

Respect: A film biography of singer Aretha Franklin

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Directed by Liesl Tommy; written by Tracey Scott Wilson

Respect, directed by Liesl Tommy (*The Walking Dead*) and scripted by Tracey Scott Wilson, is a film biography devoted to the legendary Aretha Franklin.

The “Queen of Soul,” a figure of almost universal appeal in the late 1960s and 1970s, had a series of remarkable hits, including “I Never Loved a Man (The Way I Love You),” “Respect,” “(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman,” “Chain of Fools,” “Think” and “I Say a Little Prayer.” Franklin’s music and virtuosity continue to make an immense impact.

The new feature film is the latest in a cycle of movies and television productions devoted to Franklin, who died in 2018 at the age of 76, including the National Geographic mini-series *Genius: Aretha Franklin* (2021) and Sydney Pollack’s documentary, *Amazing Grace*, filmed in 1972 but only released in 2018.

The interest in Franklin, the first African-American woman to attain solo stardom in the US at such a level, is understandable. People have a natural inquisitiveness in regard to her background, the source of her urgency, the driving forces of her musical success and related matters. The entertainment industry, of course, attempts to make use of this curiosity for its own commercial (and ideological) purposes.

Tommy-Wilson’s *Respect*, sadly, if predictably, fails to grapple seriously with the processes that produced one of the most compelling singers of the postwar era. Rather, it is a bland, generic, gender politics-influenced work centered on “female empowerment” and the vanquishing of numerous tyrannical men.

The film makes no living connection between an unforgettable artist such as Franklin and the broader currents working on her. Instead the creators throw together a succession of episodes, crafted according to a tried-and-true formula, in which the artist faces almost entirely personal (or gender/racial) challenges and, happily, overcomes them—or, unhappily, succumbs to them. This superficial recipe, as it has been applied recently to the complex lives and personalities of Judy Garland, Johnny Cash, Ray Charles, Billie Holiday, Hank Williams, Chet Baker, Elton John and dozens of others, produces few significant insights.

The film opens in Detroit in 1952. A 10-year-old Aretha (the talented Skye Dakota Turner) is awakened by her father, the Reverend C.L. Franklin (Forest Whitaker), so she can sing for some guests, among them Dinah Washington (Mary J. Blige), Ella Fitzgerald, and Duke Ellington. Other musical luminaries, such as Sam Cooke (Kelvin Hair) and Art Tatum, also show up in the

Franklin household. The film intimates that Smokey Robinson held great interest and appeal for the girl.

Numerous undeveloped incidents occur: Aretha’s adored mother (Audra McDonald) dies suddenly; Aretha is sexually abused by an unnamed house guest; she gives birth to two sons by the time she is 16.

As an adult, Aretha (Jennifer Hudson) finds herself torn between competing and controlling men: her father, her manager and first husband Ted White (Marlon Wayans) and various producers, such as Columbia Records’ legendary John Hammond (Tate Donovan), Atlantic Records’ Jerry Wexler (Marc Maron) and Rick Hall (Myk Watford), owner of the FAME studios in Muscle Shoals, Alabama. Altercations proliferate, but Aretha remains obsequious and obedient—until she suddenly takes her career into her own hands and insists, against her raging husband, on working with the Muscle Shoals musicians, who are white. It is then Aretha records her first hit “I Never Loved a Man (The Way I Loved You”).

The South African-born Tommy explained to an interviewer from *W Magazine*, “In my heart, I knew what the movie should be ... I said [to the producers], it needs to start in the church and it should end in the church. I gave them the songs it should cover and the tagline I had in my head. The movie is about a woman who has the greatest voice in the world who is searching for her own voice, but does not know her own voice.”

These are limited conceptions to say the least. In any event, what social and historical conditions need to exist so that an individual can fight through various levels of oppression and find “her own voice”? Why didn’t Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith or Billie Holiday, for instance, enjoy the same degree of artistic independence and success as Franklin?

The resulting facile and schematic film portrait of Franklin rarely hits a high note, even when Hudson belts out the earlier singer’s best-known songs. The movie lacks the artistic and social “soul” necessary. Instead, problems such as Franklin’s descent into alcoholism are quickly overcome with a bit of pedestrian advice.

References to events of the period, such as the relationship of C.L. Franklin with civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. (Gilbert Glenn Brown), are perfunctory. In reality, the elder Franklin 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, in August of that same year.

In one of the movie’s opening sequences, a visitor to the

Franklin home offhandedly mentions that “communism is absolutely for the Negro.” But nothing is made of this intriguing comment, which presumably points to the black population’s affinity for left-wing politics at that time.

Radical activist Angela Davis, a Stalinist Communist Party member, receives brief attention. When she was jailed in 1970, Aretha commented, partially quoted in the film: “Angela Davis must go free ... Black people will be free. I’ve been locked up (for disturbing the peace in Detroit) and I know you got to disturb the peace when you can’t get no peace. Jail is hell to be in. I’m going to see her free if there is any justice in our courts, not because I believe in communism, but because she’s a Black woman and she wants freedom for Black people.”

According to Wikipedia: “Franklin was also a strong supporter of Native American rights. She quietly and without fanfare supported Indigenous Peoples’ struggles worldwide, and numerous movements that supported Native American and First Nation cultural rights.”

Franklin, who sold some 75 million records worldwide during her lifetime and collected 18 Grammy awards, along with innumerable other honors, was an imposing cultural figure. Such performers inevitably reflect changes in mass conditions and sentiments. This is particularly so in the US where the working class is politically suppressed and disenfranchised. One means by which it articulates its concerns, distresses and pleasures is through music. The migration of African Americans from the South, the growth of massive industries and Northern cities, the impact of the civil rights movement, the general rise in the living standards and expectations of tens of millions of black and white workers and young people alike—these are not “colorful” background materials for a life and career like Franklin’s, they are essential to it.

“I think of Aretha as Our Lady of Mysterious Sorrows,” Wexler wrote in his memoirs. “Her eyes are incredible, luminous eyes covering inexplicable pain. Her depressions could be as deep as the dark sea. I don’t pretend to know the sources of her anguish, but anguish surrounds Aretha as surely as the glory of her musical aura.” This one observation points toward the inner Franklin more profoundly than the rambling, unfocused 145-minute film. In this case, a few words are worth a thousand images.

Chuck Rainey, her bass player in the early 1970s, told a *New Yorker* journalist in 2016 that Aretha’s voice was so emotionally powerful that at times she would throw the band out of the groove. “Aretha came to me once and held my hand and she said to me, ‘Chuck, don’t listen to me too intensely. I know what I do to people. I need for the bass to be where it is so I can sing.’”

At the 1998 Grammy Awards, on only a few minutes’ notice, Franklin stood in for Luciano Pavarotti when the great opera star canceled due to illness. She performed with mezzo-soprano power the famed aria, “Nessun Dorma,” from the final act of Puccini’s *Turandot*.

Regarding her 1967 album, *I Never Loved a Man the Way I Love You*, the WSWS wrote in a 2008 obituary of Wexler: “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.”

On “Respect” and numerous other recordings, the interplay between Franklin and her back-up vocalists, including her talented sisters Carolyn and Erma Franklin (played in the movie by Hailey Kilgore and Saycon Sengbloh, respectively) and soul and gospel singer Cissy Houston (mother of Whitney Houston), lent her music a broader attraction. “She appears as one voice articulating the moods of many. This was not the music of self-absorption and pettiness,” the WSWS wrote in the 2018 Franklin obituary.

Contemporary biopics, however, tend to abound in “self-absorption and pettiness.” Attempting to explain their recent proliferation, one commentator noted that the subjects of such films “are part of the cultural lexicon already. So you don’t have to do much, just add drama and reasoning to the internal and external conflict provided by history.” This speaks both to the narrow financial considerations and the lack of imagination and intellectual laziness that predominate. *Respect* is no exception to this unhappy rule.

Hollywood studios, in their better days, enthusiastically and shamelessly made things up in their biographical pictures, but they nonetheless attempted to bring out the general historical and social questions (democracy versus tyranny, science versus ignorance and backwardness, public responsibility versus personal feeling, solidarity versus selfishness, emotional needs versus concerns with status) bound up with many of the disparate lives they were dramatizing: Lincoln, Pasteur, Zola, Edison, Marie Curie, Custer, the Earl of Essex and Elizabeth I, Pancho Villa, Benito Juárez, Lou Gehrig, George M. Cohan and many others.



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