ARETHA FRANKLIN

BY RUSSELL GERSTEN

If, as Robert Christgau once suggested, music is the chief meeting ground between black and white cultures, then Aretha Franklin is a crucial figure in understanding these encounters. From 1967 to 1970 she was the preeminent black musician in pop music. Her record sales were phenomenal by the standards of the era. She played venues as diverse as the Apollo and Lincoln Center. She made the cover of *Time*.

Whereas many of her fellow soul singers, such as James Brown and Wilson Pickett, were not always taken seriously, Aretha was enshrined, mentioned in the same breath as Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday. Critical praise verged on hysteria. Martin Luther King Jr. presented an award to her in her home town of Detroit shortly before his assassination. During her time, she received exactly what she asked for in her greatest hit: respect.

For decades virtually all female vocalists were compared to her; her influence has extended from Bette Midler to Chaka Khan. She came to symbolize the essence of what many consider the most exhilarating form of popular music this country has ever produced: soul.

Then the furor over Aretha Franklin died down. The very excesses that had earlier seemed so exciting—frenetic bursts of energy, melodrama, screaming and hollering—began to sound embarrassing in the cooler Seventies. Critics found her forays into mainstream pop, such as "This Girl's in Love with You" and "Bridge over Troubled Water," labored, cumbersome, awkward. When they replayed the early Muscle Shoals classics, people thought them overrated, not much different from the work of other Southern soul artists of the era. They argued that Aretha had merely channeled her energies into the right place at the right time.

That view was deeply flawed. Aretha was always more than a rhythm & blues artist. On songs like "Dr. Feelgood," "Chain of Fools" and "Soul Serenade," she proved she was a consummate R&B tech-

gospel technique of note bending (melisma).

But for better or worse, Franklin has always struggled and strained to go beyond the limits of rhythm & blues. At her very first recording session in 1960,

Lady Soul.

her producer, John Hammond, mapped out four blues and gospel numbers. The eighteen-year-old demanded that "Over the Rainbow" be included on the session.

Seven years later, at her first hard-core soul session with Jerry Wexler at Atlantic, she fought for the inclusion of the light, bossa nova–based "Don't Let Me Lose This Dream," which added just enough warmth and whimsy to complement the intense R&B numbers on her breakthrough album. Though this yearning to break the shackles of conventional soul often led to embarrassing moments, it also produced some of her greatest achievements.

ding and Ray Charles. Her career is characterized by a deep irony, a great dissatisfaction with what she was, is and will be. At the peak of her success in 1968, when she appeared on the cover of *Time,* she told the reporter, "I might be just twenty-six, but I'm an old woman in disguise."

Her vocal style, with its unexpected two-octave jumps, evokes a chaotic, unpredictable world, harboring meanings that are never obvious. For example, when the consummate but traditional rhythm & blues singer Bobby Bland sang "Share Your Love with Me," he delicately and carefully interpreted the lyrics of the ballad. Aretha's version appears disor-

Aretha Franklin ponders her next move. Unlike most stars, she seemed forever dissatisfied with what she might become.

slurring over key lines and emphasizing the syllables one would least expect. Her attitude is that no mere lyricist is going to tell *her* what the song is about. The moments of ecstasy reached there, in Sam Cooke's "You Send Me" and in dozens of other cover versions go well beyond the intent of the song's composers. At her best, Aretha shows a profound understanding of what a relationship is, of what can happen between two people.

Her musical career began when, as a young girl, she sang in her father's church. She could draw on an almost mythical lineage: Her father, to whom she was always close, was one of the most popular (and wealthiest) black ministers in the North; her mother was reputedly a great gospel singer. Her first musical influences—Clara Ward, James Cleveland and Mahalia Jackson—were gospel stars and fellow travelers on the evangelical circuit. After several years on the road with her father, she decided to try the big time of the pop world: New York, and producer John Hammond.

Aretha with Ray Charles.

Hammond, the man who had produced and promoted Billie Holiday, Bessie Smith and Charlie Christian, and was soon to do the same for Bob Dylan, was duly impressed by this wild eighteen-year-old. "An untutored genius," he called her, "the best voice I've heard since Billie Holiday." He promptly signed her up and rushed her into the studio. Yet he was unable to do for her what he had done for the others.

The whys and wherefores are intricate, as is everything connected with her years at Columbia. The issue is in part sociological; 1960 may not seem like so long ago, but there still was such a thing as "race" music, music made to be distributed almost exclusively in black ghettos. That was the category Blues," was placed. It was a surprising success, considering the limited market. Unfortunately Columbia's A&R head, Mitch Miller (host of the popular *Sing Along with Mitch* TV show), decided to do her a favor. He was going to make another Nancy Wilson or Nat "King" Cole out of her—a sophisticated black crooner for the white masses. She took voice and dance lessons, and was assigned to "big-time" arrangers (like Bob Mersey, who also worked with Barbra Streisand). She got large string sections; she was no longer allowed to accompany herself on piano. She was weaned from her rhythm & blues repertoire and assigned Al Jolson tunes (such as "Rock-a-Bye Your Baby with a Dixie Melody," which became her only Top Forty pop hit on Columbia), show tunes and standards.

Lord knows what confusions this created for a sensitive, insecure nineteen-year-old. She missed sessions and ran away from New York. A sort of depression oozes out of most of the Columbia sides. Often a song will start with an impressive opening, and then Aretha will seem to lose interest midstream; at other times, the lack of instrumental support creates a sort of stalemate. The precision of the phrasing and the honesty of her approach are impressive, but there's nothing vital and nothing particularly black about these records. If Aretha had continued in this vein, she would have deserved a mere footnote in history—with a few splendid moments ("Sweet Bitter Love," "If Ever I Would Leave You," "Without the One You Love," "Johnny")—and become a hazy cult figure like Nancy Wilson.

But the years at Columbia also taught her several important things. She worked hard at controlling and modulating her phrasing, which gave her a discipline that most other soul singers lacked. She also developed a versatility with mainstream American music that gave her later albums a breadth that was lacking on Motown LPs from the same period. Most important, she learned what she didn't like: to do

R-E-S-P-E-C-T.

never again would she sing a cover version of a song the way it was written.

By the end of 1966 Aretha actually owed money to Columbia Records, while ex–gospel singers like Sam and Dave and Wilson Pickett were enjoying million-selling records. When her contract expired, Atlantic's vice president, Jerry Wexler, scooped her up. Within a year she was the most successful singer in the nation.

A natural woman.

From the start, she and Jerry Wexler were a strange pair—he, the hard-headed businessman with a deep love for traditional rhythm & blues, and she, shy and reclusive, with a profound ambivalence toward tradition of any sort. Partly by design and partly by accident, they hit on a brilliant formula. Wexler flew her down to Muscle Shoals, Alabama, to work with Rick Hall's Fame Recording Studios band to give her the Southern soul sound that was so popular at the time. On "Respect" and "Do Right Woman," she returned to the frenzied gospel call-and-response style, the main component in the successful Motown formula from her hometown, Detroit. Thus commercially they had the best of both worlds. More important, Wexler let her loose, as he had done with Ray Charles fifteen years earlier. Aretha chose all the tunes and many of the songwriters and personally directed the rhythm arrangements.

Her first (and best) album for Atlantic, *I Never Loved a Man the Way I Love You,* sounds like it had been building up inside her for seven years. Where the girl groups of the early Sixties had been sweet and coy, Aretha and her backup singers were strong and fierce, and ferociously sexual, combing decades of gospel technique in their interplay. Shortly before his death, commenting on Aretha's cover version of "Respect," Otis Redding said that the woman had stolen his song.

Aretha sounded frantic then. This tension revitalized what might otherwise have been tired rhythm & blues clichés. White audiences who had never heard of Etta James, Bobby Bland or James Carr loved her sexual frankness. Some social critics even went so far as to link changing sexual mores in the late Sixties to the popularity of the soul music of Franklin and her colleagues.

Aretha near the beginning of her long career.

Aretha was one of the first soul artists to conceive of entire albums, while many of her contemporaries were releasing two to three hit singles surrounded by filler. This helped broaden her base. People often bought the albums for the uptempo dance songs and then kept playing them because they loved the ballads—"Prove It," "Ain't No Way," "Soul Serenade." By 1967 she had been involved in virtually every form of American popular music from show tunes to low-down blues. With the help of a group of primarily white Southern musicians—among them Roger Hawkins, Spooner Oldham and Tommy Cogbill—she created four classic albums.

Twenty-five years later much of the material on the first four Atlantic albums still sounds wonderful. Looking back at them now, one of their most striking features is her quirky sense of humor. "The House That Jack Built," "Come Back, Baby," "Chain of Fools" and "Respect"—in fact, many of the songs written by men—are often sly parodies.

The other striking characteristic is sheer joyfulness. Arif Mardin, a frequent arranger and coproducer during her Atlantic years, described the spontaneous nature of the sessions, and the way she exerted control:

"She'd play the piano, and then I would start writing down what she was playing with her left hand and give it out to the bass player. [My job] was making what she felt bigger. She was the absolute mistress of the vocal group, and she would tell them exactly what to do. She would be like a sergeant major . . ."

Mardin talked of her repeated phone calls in the middle of the night. "She'd call me up and she'd

The great interpreter of a vast variety of songs.

start singing something. Then she'd say, 'Arif, I want strings here. Give me this line.' " In those years, he concluded, "She had no sense of the impossible."

Even in the early albums, a personal theme emerged. Curiously, for a so-called tough soul singer, Aretha often sang about dreaming. One can trace a trajectory through "Don't Let Me Lose This Dream," "I Say a Little Prayer," "Angel," "Day Dreaming" and "Until You Come Back to Me (That's What I'm Gonna Do)." The richness of a "Dr. Feelgood," after all, lies in its combination of the gutsy realism of the blues with pure fantasy.

Arguably the culmination of her career is on her first gospel album, *Amazing Grace,* in her reading of the line from Marvin Gaye's "Wholly Holy": "We've got to believe each other's dreams." Aretha did not grate like Tina Turner or Wilson Pickett, because when she was on target, she worked on two levels simultaneously: blues reality and romantic fantasy; upfront sexuality and a tacit vulnerability.

Decline is never pure and never simple; often the richest, most ambiguous work comes during an artist's so-called decadent period. By 1969 the public seemed to have tired of Southern soul records in general and uptempo Aretha Franklin records in particular. Initially this shift presented a challenge, and some of her 1968 singles were creative responses, especially "I Say a Little Prayer" and "You Send Me." But a profound exhaustion soon set in. Her personal life became a wreck.

Her records became mechanical and listless. "Eleanor Rigby" and "The Weight," the latter with Duane Allman on slide guitar, halfheartedly attempted to capture the post-Woodstock audience. Soon the records stopped coming altogether.

Aretha's solution was to turn inward, toward the paradoxes and aspirations and demons in her own ias back to her style as a mainstream pop-jazz singer at Columbia, and played up her interest in African and black nationalist affairs. Thus, in 1971 we were confronted with an enigmatic new Aretha Franklin, wearing natural and voluptuous African gowns, yet singing decidedly unnatural pop tunes backed by large string sections.

In the halcyon days, Franklin's hits had generally been written by men; her own compositions were relegated to flip sides or album cuts. She turned the tables with her own compositions.

In pop masterpieces like "Call Me" and "Day Dreaming," she flaunted her sensitivity and her desire to be taken seriously as a poet and an artist. "First Snow in Kokomo" tackled a subject worthy of William Carlos Williams: the mysterious processes by which some individuals pull themselves together, while others disintegrate. Her confused but often brilliant *Young, Gifted and Black* album was a frank exploration of her failed marriage and fittingly takes its place alongside the disillusioned, confessional work of writers like Doris Lessing or Anaïs Nin.

After *Young, Gifted and Black,* she needed a new direction. She knew she couldn't return to the Lady Soul of the Sixties, and that she had more or less exhausted her autobiographical repertoire. As the Seventies progressed and black music became more producer dominated, she became a displaced figure. Her career deteriorated into a series of comebacks. Though they were often glorious ("Rock Steady," *Young, Gifted and Black,* "Until You Come Back to Me" and the *Blues Brothers* movie), each was followed by a corresponding debacle.

She developed an obsession with becoming exactly what she was not: a sophisticate, a sexy, slinky Diana Ross–type figure. Finally, like a protagonist in an existential novel, she assailed her own body, losing a massive amount of weight, parading onstage in minks and a rhinestone bikini. The dancers bowed at her feet while she walked onstage.

Her albums in the middle and late Seventies were erratic and bloated; but they almost always contained a couple of brilliant moments. The Eighties albums were even more erratic, although there were great moments in the Luther Vandross–produced *Jump to It* (1982) and *The Freeway of Love* (1986).

Aretha attempted to define her style to reporter Gerri Hirshey as follows: "a lot of depth and being

"I've got some memories to look back on."

able to bring to the surface that which is happening inside, to make the picture clear . . . It's just the emotion, the way it affects people . . . The song doesn't matter."

The 1974 resurrection of the Marvin Gaye–Tammi Terrell hit "Ain't Nothing Like the Real Thing" is a perfect example of her approach to pop. Franklin takes this upbeat, uptempo tune at a mournful pace. She sounds distracted and absentminded during the first half, working at cross-purposes with the lyric. For no apparent reason, she assumes her lover has lost interest in her, and shrieks, "Let's stay together," developing an unnerving, confusing emotion, given the context of the song. Then swiftly, intuitively, she leaps down an octave and gives a sublime reading of the next line: "I've got some memories to look back on." It's difficult to convey how she projects several meanings simultaneously. First, she indicates that for all of us, no thing, no relationship ever dies, that memory is stronger than reality. On the other hand, she tells us that whatever you can't even conceive, millions of people screaming for her, reaching out to touch her. And finally it is as if she wishes to confide the simple truth: She was great and unique, she knew it, the world knew it, and nothing can obliterate that truth.

The French filmmaker and critic Jean-Luc Godard put it this way (freely translated): "There are two kinds of artists. Some walk down the streets with their heads up, looking straight ahead. They look and plan and organize, and their work is smart and wise and well developed and sometimes great. This group is always admired.

"Then there's the other type of artist. They walk down the street with their heads down, lost in thought or daydreams. Every so often, they're obliged to lift their heads, always suddenly, embracing their field of vision in a series of rapid, oblique glances. This group *sees*. However confused or eccentric their style, they see with a wonderful clarity."

Aretha assuredly fits into the latter category. Long after the mediocre works are forgotten, the beauties of her intuitive, improvisatory work will remain. No one ever sang songs of yearning like Aretha Franklin.

DISCOGRAPHY

SINGLES

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(Chart positions compiled from Joel Whitburn's *Record Research,* based on *Billboard*'s Pop and LPs charts, unless otherwise indicated; r☆ = position on *Billboard*'s Rhythm & Blues chart.)