

STAGE

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Oh Miss Dee Dee,
don't ever change

Age has not wearied this wonderful force of nature

Few artists have packed as much into 76 years as Dee Dee Bridgewater: two-time Grammy-winning singer-songwriter, Broadway actor, jazz vocal icon, social activist, and gifted spinner of yarns. If the stories she tells – of the music, the icons and the struggles along the way – carry weight, it's not only because of the way she tells them.

It's because she was there.

"Back in Los Angeles in the very late '70s, before cell-phones, when we all wore furs, had limousine services and thought we were cute, Abbey Lincoln called me," she recalls. "She said, 'Get dressed up. Wear your red fox fur. I'm sending a car'."

Lincoln, the singer, actor and activist whose blend of artistry and political conviction made her one of jazz's most formidable figures, became a lasting influence on Bridgewater. Speaking from her study in New Orleans, her trademark bald pate offset by glittery oversized glasses, Bridgewater flashes her megawatt grin.

"So, we drive to the Lighthouse Cafe in Hermosa Beach to watch Max Roach play his second set. Abbey has reserved a front table with Dom Perignon on ice and arranged for waiters to remove our coats and pull out our chairs. When Max saw us, he dropped his drumsticks. Then he says, 'Ladies and gentlemen, we have black royalty in the house. Can I present my ex-wife ... Abbey Lincoln'. We stood and took a bow."

Bridgewater's first husband, trumpeter Cecil Bridgewater, was playing in Roach's band at the time.

"Cecil kept playing with his eyes closed," she laughs.

Three times married and divorced, with a child from each one, Bridgewater recounts it all with a shrug: "It was why we didn't last. I never knew what our relationship was." Her personal life continues to be eventful. Later she'll tell me that she recently broke off an engagement to a man five years her junior: "I just ran into him and he was distraught. But oof! A fourth marriage? Do I want to be a nurse? What was I thinking?"

Over the course of a six-decade career, Bridgewater has never stopped evolving. Early on, a youthful obsession with the fearless jazz singer and businesswoman Betty Carter helped forge her artistic convictions.

"After I moved to New York at the age of 20, I'd go to all her gigs and sit alone, watching and learning," she says. "I called myself her puppy dog."

After sharing stages with towering bandleaders including Dizzy Gillespie, Dexter Gordon and Sonny Rollins, she segued into Broadway. She won a Tony Award for her role as Glinda the Good Witch in *The Wiz* in 1975 ("I tell every young singer in my masterclasses to do theatre; it stops you getting static and stale") before exploring R&B, disco and jazz-funk.

In the late '80s she married a French concert promoter and moved to a villa outside Paris. She stayed in France for 24

years, becoming a bona fide celebrity and receiving the prestigious Legion d'honneur. She also spent time in Mali, the West African country that inspired her acclaimed 2007 album *Red Earth*, which featured global music stars Oumou Sangare, the Songbird of Wassoulou, and kora maestro Toumani Diabate.

"Early on, I got the notion, especially after observing Miles Davis, that I would be like the male musicians who change with every project," she says.

Another shrug. "Anyway, I'm a Gemini. It's my personality. I'm all about being mercurial."

A formidable live performer, Bridgewater can move from scatting a trombone line to delivering a rowdy Memphis blues number to singing the American songbook with improvisatory flair. *Elemental*, her Grammy-nominated 2025 duo album with pianist Bill Charlap, finds her artfully reworking standards such as *S'Wonderful* and *Mood Indigo*.

But now, given the perilous state of the world, Bridgewater is yearning for something more galvanising. The woman who supported the Black Panther movement and later fought world hunger as a UN Goodwill Ambassador wants her music to engage more directly with the moment. Her commitment to advocacy continues via the Woodshed Network, which mentors young female jazz musicians and is overseen by her daughter and manager, Tulani. The initiative is based at Washington DC's Kennedy Centre, though its future has been thrown into doubt by Donald Trump's intervention in the centre's affairs (Bridgewater's eye roll speaks volumes).

"The songs that Bill and I do are beautiful but have nothing to do with what is going on today," she says. "With these two Trump administrations and the war in Gaza and all the things happening outside what I call the un-United States, I have to speak out."

When she plays Australia in October she'll be premiering her tribute to Abbey Lincoln. It's been a long time coming, and deliberately so.

"Before Abbey died, I promised her that I'd do a complete show of her music. I've been doing several of her songs for years, but I had to get to a place, mentally and physically, where I could really understand what she was talking about."

This has meant immersing herself in Lincoln's catalogue and worldview, even wearing the top hat she once owned on-stage. Lincoln, who died in 2010 aged 80, famously appeared on the album that came to define jazz's catalytic role in the Civil Rights movement, Max Roach's *We Insist! Freedom Now Suite*, lacing it with raw screams and protest poetry. A major figure in the Black Power movement, she went from singing standards to writing her own fiercely unapologetic songs, weathering a mainstream backlash before her celebrated resurgence in the late 1980s.

While Carmen McRae and Sarah Vaughan welcomed Bridgewater to sing alongside them, and Ella Fitzgerald – the subject of Bridgewater's Grammy-winning *Dear Ella* – once met her for tea in Paris, it is Lincoln's legacy, and her insist-

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I'm talking about social inequity and doing protest songs. Songs of rebellion

– Dee Dee Bridgewater

ence on speaking truth to power, that resonates most deeply. When I suggest that Lincoln's reputation for being "difficult" may have limited her commercial success, she pauses and fixes me with an even gaze, the sort she might direct at any backing musician who falls short. She's not shy, she says, about letting people go, though she still grapples with the notion of firing a female musician.

"See now ..." she begins, as I bluster and backpedal. "Why is it that when an individual, especially a woman, sticks to their beliefs, it's considered difficult rather than being true to themselves? Abbey stuck to her guns, and you either accepted it and were in it, or you were outside of it. She just lived very, as we say now, intentionally."

Bridgewater has spent much of her career confronting the same double standard: the tendency to reward assertiveness in men while punishing it in women. A black woman in an industry run largely by white men ("In jazz, the machismo is wow"), she has safeguarded her autonomy by producing and releasing albums on her own label. With her current all-female band, *We Exist*, she performs songs of resistance, from Nina Simone's blistering *Mississippi Goddam* to *Strange Fruit*, the haunting anti-lynching song made famous by Billie Holiday, whom Bridgewater portrayed in the stage musical *Lady Day* before releasing a Grammy-lauded tribute album in 2010.

Lincoln, however, was more than an influence: she was her mentor and friend.

"She used to say that if she had a daughter, it would be me."

Asked for a favourite Abbey story, Bridgewater recalls a mutual friend, Fabrice Rose, a French former bank robber turned novelist and jazz devotee who organised concerts while in prison and later in a Bordeaux vineyard, one of which