

A CRITIC AT LARGE | APRIL 4, 2016 ISSUE

SOUL SURVIVOR

The revival and hidden treasure of Aretha Franklin.

BY DAVID REMNICK

Aretha Franklin, New York, October 14, 1968 (contact print).

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Late on a winter night, Aretha Franklin sat in the dressing room of Caesars Windsor Hotel and Casino, in Ontario. She did not wear the expression of someone who has just brought boundless joy to a few thousand souls.



“What was with the sound?” she said, in a tone somewhere between perplexity and irritation. Feedback had pierced a verse of “My Funny Valentine,” and before she sat down at the piano to play “Inseparable,” a tribute to the late Natalie Cole, she narrowed her gaze and called on a “Mr. Lowery” to fix the levels once and for all. Miss Franklin, as nearly everyone in her circle tends to call her, was distinctly, if politely, displeased. “For a time up there, I just couldn’t hear myself right,” she said.

On the counter in front of her, next to her makeup mirror and hairbrush, were small stacks of hundred-dollar bills. She collects on the spot or she does not sing. The cash goes into her handbag and the handbag either stays with her security team or goes out onstage and resides, within eyeshot, on the piano. “It’s the era she grew up in—she saw so many people, like Ray Charles and B. B. King, get ripped off,” a close friend, the television host and author Tavis Smiley, told me. “There is the sense in her very often that people are out to harm you. And she won’t have it. You are not going to disrespect her.”

Franklin has won eighteen Grammy awards, sold tens of millions of records, and is generally acknowledged to be the greatest singer in the history of postwar popular music. James Brown, Sam Cooke, Etta James, Otis Redding, Ray Charles: even they cannot match her power, her range from gospel to jazz,

R. & B., and pop. At the 1998 Grammys, Luciano Pavarotti called in sick with a sore throat and Aretha, with twenty minutes' notice, sang "Nessun dorma" for him. What distinguishes her is not merely the breadth of her catalogue or the cataract force of her vocal instrument; it's her musical intelligence, her way of singing behind the beat, of spraying a wash of notes over a single word or syllable, of constructing, moment by moment, the emotional power of a three-minute song. "Respect" is as precise an artifact as a Ming vase.

"There are certain women singers who possess, beyond all the boundaries of our admiration for their art, an uncanny power to evoke our love," Ralph Ellison wrote in a 1958 essay on Mahalia Jackson. "Indeed, we feel that if the idea of aristocracy is more than mere class conceit, then these surely are our natural queens." In 1967, at the Regal Theatre, in Chicago, the d.j. Pervis Spann presided over a coronation in which he placed a crown on Franklin's head and pronounced her the Queen of Soul.

The Queen does not rehearse the band—not for a casino gig in Windsor, Ontario. She leaves it to her longtime musical director, a seventy-nine-year-old former child actor and doo-wop singer named H. B. Barnum, to assemble her usual rhythm section and backup singers and pair them with some local union horn and string players, and run them through a three-hour scan of anything Franklin might choose to sing: the hits from the late sixties and early seventies—"Chain of Fools," "Spirit in the Dark," "Think"—along with more recent recordings. Sometimes, Franklin will switch things up and pull out a jazz tune—"Cherokee" or "Skylark"—but that is rare. Her greatest concern is husbanding her voice and her energies. When she wears a fur coat onstage, it's partly to keep warm and prevent her voice from closing up. But it's also because that's what the old I've-earned-it-now-I'm-gonna-wear-it gospel stars often did: they wore the mink. Midway through her set, she makes what she calls a "false exit," and slips backstage and lets the band noodle while she rests. "It's a fifteen-round fight, and so she paces herself," Barnum says. "Aretha is not thirty years old." She is seventy-four.

Franklin doesn't get around much anymore. For the past thirty-four years, she has refused to fly, which means that she hasn't been able to perform in favorite haunts from the late sixties, like the Olympia, in Paris, or the Concertgebouw, in Amsterdam. When she does travel, it's by bus. Not a Greyhound, exactly, but, still, it's exhausting. A trip not long ago from her house, outside Detroit, to Los Angeles proved too much to contemplate again. "That one just wore me out," she said. "It's a nice bus, but it took *days!*" She has attended anxious-flyer

classes and said that she's determined to get on a plane again soon. "I'm thinking about making the flight from Detroit to Chicago," she said. "Baby steps."

Even if the concert in Windsor was a shadow of her stage work a generation ago, there were intermittent moments of sublimity. Naturally, she has lost range and stamina, but she is miles better than Sinatra at a similar age. And she has survived longer than nearly any contemporary. In Windsor, she lagged for a while and then ripped up the B. B. King twelve-bar blues "Sweet Sixteen." Performing "Chain of Fools," a replica of the Reverend Elijah Fair's gospel tune "Pains of Life," she managed to make it just as greasy as when she recorded it, in 1968.

Before the show, I was talking with people in the aisles. More than a few said they hadn't seen Franklin or paid much attention to her recordings for years. It was an older crowd, but they hadn't come to see an oldies show. What reawakened them, they said, was precisely what had reawakened me: a video, gone viral, of Franklin singing "(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman" at last December's Kennedy Center Honors. Watch it if you haven't: in under five minutes, your life will improve by a minimum of forty-seven per cent.

Aretha comes out onstage looking like the fanciest church lady in Christendom: fierce red lipstick, floor-length mink, a brocaded pink-and-gold dress that Bessie Smith would have worn if she'd sold tens of millions of records. Aretha sits down at the piano. She adjusts the mike. Then she proceeds to punch out a series of gospel chords in 12/8 time, and, if you have an ounce of sap left in you, you are overcome. A huge orchestra wells up beneath her, and four crack backup singers sliver their perfectly timed accents ("Ah-hoo!") in front of her lines. Aretha is singing with a power that rivals her own self of three or four decades ago.

Up in the first tier, sitting next to the Obamas, Carole King is about to fall over the rail. She is an honoree, and wrote "A Natural Woman" with her first husband, Gerry Goffin. From the moment Franklin starts the first verse—"Looking out on the morning rain, / I used to feel . . . so uninspired"—King is rolling her eyes back in her head and waving on the music as if in a kind of ecstatic possession. She soon spots Obama wiping a tear from his cheek. ("The cool cat wept!" King told me later. "I loved that.")

King hadn't seen Franklin in a long time, and when she had Franklin was not performing at this level of intensity. "Seeing her sit down to play the piano put me rungs higher on the levels of joy," King says. And when Franklin gets up from the piano bench to finish off the song—"That's a piece of theatre, and she's a diva in the best sense, so, of *course*, she had to do that at the perfect moment"—the joy deepens.

King recalls how the song came about. It was 1967, and she and Goffin were in Manhattan, walking along Broadway, and Jerry Wexler, of Atlantic Records, pulled up beside them in a limousine, rolled down the window, and said, "I'm looking for a really big hit for Aretha. How about writing a song called 'A Natural Woman.'" He rolled up the window and the car drove off. King and Goffin went home to Jersey. That night, after tucking their kids into bed, they sat down and wrote the music and the lyrics. By the next morning, they had a hit.

"I hear these things in my head, where they *might* go, how they *might* sound," King says. "But I don't have the chops to do it myself. So it was like witnessing a dream realized."

Beyond the music itself, the moment everyone talked about after Franklin's performance at the Kennedy Center was the way, just before the final chorus, as she was reaching the all-out crescendo, she stripped off her mink and let it fall to the floor. *Whoosh!* Dropping the fur—it's an old gospel move, a gesture of emotional abandon, of letting loose. At Mahalia Jackson's wake, Clara Ward, one of Aretha's greatest influences, threw her mink stole at the open casket after she sang "Beams of Heaven." The fur is part of the drama, the royal persona. When Franklin went to see Diahann Carroll in a production of "Sunset Boulevard," in Toronto, she had two seats: one for her, one for the mink.

Backstage in Windsor, I asked Franklin about that night in D.C. Her mood brightened. "One of the three or four greatest nights of my life," she said.

"I refuse to invade another planet in matching outfits."



The cool cat wept, King had marvelled. When I e-mailed President Obama about Aretha Franklin and that night, he wasn't reticent in his reply. "Nobody embodies more fully the connection between the African-

American spiritual, the blues, R. & B., rock and roll—the way that hardship and sorrow were transformed into something full of beauty and vitality and hope,” he wrote back, through his press secretary. “American history wells up when Aretha sings. That’s why, when she sits down at a piano and sings ‘A Natural Woman,’ she can move me to tears—the same way that Ray Charles’s version of ‘America the Beautiful’ will always be in my view the most patriotic piece of music ever performed—because it captures the fullness of the American experience, the view from the bottom as well as the top, the good and the bad, and the possibility of synthesis, reconciliation, transcendence.”

So much of this history—the transformation of hardship and sorrow, the spiritual uplift after boundless pain, gospel after blues—is a particular inheritance of the black church. In “The Souls of Black Folk,” W. E. B. Du Bois writes that, “despite caricature and defilement,” the music of the black church “remains the most original and beautiful expression of human life and longing yet born on American soil.” From the days of slavery, the black church was a refuge, a safe house of community, worship, and speech, and as the decades passed the music of Sunday morning became increasingly associated with the music of the night before. Thomas A. Dorsey, the father of modern gospel, was a whorehouse piano player and the musical director of the Pilgrim Baptist Church, in Chicago. His songs were sung at rent parties, and at the funeral of Dr. King. His gospel and his barrelhouse blues—“Precious Lord, Take My Hand” and “It’s Tight Like That,” “Peace in the Valley” and “Big Fat Mama”—possess, in his words, “the same feeling, a grasping of the heart.”

Aretha’s father, Clarence LaVaughn Franklin, was the most famous black preacher of his day, and by far the most profound influence on the course of her life. He was born in 1915 and grew up in Sunflower County, in the Mississippi Delta. This was the same landscape that bred Robert Johnson, Son House, Howlin’ Wolf, Muddy Waters, and Fannie Lou Hamer. B. B. King, another Delta neighbor, described in his memoirs that common ground: the Klan and the cross burnings; the fury suppressed in every child who encountered a lynching—the “strange fruit” hanging from a tree near the courthouse. “I feel disgust and disgrace and rage and every emotion that makes me cry without tears and scream without sound,” King wrote.

When C. L. Franklin was around fifteen, he experienced a vision: he saw a single plank on the wall of his house engulfed in flames. “A voice spoke to me from behind the plank,” he told the ethnomusicologist Jeff Todd Titon, “and

said something like ‘Go and preach the gospel to all the nations.’” By the time he was eighteen, he was a circuit rider, an itinerant preacher hitchhiking from church to church.

Eventually, he landed a pulpit in Memphis, where he attracted notice as “the king of the young whoopers,” a style of preaching that begins with a relatively measured exposition of a passage from Scripture and then crescendos into an ecstatic, musical flight, with the kind of call-and-response that became embedded in the music of James Brown.

Franklin left Memphis in 1944 and, after a two-year residence at a church in Buffalo, settled in Detroit, at the New Bethel Baptist Church. There he established a reputation, acquiring one nickname after another—the Black Prince, the Jitterbug Preacher, the Preacher with the Golden Voice.

In those days, New Bethel was on Hastings Street, the spine of Paradise Valley, which was the center of the black community. Detroit had swelled with black migrants from the South, and Hastings Street was dense with churches and black-run beauty salons, barbershops, funeral homes; around the corner from New Bethel was the Flame Show Bar and Lee’s Sensation. Franklin was, in the phrase of one of his congregants, “stinky sharp.” He drove a Cadillac and took to wearing slick suits and alligator shoes.

Franklin, his wife, Barbara Siggers, and their four children—Erma, Cecil, Carolyn, and Aretha—lived in a parsonage house on East Boston Boulevard, among black professionals and businesspeople. There were six bedrooms and a living room with silk curtains and a grand piano. Yet, while Franklin lived large, he preached a kind of black liberation theology—Baptist, but inflected at times with the more convulsive accents of the Pentecostal, or “sanctified,” church. As his scrupulous biographer Nick Salvatore writes, he was “unique among his fellow ministers in that he welcomed all of the residents of Hastings Street—prostitutes, drug dealers and pimps as well as the businessmen, professionals, and the devout working classes.”

Franklin gained national fame by recording his sermons. The albums sold in the hundreds of thousands. On Sunday nights, he could be heard on WLAC, a Nashville-based station that covered half the country. John Lewis, a leader of SNCC and a congressman since 1987, recalls listening to Franklin on the radio when he was growing up, in Pike County, Alabama. “He was a master at

building his sermon, pacing it, layering it, lifting it level by level to a climax and then finally bringing it *home*,” Lewis wrote in his memoir “Walking with the Wind.” “No one could bring it home like the Reverend Franklin.”

As a girl, Aretha took it all in: Sunday mornings and the nights before. She was thoroughly absorbed in the church life of New Bethel and in the cultural life of her living room, which, at times, seemed to represent the epicenter and genealogy of African-American music. Sitting on the stairs, she watched Art Tatum and Nat Cole play the piano. Oscar Peterson, Duke Ellington, Della Reese, Ella Fitzgerald, Billy Eckstine, and Lionel Hampton came to visit. Dinah Washington coached the girls on their singing. The Reverend James Cleveland, a pillar of the gospel world, showed Aretha how to play gospel chords. The kids nearby included Diana Ross, Smokey Robinson, and the roster of what became Motown.

As C. L. Franklin’s fame grew, Salvatore writes, so did his penchant for drinking, womanizing, and worse. In 1940, he had fathered a child with a twelve-year-old girl, and he remained unrepentant. He could also be abusive to the women in his life. In 1948, when Aretha was six, her mother left Detroit to live in Buffalo. The children saw her occasionally, but there was always a looming and powerful sadness in the house. As Mahalia Jackson, a close friend of the Franklins, put it, “The whole family wanted for love.” C. L. Franklin’s mother helped care for the children, as did a string of friends, secretaries, and lovers, including Clara Ward, of the Ward Singers, one of the great gospel vocalists of her time. Barbara Siggers died in 1952.

In the mid-fifties, Franklin started the C. L. Franklin Gospel Caravan and toured the country for weeks at a time, preaching his greatest hits: “The Eagle Stirreth Her Nest,” “Dry Bones in the Valley,” “The Man at the Pool.” Little Sammy Bryant, a dwarf who was a preternaturally talented singer, often opened the show and appeared alongside gospel stars like the Dixie Hummingbirds, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, and the Soul Stirrers, featuring Sam Cooke. Aretha was in his entourage, playing piano and singing. The voice—ringing, powerful, soulful—and the musical guile were there from the start. She could riff, bending notes as if high on the neck of a guitar; she had fantastic range and command of every effect, from melisma to circling the beat. These techniques came into play in her career in R. & B., soul, and pop, but “all that was *echt* gospel,” according to the scholar Anthony Heilbut.

When Franklin was fifteen, she recorded several gospel songs, among them “Never Grow Old” and “While the Blood Runs Warm.” She also saw a great deal of life, including the libertine atmosphere surrounding the gospel-music scene. By the time she recorded those first songs, she was pregnant with her second child. She left school and went on the road for, more or less, the rest of her life.

Aretha did not inherit a purely religious and musical legacy. The Franklin house was also political. She was, by the standards of Paradise Valley, a young woman of status and privilege, but she suffered the same humiliations as any black woman travelling through the South or venturing into the white precincts of Detroit. By the time of the murder of Emmett Till, in 1955, C. L. Franklin had opened New Bethel up to the movement, and, from his pulpit, he denounced segregation and white supremacy. When Dr. King came to Detroit, he stayed with the Franklins.

Aretha, too, joined the movement. At the same time, she yearned for larger stages. She saw how Sam Cooke had crossed over into R. & B. as if it were the most natural of passages. In 1960, when she was eighteen, she moved to New York and signed with Columbia Records. This marked the start of an extended apprenticeship under John Hammond, who had been behind the careers of Billie Holiday and Count Basie. Hammond had it in his mind that Aretha should be the next great jazz singer, even though the form was no longer ascendant. It wasn't until 1966, when Franklin went to work with Jerry Wexler and Ahmet Ertegun, at Atlantic Records, that she really made her hits in R. & B. But at Columbia, even singing standards like “Skylark” and “How Deep Is the Ocean,” she broke into the secular world. Franklin had her father's support and the example of Cooke, but she felt compelled to publish a column, in 1961, in the *Amsterdam News*, saying, “I don't think that in any matter I did the Lord a disservice when I made up my mind two years ago to switch over.” She went on, “After all, the blues is a music born out of the slavery day sufferings of my people.”

“Would you like to grab a water sometime?”



On June 23, 1963, C. L. Franklin helped Dr. King organize the Walk to Freedom, a march of more than a hundred thousand people through downtown Detroit. At Cobo Hall, King, acknowledging “my good friend” C. L. Franklin, delivered a speech

filled with passages that he recycled, two months later, at the March on Washington. “This afternoon I have a dream,” he told the crowd. “I have a dream,” that “little white children and little Negro children” will be “judged by the content of their character and not the color of their skin.”

King later confided to C. L. Franklin, “Frank, I will never live to see forty.” At Dr. King’s funeral, in April, 1968, Aretha was asked to sing Thomas Dorsey’s “Precious Lord.” She was now a central voice in both the black community, eclipsing her father, and in the musical world. She had crossed over.

The songs on her first records for Atlantic—“Do Right Woman, Do Right Man,” “Respect,” “Dr. Feelgood,” “(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman,” “Think,” “Chain of Fools”—were the resolution of her apprenticeship. Leaving behind the American Songbook for a while and finding just the right blend of the church and the blues, she was now celebrated as the greatest voice in popular music. “Respect” and “Think” became anthems of feminism and black power and stand alongside “Mississippi Goddamn,” “Busted,” and “A Change Is Gonna Come.” “Daddy had been preaching black pride for decades,” she told the writer David Ritz, “and we as a people had rediscovered how beautiful black truly was and were echoing, ‘Say it loud, I’m black and I’m proud.’ ”

At the same time, Franklin found that the strains of life as a star, as a mother, as a daughter to her tempestuous father were at times unbearable. Ted White, her first husband—they married in 1961 and divorced eight years later—was a jumped-up street hustler who abused her. In 1969, when her father let a radical organization called the Republic of New Africa use the sanctuary at New Bethel, the night ended in a bloody gun battle between the group and the Detroit police. The next year, she came out onstage, in St. Louis, and started singing “Respect” but then walked off, unable to continue. The promoter announced that Franklin had suffered “a nervous breakdown from extreme personal problems.” She soon recovered enough to perform, but she rarely seemed unburdened, except in the studio and onstage.

“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.”

Franklin's vulnerability has brought with it an intense desire for control that often leads to still more anguish. When it came time to do an autobiography, she enlisted Ritz, a skilled biographer and ghostwriter who had produced fascinating books with Ray Charles, Etta James, Bettye LaVette, and Smokey Robinson. He found her a singularly resistant subject. She insisted on stripping the book of nearly anything gritty or dark. Published in 1999, it reads like an extended press release. "Denial is her strategy for emotional survival," Ritz told me. It was only at the microphone, in her music, he concluded, that Franklin felt in command. There are reports that she has, in recent years, been struggling with cancer, but her friends say she'd never admit to such a thing, "not even on her deathbed."

Fifteen years after the autobiography was published, and flopped, Ritz published an unauthorized biography, filled with material that he had accumulated over time from intimate personal and professional sources. The woman who emerges is a musical genius and a pivotal figure in the cultural history of the black freedom movement; she is also someone who has suffered countless losses, been mistreated in many ways, and at times has reactions that try the patience of her associates, creditors, family, and friends. Franklin denounced the book: "Lies and more lies!" But none of the sources, including those closest to her, have backed away.

Even Beyoncé has had the experience of displeasing Franklin. The occasion was the 2008 Grammy Awards. Beyoncé, working from lines on a Teleprompter that were likely not of her own devising, introduced Tina Turner to the audience as "the Queen." With due respect to Tina Turner, this is Aretha's title, as surely as it is Elizabeth II's, and Franklin, who is easily wounded, issued a scathing proclamation. It was a "cheap shot," she said.

A larger consequence of Franklin's craving for control is that her audience has been denied one of her greatest treasures. Not long ago, Ahmir Khalib Thompson, the drummer and bandleader better known as Questlove, posted this on his Instagram feed: "Of all the 'inside industry' stuff I've been privy to learn about NOTHING has tortured my soul more than knowing one of the GREATEST recorded moments in gospel history was just gonna sit on the shelf and collect dust."

Questlove was referring to the holy grail of Aretha Studies—a filmed version, never seen in public, of "Amazing Grace," two gospel concerts that Franklin gave in January, 1972, at the New Temple Missionary Baptist Church, in

south-central Los Angeles. Pop music has long tantalized its completist fans with rumors of “rare footage”: there was “Eat the Document,” featuring a scene in which a stoned John Lennon teases an even more stoned Bob Dylan (“Do you suffer from sore eyes, groovy forehead, or curly hair?”); and there was “Cocksucker Blues,” Robert Frank’s collaboration with the Rolling Stones, featuring Mick Jagger snorting coke. Both films are now pretty easy to find—and neither is essential.

The film of “Amazing Grace” is another matter. Atlantic issued a recording from the concerts as a double LP, in 1972, and it has sold two million copies, double platinum, making it the best-selling gospel record of all time. It is perhaps her most shattering and indispensable recording. As Franklin has said repeatedly, “I never left the church.” The black church was, and is, in everything she sings, from a faltering “My Country, Tis of Thee” at Obama’s first inaugural to a knockout rendition of Adele’s “Rolling in the Deep,” two years ago, on the Letterman show.

By 1971, Franklin was at her peak, with a string of hits and Grammys, but she was also preparing for a return to gospel. In March, she played the Fillmore West, in San Francisco, the ultimate hippie venue. The film of that date is on YouTube, and you can hear her singing her hits, fronting King Curtis’s astonishing band, the Kingpins. She wins over a crowd more accustomed to the Mixolydian jams of the Grateful Dead. And her surprise duet with Ray Charles on “Spirit in the Dark” is far from the highlight.

A few songs into the set, Franklin plays on a Fender Rhodes the opening chords of Paul Simon’s “Bridge Over Troubled Water,” weaving hypnotic gospel phrases between her backup singers (“Still waters run deep . . .”) and the B-3 organ lines of Billy Preston, a huge figure in gospel but recognized by the white audience as the “fifth Beatle,” for his playing on the “Let It Be” album. Just as Otis Redding quit singing “Respect” after hearing Aretha’s version (“From now on, it belongs to her”), Simon and Art Garfunkel forever had to compete with the memory of this performance. Simon, who wrote the song a year before, was inspired by a gospel song, Claude Jeter and the Swan Silvertones’ version of “Mary, Don’t You Weep.” Jeter included an improvised line—“I’ll be your bridge over deep water if you trust in my name”—and Simon was so clearly taken with it that he eventually gave Jeter a check. Daphne Brooks, who teaches African-American studies at Yale, aptly describes the Fillmore West performance as a “bridge” to the “Amazing Grace” concerts that were just a few months away.

Franklin enlisted her Detroit mentor, the Reverend James Cleveland, to sing and play piano, and the pastor Alexander Hamilton to conduct the Southern California Community Choir. The gospel concert in Los Angeles opens with “Mary, Don’t You Weep,” a spiritual based on Biblical narratives of liberation and resurrection, and recorded, in 1915, by the Fisk Jubilee Singers. It is possibly the most wrenching music on the album. Countless performers have recorded the song—the Soul Stirrers, Inez Andrews, Burl Ives, James Brown, Bruce Springsteen—but Franklin, who was never in better voice, seems possessed by it. She delivers a pulsing, haunted version, taking flights of lyrical improvisation, note after note soaring over single syllables. In her reading, the blues always resides in gospel, and somehow this is her version of grace.

Chuck Rainey, her bass player in the early seventies, told me 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.’” Bernard (Pretty) Purdie, the drummer on the “Amazing Grace” sessions, told me that Franklin, having sung for so long with the Reverend Cleveland at New Bethel and in her living room, was absolutely sure of herself. “She didn’t have to worry about what to think about or sing,” he said. “She knew what she was doing from jump street.”

There’s no arguing with that. Aretha sang songs in Los Angeles that she first sang and recorded as a girl, including “Never Grow Old” and “Precious Lord.” There is a ten-minute-long “Amazing Grace,” part song, part sermon, that could come only from someone steeped in the tradition of her father’s Delta whooping.



The record is an enduring achievement, but the event, like Woodstock, was something that also deserved to be seen. Sydney Pollack, who had directed Jane Fonda in “They Shoot Horses, Don’t They?” and had been nominated for an

Academy Award, wanted to make that happen. Pollack and his crew filmed both nights. The sixteen-millimetre color footage was shot in the most straightforward way, but there was a problem: Pollack was not an experienced documentarian, and he and his crew failed to use clapper boards to synchronize the sound with the images. After a months-long effort to fix the

problem, Warner Bros. shelved the project. Pollack went on to direct “The Way We Were,” “Three Days of the Condor,” and “Out of Africa.” He lost interest in “Amazing Grace.” The film stayed in a vault for forty years.

In 2007, Alan Elliott, a record producer, approached Pollack about the film. Pollack had cancer, and Warner Bros. sold Elliott the rights to the film. Pollack agreed to work on it with him, but he died the next year.

Elliott succeeded in getting the film synchronized, but he has not yet won over the subject and star of the film. For years, he and Franklin have tussled over permissions, rights, and contracts. The Telluride Film Festival was scheduled to show “Amazing Grace” last September, but Franklin’s lawyers filed suit. Judge John Kane, of the U.S. District Court in Colorado, held a slapped-together seventy-one-minute hearing the afternoon before the screening. Franklin testified by telephone.

“For them to show that film” and for Elliott “to just completely and totally and blatantly ignore me where my name and reputation, my concern, it would be terrible,” she said. “This is my fifty-fifth year in the business, and he is all but fearless.”

Elliott was proposing only to show the film to a couple of hundred people at Telluride, where the goal was to find a distributor. He told me that he has offered to pay her far more—a million dollars and half the proceeds—than she was originally promised. As they negotiated, Elliott and his representatives also encountered a quality of chaos that often surrounds Franklin’s business affairs. Lawyers and agents came and went. Franklin, who is the wariest of personalities, deflected and delayed, even as some of her closest friends encouraged her to settle the deal and enjoy the inevitable attention that would come with “Amazing Grace.”

“Aretha gets offended when she thinks you think you’re getting over on her,” Tavis Smiley told me. “It’s hard to know why that line gets blurred from time to time, between making people respect you and self-sabotage. But don’t ever underestimate the power of the personal. ‘Respect’ is not just a song to Aretha. It’s the mantra for her life.

“Aretha authorizes her own reality, and sometimes it’s hard to juxtapose that reality to *the* reality,” he went on. “We’re all guilty of that at times, but Aretha does that to a greater extent, and it can be dangerous. Sometimes, in life, we can unwittingly self-sabotage when we want ultimate control.”

In Denver, Judge Kane was protective of Franklin, issuing the injunction against the screening in Telluride for that evening. In his ruling, he quoted “Othello”: “He that filches from me my good name robs me of that which not enriches him and makes me poor indeed.” Elliott and Franklin have meanwhile inched toward a settlement. When the hope arose that “Amazing Grace” was a possibility for the Tribeca Film Festival, coming next month, Robert De Niro called Franklin and implored her to make it happen. That is unlikely to occur.

Watching Aretha Franklin sing from the pulpit and at the piano somehow intensifies everything heard on the record. It’s almost too much to absorb in one or two viewings. I’ve watched it a half-dozen times, and it never fails to leave me in tears. The most touching moment in the film comes when James Cleveland gestures to C. L. Franklin, who is sitting up front, next to Clara Ward. The Reverend cannot resist a prideful star turn at the pulpit.

“It took me all the way back to the living room at home when she was six and seven years of age, it took me back to about eleven, when she started travelling with me on the road, singing gospel,” he says. “I saw you crying and I saw you responding, but I was just about to bust wide open. You talk about being moved, not only because Aretha is my daughter. . . . Aretha is just a *stone* singer.”

Then Aretha sits at the piano and leans hard into “Never Grow Old.” As she sweats under the lights, her father approaches her at the piano and tenderly mops her forehead with a handkerchief.

“You can hear Aretha’s influence across the landscape of American music, no matter the genre,” Obama wrote me. “What other artist had that kind of impact? Dylan. Maybe Stevie, Ray Charles. The Beatles and the Stones—but, of course, they’re imports. The jazz giants like Armstrong. But it’s a short list. And if I’m stranded on a desert island, and have ten records to take, I know she’s in the collection. For she’ll remind me of my humanity. What’s essential in all of us. And she just sounds so damn good. Here’s a tip: when you’re deejaying a party, open with ‘Rock Steady.’ ”

With the breadth of Aretha’s influence comes the regularity of musical homage. The titans of hip-hop adore her. Mos Def sampled “One Step Ahead,” on “Ms. Fat Booty.” Kanye West sampled “Spirit in the Dark,” on “School Spirit.” Alicia Keys sampled “A Natural Woman,” and Dr. Dre and

Outkast, in accordance with the sage advice of their Commander-in-Chief, sampled “Rock Steady.” The Fugees, Public Enemy, Slum Village—Aretha is everywhere. There is no “Formation” without “Respect.” One queen follows another.

Beyoncé may have overstepped on one occasion, but she knew the score. A singer like her, who is steeped in both the sacred and the profane, who can provide flawless versions of both “Precious Lord” and “Bootylicious,” understands the variousness of her roots and the specificity of her debts. “The soulfulness comes from the gospel,” she once said. “It comes from Aretha, who listened to all of that, who sang in the church.”

The morning after the Windsor concert, I went to Sunday services at the Franklins’ old church, New Bethel Baptist. Arriving half an hour early, I met C. L. Franklin’s successor, Pastor Robert Smith, Jr., a stout gray-haired man in a dark three-piece suit.

Pastor Smith led me to “the history room,” which was filled with photographs and souvenirs of the Franklins. The sanctuary can hold a couple of thousand worshippers, but the stream of people arriving was modest. The days of vitality, of Paradise Valley and Black Bottom, are long gone. The workers for Ford and General Motors went South. There are few middle-class parishioners left at New Bethel. “My appeal is largely to the broken,” Pastor Smith said. “People coming from prison, drugs. My style of preaching doesn’t appeal to the professionals. A lot of them are going off to the mega-churches.”

It’s been a long time since New Bethel echoed with “The Eagle Stirreth Her Nest.” Early one morning in 1979, six burglars broke into C. L. Franklin’s house. Franklin kept a gun in his room and fired two errant shots. One of the burglars fired back, hitting him once in the knee and once in the groin, rupturing his femoral artery. He spent five years in a coma and died. His funeral was among the largest in the history of Detroit.

Like others, Pastor Smith has had his rocky moments with Aretha Franklin over the years, and is careful not to offend her. Aretha is supportive of New Bethel—sending money and food packages, organizing the occasional gospel concert—and their relations, he says, “are better now than they’ve been, but it’s a day-to-day thing.” The importance of Aretha Franklin, he made clear, is the “sense of higher things” that her music inspires.

The rest is dross. Her genius, her central place in American music and spirit, is undeniable.

“I don’t care what they say about Aretha,” Billy Preston, who died in 2006, once said. “She can be hiding out in her house in Detroit for years. She can go decades without taking a plane or flying off to Europe. She can cancel half her gigs and infuriate every producer and promoter in the country. She can sing all kinds of jive-ass songs that are beneath her. She can go into her diva act and turn off the world. But on any given night, when that lady sits down at the piano and gets her body and soul all over some righteous song, she’ll scare the shit out of you. And you’ll know—you’ll swear—that she’s still the best fuckin’ singer this fucked-up country has ever produced.” ♦



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