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Dee Dee goes the distance

IT TOOK them a jolly long time, but jazz writers are conceding that self-exiled American jazz and showbiz artist Dee Dee Bridgewater is one of the best jazz singers of the past century.

She turned 50 the other day and recently brought out an album, *Live at Yoshi's* — just to show America her vibrancy and relevance.

Dee Dee was born Denise Garrett in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1950. She must have heard the voice of Ella Fitzgerald before she could gurgle because her mother endlessly played the records of that grand lady of jazz.

Like so many others, the Garretts migrated to the prosperous Michigan town of Flint. Despite the liberal pretensions of the North, social relations there forced Dee Dee onto the defensive, or go the extra distance to prove herself.

Despite these everyday frustrations, Dee Dee sang everywhere in Michigan during the 1960s. In 1969 she toured the Soviet Union. Then an extended stint in New York City followed. But while her career reached for the stars, her personal life descended into chaos. Racism, exploitation, and the liberties of abusive husbands Cecil Bridgewater and stage director Gilbert Moses prompted her to leave for France. But only after she had recorded her debut jazz album, *Afro Blue*, and a splash of disco and funk albums.



BackBeat

With Cornelius Thomas



DEE DEE BRIDGEWATER

In 1983 she performed live in Paris for the first time. She entered the theatre also, singing Billie Holiday in *Lady Day*. In 1986 she settled there permanently.

She enjoyed France, without being naïve about racism. But there she did not have to prove herself beyond the colour of her skin. She told the Dutch magazine *Jazz*, "Als

zangeres word ik hier gewaardeerd vanwege mijn musiek. Ik hoef geen gimmick te hebben. Ik hoef niemand's kont (backside) te kussen."

During a tour of the United States, Dee Dee achieved her finest musical moment with her tribute to Ella, simply entitled *Dear Ella* — for which she won a Grammy in 1997. But she also found racism unchanged. Instead of appreciating her authentic voice and worth, record company executives asked if she would not sound a bit more like Diana Krall — a white jazz singer. She minced no words when she told *Jazz*: "Diana Krall is het stereotiepe voorbeeld van die blanke zangeressen die ze nu lanceren. Ze doet niet veel bijzonders maar ze krijgt wel de publiciteit en de miljoenen voor marketing." She followed by accusing record companies of taking her albums out of circulation to promote Krall.

Dee Dee's not into brown nosing — not even when it comes to the moguls of music. Despite recent successes she said if she did not get a better deal, *Live at Yoshi's* would be her last album under a contract. Fortunately the *Live at Yoshi* album is already on the market, with Dee Dee at her sassiest, sexiest and humourously scatting self.

She'll tell you what a little moonlight can do on a slow boat to China.