

ARETHA FRANKLIN

BY DAVID RITZ

“There are singers,” said Ray Charles, “then there is Aretha. She towers above the rest. Others are good, but Aretha is great. She’s my only sure-enough sister.”

Ten years later, when Rolling Stone magazine named the 100 Greatest Singers of All Time, Aretha placed first. Mary J. Blige explained the victory by writing, “You know a force from heaven. You know something that God made. And Aretha is a gift from God. When it comes to expressing yourself through song, there is no one who can touch her. She is the reason why women want to sing.”

Since the moment Aretha stepped to the pulpit at her father’s famed New Bethel Baptist Church as a young girl singing in the great gospel tradition, the world has recognized her as a musical miracle.

Her childhood friend Smokey Robinson said, “Our neighborhood was filled with kids who had musical talent. We could pick out melodies on the piano and sing along. But Aretha—at age six or seven—played whole chords on the piano. Complex gospel chords. At six or seven, she didn’t sing. She soared. She was the prodigy of prodigies.”

Born Aretha Louise Franklin in Memphis, Tennessee on March 25, 1943, her family moved to Detroit when she was two. She remains a Detroiter to this day, a proud product of that city’s wide-ranging and rich musical heritage.

Her professional career has had three dramatic turning points, one more exciting than the next.

The first was her move from gospel to secular. At 18, her progressive preacher father brought her to Columbia Records' John Hammond, the man who had discovered and recorded Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday (and later Bob Dylan and Bruce Springsteen). At the largest label in the world—the home of Mahalia Jackson, Miles Davis, and Barbra Streisand—the plan was to turn Aretha into a teenage superstar singing standards and jazz. Those records—especially her 1963 tribute to Dinah Washington and the remarkable “Skylark” in the same year—remain classics. She performed in New York’s hippest jazz clubs with artists like Art Blakey and John Coltrane. Additionally, in conjunction with writer producer Clyde Otis, Aretha enjoyed a string of R&B hits: “Running Out of Fools,” “Soulville,” and “You’ll Lose A Good Thing.”

The second shift was seismic. In 1967, Aretha jumped from Columbia to Atlantic Records where Jerry Wexler became her producer. Everything changed; she suddenly rocked our musical world like no one else before or since. As Aretha wrote in *From These Roots*, her 1999 autobiography, “I felt a natural affinity for the Atlantic sound. Atlantic meant soul.” Aretha took soul to another level. Anchored at the piano, she also took a co-producer role in arranging both music and vocals. The result altered history. Starting with “I Never Loved A Man (the Way I Loved You),” she claimed ownership of the bestselling charts. Her “Respect” became a multi-dimensional anthem, a sound piece for the civil rights movement and rallying cry for all groups suffering neglect and discrimination. “Dr. Feelgood,” “Chain of Fools,” “Do Right Woman—Do Right Man”—Aretha defined the sixties. At the funeral for Dr. Martin Luther King, it was Aretha who led the nation in musical mourning. Her

cultural iconography was permanently established, the recognition of her genius an established fact. She would wind up winning no less than 18 Grammys.

Not one to accept categorization, Aretha went to church in 1971 to record *Amazing Grace* that, in the words of colleague and mentor James Cleveland “is the most successful gospel album ever made.”

When critics remarked on Aretha’s return to church, she commented, “I never left church and never will. Church is my heart. Church is where I was born and where I live.”

The late seventies were challenging times for singers of the soul. Disco swept the country and knocked more than a few established stars off the charts. But Aretha, long the established Queen of Soul, maintained her crown with tenacious grace. While others fell away, she survived. By the start of the new decade, she found a new champion in music mogul Clive Davis. Her third turning point came in 1980 when she signed with Davis’ Arista.

What followed was a series of brilliant albums and singles. Aretha teamed with star producers Luther Vandross (“Jump to It”) and Narada Michael Walden (“Freeway of Love” and “Who’s Zooming Who.”) She sang hits duet with George Michael (“I Knew You Were Waiting [For Me]”) and Elton John (“Through the Storm”). In 1987, she self-produced her second landmark gospel record, *One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism*.

Aretha was the musical highlight of Whoopi Goldberg’s film *Jumpin’ Jack Flash*, backed up by the Rolling Stones. And her appearances in both *Blues Brothers* films received universal acclaim.

The legend expanded in the nineties when Aretha's "Rose Is Still A Rose," penned and produced by Lauryn Hill, was named "soul hit of the decade" by the L.A. *Times*. Her appearance on MTV's *Divas Live*, together with Mariah Carey, Celine Dion, Gloria Estefan and Shania Twain, became another high point.

In 1987 Aretha became the very first woman to have been inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Seven years later, she became the youngest artist to receive the Kennedy Centers Honor.

Perhaps the most thrilling moment of all came in 1998 at the 40th Grammy Awards at Radio City Music Hall. Before a world wide audience of 1.5 billion, Aretha stepped in for an ailing Luciano Pavarotti at the last minute and interpreted Puccini's "Nessun Dorma" to operatic perfection.

On December 17, 2008, then President-elect Barack Obama turned to the Queen to render her inimitable version of "My Country 'Tis Of Thee."

"If you look over the arc of her career," said Jerry Wexler, "there is no American musical artist who has achieved her level of accomplishment. It has been one triumph after another."

For six decades, Aretha Franklin has been a beacon of creative originality. She is revered and loved with a passion reserved only for the immortals. She is considered the great voice of her people. And those people—black and white, European and Asian, Latin and African—all acknowledge her royalty and permanent place in this planet's cultural history.

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