



Family photo of the Bishops.

wild belles

How Black Girls came to Rule the American South

■ text_SHAYLA LAWSON ■ photography_SUPPLIED

As a woman who grew up fighting against the Southern stereotype, I find the story of Black Girl Culture amidst the exploration migration incredibly important. My parents are from California. Before that, my people were Texarkans, Creoles, and from other locales farther south. I was born in Minnesota but grew up in Kentucky. I spent a considerable amount of my undergraduate education abroad. Because my family had a little taste of nearly everywhere regionally, with close family friends from multiple diverse backgrounds, I tended to think of myself as a global citizen or, if pressed to define myself more locally, born in the Midwest. But truthfully, this was not really the case. Neither of these definitions explained my laugh or my temper, my fascination with wild things or how automatically I would jump up and say, "Honey, you hungry? I'll cook you something," to a complete stranger. According to family legend, the grandparents of my paternal grandmother founded Bishop, Texas—one of the few towns owned and governed by freed slaves after the Civil War. And my mother's side—fire-breathing, steely-eyed story-tellers. There was no question in my mind, from the times I visited them and was old enough to remember, I was going to write. The story was our blood. I remember the first time my mother told me about my great-

grandma Margie, she became my comic book hero. She gave birth to eight children. Then, in a feat unimaginable for a woman of the misogynistic south during the late 19th century, she shot her then-husband in the foot and ran off. The children ended up with family in California, where she one day returned to reclaim her role as a woman of generations, a sharp-tongue matriarch who chased rotten men out of the family business with skillets or knives. I hear the story and feel nothing but compassion. Yes, the violence is alluring, but what gets me most is she had the ability to return and to leave. She took care of herself. How many women ever learn to do that? I often imagine her as sort of juke-joint Annie Oakley, canvassing the southern circuit with Suge Avery-style impudence and that somewhere there lays a sepia portrait of her in her younger years with that same feverish red underpinning that laces the cover of *Mama's Gun*. She came back. She remarried. She had more children, and sisters, and close friends. She gave me fearlessness and imperfection. But, "I was born in Minnesota," I say. Although I used this explanation as an attempt on establishing my own identity, the words pay service to no one. The prejudice that exists against Southerners remains largely because we still view ourselves in terms of those who migrated to the north during the early years of industrialization (the progressive) and those who maintained their farmland, with the connotation of slave-land, roots (the disenfranchised). This division is not one that exists solely amongst Americans of African descent—or solely amongst Americans at all. But the presence of this differentiation formed the basis for two very distinct identities along the Atlantic coastline. However, this linear notion of development denies the cultural integration,



Versailles Road—Lexington, Kentucky. To the left there is a farm. To the right there is (literally) a castle. Photo by Philip Jones

the sounds of Southernness, Americans champion dearly as our distinct artistic and civic contributions to the world scene. 90% of the African-American population in the United States draws its roots from the South. That means 90% of all that defines us as the 20 million or so Black Girls living in the United States—music, dance, fashion, the civil rights movement—has roots there. Think Ruby Dee, Josephine Baker, and Nina Simone. Think Susan Lori Parks, Oprah Winfrey, and Beyoncé Knowles. We can view their achievements as self-evident and reflective of a burgeoning Black Girl Ruling class. But we can also look at their achievements of part of a continuous southern narrative. The isolated nature of the field made Southern women contemplative. Many of them were bookish and prone to adventures that involved earth: climbing trees or quilting to keep out the cold and the occasional loneliness. With men often on the periphery, physically or emotionally displaced by the complicated family structure that pervaded African-American homes in the post-antebellum period, these women relied on a system of matriarchal hierarchy. They created economic opportunities for themselves where none existed, parlaying their domestic skills into empires that fed and educated their children. And their daughters—the awareness that life, the Harlem Renaissance, the expatriates, the early buzz of transculturalism, the belief they could create a world that challenged, advanced, and accepted their beautified presence—grew up with ravenous ambition. We see portions of this brave world reflected and restored in the personal stories of so many Southern Black Girls we adore. They are stars to us, yes, but they go home to the kitchen and they are barefoot and cooking beans and drawing out their words with a slower cadence. I do not say these things to turn the measured genius of these women into a pejorative façade. We see within America, as with countries across the diaspora, a public and private face. Southern women, globally successful southern women, often hide their grassroots from the mass media under cosmopolitan skirts. But in this too, I argue, they are Southern. The pervasive allure of these women lies in their ability to, at once, summon their own uniquely feminine version charm while protecting their interior

with a power as liquid and deadly as mercury. We see them as real, grounded, and somehow accessible. Their womanly story of displacement so deeply akin to the struggle of West Indian Islanders, of South Africans, of our universal struggle for independence, they quickly mold to the skin of a worldly identity that transcends one particular part of the globe. I love how my mother's friend from Ghana, who helped raise me explained that the teenagers in hometown did not start rocking afros until they saw Americans wear them, a la Angela Davis and how Erykah Badu taught me, and countless other American women, how to wrap my hair. Without women who came from the pride of the cyclical transcendence we see in Southern Black Girls, we would find the transcultural world—the transference of cultural ideas from one adapted community to another—decidedly different. I do not think it often occurs to people how distinct regional inheritance shapes Americana. A country of the displaced we do possess the unique pleasure of understanding ourselves as individuals, a new nation, attempting to live without the burden stereotype and tradition. It is like New York. New York is the only city I have lived in which the natives, long-time, and new inhabitants all define themselves as its people. Outside of the city's poshness, I believe this transition happens because it accepts its emigrants kindly. Although occasionally territorial, the city understands our movement fills the city with new and interesting beauty. I do not know if I will ever call myself a New Yorker. I have nothing against the idea; I just do not know if it explains what I am doing here. I started telling people I was from "the South," while living in Italy, and if pressed for more specificity, Kentucky. I did so because of how quickly Europeans assumed being American meant I was from New York. 9/11 created a much more sensitive portrait of America for many Europeans, especially New Yorkers. I understood their assumption as one of empathy, not ignorance. Besides, I do not look like your average middle-of-the-road-from-the-middle-of-nowhere tourist. However, I decided to correct their biases in order to let the world know: New York is not the only city tied to the intricate fabric of our global community and, as young creative people working in small towns around



A very young me with Flora Mae Brown, sister of my great-grandma Margie.

the globe know, culture does not come solely from urban metropolises. In expressing my Black Girlhood to the rest of the world, the South is who I am; and Southern daughters sprinkle the Black Girl scene with their sex, charm, and witty independence. I grew up in Lexington, a hilly city of trees, bourbon, and horses—I am a wild horse. I hope at some point someone will ask me where I come from, I will give them my story in the distillation of a region—the South—and it will make sense to us collectively. And it will encourage others to tell their stories in terms of where we reside and who our people are, knowing we can always return to the deep center of things. My women would be proud of me.

I asked my friends for stories about being raised by southern women. Here are their responses: My people are all handy. They are seamstresses, milliners, quilters, crochet-ers, creative, gentle, big, tall, soft-voiced (unless up in the pulpit where they transform into Sojourner Truth-type orators), curvy women with hereditary large hands made for turning earth, and the pages of bibles...made for grabbing a few wayward "chillun" up by the scruff if need be. They are brilliant – razor sharp – steadfast in their spirituality. Having migrated to Indiana from Alabama, these are women who own acres of land, buried husbands and children, they are master chefs of soul in the kitchen, and though the decades whittle them down here and there, what is left gleams like raw amethyst. My Grandma Doll, has only voted once for a presidential candidate, John F. Kennedy, and only because she saw something in him worth voting for. She said she won't vote until there's a Black candidate who could actually win the presidential election. She's in her 80's and planning to vote for the second time in her life – talk about sticking to your guns. – Bianca Lynne Spriggs My grandmother has been arrested more times than she can remember. In writing this I am not airing the family business, rather I am stating a fact. One she would gladly tell you herself should the conversation venture to such terrain. At 75 she is a six decade veteran of the Civil and Human Rights movement. She has lived all but one year of her life in the South, first Memphis, Tennessee followed by Louisville, Kentucky. She does not bite her tongue for anyone, is rumored to have a gun arsenal that would rival that of Heston's (a result of many Klan threats by in the day), will stand by her man even when she is demanding he 'get his black ass out of this house' if he dared to drink too much whiskey under their, albeit more aptly her, roof. She personally prefers Bloody Marys but had to cut back because of high blood pressure medicine. In the past she was called Cook and Book,

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Bianca Spriggs-Floyd



Shayla Lawson. Photo by Jeff Taylor

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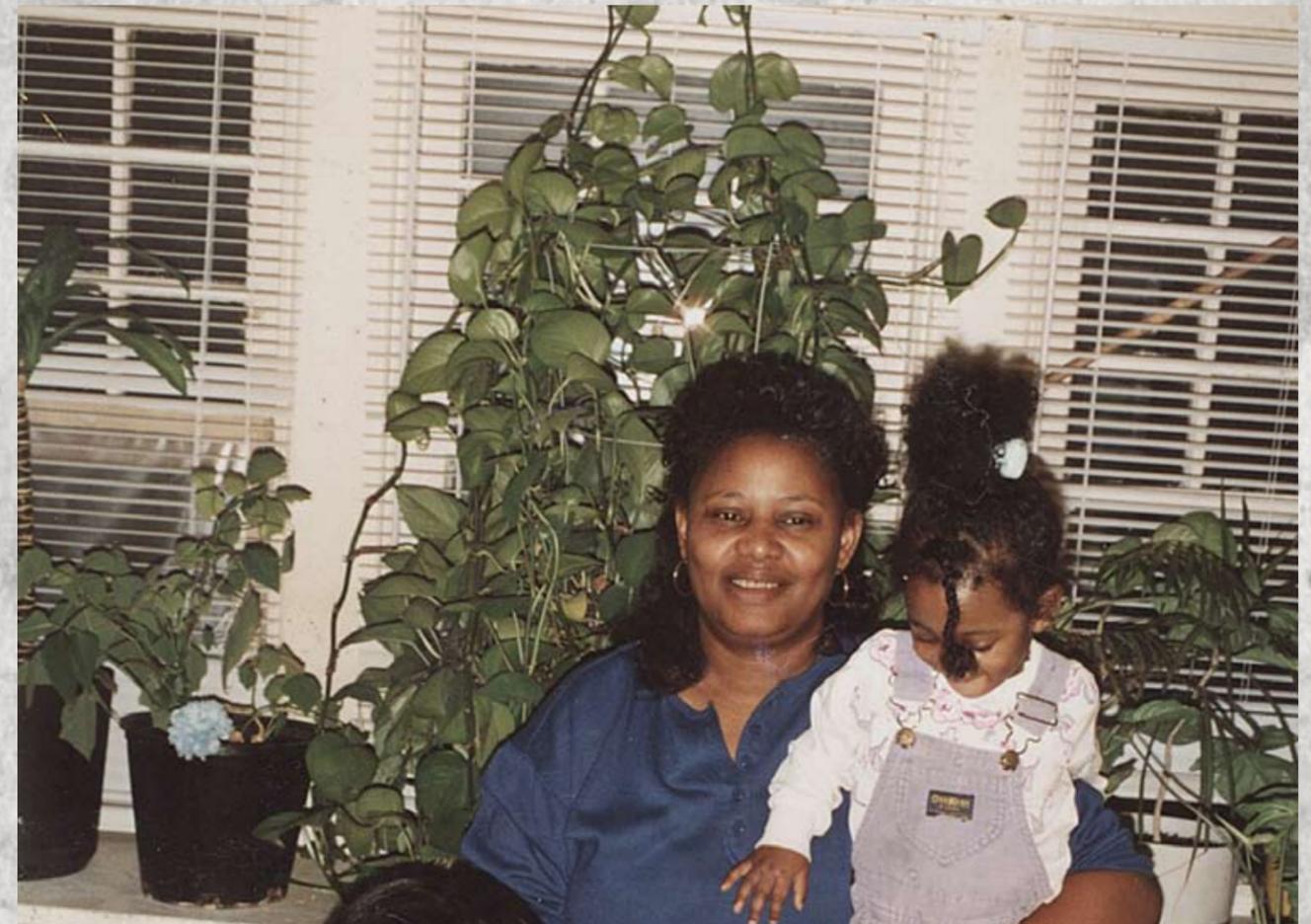


Mattie Florence Jones (Nana)

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10) The Lawson Family: myself (left), mother Gloria, father Travis, and sister Arielle (center). We took this picture one year at a local amusement park. In it, my father and sister look eerily kindred to our Bishop relatives.