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Jimi Hendrix The Observer

Lithofayne Pridgon: Jimi Hendrix's original 'foxy lady'

Sam Cooke, Sly Stone and Little Willie fought for her attention. Jimi Hendrix loved her so much he wrote songs about her. In a rare interview Lithofayne Pridgon tells Chris Champion the unvarnished story of Harlem's wildest music scene – and how she came to be Hendrix's greatest muse





📷 'They were bold and daring, yet endearing at the same time, and they allowed me to just be who I was': Lithofayne Pridgon reflects on the famous men in her life. Photograph: Jeff Burton for the Observer

Chris Champion

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Never been kissed until she met “Fever” singer Little Willie John. Seduced by Sam Cooke at only 16. Pined for by [Jimi Hendrix](#) as the one woman he loved but could never hold on to. Lithofayne Pridgon, the unacknowledged inspiration behind Hendrix’s “Foxy Lady”, has held some of the most charismatic and talented performers of their day in her sway, and befriended many others – a roll call that includes Jackie Wilson, Marvin Gaye, Sly Stone, Ike Turner and James Brown. She was also Etta James’s best friend.

She’s most closely associated though with Hendrix, her lover dating back to 1963, before he was a guitar-slinging R&B sideman to acts such as the [Isley Brothers](#) and [Little Richard](#), back when he still wore a process and spelled his name with two “m”s and a “y”.

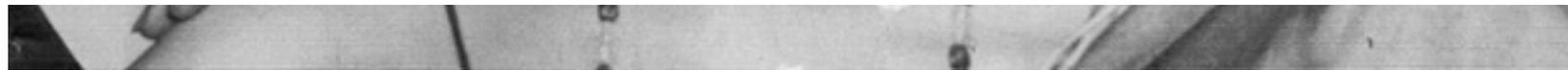
To the men in Lithofayne’s life, she was muse and confidante. Yet, it’s clear Lithofayne Pridgon is as formidable and compelling a character as anybody she was associated with. In the liner notes she wrote for *Blues to the Bone*, Etta James’s 2004 album of blues covers, Lithofayne described herself and her friend as “probably among the first liberated, modern day, black females”. When she hears it back now, talking over pancakes at a breakfast spot in her adopted hometown of Las Vegas, she demurs. “It was just something I wanted to say, you know, but we were liberated, for sure.”

Ballsy and badass, she is possibly the most streetwise septuagenarian you’ll ever meet. She has a filthy laugh that barrels out whenever something tickles her and an easy manner that draws you into her confidence. She also has a low tolerance for bullshit that

finds her quick to shoot down anything that rankles. [Ahmet Ertegun](#), who offered her a deal with Atlantic in the 70s – after hearing her sing and play self-penned songs characterised by the same fierce intelligence and sharp wit she displays in person – used to tell her she was “refreshing”.

“Fayne was a party girl, she liked to have a good time,” says Winona Williams, a former Wilhelmina model and girlfriend of Paul McCartney and David Bowie, who first met Lithofayne on the late-60s New York music scene through Hendrix and remains one of her closest friends. “Still, to this day, you can’t tie her down. Her spirit just roams free.”





📷 'We had lots of cop friends, lots of hustler friends, lots of music friends': with James Brown in the 1960s. Photograph: Courtesy of Lithofayne Pridgon



She has given only a handful of interviews in the 45 years since Hendrix's death, because she doesn't trust anybody else to tell her story right. A born raconteur, she has been writing her memoir, centred on her life with Hendrix in Harlem in the early 60s, where music folk and underground figures mixed freely. "We had lots of cop friends, lots of hustler friends, lots of music friends," she says. She says it makes her laugh when people talk about the peace and love of the 60s. That wasn't the 60s she knew, not in Harlem, not anywhere. "I knew people that shot other people up with battery acid," she says.

To hear her talk about the people she knew – whether Hendrix, Cooke, Etta James or any of the others – is like hearing about them for the first time, stripped of the mythology that surrounds them. She makes no attempt to varnish their personalities. Yet, she is utterly non-judgmental, as honest and self-deprecating about herself as she is about others. If anything she's too modest.

"I don't know what would attract them to me," she says, genuinely bemused. "Heaven knows, there were much prettier girls."

Just about the only sight you can catch of Lithofayne in her prime is in the 1973 documentary *Jimi Hendrix*. She's a captivating presence: hip, expressive and perpetually animated; slim and fine-boned, with her hair stacked up on her head in a

mass of thickly twined curls and locks. She was filmed for the documentary sitting by the pool in the Bel Air mansion Sly Stone had purchased from [John Phillips](#) of the Mamas and the Papas.

Lithofayne was living there at the time. Sly had brought her out from New York towards the end of 1971 – at the height of his fame and all the craziness that came along with it – telling her he wanted to record her. As he'd never even heard her sing, she suspected he had other intentions in mind. “I told him from the beginning, ‘Yeah, if you want to do this, we can do it. Fine with me – platonic.’”

She wrote a few songs, including one called “Placidyl Syl”, a reference to both Sly’s birth name (Sylvester) and his taste for pharmaceutical sleeping aids, but he never did get around to producing her.

Instead, she found herself mothering him. On one occasion, she returned to Bel Air from visiting Etta James to find his flunkies standing around on the lawn, fearful to go inside because Sly had shot the place up. Lithofayne walked into the house alone and found Sly sitting in the lotus position in the middle of his bed, a gun by his side.

“Where you been?” he demanded. “I almost lost my fuckin’ mind. Don’t ever go off like that again.” She told him: “People keep asking, what did you do before you got me?” “Tell them muthafuckas I *suffered*,” Lithofayne says, mimicking Sly’s gravelled bass voice. At that point she realised his dependency had taken a dangerous turn. “I thought, oh shit, it’s time to go.”





📷 'Don't ever go off like that again' ... Sly Stone. Photograph: NBC/NBC via Getty Images



In the event, that decision was made for her. Her father called, shortly thereafter, with a tipoff from a friend in the LAPD. “He said, ‘Honey, you better get out of there. They got the house under surveillance.’ I said, ‘For *what?*’” She didn’t have to be warned twice. At the beginning of December 1972, the house was raided by armed cops and Sly was arrested for failure to produce identification. “I think I was just protected,” she says now. “Universally-protected — I know I have it in my chart — because I was very stupid. I could have been in any of many of the things I’ve known to go down. And here I am

about to be 75-years old.”

Lithofayne Pridgon was born in 1940, in a place called Dirty Spoon, a neighbourhood in the city of [Moultrie](#), southwest Georgia. “About a full square mile of poor people” is how she describes it. “Not just blacks, but poor.” Located between the railroad line and a cemetery, Dirty Spoon was an alley with a dip at the end, shaped like a spoon. The women in Dirty Spoon, she says, “drank moonshine and partied. And most of them didn’t have husbands. All the loose ladies were in Dirty Spoon.”

Even so, her mother was sent away to Missionary College in Springfield, Massachusetts, for bearing Lithofayne out of wedlock. She rarely saw her father, Eddy Clay, a hooper with the Katherine Dunham Dancers and Eartha Kitt, who was usually out on the road or playing on Broadway. Lithofayne was an only child, her parents never married. “Just about the only thing they had in common was me.” She was raised, for the most part, in a more well-to-do section of the city called Crosstown, by her paternal grandmother, said to be the illegitimate child of Henry Ford who kept a winter home in Georgia, several counties north. “Old man Henry Ford is supposed to have been my great granddaddy,” Lithofayne says. Although the Ford lineage was never definitely proven, her grandmother had a sizeable portfolio of land in Moultrie for reasons that couldn’t be

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explained — she earned money by taking in washing at a dollar a load. She tried to instil in Lithofayne the idea that Dirty Spoon was “full of decadence and the dregs of humanity”. But the people who lived there and the lives they led, so free and wild and fun, continued to have a strong hold on her imagination.

Summers were spent in Massachusetts with her mother, who worked at MassMutual life insurance and led an active social life in the company of musicians passing through town on the [chitlin’ circuit](#). “She was a notorious cook, always had a big apartment,” says Lithofayne. “All these guys liked to come to her house and hang out.” Not wanting a child in tow to cramp her style, she would pass off Lithofayne as her sister.

Towards the end of 1955, fresh off his first hit “[All Around the World](#)”, Little Willie John, the 5ft 4in singing dynamo from Detroit – now considered to be the missing link between big band-era rhythm and blues and the performer-driven soul music of the 60s – came to play the Roseland Ballroom in Holyoke, Massachusetts. “My mama was going with the band leader,” says Lithofayne. “So that’s how I met Willie. My first kiss and everything. And his daddy was travelling with him. I remember he had a silver streak through his hair. Teenager, and his daddy had a silver streak through his hair, so *he* had a silver streak through his hair.”





📷 Jimi and Lithofayne outside the Apollo, 1969. Photograph: Courtesy of Lithofayne Pridgon



He was 17, she was two years younger. “I bragged to everybody I knew him,” she says. When her cousin in Dirty Spoon told her Willie John was going to be playing nearby, she contrived a reason to travel south to see him again.

“I believe that was the time I met James Brown. Willie John introduced me,” she says. “He used to call me ‘Little Sister’.” She would remain friends with Brown, even touring with the James Brown Revue in the 60s, but it was Little Willie John who stole her heart: “He was totally uninhibited. Super free spirit. Wasn’t scared, didn’t feel threatened by anything or anybody. Totally streetwise. And he could sing his ass off.” John would provide her entry into another world, just like Dirty Spoon but bigger – Harlem.

By the time she arrived, the area was past its jazz-age heyday, but still fizzing with excitement and opportunities to have fun. The first time she went, at 16, Willie John took her to the Cecil Hotel, a five-floor apartment hotel above famed restaurant and jazz spot [Minton's Playhouse](#), where all the music folks would stay, hang out and party. That's where she was introduced to Sam Cooke, at a party in a suite occupied by a man named "Cripple Lou", who ran the hotel. "He was an ex-cop from the New York City Police Department," she says, "and he was missing some toes."

She was used to Willie John showing her off. "He had no problem displaying me," Lithofayne says. She was young but self-assured for her age and in control. "He'd call me his woman, and I wasn't anybody's woman." That night, he wanted to show her off to Cooke. Later that evening, as she walked through a darkened room in the suite, Cooke was waiting for her, at the window, pretending to look out on 118th Street. She didn't see him as she hurried through. "He reached out and snatched my hand," she says. "I was startled at first." She recognised him from the silhouette cast by the light of the street lamps. "Immediately, when I saw it was him, it was like all the fear was gone. When he pulled me close to him and kissed me, hell yeah, I just melted in his arms."

Just to recall it gives her a thrill. As she talks, Sam Cooke's "You Send Me" begins to play in the diner and gives her another thrill. "It's Sam," she says delightedly, interrupting her flow the second his voice starts singing, as if she'd just caught sight of him walking through the door. She listens, smiling, rapt by a memory. "It makes tears run down, this one."



Hendrix adored her to distraction. He had her but he didn't have her exclusively, and that drove him up the wall



brother.

Cooke, who she describes as a “super-super gentleman”, took her under his wing and looked after her, nicknaming her “Chineesy” – after the distinctive eye make-up she still wears that made her look so exotic. Willie John, she says, “didn't care” that she took up with Cooke as well. “As long as he knew everything going on and he was the boss of it, it was OK with him.” And she was happy to let him think that was the case. Her mother soon moved to New York and took up with Cooke's

Through Willie John she would be also introduced to a notorious figure called Jack Taylor, aka “Fat Man” or “Fat Jack” – nicknamed for the size of his girth, although the breadth of his influence was equally impressive. “He was the dope kingpin of Harlem – he had everybody in his pocket,” she says. In order to launder his ill-gotten gains, Fat Jack owned a number of legitimate businesses, too—an R&B label called Ro-Jack, several restaurants and apartment buildings. His largesse was legendary, especially towards folks in the music scene.

“There was a whole clique around Harlem,” Lithofayne says. “He was rumoured to be the dope dealer to all the stars.” She developed a friendship with Taylor outside of Willie John. “We would frequent the same kind of places and run into each other here and there, now and then. And there were always cute guys, cute girls, on the scene. Everybody was young and energetic. And so if you saw somebody you liked you kinda

just hooked up with them — hooked up with them, took them with you.” These spontaneous hook-ups usually took place at a hotel suite or at an apartment rented by Taylor, known as his “sets”. “You’d take the young tenders in and just party to your hearts content. Sometimes a set lasted two or three days.” And Fat Jack was the one who “always provided the finances, the drugs or whatever was necessary”.



📷 Little Willie John ... 'He had no problem displaying me' Photograph: Michael Ochs Archives



When she ran into Hendrix in 1963, at the stage door of the Apollo, she had come to see

Cooke, who was performing there. Hendrix was inside, a jobbing guitarist, looking for an opportunity to meet the soul star and pitch his skills. Although she couldn't quite place him, she felt she knew him from somewhere before. Then he said his name, "Jimmy", and it clicked.

She had encountered him, almost a year earlier, at one of Fat Jack's sets. That day, she had gone out to run an errand for her mother and, on her way back home with the change, had stopped by one of Fat Jack's apartments. She asked one of his men who was inside. "This little musician cat," he told her. "I said, 'Is he a virgin?' He said, 'No, but you'll like him. He's your type.' He just knew what I liked.

"I liked skinny, raw-boned, over-fucked, underfed-looking guys," she laughs. Hendrix, she says, was "my type".

He made enough of an impression on her then, as a lover, that her heart skipped a beat when she realised who it was after bumping into him again. "I was like, 'Oh my God, it's him.' I was trying to be real cool."

They walked all the way from the Apollo to her mother's apartment, near Central Park, and, there, bonded over her mother's large collection of blues records. Later, they ended up in a room at the Cecil Hotel and hopped into bed. From that moment on, she says, "We were inseparable."

There's a feeling that she was drawn to qualities in her lovers that resonated with her own sense of self. John's uninhibited spirit, Cooke's romanticism, the sensitivity of

Hendrix. Of John, Cooke and Wilson, she says, “They were all totally different than the songs they sang. They could sing the hell out of some love song. But, as we used to say back then, they were all from city to city and titty to titty.

More on this topic

Jimi Hendrix, in his own words: 'I dig Strauss and Wagner – those cats are good'

“That side of them appealed to me, because I always loved womanisers,” she says. From the time she arrived in New York, she began to relish her sexual freedom in the same way, and on equal terms, as her famous lovers: “There were things about them that were bold and daring, yet endearing at the same time, and they allowed me to just be who I was.” They made no demands on her, no attempts to tie her down. When Hendrix came into her life, all that changed.

He wasn't a womaniser then, she says, not until later on. But he fell head-over-heels in love with Lithofayne. She, in turn, nurtured his talent, validated his ambitions. “Folks say that we lived together,” she says. “I don't feel like we lived together, but I would stay for maybe a few weeks at a time and I'd get my knees in the breeze.”

He had it in mind they were a couple. She maintained she'd never had a boyfriend, never been anybody's girlfriend, and wasn't about to start now. “My mother even told Jimi, ‘Pay Faye no mind because she falls in and out of love every week.’ And I did, I loved that love rush.” But her relationship with Hendrix was different. “This might sound crazy to you, but he was almost like my baby,” she says. “He was a sweetheart and it's as simple as that.”



📷 Lithofayne Pridgon and Etta James, 1968. Photograph: Courtesy of Lithofayne Pridgon

But Jimi, she says, so young and in love, was also “insanely jealous”. She has an extraordinary collection of love letters from him, written in florid, lyrical prose – the same style later evident in his lyrics – that prove without a shadow of a doubt the intensity of his infatuation; an intensity that scared her. “As I write more and more, I feel myself grow so very weak under the power of you,” he wrote in one.

For all her talk of being a “loose lady”, Lithofayne is clearly a romantic at heart; one who

sought from the men she knew a love that was pure and uncomplicated by jealousy, disaffection and possessiveness; a love that swept her off her feet, but also a love that left her to be free. “I wanted to continue seeing Jackie and Sam and Willie,” she says. “I didn’t think about it in terms of, ‘I’m your old lady.’ I wasn’t anybody’s old lady.” She loved them all equally and unreservedly. “That was the problem,” she says. Jimi couldn’t handle that.

“He adored her, to the point of distraction,” Winona Williams says of Hendrix. “You always want what you can’t have. And he had her but he didn’t have her exclusively, and that drove him up the wall.”

One time Lithofayne recalls, he even said to her, albeit jokingly: “I’d like to freeze you in a cake of ice, thaw you out when I want to, if that was possible, huh?” “Stop talkin’, crazy,” she replied. “He talked crazy.”

Hendrix left the US in September 1966 for England, where he would find a recording contract, recognition and fame. But he made a point of tracking Lithofayne down whenever he came back to New York, and she remained very much on his mind. His deep, abiding love for her never faltered, seemingly finding form in a song he recorded in London for his debut album, “Foxy Lady”.

Surprisingly for a figure so pored over as Hendrix, none of his many biographers has given any serious consideration as to who might have been the subject of this, one of his most celebrated songs. Worse, it seems to have been completely misread as nothing more than a lascivious come-on, bedroom braggadocio to shore up the exotic strutting,

super-stud persona attached to Hendrix. A close reading of the lyrics reveals that “Foxy Lady” is not just a song about sexual desire, but the desire for fidelity. A few lines from it clearly reference his frustrations about Lithofayne’s refusal to commit solely and absolutely to him.

Scant evidence exists to back up the assertions of those who have been named, or have named themselves, as Jimi’s Foxy Lady. Hendrix himself never spoke of who the song was about. However, at that time in his life, there was only one woman Hendrix knew intimately enough, and had a history with, who could have inspired its lyrics: Lithofayne Pridgon.

She tells a story that illuminates where the title may have come from. “He used to call every pet we had ‘Foxy,’” she says. One time, they found a kitten on the street and took it in; Jimi immediately named it Foxy. Later on, they bought a poodle; he named that Foxy, too. He was also in the habit of using the word in other ways: “He used to like to refer to good-looking girls as foxy. Or if I put on certain things, he’d say, ‘Wow, you look foxy in that.’”

So wrapped up was she in her own story with Jimi, she never thought for a minute the songs with which he found fame could be about her. She thinks it would make her sound “cocky” if she claimed they were now. “He was always saying: ‘This is about you. I wrote this about you,’” she says. “I just thought it was cute.”

The profound influence she had on his life has been so sorely overlooked, it’s likely his love for Lithofayne inspired other songs, too. Certainly, a number of cuts on his debut

album, *Are You Experienced*, seem to have been written with her in mind: the love he clearly felt was written in the stars, destined to last for eternity, of which he sings in “Love or Confusion”; the desperate plea for his devotion to be recognised in “Can You See Me” in which he wails, “Can you hear me cryin’ all over town?”. (“If he couldn’t find me,” Lithofayne recalls, “everybody in Harlem knew he was looking for me.” She would visit her usual haunts and people would tell her, “Girl, Jimi, was by here, you better go.”) “And Fire”, in which he determinedly edges every rival suitor for the subject of his affections out of the way.

“Jimi would have settled down with Fayne,” says Williams. “I don’t see any other woman that he’d have settled down with – but Fayne was not about to settle down. If Fayne had said: ‘Look, I want you to leave all of these women alone and we’re going to do this,’ he would have done it.”

“Well, he might have,” Lithofayne laughs, “but that would have been dumb.”

Williams is adamant that Lithofayne, the only constant in his life from the time he first hit New York in 1963 through the seven years until he died, was the one person among his circle of intimates who superseded all others. “All of these girls that think they had a part of this man’s heart need to know that his whole heart belonged to Lithofayne Pridgon,” she says. “But he couldn’t get it.”

Sitting in the car outside the diner, Lithofayne produces a CD from her jacket and says: “I want to play you something”. She slips the disc into the slot in the dash. After a few seconds, there is the sound of a barebones blues being finger-picked on an electric guitar. Then a voice, unmistakably that of Hendrix, begins to sing; a blues for Lithofayne Pridgon.

For close to half an hour he sings, of the diamond necklace he always promised to buy her, of the room they first stayed in together at the Cecil, of people they knew, like Fat Jack Taylor. He begins to strum the chords of “Hey Joe”, calling out her name, over and over — “Faytoe”, her nickname back in Dirty Spoon. Although she has heard the tape many times before, Lithofayne listens intently, only occasionally passing comment. At one point she shakes her head, embarrassed when Hendrix veers into details she feels are explicit and risqué.

She remembers the day it was recorded. She had just come off the road with James Brown in 1968, a tour he had expressly asked her not to go on. “I was gonna make it up to him so he wouldn’t be pissed,” she says. “That’s what I did sometimes, you know, I’d spend a little extra time go and hang with him and stay for a while, just so we’d be OK.”

That day, he had called Lithofayne and asked her to come over to his apartment on 12th Street in the Village. While waiting for her to arrive, he began to spontaneously commit to tape his deepest thoughts and feelings for her. The recording lasts about as long as it probably took her to get there. Towards the end, he improvises a line: “I can hear her footsteps coming down the hall”. Soon after, the machine shuts off.

Lithofayne had no idea the tape even existed until 25 years later, in September 1995, when Sotheby’s put it up for auction in London as part of a lot of four reels. The so-called “Faye Tape” was the only one that contained unheard material. Although unreleased, it is not unknown, being one of the most sought after of all recordings by Hendrix fans. The Sotheby’s catalogue described it as “an almost flawless, fascinating private performance”. It is that and more, an utterly unique document: Jimi Hendrix in a way he has never been heard before, raw, unguarded, vulnerable, pouring his heart out to the woman he loved.

She and Jimi continued to connect up until 1970. A photo of them on the verge of locking lips appears on the inside gatefold sleeve of his 1968 album, *Electric Ladyland*. He was showing her, in his own way, that he wanted the world to know he was still her man. The last time she saw him was in August 1970. “He was about to leave to go to die,” she says.

At the end of the month, he left New York for England and a European tour that would be cut short in under three weeks by his untimely passing.



📷 Sam Cooke starts to play. 'It's Sam,' she says as if she'd just caught sight of him: Lithofayne Pridgon. Photograph: Jeff Burton for the Observer



The night Hendrix died in London, Lithofayne was recording at his Electric Lady studio in New York. She didn't find out until the next day. She was sitting in the window, her writing spot in the third-floor apartment on Pulaski Street in Brooklyn that Jimi had got for her, when she saw a squad car pull up outside the building. She remembers thinking: "I wonder what these muthafuckas want this time of day. I ain't gettin' high." The cops, she says, "used to bring drugs to my house. They'd bust somebody down the street, get the dope, bring it to my house. Cops were fun. Everybody thinks cops were so

horrible – that’s bullshit. I knew fun, fun, fun cops.”

More on this topic

When Jimi Hendrix came to London, he changed the sound of music for ever

These cops came bearing grim news. “They threw something on the bed, said, ‘Here, sid’down, you’re gonna need this,’ and they told me,” she says. “I think I was numb because I didn’t react for some reason.”

She didn’t react for two weeks, until she overheard a commotion, her downstairs neighbour being told her husband had died. Lithofayne didn’t even know the man but broke out “blubberin’ and cryin’” – a delayed reaction, she believes, but possibly not just to Jimi’s death.

Three lovers, lost in six years: Sam Cooke shot to death in December 1964; Little Willie John, four years later, through disputed circumstances in prison while serving out a conviction for manslaughter; Hendrix, two years after him. “I know I got the hell out of there,” she says. At the close of 1971, she met Sly Stone during his concerts at Madison Square Gardens and took him up on an invitation to head west. Lithofayne kept moving, just as she had always done.

She took up for a time with Eddie Hazel, guitarist with [Funkadelic](#), who inspired her to write more songs. In 1973, she signed a contract with Atlantic Records under Ahmet Ertegun and recorded an album backed by Shuggie Otis, prodigious guitarist son of Johnny Otis, and the Muscle Shoals Rhythm Section, which remains unreleased. Lithofayne, always one to take the road less travelled, decided to forego a music career to attend college and study music instead. She remained in LA until the mid-90s,

maintaining friendships with musician friends like James Brown and Ike Turner, and was so tight with Etta James that they were nicknamed “Thelma and Louise”. And through it all she continued to write, processing her experiences through lyrics and prose.

Her time with Hendrix, in particular, weighs heavily on her, sometimes too heavily. Over the years, friends and acquaintances have suggested things might have turned out different if only she had acceded to his demands. “In other words, if I had stopped being me and become somebody else,” she says. “Oh my God, that’s too much responsibility.” But she believes in her heart that “ole coulda-shoulda-woulda shit” is just a losing game.

All she knows is what she felt and the way he behaved around her. “I don’t have any doubt in my mind that there was all that crazy love there. But that was the same shit that scared the *fuck* out of me, because Jimi was *something*, honey — he was a force to be reckoned with, no matter what.”

In her telling, they all were — Sam, Jimi, Jackie, Willie John — all the men she loved and gave herself to. She’s clearly as much in love with them now as she was then, fiercely protective of their memory and her own.

“I always say that they were not meant to stay here for long periods. I don’t know how to explain that. But it’s like their light... the light that shines the brightest burns out faster.

“Regardless of the controversy about how they died, or whatever, I think it was just

meant to be.”

Thankfully, Lithofayne Pridgon has stayed the distance. And maybe that was meant to be as well, written in her chart, for she has quite the story to tell.

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