



ARETHA FRANKLIN

MARCH 25, 1942–AUG. 16, 2018

PHOTO COURTESY OF EBONY ARCHIVES

FAREWELL, OUR ROYAL

EBONY PAYS TRIBUTE TO THE QUEEN OF SOUL, WHOSE MUSIC WAS THE SOUNDTRACK OF NUMEROUS GENERATIONS AND WHOSE GOOD WORKS HELPED GALVANIZE THE FIGHT FOR CIVIL RIGHTS AND EQUALITY FOR WOMEN by MARGENA A. CHRISTIAN

She was a study in contrasts. By many accounts, the odds should have been stacked against the shy girl who hailed from Detroit. She was a high school dropout, the mother of two children at the age of 15, and the product of a single-parent home, living with her dad, the Rev. C.L. Franklin, a renowned gospel singer and a prolific preacher in the tradition of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Her father spoke favor over her life, proclaiming that she would one day perform for kings and queens. Not only did she do both, but in the process, Aretha Franklin became royalty herself and carved a place in the annals of music history as the undisputed Queen of Soul, belting out gospel-tinged classics that crossed music genres and generations for more than 50 years.

During her sold-out concerts, audiences often witnessed her testifying at the piano, revealing how doctors counted her out after a 2010 diagnosis of pancreatic cancer that required the removal of a tumor. Aretha, 76, lived eight years longer than expected but finally lost her gallant battle with an advanced pancreatic cancer of the neuroendocrine type at her home in Detroit, leaving behind four sons and four grandchildren.

Growing up and singing in her father's church, Aretha's signature gospel sound, fueled by the tremendous power behind it, helped to cultivate her vocal identity. A towering figure in the music industry, she was the blueprint for what soul music was all about, amassing more than 100 singles on the Billboard charts, including 17 Top 10 pop singles and 20 No. 1 R&B hits. Songs such as her 1967 defining tune, "Respect," and other signature releases—"(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman," "Chain of Fools," "Day Dreaming," "Something He Can Feel," "I Never Loved a Man (The Way I Love You)" and "I Say a Little Prayer"—showcased her nearly four-octave range that distinguished her as an artist.

She won 18 Grammy Awards during her career. Aretha made music history in 1987 as the first woman inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Musically, she stayed true to her church roots. With cries, wails and moans, Aretha never stopped bringing gospel inflections into her music, whether it was blues, jazz, soul or pop.

She recorded her first spiritual album, *Songs of Faith*, in 1956 at her father's church. Following the 1963 death of Dinah Washington, Queen of the Blues, Chicago DJ Pervis Spann, "the All-Night Blues Man," christened Aretha the Queen of Soul during a symbolic stage coronation at the Regal Theater.

Her honest homegrown sound was not contrived. She could belt out a spiritual tune and even lighten up her sound, creating a jazz or blues sound. This was unusual in the 1960s, when most artists purposefully created polished music with the intention of

crossing over genres. Not Aretha. Her sound was raw and organic. It defined what it meant to be a soul singer.

She took pop and show tunes and gave them fire, once telling EBONY magazine that R&B is "our culture" and that Black legends had to "stay in the forefront of it." When asked during the same interview to whom she might pass her crown, the Queen of Soul didn't bite her tongue. "You can put that one away," Aretha said, laughing. "I'm in it for the long run."

THE VOICE

Controlling her circumstances was something she constantly worked to do. Aretha's strong sense of pitch and rhythm allowed her to handle arrangements and to have owned her own publishing company. Quite the fierce businesswoman, even creating Aretha's Records at one point, she understood business and performance, which was atypical for female artists in the male-dominated music industry. First husband, Theodore "Ted" White, whom she married at 19, acted as her manager. However, due to strains in the tumultuous union, including reports of abuse, she eventually had her brother the Rev. Cecil Franklin serve in the role, beginning in 1966 until his death in 1989. From that point forward, she was shrewd and meticulous when handling business, requiring that promoters send half of her money before a performance and asking that they give her the other half in cash on the day of the event. Whenever she hit the stage, so did her purse, often placed near or beneath the piano, during concerts for this very reason.

A self-taught piano prodigy, Aretha studied by watching gospel icon James Cleveland, one of her mentors, play. She was given music by Dorothy Donegan, Oscar Peterson and Art Tatum, at the insistence of her father, who wanted to see if she could "rise" to the occasion. She admitted to modeling her song stylings after Peterson by emulating that driving rhythm effect.

While honing her craft, she also had an appreciation for classical music and later took private piano lessons as an adult. She teamed with former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in 2010 for classical concerts. Before that, at the Grammy Awards in 1998, she magnificently pulled off a live performance of "Nessun Dorma" at a moment's notice after renowned tenor Luciano Pavarotti took ill.

Constantly ready for change, by the time the '80s rolled around, the music industry had undergone a shift. This is when she brilliantly eased into more crossover music and dance tunes with songs including "Freeway of Love," "Jump to It" and duets with British pop stars such as George Michael for the Grammy Award-winning song "I Knew You Were Waiting" and the Eurythmics for the Grammy-nominated "Sisters Are Doin' It for Themselves." Tina Turner was initially slated to do the women's

(continued on page 85)

(continued from page 73)

anthem with Annie Lennox but declined; Franklin picked up the mantle because this was an opportunity to empower women/sisters as she had since the beginning of her career.

FREEWAY OF LIFE

Though Aretha remained regal and dignified, she had a hard life and knew the blues. She was born in Memphis, Tennessee, to the Rev. Franklin and Barbara Siggers Franklin, a nurse's aide and pianist. When she was 4, the couple relocated to Detroit, where he became the pastor of New Bethel Baptist Church. Her parents separated when she was 6, and her mother moved to New York, taking her oldest child, Vaughn, leaving Aretha and three other siblings with their father. Four years later, her mother died of a heart attack, and at age 12, the gifted singer gave birth to her first child, Clarence. At 15, she had another son, Edward.

Aretha, raised by her paternal grandmother Rachell, told EBONY that growing up without her mother's presence allowed her to see how she missed "things a mother would have guided her daughter to do. I've learned a lot of things the hard way. If she had been here, I can see where some things would have been different. But by the same token, the things I learned from my dad were invaluable," she said.

Her first marriage produced a third son, Ted Jr., who eventually played guitar for his mother's touring band. Aretha's second marriage, which lasted six years, was to actor Glynn Turman, noted for his work in the cult classic film *Cooley High* and for his role on *A Different World*, for which she sang the theme song in 1988 when the show established its identity with authentic storylines about life at HBCUs.

She told JET magazine her well-publicized romance and engagement to former Temptations lead singer Dennis Edwards was the inspiration behind her 1972 starry-eyed tune "Day Dreaming."



Franklin performs on *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson* in 1970.

PHOTO COURTESY OF EBONY ARCHIVES

A former singing evangelist, she quit high school to go on the road with her father and recorded her first gospel album, *Songs of Faith*, in 1956. At 16, the child prodigy was the nation's youngest gospel singing star. After seeing Sam Cooke perform, she took an interest in doing secular music with her father's blessing. Columbia Records producer John Hammond later heard the 18-year-old sing at New York's Village Vanguard. The following day, he signed her as one of Columbia's "five-percent artists," a choice deal that guaranteed high royalties for five years. At the label, her first album, *Aretha: With the Ray Bryant Combo*, was a secular project filled with jazz and show tunes.

Success seemed swift but didn't happen overnight. Aretha let it be known that she had to pay her dues, joking to EBONY about playing in the tiniest club in the world, where "one foot was in the dressing room, and if I moved the other foot, I was out of the dressing room."

It wasn't until she left Columbia and signed with Atlantic Records in 1967 that her career flourished. "To me, Atlantic meant soul," she told EBONY. Her first hit song was a remake of Otis Redding's "Respect." Aretha told the magazine that she and her sister Carolyn learned a local Detroit cliché that they liked: "Sock it to me."

When Aretha did her rendition of the song, an initial plea for a man asking that his woman respect him, the focus changed. She explained: "We incorporated [the cliché] into the recording. . . . That line really became major across the country. I had no idea that it would go that far. [The song] also became a mantra for the Civil Rights Movement."

SOUL SISTER FOR THE MOVEMENT

She toured Black colleges, raised funds for the Civil Rights Movement and performed at prisons.

Caring deeply about her race, not only in song and in words, but also in deeds, she proved herself to be Soul Sister No. 1 in 1970 when she was ready to pay Angela Davis' bond. Aretha told JET, "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."

Forever using her high-profile platform for the liberation of African-Americans and women, Aretha was noted for her philanthropic efforts and work with charitable organizations across the country and in the Detroit area. And though she never graduated from Detroit's Northern High School, she was known to purchase lunch for other students unable to afford a meal. Once she achieved fame, Aretha did a commercial for a record store in Detroit and donated her earnings to a local shelter for abused women.

Known for being very direct, she admitted to EBONY in 2010 that she could be a diva. "I have been a diva, but generally I'm just the lady next door. I'm very down home." She was so into one live performance on national television that she showed everyone how much she could get down by snatching off her own wig while wailing out a note! But away from music, the Aries took an interest in astrology, painting, fishing and cooking—namely, soul food. When she had star-studded bashes in Beverly Hills, California, or in Detroit, soul food was always on the menu. "I can wear some chitlins out," she once boasted to EBONY. During another interview with the magazine, she jokingly said, "Chitlins will cure a sore throat every time."

Because of her intense fear of flying, she traveled on a



luxurious tour bus, often passing the time by watching videos starring Tyler Perry’s *Madea*, the no-nonsense granny character who was born and debuted at the Regal Theater, the same Chicago venue where Aretha had been crowned music royalty.

Among one of the additional things that made her stand out was that Aretha wasn’t above shunning industry standards. She played by her own rules. For instance, while other African-American artists were clamoring for mainstream press coverage, Aretha never made it a secret that her allegiance was to *JET* and *EBONY* magazines—the Black press. So much so that she became the first celebrity spokesperson for Fashion Fair cosmetics.

A staunch Democrat, she told *EBONY* in 2010 that she knew one day she’d live to see a Black president. “And some time ago, I very well thought it might have been Mr. Obama. When he delivered the keynote address for the 2004 Democratic convention, I called him the very next night and asked him if he would come to Detroit and [speak] at one of my affairs. ... He finally said that his calendar was really full. He would not be able to do it, but perhaps another time.”

The time came in January 2009, when he made history as the first African-American president and invited her to be the featured singer at the inauguration, where she performed “My Country ‘Tis of Thee.” She said, “It was stupendous! I don’t know if that can ever be topped—to have been honored by such a great man. If he never does anything else for me, he’s done it for allowing me to be a part of one of his most important moments.”

For more than five decades, the Queen of Soul carried the torch. The stage was her pulpit and the audience her congregation. Her faith never left her, and she remained strong until she took her final breath.

“It’s the rough side of the mountain that’s easiest to climb; the smooth side doesn’t have anything for you to hang on to,” she once said. Quoting her grandmother in concert, Franklin often testified, “It’s not about the going in, it’s about the coming out.”

Former EBONY magazine senior editor Christian, Ed.D., is a distinguished lecturer at the University of Illinois at Chicago, where she was awarded the 2017 Lecturers’ Distinguished Teaching Award for English Studies.



“For more than five decades, the Queen of Soul carried the torch. The stage was her pulpit and the audience her congregation.”

