

Bettye and the Jockettes Spinning Records at the Holiday Inn

By
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STORY OF THE PLAY

It's July 3, 1956 and the jockettes of WHER, America's first "all-girl" radio station in Memphis, Tennessee, are having one heck of a day: the copywriter has run off to elope, they have just found out that *the* Elvis Presley is coming to the station to be interviewed on-air and their star DJ Bettye has shown up... in pants! When Elvis's record promoter arrives and is none other than Bettye's former flame Benjamin, sarcastic zingers fly, sisterhoods are forged, and secrets are exposed. Approximately 1 hour and 40 minutes.

Although this play is inspired by historical people and places, it is a work of fiction.

ORIGINAL PRODUCTION

Original Cast and Staff of BETTYE AND THE JOCKETTES SPINNING RECORDS AT THE HOLIDAY INN was produced by Retro Productions Theater Company (Heather E. Cunningham, producing artistic director) with associate producer The Mozzlestead Company (Montserrat Mendez, founder and exec. producer) in New York City, May 2024. It was directed by Sara Thigpen; the set design was by Lauren Barber; the costume design was by Viviane Galloway; the lighting design was by Ndanu Mutisya; the sound design was by Robert A.K. Gonyo; the properties were designed by Heather E. Cunningham; the production was stage managed by Jodi Witherell; the dramaturgy was by Heather E. Cunningham and Sara Thigpen. The cast was as follows (in alphabetical order): Tracey Beltrano, Heather E. Cunningham, Joe Mathers, Marie Elena O'Brien, Alisha Spielmann, Matthew Tarricone, and Morgan Nadia Williams.

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CHARACTERS

(2 m, 5 w)
(in order of appearance)

BETTYE: 40s/50s. WHER jockette. White. A star in reality and an even brighter one in her own mind. A full-figured woman, she's stunning, stylish, and a sarcastic ballbuster. Guards a wounded heart.

KIT: 20s/30s. WHER jockette and a frustrated office gal-Friday. Open ethnicity. Spunky, smart, and harboring a secret. She has her fingers on the pulse of what's cool...even if it goes unnoticed.

SAM: 30s/40s/50s. Record producer and WHER owner. White. Southern. Young heart with an old soul. He's a clever businessman with an eye for opportunity and a soft-spot for the underdog.

DOTTIE: 40s. WHER salesgirl. Open ethnicity. Southern. Sexy. Shrewd. Rides high on extremes and has a flair for the dramatic. Works her tail off.

ESTHER: 40s/50s. WHER librarian. Open ethnicity. Bookish and bright, she often feigns befuddlement. Funny even when she doesn't intend it. Loyal to the core.

CATHERINE: 20s/30s. A copywriter by happenstance. Black. Southern. Pretty and proper. Quietly confident and unapologetically intelligent.

BEN: 30s/40s/50s. Record promoter. Jewish. Dashing. And he knows it. Dry-humored and disarmingly charming.

WHER RADIO STATION SET

Painted pink and purple, it's decorated playfully with plush furniture and hosiery hanging from a clothesline. Photographs of women's fashion are pinned to the wall. A sign reads: WHER - 1000 Beautiful Watts. An intercom switch is beneath it. A table with three chairs are DSR. A sofa, coffee table, wingback chair and coatrack (with Sam's suit coat and hat) are DSL. The coffee table, with a festive red, white, and blue banner pinned to the front, is prepared with bite-sized peanut butter and banana sandwiches on a pretty tray. A large glass soundproof booth is USC. Hanging on the wall is an aluminum ON AIR sign which lights up every time the mic is hot. SR leads to the offices and locker room. And SL leads out of the station to the hall.

Pronunciation of WHER

The radio station of WHER is pronounced using its call letters: W-H-E-R.

PRELUDE

(AT RISE: July 2, 1956. Memphis, Tennessee Radio Station WHER. LIGHTS up on BETTYE USC in the glass booth wearing headphones. Just before Bettye speaks, the On Air sign turns red. The remaining WHER space is lit but dim.)

BETTYE: That was “Stardust” sung by the one and only Ella Fitzgerald. Originally recorded by Hoagy Carmichael in 1927. Twenty-nine years ago. I was wearing a cloche hat, carrying a copy of “The Billboard,” and all was right with the world. This is WHER radio, Memphis, Tennessee. America’s first all-girl radio station, 1430 on your dial. At this time, please turn off or silence anything that rings, dings, pings or casts light. And keep your Kodak Brownies and 8 millimeters in their cases as recording and photographs are not permitted. In case of an emergency, please exit from where you entered. And if you see something suspicious, alert a member of our crew. That will be it for me tonight, friends. Until we meet again, I am Bettye. *To the Moon and Back.* Enjoy.

(BETTYE removes her headphones. Stands. She stretches into a cardigan and collects her purse. It’s late but still, she looks impeccable. Bettye turns out the booth light. LIGHTS out on booth. KIT, a young jockette with a “rockabilly” vibe, stands SR at a table overrun with records. She turns on a small lamp. She’s tired. She sits, removes her horn-rimmed glasses, and rubs her face. Then a slice of vinyl catches her eye. Kit puts her glasses back on. Pulls the record from the pile. Bettye crosses SL, startling Kit. Kit quickly, nervously, sticks the record back in the pile, hiding it.)

BETTYE: Another late night?

KIT: Ah, more like a very early morning.

BETTYE: You’re young. And free. You should be out joie de vivre’ing it.

KIT: I do. I will. Heading out shortly.

BETTYE: Good girl. Catch you on the flip side, Kitty Kat.

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(BETTYE exits SL. KIT returns her eyes to the table. Pulls the record from the pile. Lifts it up. And smiles. LIGHTS fade out. During scene transition, MUSIC.)

ACT I
Scene 1

(AT RISE: July 3, 1956. It is morning. LIGHTS up on the station. KIT is in the booth, live on air. She's wearing headphones and is blissfully unaware of anything else. SAM is pacing SL with a cup of coffee in his hand. It's not his first. Beside him is ESTHER who is sitting dutifully on the sofa. A heap of books, magazines, and records are on her lap. Bifocals dangle on her chest. Much like the banner on the coffee table, her blouse is also covered in stars and stripes. DOTTIE, dressed in an all-black curve-hugging dress with a cigarette pinched between her fingers, enters SR and crosses to the table. She is clutching a piece of paper to her chest and sobbing.)

SAM: Darlin'. What's the matter?

(SAM hurries over to DOTTIE. ESTHER follows, struggling to carry the large stack of books.)

DOTTIE: I'm so sorry, Sam. But I just received the most excruciating news.

SAM: What is it, Dottie?

DOTTIE: It's Frances. She's...she's...

ESTHER: Dead?!

DOTTIE: Married. Eloped. Last night. Under the fireworks. And now she's holed up in a two-bit motel outside of Nashville with that wonky-eyed Arthur. How fabulous does that sound?

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(SAM frantically beckons to KIT in the booth. Once the jockette notices, she tears off her headphones and races out of the booth.)

ESTHER: Oh, honey. Your day will come. Again.

DOTTIE: It's not that, you nit! I spent hundreds of hours of leg work, literal leg work, selling thousands of dollars of commercials with the promise that if this day ever came, we'd have brand spankin' new spots to air. And that day has arrived perfectly timed. On Lady Liberty's wings. Just as every proud American is tuning into their new favorite radio station, WHER. But without a copywriter, we have no copy. Which means we have no commercial. And without a commercial we can't pay our surprise star guest and his entourage. And I can't show my face in public again. And the public doesn't deserve that. *(Cries.)*

KIT: Of course it doesn't.

DOTTIE: If we lose Opey soap, I'm washed up. *(Cries louder.)*

ESTHER: That would be ironic.

KIT: When's Frances coming back?

DOTTIE: Probably never. If her bustle is on backward.

KIT: Do you think?

ESTHER: Would explain the vomit.

DOTTIE: Virile wonky-eyed Arthur.

(SAM picks up the paperwork and thumbs through it.)

SAM: Well, Dottie. Maybe you could write the commercials?

DOTTIE: Me? A writer? So you think I'm ugly? *(Wails.)*

SAM: Of course not. Esther, honey. You give it a try.

(SAM sticks the papers on top of ESTHER's stack of books. She attempts to read the top page.)

ESTHER: Oh, OK. Opey Soap. Opey Soapy. Okey dokey Soapy. Well, it rhymes. So that's good.

DOTTIE: We're doomed.

SAM: Now don't fret. We can do this. We need to do this. What about you, Kit? You're my Gal Friday. Can you write?

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KIT: No. But I can call. The temp office. *(KIT pulls the papers from underneath ESTHER's chin.)* Esther, you can put these down. We'll sort through them together.

(ESTHER drops the records and books on the table with an exhale.)

KIT: *(Cont'd.)* Sam, can you pull the questions off your desk?

(SAM nods, obediently and races off SR.)

KIT: *(Cont'd.)* And Dottie, you take care of...you.

(KIT hands DOTTIE a tissue and returns to the booth just as BETTYE enters SL. She's dressed brightly and fashionably. And much to her colleagues' dismay, wearing pants.)

BETTYE: Have no fear, Madam Bettye is here. Traffic was a nightmare. Maybe Ike's motorcade's in town for the festivities... What?

ESTHER: I think you may have forgotten to get dressed.

BETTYE: Oh, my pants? Well, I got Sam's call that I had to get down here as soon as possible. Only had time to toss on Mama's pearls and my signature lipstick. Jungle Red. Surely, you've seen a woman in pants before. Esther? Dottie?

DOTTIE: I heard the stories. But didn't want to believe them.

BETTYE: Look, I have a change of clothes in my locker. It's not like any of our listeners see me anyway. I got a mind for business but a body for radio.

(SAM reenters SR, carrying a notepad with interview questions.)

SAM: Kit, as usual, you nailed... Godamn!

BETTYE: Never knew you to be a blasphemer, Boss.

(SAM clutches his chest.)

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ESTHER: Sam?!

DOTTIE: Oh great, Bettye. Your trousers killed Sam!

(ESTHER helps SAM into a seat at the table.)

BETTYE: I'm changing!

(BETTYE strides across stage. KIT emerges from the booth and almost bumps into Bettye.)

KIT: OK, the agency is sending a girl down as soon as... Why is she here?

BETTYE: Good morning to you, too, Kitty.

KIT: Sam?

SAM: Well, Kit. So, I thought since Elvis decided to surprise us at the station—

BETTYE: Elvis Presley?

SAM: The one and only, baby.

BETTYE: Don't call me baby. And don't pull my leg.

DOTTIE: It's a good thing you're wearing those britches.

SAM: I just got the call an hour ago. He's a fan of the ladies of WHER—

BETTYE: He's a fan of the ladies. I'll give you that.

SAM: And he'll be here this morning.

KIT: And I'm the morning DJ.

SAM: I understand that.

KIT: And this is my time slot. Morning is my time slot. It's Cup O' Coffee with Kit. Not Cup O' Coffee with Bettye. That doesn't even sound right.

ESTHER: Agreed. It's the alliteration. Maybe I should be a writer?

BETTYE: Why Elvis?

SAM: Well, Bettye. I'm glad you asked. He's in town for a Fourth of July charity concert. Such a sweet boy. Despite the gyrations.

BETTYE: Sam.

SAM: *(Gulping/deflecting.)* It was Kit's idea.

BETTYE: *(To KIT.)* WHER is a jazz station.

KIT: You don't say.

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BETTYE: And Mr. Presley isn't a jazz artist.

KIT: I hadn't heard.

BETTYE: He's that other sound.

KIT: It's called rock n' roll. *(To SAM.)* She doesn't even appreciate the music.

BETTYE: I appreciate all music. Even the fads.

KIT: Sam!

SAM: I'm sorry, Kit. I need a real pro on this one. Next time. Esther, bring the stack. Bettye, let's talk. I'll divert my eyes.

(SAM and ESTHER exit SR. BETTYE follows but not before some over-the-shoulder advice to a dejected KIT.)

BETTYE: Chin up, Kitty. When Lady Day and I are old broads cruising around the country in my new flip top, you'll be running this place. Won't that be something. *(Exits.)*

KIT: Great. So, what about the next forty years?

DOTTIE: Get married. Have babies. Hobnob with the Rockefellers. Oh, you? Go to school. Isn't that what girls like you do?

KIT: Girls like me?

DOTTIE: The ones who lollygag at the bookstore.

KIT: How do you --? Why do you think -- ?

DOTTIE: Clever girls, Kit. You're sharp. At least I thought you were.

(SFX: The doorbell rings.)

KIT: I'm here because I love music. And I believe the future is rock n' roll. Sam believes it too. And he believes in me. At least I thought he did.

DOTTIE: Of course he does. He always puts money on the underdog. Oh honey, I don't mean to offend. It was the same with me, you know. I had no sales experience. But I had a great set of gams and a gift for chitchat. Hopefully serves me well on the unemployment line.

(SFX: The doorbell rings again.)

End of Freeview

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