‘The Queen Is Dead – Long Live The Queen’

A Tribute To Aretha Franklin

By Billy Vera

But the Queen is best served, not by discussing the dysfunction 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 choice 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 Beatle’s ‘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 Heinen 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 one hits. 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’, ‘直到 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 making 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. 

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