

Aretha Franklin (1942-2018)—A tribute to the Queen of Soul

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The death of legendary singer Aretha Franklin from pancreatic cancer at the age of 76 has unleashed a wave of grief over her loss and a deep appreciation for her work. The “Queen of Soul” was one of those rare figures of almost universal appeal. The transcendent quality of her voice, which seemed to pierce through everything false or inessential with a determination to tell the truth, has touched generations of people and will continue to do so. To mourn her loss is also to recognize that she was an all-too-rare artistic type, the likes of which has not come along for some time.

Aretha Franklin was born March 25, 1942 in Memphis, Tennessee, but grew up in another important city for music, Detroit, Michigan. Her father was C.L. Franklin, the pastor of the New Bethel Baptist Church, whose recorded sermons would earn him the nickname “the man with the million-dollar voice.” The elder Franklin became a friend and supporter of civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. He was one of the organizers of the June 1963 Walk to Freedom in Detroit, estimated to have been the largest civil rights demonstration in the US prior to the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom that same August.

Owing to her father’s position, Franklin’s childhood home became a gathering place for many significant artistic and cultural figures who were friends of the family. Among the regular visitors were gospel singers Mahalia Jackson, Clara Ward and Sam Cooke, and jazz pianists Art Tatum and Oscar Peterson. In this rich cultural environment, Franklin developed her love for music and began teaching herself to play piano and sing.

While there was much in her life to nourish her artistic development, Franklin also endured significant hardship. Her mother left the family and moved to New York, where she would die when Franklin was only 10 years old. By the time Franklin turned 16, she had already had two children of her own, her first at the age of 12. These events left a lasting mark on the young artist, though she never spoke about it in any detail. Friends described the lingering pain and sadness they caused in her life.

Franklin began performing at the church services led by her father, perched on a chair because she was so young and small. When her father’s success led him to tour the country, she went with him to sing. In this way she was tested before countless

audiences. During their tours of the American South, she also endured firsthand the injustice and humiliation of segregation.

Franklin made a name for herself as a gospel singer in the course of these tours. R&B label Chess Records began recording her in the late 1950s, as they had the sermons of her father. When Sam Cooke made the leap from gospel to secular music, it cemented Franklin’s desire to do the same.

Her own career in pop music began at Columbia records, which never quite knew what to do with her. Her music was positioned somewhere between jazz and pop, not unlike the work of Dinah Washington, whom Franklin greatly admired. There were high points, including the more R&B “Won’t Be Long” and an extraordinary version of “Skylark,” which reportedly made both Etta James and Sarah Vaughan a little nervous. Others like “Over the Rainbow,” “Ol’ Man River,” and “Swanee,” however credible her versions may have been, felt like songs she was stuck with, and from which her abilities badly needed to be set free.

It was not until she joined Atlantic records and began her collaboration with legendary producer Jerry Wexler and engineer Tom Dowd that Franklin reached her fullest potential. Among the many albums they recorded together, *I Never Loved a Man the Way I Love You* (1967), *Lady Soul* (1968) and *Spirit in the Dark* (1970) stand out as major achievements.

In an obituary of Wexler in the WSWWS in 2008, we wrote about the first-named record: “The album epitomizes the Atlantic R&B sound. There is the stomping backbeat, with a full-bodied snare drum ... snapping down hard on the 2 and 4 of the beat. The bass guitar is given a prominent role in the front of the mix. Franklin’s piano, played loud and heavy, finishes off the rhythm section, making very clear the gospel influence that was such an intimate part of her sound as well as Wexler’s. Horn sections, on this and all the great Atlantic recordings, are never recorded with undue brightness or gloss, but are allowed to retain a ‘dryness’ and a growl, not unlike the sound of the Kansas City shout blues groups Wexler must have heard in the late 1930s.”

So many of the songs from these and other albums from this time deserve to be heard again and again. Among the finest are “Respect,” “I Never Loved a Man (The Way I Love You),” “Do Right Woman, Do Right Man,” “Chain of Fools,” “(You

Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman,” “Think,” “I Say a Little Prayer,” “Don’t Play That Song,” and “Day Dreaming.”

With the guidance of Wexler and Dowd, Franklin was finally given the musical support she needed. She was put with the Muscle Shoals Rhythm Section, a group of studio musicians working out of FAME studios in Muscle Shoals, Alabama who were responsible for some of the most enduring soul and R&B music of the period.

When she travelled to Alabama in 1967, where just four years earlier Gov. George Wallace had delivered his inaugural address calling for “segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever,” Franklin and the musicians of Muscle Shoals (who were white, to the surprise of many admirers) came together to make some of the most extraordinary music of their careers and of the entire period. The sessions were somewhat tense and were ultimately called off prematurely when Franklin’s husband got into a brawl with studio manager Rick Hall after just one song, “I Never Loved a Man (The Way I Love You),” was completed. But when the success of this single—arguably the best song any of those involved had ever done up to that point—became clear, the musicians travelled to New York to complete the album.

These sessions produced “Respect,” Franklin’s signature song. Originally written and recorded by Otis Redding, another legend, it was about a man who wanted “respect” from his wife after a long day of work. Franklin reworked and rearranged the song, transforming it into a kind of working-class woman’s answer to the original. Over its taunting guitar licks and irresistible groove, Franklin’s trumpeting voice belted out the lyrics like someone who had long grown tired of remaining quiet. She wasn’t asking for respect so much as she was demanding it, and she literally spelled it out for anyone having trouble getting her point. This was a case of a song intersecting perfectly with the times. In the midst of the struggle for equal rights, which energized all of Franklin’s music of this period, the “respect” she demanded in the context of a romantic relationship took on far broader social implications.

In “Respect” and numerous other recordings, the frequent and conversational interplay of Franklin with her backing vocalists, who included her talented sisters Carolyn and Erma Franklin and soul and gospel singer Cissy Houston (mother of Whitney Houston), lent her music a broader appeal as well. She appears as one voice articulating the moods of many. This was not the music of self-absorption and pettiness.

Franklin’s songs about love and turbulent relationships, something she knew all about, are devastating. From the tenderness and infatuation of “Day Dreaming” to the fight of “Don’t Play That Song,” to the mixture of both on “I Never Loved A Man (That Way I Love You),” she seemed capable of getting at the truth of all of it. Where are the performers today capable of such sophisticated and nuanced expression? How many songs today communicate as much as these? An ability to sing about oneself without *only* singing about oneself is

something which is lost on many performers. But Franklin had it.

The best material Franklin sang carried with it a feeling of tremendous strength and determination. It was in her playing too. When her hands came down on the piano keys to play those big, rolling gospel chords, there was always a chance she might push right through them.

Even more impressive than the range of notes Franklin’s voice could accommodate was the emotional range it contained. With subtle shading or with fierce insistence she could express satisfaction, disappointment, anger or optimism—sometimes all in the same song. The drama and narrative were to be found not just in the lyrical content or melody, but in the very sound of her voice, her phrasing and improvised vocal runs. She appeared to feel everything she sang.

When Martin Luther King was assassinated in 1968, Franklin used that voice to sum up all the anger, sorrow and determination to go on felt by large numbers of people after that horrible event. She performed a devastating rendition of the gospel classic “Precious Lord” at King’s funeral service. The brief footage of the performance available online reveals a terrible drama playing out on her face.

Franklin’s music of the late 1960s is her strongest, but there was significant work ahead as well. The gospel album *Amazing Grace* (1972), *Young, Gifted and Black* (1972) and *Let Me in Your Life* (1974) are all worth hearing. Her later material was less consistent, but even into the 1980s she produced interesting material.

During the 1998 Grammy Awards ceremony, she surprised everyone with a stunning, if unorthodox, performance of *Nessun Dorma*, from Giacomo Puccini’s *Turandot*, when she filled in on short notice for an ailing Luciano Pavarotti.

A 2015 performance of “(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman” at the Kennedy Center Honors, a tribute to Carole King, one of the song’s composers, revealed that she never ceased to be capable of connecting with large crowds in the most intimate of ways. She was a genuine artist. Her major contributions live on.



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