

'The Queen Is Dead – Long Live The Queen' A Tribute To Aretha Franklin

By Billy Vera

Black America has blessed us with some breathtakingly wonderful female voices: Dinah Washington, Billie Holiday, Nancy Wilson, Nina Simone, Patti LaBelle, Esther Phillips and lesser known greats like Big Maybelle, Baby Washington and the sinfully neglected Annie Laurie. But each of these, for all their gifts, must bow to the great Aretha Franklin.

From the time Dinah Washington left us in December of 1963 until Aretha found herself in Muscle Shoals, Alabama at the hands of Jerry Wexler in 1967, there was no Queen. And suddenly, there she was, the one we'd been waiting for.

I was in Wexler's office when the dub came in. Chip Taylor and I were peddling our song, 'Storybook Children' in hopes that he'd record it as a duo with a pair of Atlantic artists of his choice (as it turned out, one of those chosen was myself).

"Before you play your demo," he said, "I got something you gotta hear," and put on the acetate of 'I Never Loved A Man (The Way I Love You)'. I'd been aware of Aretha's Columbia records of 'Runnin' Out Of Fools' and 'Lee Cross,' but this was night and day from those.

No mere hit record, here was a star of the highest order. No one not deaf could fail to hear it. Not wishing to follow a record that great, I was on the verge of telling Jerry we'd come back the next day to play him our song, but he listened and took it, offering me an Atlantic Records contract.

Like any regular listener to black radio, I soaked up every Aretha release, absorbing them into my psyche and my heart and my very soul. She spoke to us like no other. Hers was the voice of the century, at once supremely joyous and then in the next breath, expressing a sadness capable of breaking the hardest of hearts.

She had the vocal chops, there is no doubt, and used them with such precision to convey the most minute change of mood. There could be no mistaking the meaning of the words she sang.

As did I, Aretha had a special affinity for Johnny Ace. She recorded four of the singer's songs, 'Never Let Me Go', 'My Song' and a medley of 'The Clock' and 'Pledging My Love'. Also from the Duke Records catalogue, came her soulful cover of Bobby Bland's 'Share Your Love With Me'.

Her virtual rewrite of Otis's 'Respect' is the one that put her at the top of the heap. If one 45 rpm piece of vinyl could be called a phenomenon, this was it. From that point forward, she went from star to superstar.

Raised in the family of the Reverend C.L. Franklin, perhaps the nation's foremost minister. Guests in the Franklin home in Detroit included the likes of Sam Cooke, Mahalia Jackson and every gospel star there was. We can hear in her recording of 'Precious Lord,' at age fourteen, that her unquestionable talent was already full blown. Her unquestionable instincts for finding the emotional core of every song she sang were miraculous. There were rumours of sexual abuse, perhaps incestuous, which would account for her atrocious choices in men over her lifetime.

But the Queen is best served, not by discussing the disfunction of a life, but by praising the music, its creation and its effect on her countrymen and women and the world.

Jerry Wexler's greatest contribution was his choices of material for his artists. Ever since the day, as a record reviewer for *Billboard* magazine, he heard in Erskine Hawkins's cover of the Pee Wee King/Redd Stewart song 'Tennessee Waltz' the makings of a hit for Patti Page, he knew he had the ear for a hit song. This was especially valuable for an artist like Aretha, whose limited repertoire of self-generated songs could never keep up with her recording obligations. Yet, she could write a fine song when she set her mind to it, as 'Don't Let Me Lose This Dream' and 'Dr. Feelgood' attest to.

Whatever the source, whether new songs by the likes of Don Covay: 'Chain Of Fools', 'See Saw', or the Beatles' 'Eleanor Rigby', 'Let It Be', or Bacharach and David's 'I Say A Little Prayer', she, in that worn out *cliché*, made them her own. She even covered my hit, 'With Pen In Hand'.



Wexler told me to dig her as a blues singer and I agree. St. Louis Jimmy's 'Going Down Slow' is a knockout blues performance, as are Percy Mayfield's 'River's Invitation' and 'Today I Sing The Blues', the old 1940s Helen Humes hit. Oh yeah, Jerry's song memory went very deep.

I was fortunate to be sitting in the booth the day in December, 1967 when she recorded the song I regard as her masterpiece, her sister Carolyn's 'Ain't No Way'. If this one doesn't choke you up, we can end this discussion right here. You have no heart or soul.

Quietly, she played the song alone at the piano and let the musicians, mostly white southern boys from Alabama or Tennessee, listen and, little by little, find their parts to fit with her conception, leaving plenty of space for her to be Aretha. For, as an art director friend once told me, Art, in all its iterations, is the balance between space and form. Wexler, Arif Mardin and Tom Dowd would make suggestions as

necessary, but first and foremost, the Queen must be comfortable with her surroundings so she could soar.

The following day, other obligations made it impossible for me to get back to hear the horns being added, but I knew the Atlantic process, one I've followed ever since. Either Tommy or Arif would sketch out some ideas or Wexler or the horn players themselves might suggest parts based on what the rhythm section had done. All were pieces of a beautiful puzzle.

Her incredible force of personality when singing (she was shyly quiet when not singing) ultimately resulted in over eighty chart hits – eighteen of them number ones. But chart numbers do not tell the whole story.

In 1972, as they had for LaVern Baker, Atlantic allowed her a gospel album, recorded live, two discs with James Cleveland's choir. It sold well and could be found in homes throughout black America.

We tend to think she went downhill after the first five Atlantic years. By that time, the black power movement dictated that the white musicians had to go and the role of the white producers be diminished. The irony is the records after that became slicker, smoother, and some would say less soulful. Yet, there were still number one hits, 'Angel', 'Until You Come Back To Me', 'I'm In Love', 'Something He Can Feel'.

Hardcore fans thought it was the end of the world when Clive Davis signed her to Arista in 1980 after a couple of years of middling sales figures at Atlantic. Ahmet had put Jerry out to pasture. What on earth would a stiff like Davis do to 'our' Aretha? Would he turn her into Barry Manilow? Clive appears to have, as much as he was capable of, stayed pretty much out of the way and put her together with the hitmaking black producers of the day. This strategy, as soulless and corporate as we might think it was, resulted in a return to number one, not once but three times, 'Jump To It', 'Get It Right' and 'Who's Zoomin' Who'. Not songs that will stand the test of time, but they kept her career going.

I ran into her in 1988 at a tribute concert to James Brown we were both appearing on. Her sister Irma came over to me and said "Ree would love to say hello," and brought me to where she was seated in a booth.

Not the most articulate person, she was a woman of few words, but she got her point across succinctly, "Well, if it isn't Mr. Storybook Children," a reminder of my past with Judy Clay, who'd sung on some of her Atlantic records. She congratulated me on my song 'At This Moment', which was number one at the time. She simply said, "Don't ever forget where you came from, baby," a lesson I've taken with me.

If Aretha Franklin had never sung another note beyond 'Respect', 'A Natural Woman' and 'Ain't No Way', she would go down as the greatest singer of her time.

Words like iconic, quintessential, historic, superstar, epic, phenomenon don't do her justice. Those who would be Aretha were – and are – legion, but there was only one Queen, only one Lady Soul.

Aretha Franklin, born 25th March 1942 in Memphis, died on 16th August 2018 in Detroit, Michigan.