

Blackbirding: A Listener's Guide

ABOUT THE ALBUM

Funded by grants from YoungArts, The Color Me Country Artist Fund and the [New York City Women's Fund for Media, Music and Theater](#) by the City of New York Mayor's Office of Media and Entertainment in association with The New York Foundation for the Arts during an artist residency from the [National Parks Arts Foundation](#), and written, arranged and produced by [Queen Esther](#), *Blackbirding* is a reclamation driven Black country soul album that roams [the Gettysburg battlefield](#) to create songs that dismantle myths and assumptions about what happened there -- and to explore the reasons why, [like slavery](#) and [The Civil War](#), blackbirding has never really ended.

This is much more than an album—it's an act of truth-telling. This music reclaims the Civil War narrative through the lens of a Southern Black feminist, bridging past and present with unflinching honesty. [Blackbirding](#) -- the lucrative 19th century practice of kidnapping free Black folk to enslave them -- continues today. Like their predecessors in the 1800s who were police officers and detectives whose antics were sanctioned by local, state and federal governments, ICE Agents are 21st century blackbirders. This body of work interrogates that continuity, centering Black voices, bodies, resistance, and grace.

Each song encompasses different aspects of the conflict, churning lost history into music that's a seamless irresistible blend of country, jazz, soul, R&B and pop, spirituals, and sacred traditions offering a sonic tapestry rooted in Black ancestral memory. Ultimately, what one hears reflects the unbridled chaotic melange of the battlefield – men who literally took up arms against their brothers, uniformed Southern white officers accompanied by enslaved uniformed unarmed Black men, dirt farmers, women in uniform on both sides of the conflict as [Les Vivandieres](#), Irish immigrants, [Swedes](#), [Huguenots](#), Germans, Italians and European mercenary soldiers of every ilk, trained to the hilt by the French military, led to victory by a Spaniard, fought on farmland owned by free Black men -- and all of it drowning in blood and wine.

Each song pulls itself out of that turmoil and radiates outward—from lost daughters and haunted battlefields to the everyday quiet of [surviving in America while Black](#).

When you listen, you can hear all of this – and much more.

ABOUT THE ALBUM COVER

Inspired by contemporary Black American painter [Barkley L. Hendricks](#)' 1969 portrait [Lawdy Mama](#) and photographed by [Angelica Dass](#), Queen Esther stands in front of a gold arch, with a backdrop drenched in the same color as her dress – haint blue. Something – or someone – has startled her. The mood isn't fear or anger. It's righteous indignation.

Although the color [haint blue](#) – subtle variations of a pale blue-green hue – is associated with porches and verandas throughout the South, this West African tradition was passed down through generations in the Gullah/Geechee nation, now led by duly elected chieftess Queen Quet. [The Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor](#) is a US National Heritage Area and operates as a recognized, autonomous governing body that deals directly with the United Nations.

The prevailing belief is that evil spirits and haints (a Gullah word for ghosts) can't cross large bodies of water, so a bit of trompe l'oeil is used to trick them. In this way, Queen Esther surrounds herself with the color haint blue to ward off evil – and takes it a step further by wearing it.

The arch – a nod to medieval religious icons whose golden luminosity symbolizes God's divine and enduring presence – puts forth the idea of the Black woman as sacred. This sacredness is in reference to “the Eve gene”, which is not a gene but a person: [Mitochondrial Eve](#), an African woman who lived 150,000 – 200,000 years ago. All humans today carry her [mitochondrial DNA \(mtDNA\)](#) which is only passed down from mother to child. Was she the first woman that ever lived? No. Were there other women alive at the time when she was alive? Yes. What separates [Mitochondrial Eve](#) from everyone else is that her female line is the only one that produced an unbroken maternal lineage to all humans today.

Because of her, genetic scientists have mapped ancient human migration routes, proving that people shared a common African ancestor before they drifted throughout the world. Are Black women the only women who carry “the Eve gene”? Yes. Some would argue this, of course – but one thing is absolutely certain: Through a Black woman’s womb, modern humans exist.

This image says: No act of aggression, no disturbance, no threat of danger will ever change the fact that Black women are sacred. Some would say that the amount of unwarranted aggression that Black women receive in the world is a clear indication that we are divinely protected, because no one else will do so. Our resilience and our fortitude, our brilliance comes from God, whose power shows up in our weakness and is ultimately a testimony to the world that we are of the divine.

On the back of the album is the arch itself – empty, because the Black woman has been spirited away to a place in glory where she can no longer be harmed.

Sacred, indeed.

TRACK-BY-TRACK BREAKDOWN

1. *Are You Thirsty?* (*Les Vivandières Theme Song*) is a feminist battle cry inspired by les vivandières — unsung uniformed military women on both sides of the conflict who sold wine to soldiers in the midst of battle, and sometimes gave medical care in the worst of circumstances.

When considering the word thirsty as slang in the Black vernacular, it’s also a sly nod to the power and resilience of Black people. Because in spite of the pure hatred that we endure from so many, who isn’t thirsty for Black culture + food + slang, etc?

2. *Can’t No Grave Hold My Body Down* is a spiritual rooted in resurrection. Gabriel’s trumpet. An angel rolling away the stone. It’s dedicated to Lincoln Cemetery, established in 1867 by the Black men’s society The Sons of Goodwill for the proper burial of Gettysburg’s African American citizens and Civil War veterans. Because even in death, there was segregation in America.

This cemetery includes many of Gettysburg's earliest Black residents that were reinterred when the town's "colored cemetery" was cleared in 1906 to build houses. This is also the final resting place for at least 30 members of the US Colored Troops that were denied burial in the National Cemetery.

3. *Hold Steady* is about specific conflicts during the Battle of Gettysburg that were especially bloody and pivotal, most notably the Triangular Field, The Pinhook and Little Round Top. The song reads like a rallying cry, an anthem of self-reliance when no help is coming. It captures a spiritual grit and battlefield defiance.

It's also the survival code of Black resilience. It's about us – constantly freeing ourselves and each other during slavery by any means necessary, educating ourselves when it was illegal to do so, fighting for our lives when self defense was a felony, and thriving in spite of institutionalized racism, which is prejudice made legal. Black codes. Jim Crow. Segregation. Red Summer. The Bar Exam – created to prevent Black law school graduates from becoming lawyers. The exclusion of Black soldiers from The GI Bill. Etc, etc, etc.

“And still, like air, we rise.” – Maya Angelou

4. *The Devil May Care (But Jesus Knows)* takes place in an area that encompasses a specific rock formation on the battlefield known to locals as The Devil's Den, an area across from it called Little Round Top and the section between them that soldiers referred to as The Valley of Death. It's about the soldiers who were injured and trapped in that valley, many eventually succumbing to their wounds.

This is also a testimony and a nod to Black resilience, even when facing death.

5. *Hey Virginia!* is a battle cry and a reckoning—a poetic indictment sung with a sly grin and a sharp knife. It taunts the myth of Confederate glory, calls out the state as both origin and illusion, and reclaims power through truth-telling. This song is my confrontation with historical denial, dripping with Southern sarcasm and battlefield bravado. It's a direct address to the Confederacy's spiritual capital—and to their

ongoing refusal to reckon with defeat.

6. *I Feel So Alive* is inspired by a section of the battlefield called Iverson's Pits, considered by many to be a supernatural hot spot. This is where 900 men of Brigadier General Alfred Iverson's North Carolina Brigade (consisting of the 5th, 12th, 20th, and 23rd North Carolina Infantries) died simultaneously in a hail of bullets because Iverson was so sure he'd overtake the Yankees soldiers there, he failed to deploy an advance line of skirmishers to prevent a possible ambush. As a result, they got ambushed and brutally massacred – with Iverson safely in the rear.

This song radiates a sacred paradox: the nearness of death kindling a radiant, divine love. It's quiet, intimate, and brave—an elegy, a prayer, and a love song all at once. The battlefield fades and what remains is the soul, poised between agony and transcendence.

This song is a spiritual companion to *Oh My Stars* but from the mouth of the dying. It anchors *Blackbirding* in the mystery of grace amid the horror of war.

7. *Oh My Stars (The Gettysburg Variation)* Completed during the pandemic when COVID ravaged the nation, this song is about dying alone—in The Wheatfield at Gettysburg then or a hospital bed now. This song shimmers with intimacy, grief, dream logic, and cosmic wonder. It's deathbed-soft, battlefield-quiet. There's spiritual surrender here, but also deep communion—with the divine, with a departed presence, with the stars as witnesses. It echoes both the solitude of the dying soldier and the isolation of modern grief, layered with love as the only remaining light.

Cosmic, aching, and filled with longing.

8. *Rebels* exposes how rebellion rooted in grievance becomes a destructive creed. This song isn't just about the Confederacy; it's about the insistence on lost causes, the refusal to evolve, and the dangerous nostalgia that weaponizes victimhood. Yes, this is a direct critique of The Lost Cause ideology and its contemporary heirs—from the Daughters of the Confederacy to January 6. It is both a cultural autopsy and war chant flipped inside out. This track is the autopsy of the

Confederacy's soul, dragged into the now. With this, Queen Esther is not just critiquing the past— she is exposing the fuel still burning beneath us.

9. *Magic* is an Olivia Newton John cover song that transforms from a shimmering 1980s pop ballad into an ancestral hymn. It's an affirmation of spiritual inheritance, divine guidance, and Black transcendence—sung by those who came before, guiding those who are still here. In Queen Esther's hands, this cover becomes a song of sacred intimacy between the living and the dead. It carries the ancestral voice that whispers, "You're not alone. I've been here all along. Keep going."

10. *Home Free* This is a brutally honest song about racism today. It's a spiritual in reverse—not a hymn of deliverance, but of exposure. It's an unflinching testimony: a Black American truth-telling protest song that rejects platitudes and exposes the illusion of freedom.

11. *When I Get Home* is a gospel song that's a bridge to eternity and a refrain of endurance passed down through generations. It doesn't wrestle with history -- it transcends it. A traditional Black gospel spiritual. A throughline from the ancestors to now. A promise of rest, reunion, and something greater.

12. *You're Gonna Get What's Coming* is a Bonnie Raitt cover (written by Robert Palmer) that becomes retribution in the form of a song. It's the Battle of Gettysburg wrapped in swagger: Pickett's Charge, Confederate arrogance, and violent comeuppance delivered with heat and prophecy. It's the sound of a turning tide—framed as a warning to the oppressor, to the insurrectionist, to the would-be victor who forgot that the arc bends toward justice – augmented by gunpowder.