

Amazing Grace: A film about American singer Aretha Franklin's most popular album

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Directed by Sydney Pollack

Amazing Grace, a concert film currently showing in select theaters around the US, captures the recording of singer-pianist Aretha Franklin's January 1972 gospel concert album of the same title.

The concert, filmed by American director Sydney Pollack, took place at the New Temple Missionary Baptist Church in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles. The film is at times a powerful document, capturing a remarkable artist at the peak of her musical abilities.

The album version of *Amazing Grace* still stands as Franklin's highest-selling album of her nearly 60-year career and the highest-selling gospel music album ever recorded—by a large margin. The choice to record a live gospel album in the early 1970s was a somewhat unexpected development. Franklin was riding an 11-year successful recording period with Columbia and Atlantic Records, that produced powerful soul and R&B songs such as “Won't Be Long,” “Respect,” “I Never Loved a Man (The Way I Love You),” “Chain of Fools,” “Don't Play That Song (You Lied)” and dozens of other moving and vibrant songs.

The filmed version of the concert never made it to audiences at the time because Pollack, still a young filmmaker in 1972, failed to use a clapperboard to synchronize the visual images with the recorded sound. The result was the equivalent of a “million-piece puzzle” that was too difficult for Pollack and his colleagues to figure out. For nearly four decades the uncompleted work was considered something of a lost historical-artistic document.

The emergence of new film technology eventually made it possible to digitally restore and—for the most part—assemble the images and sound. Producer Alan Elliott and editor William Steinkamp undertook the reconstruction project after Pollack's death in 2008. However, Franklin sued Elliott upon completion of the project to keep the film from being released, apparently over concerns about publishing rights. After Franklin's death in August 2018, her family arranged with Elliott to release the film.

The result is an often powerful record of an important event. But the absence of a clear vision in the making of the film is also evident and limits its impact.

On the one hand, *Amazing Grace* captures a performance, Franklin at an extraordinary point in her development as a vocalist, improviser, pianist and an intensely serious artist. Her patience, her ability to absorb suffering and heartache and turn them into deeply piercing vocal form, her control of vocal range and timing and her very mature understanding of how to communicate with an audience—all of this comes through.

The greatest benefit of viewing the concert film, as opposed to merely listening to the album, is that the viewer observes the enormous strain and stress that Franklin carries at nearly every instant. There is nothing light-hearted about the singer's approach to the material in *Amazing Grace*. Her face is drenched with sweat and often distorted by pain during the event. One feels tension throughout the entire concert, as Franklin performs largely religious songs about overcoming suffering and sorrow to an audience many of whom have endured both. A great deal appears to be riding on Franklin's powerful musical shoulders.

The accompanying Southern California Community Choir (SCCC), led by the gravel-voiced Rev. James Cleveland, is remarkable as well. The choir members' talent and discipline and the emotion they exude are key elements in the ultimate impact Franklin's singing has on the audience.

The songs featured in the two-evening performance include a mix of traditional early 20th century African-American gospel songs and “secular” tunes, written by figures such as Thomas Dorsey, Clara Ward, Marvin Gaye, Carole King, Rodgers and Hammerstein and others.

Songs like Gaye's “Wholly Holy” and the gospel traditional “Precious Memories” feature a complex, slow-building interaction between Franklin, Cleveland and the SCCC Choir.

Certain numbers showcase one of the most understatedly powerful elements of the overall performance, the group of incredible backing musicians Franklin chose to accompany her, chiefly, drummer Bernard Purdie, guitarist Cornell Dupree and bassist Chuck Rainey. The medley of Dorsey's “Precious Lord” and King's “You've Got a Friend” highlights this more than any other, letting the band get ahead of the song for a moment, reminding the audience how important the musicians are in keeping rhythm and groove right under the surface of things.

Other particularly compelling songs include what became a powerful civil rights anthem, “How I Got Over,” by gospel singer Clara Ward, written after she and her family survived an attack by racists in Georgia in the early 1950s. Ward, who lived a very difficult life, is there as an audience member, a year before her early death.

The traditional gospel song “Climbing Higher Mountains” is also quite remarkable. It starts haltingly, but Franklin recovers and sings to a driving pitch. She rouses the entire audience to its feet—including the Rolling Stones’ Mick Jagger, in attendance at the back of the church. The song ends with a small in-the-moment duet between Franklin and Cleveland, showcasing her openness and strengths as an improviser.

Her interpretation of the title song “Amazing Grace” is perhaps the film’s highlight. The hymn was written in the late 18th century by a slave trader-turned-abolitionist clergyman named John Newton. In Franklin’s hands, it is an emotionally gut-wrenching song, laden with enormous suffering and conflict. The album version of the song is over 16 minutes long. In the concert film, choir and audience members are shown weeping within the first minute of Franklin’s moving, grief-laden rendition. Cleveland himself steps away from the piano, and buries himself in a towel to sob. The mood by the end is somber, and one also experiences deep relief.

The performance is astonishing, but its tour de force character, which might even express nothing more than a personal experience and epiphany, also points to what is lacking in *Amazing Grace* as a film.

There is no context provided by the filmmakers as to the setting, historical backdrop or even the facts of Franklin’s career and biography. Nothing in the form of narration or summary captions is included—one is simply dropped into the event. This is unfortunate.

In his introduction to “Amazing Grace,” Cleveland lets the audience know how difficult it was for the performers to even rehearse the song, because Franklin’s lyrics “through many dangers” triggered powerful and difficult memories for them. One wishes the filmmakers would have pursued what Cleveland meant by this reference. It is one of the few moments in the film where the circumstances that form the historical backdrop to the concert are even referenced. That social and political situation is undeniably charging the atmosphere at the New Temple Missionary Church concert and influencing the crowd and Franklin’s performance.

Her decision to record traditional gospel music in 1972 came at a critical political and social juncture characterized by the inner-city rebellions, the mass anti-war protests and a revolutionary global upsurge. It also came in the aftermath of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and other political murders in the US.

Watts itself had been the scene of a social explosion by largely African American workers and youth that erupted to the surface in opposition to pervasive brutality, poverty and

repression in 1964.

Franklin was the daughter of the pastor C.L. Franklin, whose New Bethel Baptist Church in Detroit was a significant cultural hub of the civil rights movement. She sang at King’s funeral in 1968.

The historical and social peculiarity reflected in *Amazing Grace* is that much of the anger and fervor of some of the most oppressed sections of the American working class still found ideological expression in religious terms and musically in the form of gospel music.

On the thirtieth anniversary of King’s assassination, the WSWS asked, “Why was it that the struggle against racial inequality developed under the leadership of reformists and Baptist preachers, rather than more radical and revolutionary forces?” Much of the answer, the comment explained, lay in the bankruptcy of the official labor movement in the US. The CIO industrial union movement conducted bitter struggles in the 1930s, but it was rapidly brought under the control of the capitalist state and the Democratic Party. The newly merged AFL-CIO leadership in the 1950s treated black workers with disdain.

“Under these conditions the struggle for civil rights developed outside of and apart from the trade union organizations, which at that time embraced nearly 35 percent of the work force. The program of the civil rights movement remained on the level of bourgeois democratic demands.” Its musical accompaniment, as it were, reflected some of these same problems and contradictions.

Franklin’s decision to “return to the church” is simply presented “as is,” as a personal and artistic choice, without any explanation of what was going on in and around the concert and what complex processes it might have expressed.

By 1972, with the civil rights movement beginning to ebb, one senses that Franklin was at a crossroads in her artistic and political life. When the ruling class launched its counter-offensive in the late 1970s, many of the civil rights-era artists were thrown into considerable crisis.

Nonetheless, those limitations notwithstanding, *Amazing Grace* is an important document of a powerful event involving one the 20th century’s most remarkable popular singers.



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