

L. L. Cool J.'s first role as an actor came in 1985 in a film about the early days of Def Jam Recordings called *Krush Groove*. The next year, he appeared in a film called *Wildcats*. Although he had only cameo appearances in both films, he won a starring role in *Out of Sync* in 1995. The film did not do well at the box office, but it did help him earn a starring role in a sitcom called *In the House*. The sitcom aired on NBC from 1995 to 1999. L. L. has appeared in several other films, including *Halloween H20* (1998), *Deep Blue Sea* (1999), *Any Given Sunday* (1999), *Deliver Us from Eva* (2003), *S.W.A.T.* (2003), and *Last Holiday* (2006). In 2009, L. L. Cool J. was given a prominent role as former Navy SEAL and special agent Sam Hanna in the CBS drama series *NCIS: Los Angeles*.

In addition to his music and acting careers, L. L. produced a clothing line called TROOP, which he launched in the mid-1980's. He also wrote several books, including his autobiography and a children's book called *And the Winner Is . . .* (2002).

#### SIGNIFICANCE

L.L. Cool J. was an influential hip-hop artist, showcasing the rough-edged New York style of Def Jam Recordings to a national, mainstream audience. Between 1985 and 2006, he released twelve albums, produced nineteen Top 10 singles, and received several awards, including Grammy Awards for "Mama Said Knock You Out" in 1992 and "Hey Lover" in 1997. L. L. also won three Image Awards from the National Association for the Ad-

vancement of Colored People (NAACP). He received a Source Foundation Image Award for his philanthropy and his work with JumpStart, a literacy program for low-income children. L. L. Cool J.'s longevity in the entertainment industry is a testimony to his versatility and talent.

—Alison S. Burke

#### FURTHER READING

Baughman, Brian. *Hip-Hop: L. L. Cool J.* Broomall, Pa.: Mason Crest, 2007. This biography for teenage readers provides a general overview of the life of L. L. Cool J. and contains many full-color photographs from different stages in his career.

L. L. Cool J. and Karen Hunter. *I Make My Own Rules*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997. This autobiography chronicles the rapper's abusive past, his experiences in the music industry, and the obstacles and triumphs he has encountered throughout his life.

Michel, Sia. "L. L. Cool J." In *The Vibe History of Hip-Hop*, edited by Alan Light. New York: Three Rivers Press, 1999. A music critic takes an incisive look at L. L.'s career in the context of contemporary popular music, examining his longevity and mainstream appeal. Includes discussion of his feuds with rival rappers.

**SEE ALSO:** Omar Epps; Jamie Foxx; Jay-Z; Puff Daddy; Joseph Simmons; Russell Simmons; Will Smith.

## PATTI LABELLE

### Singer and actor

*Known for her passionate stage performances and wide vocal range, LaBelle has had a career as a singer, a songwriter, and an actor.*

**BORN:** May 24, 1944; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

**ALSO KNOWN AS:** Patricia Louise Holte (birth name)

**AREAS OF ACHIEVEMENT:** Film: acting; Music: pop; Music: rhythm and blues

#### EARLY LIFE

Patti LaBelle (lah-BEHL) was born on May 24, 1944, to Henry Holte, Jr., and Bertha Holte. Bertha, also known as Chubby, served food at St. Agnes Hospital before quitting in order to stay home with her children. Henry worked at a train factory called Baldwin Locomotive.

Family and friends gave LaBelle the nickname Patsy. When LaBelle was twelve years old, her parents separated; her father had been unfaithful and abusive to her mother. During her teen years, LaBelle was sexually abused by her mother's boyfriends, and she was too ashamed to share this fact with anyone. Instead of running away, LaBelle found an escape in music, which she found transformed her, transported her, and saved her life.

When LaBelle started junior high school, she became involved deeply in music. The first time she heard the songs of Gloria Lynne, Dakota Staton, Dinah Washington, and Sarah Vaughan, LaBelle felt a deep connection to them. Their voices captivated her, and the lyrics and jazz rhythms moved her spiritually. LaBelle started imi-



Patti LaBelle. (Redferns/Getty Images)

tating these singers. When she sang, she felt free and began to understand power of music, which she desired to share with others.

LaBelle began singing in the Beulah Baptist Church choir. The congregation was stunned by LaBelle's powerful voice, which moved them to tears. From that point on, people from other churches in Philadelphia would visit Beulah Baptist just to hear LaBelle sing.

When she won first place in her high school talent show, LaBelle knew she wanted to sing for the rest of her life. The first singing group that LaBelle joined was called the Ordettes and was managed by Bernard Montague. The group sang at local venues in Philadelphia, and when it disbanded, Montague found three more young women—Sarah Dash, Nona Hendryx, and Cindy Birdsong—to join LaBelle in the Ordettes. LaBelle persuaded her mother to let her drop out of high school in or-

der to pursue her singing career. (Twenty years later, LaBelle returned to finish and to get her diploma.)

#### LIFE'S WORK

By 1962, the group was performing consistently at truck stops, juke joints, and honky-tonks. That same year, the group signed its first recording contract, with the Blue Bell Record Company. The record company president, Harold B. Robinson, renamed the group the Bluebelles. The group performed in Los Angeles, the Northwest, the Deep South, and England. While traveling in the South during the 1960's, the group encountered discrimination and racism. Since they could not stay at motels because African Americans were not permitted, they slept in their car and washed up in the restrooms of national parks.

In 1967, the Bluebelles became a trio when Birdsong left the group to sing with the Supremes. Despite the loss of Birdsong, the Bluebelles were a success, appearing at the Apollo Theater. In 1971, they changed their name to Labelle. During the 1970's, they combined elements of rock, soul, and funk in their music. Their first number one hit was "Lady Marmalade." Labelle was the first contemporary pop group and the first African American group to perform at the Metropolitan Opera House. The girls were also the first African American vocal group to be placed on the cover of *Rolling Stone*. Labelle continued to tour worldwide until the group decided to separate in 1977 to pursue solo careers. Decades later, the group reunited to release the album *Back to Now* (2008).

In 1977, LaBelle released her solo album, *Patti LaBelle*, with Epic Records. This album features "Joy to Have Your Love," which reached the Top 20 rhythm-and-blues dance singles. LaBelle did not achieve the commercial success for which she had hoped. Other albums LaBelle produced included *Tasty* (1978), *It's Alright with Me* (1979), *Released* (1980), *The Spirit's in It* (1981), and *The Best of Patti LaBelle* (1982). None reached the Top 20 charts.

LaBelle did not reach commercial success as a soloist until 1983, when she released *I'm in Love Again*. Her song "New Attitude" (1984) reached the pop chart's top twenty. In 1986, LaBelle's popularity soared with the release of *Winner in You*. The album contained the song "On My Own," which LaBelle sung with pop singer Michael McDonald.

In 1991, LaBelle won her first Grammy Award for her album *Burnin'* (1991), which features here celebrated rhythm-and-blues songs "Somebody Loves You Baby" and "When You've Been Blessed." She won another Grammy Award in 1998 for *Live! One Night Only* (1998). Other awards include the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Image Award for best performance in a variety series (1996, 1998) and *Soul Train's* Lena Horne Lifetime Achievement Award (2001). LaBelle was inducted into the Apollo Legend Hall of Fame in 2009.

As an actor, LaBelle has appeared in such situation comedies as *A Different World* (1990), *Out All Night* (1992), and *The Nanny* (1994). She has appeared in such films as *A Soldier's Story* (1984), *Sing* (1989), and *Semi-Pro* (2008). She also starred in the musical film *Idlewild* (2006).

#### SIGNIFICANCE

LaBelle is passionate about singing and about healthy living. Her 1980's hit "New Attitude" addresses the importance of taking control of one's life. Although LaBelle first recorded the song in 1984, she rerecorded it for an ad campaign, which displayed her taking control over her life after collapsing on stage and discovering she had diabetes. In an effort to help people learn how to cook healthful foods, LaBelle wrote two cookbooks, *LaBelle Cuisine* (1999) and *Patti LaBelle's Lite Cuisine* (2003). LaBelle is also an advocate for programs that

support cancer research and help cancer patients. Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center, located in Miami, Florida, has dedicated a research laboratory in LaBelle's name. LaBelle created the Patti LaBelle Medical Education Scholarship Fund to assist African American medical students. As a spokeswoman for the National Minority AIDS Council's "Live Long, Sugar" campaign and for the National Cancer Institute, LaBelle has extended her message of healthful living to the world.

—Monica T. Tripp-Roberson

#### FURTHER READING

LaBelle, Patti, and Laura B. Randolph. *Don't Block the Blessings: Revelations of a Lifetime*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1996. Detailed autobiography covers LaBelle's early life and the challenges she faced in building a career.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Patti's Pearls: Lessons in Living Genuinely, Joyfully, and Generously*. New York: Warner Books, 2001. Provides insight into the positive philosophy of life LaBelle preaches.

Nathan, David. *The Soulful Divas*. New York: Billboard Books, 1999. Provides a personal portrait of several black women prominent in popular music, including LaBelle.

**SEE ALSO:** Pearl Bailey; Aretha Franklin; Macy Gray; Gladys Knight; Tina Turner.

## WILLIE LANIER

### Football player

*Considered one of the greatest defensive players of his era, Lanier was a dominant middle linebacker for the Kansas City Chiefs. He stepped up into the middle linebacker position during the 1960's, at a time when many prejudiced coaches and fans believed that only white players had the intelligence to play that role.*

**BORN:** August 21, 1945; Clover, Virginia

**ALSO KNOWN AS:** William Edward Lanier; Contact; Honey Bear

**AREA OF ACHIEVEMENT:** Sports: football

#### EARLY LIFE

William Edward Lanier (luh-NEER) was born August 21, 1945, in Clover, Virginia. His family later moved

to Richmond, where he attended Maggie Walker High School. Lanier planned to attend Morgan State University in Baltimore, Maryland, believing that he would encounter less racial prejudice at a northern school than in the South. Lanier called the head coach of Morgan State University personally but was told there were no athletic scholarships available. He enrolled nevertheless, passing the entrance exam near the top of his prospective class; after he excelled on the football field, he was granted a scholarship in his second semester. Over the course of his college career, Lanier was twice chosen as a Little All-American (given to players at smaller schools) and was voted most valuable player (MVP) of the Tangerine Bowl.

Lanier did not intend to use his college football experi-