

Houston-born sisters Beyoncé and Solange Knowles couldn't be more different. They emit different energies, seem to vibrate at different frequencies. Solange is the emo Cancerian who lunged at her brother-in-law in an elevator. Beyoncé, a preternaturally polished Virgo, clung to the corner and fixed her dress. Lately, I've been hung up on how they're similar. I think it's because, for people who've paid attention, it's their differences that got drilled into us over the years. By the time Solange released her first record in December 2002, Beyoncé, with Destiny's Child, had released four albums, earned three Grammy Awards, and was in the final recording sessions for her solo debut. Focusing on their differences was probably a strategic move dreamed up by their father, and, at the time, manager, Matthew Knowles, to maximize the commercial viability of the two artists. Yet, seventeen years later, in the spring of this year, both siblings released albums and accompanying films with musings on "home."

The two projects are like fraternal twins—individually interesting, but fun and compelling to think about in relation. Both are follow-ups to albums that were career highlights. Both build their foundations on rhythm, the voice, and vocal harmonies. Both marry light and sound and knit their soundscapes into images. Both depend on the improvisational skill of a cohort of contributors. Beyoncé's project, the live album companion to her Netflix documentary "Homecoming," documented her two headlining sets at last year's Coachella and layered the visuals and sonics of HBCU pageantry atop references to a specific, Southern emanation of blackness. Solange's fifth studio album, *When I Get Home*, traveled the exact same terrain, but in a far-out, deconstructed way, with references to cosmic jazz and psychedelic R&B, black cowboys, crop circles, undulating hips and mudras, and the skyscrapers and wide, green lawns of the sisters' hometown.

It's logical that if two people share a childhood home, they grow up to be into the same things. But it's taken time — for us, as audiences, to widen our perspectives enough so that we can see, in the same frame, how they're similar and how they're not. It's taken time for the two sisters to grow comfortable enough being themselves while publicly navigating the music industry as black women. To differentiate herself from her sister's glamorous pop image, Solange initially emanated an alterna-vibe that resonated with femmes who may have liked Beyoncé, but felt hemmed in by her R&B fantasy, lead-girl-in-a-video perfection. While Bey rocked the trendy low-slung denim of the early aughts, went and stayed blonde, and mostly kept a huge mane of loose, blown out curls, Solange wore red box braids, and in her first video, a floor length patchwork skirt. She was the earthier sister, positioned in alignment with the diasporic neo soul scene of the late 90s. She had a baby, got married early, and lived with her young family, for a while, in Idaho. Then she sheared her long locks and quietly rented a brownstone in Carroll Gardens.

We didn't linger on or make much meaning from Solange's time as a background dancer for her sister's group, or how she'd replaced Kelly Rowland in the lineup for some tour dates when they opened for Christina Aguilera in 2000. But it did raise eyebrows when, during Solange's Brooklyn years, Beyoncé began showing up at concerts of indie acts her sister put her on to.

Solange's first album *Solo Star* covered a lot of musical ground, but didn't make much of an impact commercially or otherwise. She was then 16. Between 2001 and early 2003, a number of female R&B vocalists made big Top 10 pop albums: Alicia Keys, Janet Jackson, Ameriie, Ashanti, Mya. Beyoncé's 2003 debut (coupled with the rapid deterioration of the recording industry) seemed to flatten out the pop-R&B landscape like a grenade. Five years later, Solange released the Motown-influenced *Sol-Angel and the Hadley Street Dreams*, then left her label. She independently released the 2012 EP "True." Its lead single "Losing You," a buoyant breakup bop, was a breakthrough. *A Seat at the Table*, with spoken word interludes that include interviews with her parents about black history and family, came out in the fall of 2016. It was Solange's first album to debut at number one on the Billboard 200. By then, Beyoncé was talking about her mama's and daddy's roots, too, most explicitly, on *Lemonade*, her sixth studio project as a solo artist. Just five months before, *Lemonade* earned the same chart placement.

[According to Billboard](#), besides the Knowles sisters, in the history of the chart there have been only two other pairs of sibling solo artists in which each sibling has earned a number one pop album: Master P and Silkk the Shocker during a run of releases in the late nineties, and Janet and Michael Jackson. The Jacksons' older brother, Jermaine, The Braxton sisters, Toni and Tamar, and the Simpson sisters, Jessica and Ashlee, have all earned albums in the Top 10. But the only solo siblings to earn number ones during the same calendar year have been Janet and Michael, Solange and Beyoncé.

Michael famously got his start in a band of brothers, The Jackson Five. After signing to Motown in 1969, their first four singles — "I Want You Back", "ABC", "The Love You Save", and "I'll Be There" — all went to number one. Their father, Joseph Jackson, a former boxer and steelworker born in Arkansas, managed the band with reportedly horrid methods. Jackie, Tito, Jermaine, and Marlon all became capable musicians individually. But it was Janet, born eight years after Michael, too young to join her brothers' band, who truly absorbed their ascent. She performed in the family's variety show and TV sitcoms in the 70s, and beginning in the late 80s, released music that,

arguably, approached Michael's impact. *Control*, *Rhythm Nation*, *Janet.*, and *The Velvet Rope* are gorgeous, singular statements that define pop-R&B and still sound alive.

Janet has earned more number one albums than Michael (seven to his six) and her singles have been in the Top 10 for more weeks than his ("That's the Way Love Goes" was the longest running number one for either of them). For a while, the fiasco of Super Bowl 2004 derailed Janet's career. She lost endorsement deals and had a long, marked decline in album sales. "Nipplegate" [angered then CBS chairman Les Moonves](#) so much that he'd reportedly ordered MTV and VH1 to stop playing her videos. Janet's black fans always suspected something sinister at play. Last year, the *New Yorker* and *New York Times* published sexual assault allegations against Moonves and his pattern of derailing women's careers [became public knowledge](#). Janet got inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame this past March, and while that's somewhat palliative, it doesn't give back the lost years, or acknowledge her sprawling, multi-medium contributions to entertainment. Still, her reputation hasn't had the kind of epic blemishes Michael's has, and our current ferment of empowered, black women singers owes everything to her.

Though they're starting to, Solange and Beyoncé haven't leaned all the way in to their shared origin in the way of Michael and Janet in the "Scream" video, where their charisma and similar, long-limbed, open hip-jointed athleticism is foregrounded in nearly every frame. We got glimpses at Solange's [set at Coachella in 2014](#), when Bey joined in for a dance break, and its reprise in Bey's sets, a highlight of the 2019 film. Solange has, like Janet, who sang backup on *Thriller*, been all over Beyoncé's catalog. And while coverage of black pop has evolved from the 90s and early 2000s, when Janet got blackballed and Beyoncé and Solange seemed to represent poles on a restricted continuum of what a black woman in pop could be, it still hasn't gone far enough.

In *Interview*, Beyoncé asked her younger sister where she got her inspiration, and she answered, "For one, I got to have a lot of practice. Growing up in a household with a master class such as yourself definitely didn't hurt." She also namechecked Missy Elliot, who produced and provided vocals for some of Destiny's Child's finest tracks. In other words, she claimed her proximity to her older sister's career, as nourishment, cultivation, as part of what undergirds her artistry. When Solange's latest album launched, the NPR music critic Ann Powers made a playlist of its antecedents called the "mamas of Solange." It included Alice Coltrane, Minnie Riperton, Tweet, Aaliyah, and TLC. It did not include Beyoncé or Destiny's Child, contemporaries of some of the women who did make the list. Maybe it's taken for granted? Stevie Wonder's ambient *Secret Life of Plants* is brought up a lot in relation to *When I Get Home*, but *The*

Writings on the Wall and *Dangerously in Love* are also important building blocks of the music Solange and most contemporary pop and R&B artists make. It feels incomplete to not say so. Similarly, when thinking of Beyoncé, something's missing when we don't acknowledge how indebted she is to the cluster of women around her. Perhaps that's leftover residue from the marketing machine of the late 90s and early aughts, too — an overemphasis on singularity.

When I Get Home's interlude "S. MacGregor," named after an avenue in Houston's Third Ward, contains snippets of Phylicia Rashad and Debbie Allen performing a poem written by their mother, Vivian Ayers-Allen. Rashad and Allen make up another culturally significant sibling pair. There's *The Cosby Show* and *A Different World*, but also the stage — Rashad is the first black woman to win a lead actress Tony, and Allen originated the role of Beneatha in *Raisin!*, the musical adaptation of *A Raisin in the Sun*. Allen was nominated for Tony Awards for *West Side Story* and *Sweet Charity*, and is probably most famous for her work on "Fame!"

Both sisters also had short-lived recording careers. Rashad released a tribute album to Josephine Baker in 1978 and an album of nursery rhymes in 1991. She memorably sang on multiple episodes of *The Cosby Show*. Allen released *Special Look* in 1989. It was a pop, dance-R&B concoction that sounds like a harder edged Paula Abdul, whose debut *Forever Your Girl* released the year before. Today, Allen directs for TV and runs Los Angeles' Debbie Allen Dance Academy, while Rashad directs for the stage.

Allen's younger than Rashad by 2 years, and they have two older brothers: the jazz musician Andrew Arthur Allen, and Hugh Allen, a banker. Their parents' nasty divorce in the mid-'80s got covered in *Jet*. I often wonder about the dynamics in high-intensity, high-achieving households like theirs. Some accounts say Solange felt neglected for parts of her childhood when her older sister's group became the family business. Their five-year age difference is too wide for straightforward competition, but not so for resentment. Some of my earliest memories are the legendary fights between my two older, high-achieving siblings. It still annoys me to think about how much time and energy their rivalry took up (and continues to take up) in our family. In an interview with Maria Shriver last year, Tina Knowles Lawson said she deliberately taught her daughters not to be intimidated by another woman's shine and sent them to therapy early on to learn to protect and support each other. From the perspective of an outsider, it seems to have worked.

Family dynasties are neither new nor newly influential in pop. My mother adored the voice of Karen Carpenter, who'd gotten her start in a duo with her brother, Richard. The LPs of the Emotions, the Pointer Sisters, the Jones Girls, and Sister Sledge were in my mother's racks, too, — all vocal groups with at least one pair of siblings. The early years of rock and roll, the doo wop era, is full of crews of schoolmates, like the Chantels, the Marvelettes or the Supremes, or sibling groups like The Andrews Sisters, the Shangri-Las, and the Ronettes. Later, there's DeBarge, the Emotions, The Sylvers, the Five Stairsteps, Wilson Phillips, the Winans, Ace of Base, Xscape, the Beach Boys, the Bee Gees, the Isley Brothers. Part of me wants to say it's because of the genre's origins in domestic spaces like the living room or the stoop, a refuge of creativity against the backdrop of chaotic 20th century urban life. Music education in schools provided training, as did the subtle rigor of the church, where troupes, quartets, and choirs led worship. When describing what's special about "that sibling sound," in 2014, Linda Ronstadt told the BBC: "The information of your DNA is carried in your voice, and you can get a sound [with family] that you never get with someone who's not blood-related to you." What a voice sounds like, in large part, depends on physiology—the shape of the head, chest, the construction of the sinus cavities. It makes sense that the sweetest, most seamless harmonizing could happen between people who share DNA. And as audiences, we like being witness to the chemistry of our performers. It can feel fun and somewhat uncanny to watch people who look a little bit alike sing and dance in formation.

None of this completely explains how much popular music has historically been "A Family Affair" (a number one in 1971 for Sly and the Family Stone, a group comprised of Sylvester Stewart and his siblings Freddie and Rose, with baby sister, Vaetta, in charge of the backing vocalists). Or how much, aside from the Jonas Brothers, the top 40 of the past few months is absent sibling groups, or, really, groups of any kind. Haim, the trio of sisters Este, Danielle, and Alana from the San Fernando Valley, had Top 10 albums in 2013 and 2017, and will co-headline this year's Pitchfork's festival with the Isley Brothers and Robyn. They sing in [effortless three-part harmony](#), are aggressive on guitar, bass, and percussion, and write their own songs. A *New York Times* critic called them proudly "anachronistic," because their sound is a throwback to earlier eras and bands like Fleetwood Mac and Destiny's Child, whose Stevie Nicks-sampling "Bootylicious," was the last pop number one from a girl group. In a 2011 piece for *The Root*, Akoto Ofori-Atta attributed the decline of vocal groups to, among other factors, reduced record label budgets and the "me-first" narcissism of social media. She also suggested the cyclical nature of music trends could mean that audiences will want to hear tight vocal harmonies again. I'd think that was impossible since digitization has meant that people don't *have* to sing together anymore. But singing itself has gotten

new life from young R&B artists like Ella Mai, Moses Sumney, and H.E.R., so who knows.

In 2015, Beyonce signed the sister duo Chloe+ Halle to her record label. She'd seen them on YouTube [performing covers and accompanying themselves](#) on keys in their living room. The young women sing ethereal, soul-inflected harmonies, play multiple instruments and compose and produce their own music. They're also actresses with recurring roles on "grown-ish." Their first studio album *The Kids are Alright* released last year and earned the group two Grammy nominations. They performed at the ceremony, memorably, in the [tribute to Donny Hathaway](#), and at the Grammy's tribute to Motown, they performed the Marvelette's "Please Mr. Postman," Motown's first number one. None of the singles from Chloe + Halle's record have made much of a commercial impact or stuck with me yet, but, based on history, the incubation potential of the vocal group, the sibling group in particular, bodes well for longevity.