watched the impact of the AIDS epidemic and the "war on drugs" on my family and community, is that there is a library of memories in my parents' record collection. There you'll find Little Richard, Sly and the Family Stone, Prince, and Rick James. *Bitchin'* reminds us that albums carry those who are missing and their stories.

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