



ARETHA: HOW SHE GOT OVER

Seventy years of Lady Soul
By Anthony Heilbut

Two of the most significant public events of our time have been graced by the presence of gospel singers. The first was the 1963 March on Washington, at which Mahalia Jackson sang a triumphant “How I Got Over,” recalling the storefront singer of her youth and not the officious matriarch of national television. The second event was Barack Obama’s inauguration, at which the only vocalist was Aretha Franklin.

Her arrangement of “My Country, ’Tis of Thee” was not her finest hour vocally (although she nearly stole the show with her beribboned gone-to-meeting hat). But in a sense, she had already inaugurated the inauguration the night before, at a gospel concert at the Kennedy Center. There she climaxed with a classic Clara Ward piece, “The Old Landmark,” shouting and dancing across the stage. Yet the great moment had occurred earlier, during “Precious Memories,” which, as ever, allowed her to wail and slur to her Baptist heart’s content. This time, she ad-libbed a reference to “the days of Dr. King”—and the gospel sound finally found its political witness. With a single phrase,

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she invoked a half-century of struggle. (No matter that in subsequent months the inaugural euphoria would dissolve into the sourest national mood since 1968.)

It is received wisdom that the



Beatles and Bob Dylan changed the culture of the Sixties. The ways in which Aretha did the same go uninspected, but are perhaps more intriguing. Few female performers, and certainly no black female performers, have continued to claim the spotlight fifty years after their initial glory. Fewer still have incarnated so many roles—foxy lady, proto-feminist, earth mother, avatar of high culture from opera to ballet,

and fiery evangelist—and insisted on being all of them, at any time, in any place.

Aretha would be the first to say that the real star in her family was her father, Reverend C. L. Franklin, pastor of Detroit’s New Bethel Baptist Church. During the Fifties, his albums preaching a theology of liberation and racial pride sold millions of copies, and helped prepare the way for Dr. King. Within black America, Reverend Franklin was royalty. That his daughter, born in 1942, would become the Queen of Soul should hardly surprise us.

In his biography *Singing in a Strange Land: C. L. Franklin, the Black Church, and the Transformation of America*, Nick Salvatore reveals the reverend to have been a huge character, whose personality comprehended great charm and eloquence, a heroic drive to outrun the miserable circumstances of his youth, and a surplus of energy adequate to a political statesman, CEO, or matinee idol. He was also a notorious lover of women and liquor, a Falstaffian figure to astonish Nathaniel Hawthorne and delight Graham Greene.

His daughter learned at his feet—and at the feet of his accompanists. It was an education for Aretha, unobtainable in any conservatory, to watch pianists like Herbert Pickard and James Cleveland shadow her father as

he led the congregational hymns or burst from preaching to a musical chant. She began to accompany him as well. She was often perceived as shy and withdrawn, and women such as Marion Williams and Frances Steadman of the Ward Singers tried to fill the void left by her mother, who had abandoned the family during Aretha's childhood and died in 1952.

Aretha made her first recording when she was fourteen, performing at New Bethel Baptist with an adolescent's timbre and a grandmother's authority. The song she chose, "Never Grow Old," was a singularly apt prologue to a five-decade career. On the scratchy live recording, Aretha's phrasing is unusually direct, with very little of the melisma (what church ladies called the "flowers and frills") that would later grace most of her work.

The record was a success with the gospel audience, as was her next one, "Precious Lord." With two hits to her name, she joined her father's troupe on the gospel highway. By now she had dropped out of school and given birth to the first of her four sons. (She has never publicly identified the father.) Again, she struck the older women on the circuit as bashful and awkward. Her talent was indisputable, but she seemed to lack the ego needed to compete with singers who believed that "if somebody don't shout, you ain't done nothing." Often the show was stolen by C.L.'s soloist Miss Sammie Bryant, a dwarf with Goliath's voice and confidence. Aretha later admitted that she suffered from stage fright: forced to contend with such titans, what youngster would not? But that didn't prevent her from studying them, and although her glance was characteristically aslant, she didn't miss a thing.

Over the next four years, her style evolved as she encountered other artists, particularly Cleveland, the director of New Bethel's choir. He introduced her to what Aretha would later call his "deep, deep sound," allowing her a vocal and harmonic freedom beyond the ken of her initial idol Clara Ward. Aretha's ascendance came at the end of gospel's best period; the soloists, quartets, and small groups all began to be upstaged by choir directors, with Cleveland leading the pack.

Just as Aretha quit the field, it changed utterly. Ironically, by recreating gospel as it was before she left it, she would become the last custodian of the very music she had seemed to abandon.

In 1960, Aretha signed with Columbia Records. By now her style was set: Byzantine note-bending, bold contrast in dynamics from brooding complaints to ecstatic shrieks, a meditative approach that obliged her to sing behind the beat, spontaneous asides, pauses within a syllable, and a lyrical use of aspiration until breath itself could be musically notated. All that was *echt* gospel, as was a perception of everything non-gospel as indiscriminately Other. Each attempt to mold her into a more conventional singer gave way to the inevitability of her gospel temper.

To some degree, her path had been prepared by two men, Ray Charles and Sam Cooke. But there was a difference. Charles was an R&B and jazz musician whose adaptation of gospel devices was both derivative and expedient. Cooke got his start in the world of gospel, joining the Soul Stirrers as a teenager. Once he crossed over to pop, however, his early hits studiously downplayed gospel fervor to the point where he resembled a slightly more animated Nat King Cole.

Aretha, then, was really the first gospel star to switch fields without switching styles. According to myth, Columbia tried to remake her into a black Barbra Streisand, playing on her affection for Broadway pizzazz. That probably explains the inclusion of a kittenish duet with Paul Owens, "Love Is the Only Thing," at her very first session, along with Judy Garland's "Over the Rainbow." But Aretha also insisted on recording "Today I Sing the Blues," which remains one of the most profound performances of her career.

Though she is already in her best voice, she deliberately keeps her virtuosity in check. The song's first line, "Without a word of warning," conveys an urgency bordering on terror. The next line, "The blues walked in this morning," introduced America to the subtleties of her style: the word "blues" is soft, minimally slurred, and sustained. Crucial phrases such as "my

lonely room" and "sad and lonely feeling" are sung with a quiet intimacy. But when she distinguishes between a gentle past and a harsh present, she colors the second syllable of the word "today" with vibrato, italicizing it and making audible the progress from joy to melancholy.

Thus she inaugurated her major-label career with a precise distinction between love songs—frivolous, unwitting, kid stuff—and the blues. Of course she could sing the lighter fare, as "Rainbow" demonstrated. But by affirming the blues over love songs as the more serious vehicle, she accomplished an amazing sleight of hand. Blues became deep the way gospel was deep—and she could moan her heart out in blues and gospel.

There is more of the pure church singer in Aretha's records for Columbia than in anything that would follow, despite Jerry Wexler's famous comment that he had struck gold by returning her to church. If anything, her records of pop standards, even more than her blues, are saturated with all she had learned by studying the giants of gospel's golden age. She remained their daughter, never more true than when she echoed their voices in work they would never have dared to sing.

Here is the amazing paradox of Aretha's early career: by applying her ancestors' sensibility to the Great American Songbook, she virtually colonized American music for the gospel style. The union of white composers, all of them deeply influenced by African-American music, with the most brilliant black singer of her generation was a watershed event in the history of popular culture. These ballads let her assume different personae, engage different tones. From the stark dialectic of the gospel hymnodists, she advanced to the more nuanced world of the great pop lyricists. Their songs allowed her to be witty, whimsical, and wistful, a girl who might speculate about death but also dream of life and love.

With age, the extremely youthful mezzo-soprano would deepen and inevitably coarsen. But in the early Sixties, the voice was preternaturally

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clear, both childlike and womanly; and no note she desired was unavailable to her. She also learned from singers outside the gospel universe, including Billie Holiday, the least church-derived jazz singer, more Irish Catholic than black Baptist. You can hear traces of Holiday throughout Aretha's early work: the whispered asides, the delicately playful approach to time and phrasing.

A more surprising influence was Judy Garland, whom Aretha has sometimes called her second inspiration after Clara Ward. This is not as strange as it may sound. Black audiences listened to the Hit Parade on the radio; even the archetypal blues singer Robert Johnson sang his share of pop tunes. Both Aretha and Garland were child stars imperiled by the danger of early fame. Garland offered the example of impeccable diction and a clear voice throbbing with emotion. The older gospel women, excepting perhaps Mahalia Jackson, sounded quirky to mainstream ears, too growly and rural. But Aretha, thanks largely to Garland's model, had a Broadway voice, famously clear from morning to midnight.

No lyric scared her. Ira Gershwin and Johnny Mercer specialized in multiple rhymes demanding precise articulation. But Aretha grew up listening to Marion Williams sing "Surely God Is Able," whose composer, Reverend W. H. Brewster, was no rhyming slouch himself. From Brewster's "Don't you know God is able/ Clouds may gather around you, so dark and sable," it is no great leap to Ira Gershwin's rhyming of "liable" and "Bible," or to Mercer's "my last remark" and "Noah in the ark."

Indeed, Aretha delights in finishing-school enunciation, and unlike, say, Mahalia, she has no trouble with the letter s: it becomes a sensuous delight, you await its reappearance. She can inhabit an unfamiliar word like *skylark* (not a common bird in Detroit) with sheerest joy in its sound. (Something similar occurs in Marlene Dietrich's magnificent "Lazy Afternoon," when she sings "a fat pink cloud" with so thick a German accent that the cloud becomes a sex toy.)

Which isn't to say that every conservative critic was won over by Aretha's interpretive boldness. Rex

Reed complained that she was a worse ballad singer than Robert Goulet. He probably meant that she disregarded the legato line, pausing and breaking time, defiling the melody. (In other words, the Clara Ward in her beat out the Judy Garland.) But in the end, her style was built on this improvisatory élan. Nothing—not even the national anthem—is set in stone. When she sang "The Star Spangled Banner" at the 1992 Democratic Convention, she ad-libbed so loosely that she was still at "gleaming" when the orchestra hit "the rockets' red glare."

Columbia's attempts to make R&B hits with Aretha were not aesthetic failures, but they went nowhere commercially. Hits were what she wanted, however, and after her move to Atlantic, in 1967, she had them in abundance. For several years, she could do no wrong. Her gospel artistry dignified rock and roll, even as a generation of white fans began treating their heroes with an almost religious devotion.

While the Beatles trafficked in gurus, Aretha excavated gospel roots—her Jesus against their Maharishi. She had plenty of hits with laid-back, secular ditties like "Spanish Harlem" or "Day Dreaming." Yet she saved her favorite licks for songs in which she could work a synthesis of sexual and spiritual ardor. In one of her best vocals of the Atlantic era, "Good to Me As I Am to You," she sails to the top of her register, violating meter, decorum, and bel canto as she implores some loving reciprocity as fervently as she might call on Jesus to make a way out of no way. On her best Atlantic album, *Spirit in the Dark*, the gospel stands in bold relief. The title track is a blatant excuse to speed up the tempo and shout. There's a fabulous clip of her in 1971, performing the song at an Italian nightclub and dancing for almost five minutes. Here she is, shouting as hard in Tuscany as in her daddy's church—insisting that she was anywhere, everywhere, C. L. Franklin's daughter.

In the early Seventies, she began to experiment with newer rhythms ("Rock Steady") and themes ("Young, Gifted and Black"). The latter cut united her at last with a gospel organist, Billy Preston, who had been play-

ing for James Cleveland since he was a teenager. Although Aretha had arranged this Nina Simone ballad to resemble a hymn, it was most likely Preston's church chords that led her to holler "Thank You, Jesus!" and give a gospel identity to the proud young blacks with their "souls intact."

She had become a huge star, and a contested figure. Was she the woman who had never loved a man with greater self-abnegation, or was she the wary protector of her money—and the respect it deserved? There were rumors that her first husband, Ted White, whom she married in 1961, had mistreated her. Yet he was the co-writer of her most spirited assertion of autonomy, "Think," not to mention the lascivious gospel parody "Doctor Feelgood." If her stormy marriage pained her, she was also disgusted by intrusive reporters and estranged friends who predicted that she was doomed to be another Billie Holiday. Aretha was happy to be a star but refused to be an icon. Perhaps that is why she also remained aloof politically. When she appeared at civil rights rallies, it was only to sing "Precious Lord"—she left the preaching to Dr. King and her father.

A series of public woes, particularly the end of her marriage to White, led Mahalia Jackson to prophesy Aretha's return to church. As it happened, two weeks before Mahalia's death in 1972, that's where Aretha found herself, singing to an audience that included her father and Clara Ward. (The performance was later issued as *Amazing Grace*, which remains the best-selling album of Aretha's career.) After romping through "How I Got Over" and Inez Andrews's arrangement of "Mary, Don't You Weep," she turned to elemental hymns like "Amazing Grace," guided again by James Cleveland.

Here was absolute proof that the best gospel musicians are uniquely attuned to the singers they accompany. Cleveland's chords were as allusive as a C. L. Franklin sermon, each harmonic turn the equivalent of her daddy's cries. And whenever she got caught up in the spirit, Cleveland also knew what spoken interjection would fan the flame. At the end of "Never Grow Old," he expounds on the message of eternal youth. Aretha returns and testifies: "I'm so glad I've got

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religion, my soul is satisfied.” The Southern California Community Choir echoes her reiteration of “soul.” Their massive vocalization, delivered just as soul music was at its apogee, was a kind of musical wink. You want soul? We’ve got *Soul*.

After 1972, with a few exceptions (such as the mid-Seventies rave-up “Mr. D.J.” and the ballad “I’m Not Strong Enough to Love You Again”), the quality of her output declined. Part of the problem was technical. Well into her early thirties, Aretha exploited a range that soared from a low moan to a bright high D, covering a good four octaves. But as time decapitated her top notes, and soul music became passé, her career ground to a halt.

She cut some disco recordings, but while disco’s alliance of divas and gay men replicated the emotional world of the gospel church, Aretha was unable to remake herself commercially, and she was superseded by other, less gifted singers. She remained too much the descendant of old-school “prayer warriors” to qualify as a convincing dance-club queen. Her dress size alone made her the anti-Diana, and she ended the decade playing a waitress in *The Blues Brothers*, blowing away the other performers in what must nevertheless have been an embarrassing Hattie McDaniel moment for someone with her love of glamour.

But as the producer and impresario John Hammond once said, gospel singers have nine lives. Uplifted by their fans, even the most vocally damaged can revisit the old landmark. In 1980, Aretha signed with Arista Records. Her songs were catchy, inane items like “Jump to It,” “Freeway of Love,” and “Who’s Zoomin’ Who?,” and they made her a popular star once again. She performed a duet with Annie Lennox of the Eurythmics on the 1985 feminist anthem “Sisters Are Doin’ It for Themselves,” but the sentiment seemed disingenuous: she had never talked about doing it without a man. Surprisingly, the most soulful vocal she had delivered in years was on “I Knew You Were Waiting (for Me),” an equally unlikely duet with George Michael.

And where was the church? During those years, James Cleveland remained

the king of gospel; the top quartet, the Mighty Clouds of Joy, boasted a lead singer, Joe Ligon, who sounded just like Reverend Franklin. Mahalia was gone. Clara Ward died in 1973, at the age of forty-eight. But Aretha’s greatest loss occurred in 1979, when Reverend Franklin was shot in the course of a burglary, and entered a five-year coma from which he never awoke. His funeral was the largest in Detroit history. Over the next few years, Aretha lost her brother, Cecil, as well as her sister and musical alter ego Carolyn. Many of her gay colleagues and fans would eventually succumb to AIDS, including, in 1991, James Cleveland.

In 1987 she recorded a second gospel album, *One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism*, for which she sang duets with Joe Ligon and called on Jesse Jackson for an inspirational sermon. But as she made her commercial and gospel moves, a new crop of contemporary singers had taken her gaudiest mannerisms to new heights of tastelessness. What I have dubbed “the Detroit disease” and “the gospel gargle” came to permeate the pop world. It’s the basis of the ululating *American Idol* style. Critics have argued that Aretha’s vocal gymnastics had nothing to do with this new excess, but that’s exactly where it came from. Not for the first time in popular art had very good seeped into very bad. Young women attended to Aretha’s every inflection. And for years, the pop charts were led by her acolytes—by Whitney and Mariah and their melismatic ilk—riffing on her runs as she had once moaned past her idols.

As she headed into her fifties, Aretha could seem both withdrawn and bursting with plans and resolutions. Some were intellectual, bespeaking her love of high culture. Others were entrepreneurial. At one point she announced that she would start a new label to produce records by other artists, including her sister Erma and her son Kecalf. (Another singer she has mentioned wanting to produce is Wayne Newton—a less risible idea than it may sound, given Newton’s history as a former child star with a freakishly high voice and a love of glitz.)

In the summer of 1994, Aretha gave a concert at the White House, an event she apparently regarded as her career's high point. Coming on like an Ella Fitzgerald wannabe, she advanced to the maudlin, the hoary, and the trifling: "Old Man River," "Drink to Me Only with Thine Eyes," and "Freeway of Love." Except that the show tune became a gospel tribute, replete with gorgeous intervals; the English ballad became the Ward Singers hymn, "I Heard the Voice of Jesus," which has the same melody; and the Top 40 finger-popper became a rousing, churchy anthem.

Several black politicians were in the audience that day, among them Jesse Jackson, seated a few feet away from President Clinton. A couple of years earlier, the rift between the two men had been symbolized by another singer, Sister Souljah, whose provocative comments in the wake of the 1992 Los Angeles riots had led to a very public denunciation by Clinton during his campaign. But Lady Soul had brought them both to her altar (or, as the hymn says, humbly to their feet). During "Freeway of Love," Reverend Jackson clapped rather awkwardly, each burst accompanied by a little jump from his seat. And during the bridge of "Old Man River," while Aretha sang about landing in jail, the president nodded in furious assent, as if persuaded by a sentiment he had never heard before. He looked like any white blues lover, trying to get with the program. Just what were these listeners embracing as gospel truth? It was a rich spectacle seeing two consummate showmen yield to a more talented performer, a delicious parody of the multiform responses she had elicited over the decades.

Four years later, she astonished the Grammy Awards by replacing an ill Luciano Pavarotti less than an hour before showtime and singing "*Nessun Dorma*." The response was ecstatic ("She can sing anything!"), except among those who detected a musical version of the Emperor's New Clothes. She missed the final high note, which would have been a piece of cake during her youth. Instead she employed an old gospel trick, touching on or more accurately intimating the note, and then descending to a bluesy melisma so complicated that you forgot about what you should have heard. Fans didn't

know the difference, and the aria remains in her repertory. Afterward, she told the *Times* that she'd like to study piano at Juilliard, an ambition C. L. Franklin would have applauded.

Meanwhile, Aretha-watchers gossiped about her romantic travails (her second marriage, to the actor Glynn Turman, ended in divorce) and her financial indiscretions. News reports tracked her profligate spending habits. In 1996, she was rumored to have traveled from Detroit to Toronto to see Diahann Carroll in a production of *Sunset Boulevard*. Arriving in Toronto during a cold spell, she purchased a mink coat and two tickets for the show, one seat for herself and one for the coat.

By the late Nineties, she had come to occupy a unique position in pop music. The spotlight had dimmed for most of her contemporaries, and many of them were now dependent on infomercials and Las Vegas. But she still inspired much younger producers, such as Narada Michael Walden, Kenneth "Babyface" Edmonds, and Sean "Diddy" Combs. Very seldom has a black artist so identified with one style allied herself with so many others. (Imagine Louis Armstrong jamming with Cecil Taylor.) Since the disco era, of course, she has often seemed either a chameleon or a hapless bystander at the mercy of her producers' whims. Yet her collaborators wouldn't all try so hard if it were not tacitly agreed that she was the last of the great ones.

She became a perversely defiant presence onstage, daring the public to accept a series of performing selves, to watch her exchange bodies nearly as often as she does gowns. She started clowning like the Ward Singers of her youth. One of her favored ploys was to shake her head until her wig flew off, a sign that she was beyond happy. Of course, the hair revealed was itself thick and lustrous, worthy of a queen.

In 2008, she released a collection of Christmas carols, three of which she produced herself. Of course she gossiped them all. Appearing on *The View*, where her very grand muumuu startled the natives, she performed "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing," and embellished

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the word “Bethlehem” with low, scooping, bluesy runs. She continued with “Respect,” a song whose charms should have been long exhausted. Yet Aretha now delivered it with a mini-sermonette, in which she informed her boyfriend that her demands were modest. “I’m just a simple woman,” she said, something that only a fool would believe.

The middle-aged, mostly white women in the audience screamed like bobbysoxers. She had become the greatest example of a woman singing to other women, with an authority that made vocal quality irrelevant. Many times she has played her sex’s ambassador, letting men know what women really want—whether it be respect, freedom, tenderness, or the simple chance to shine on their own. And her significance for black women, particularly those raised in the fundamentalist church, was little short of epochal. Thanks to her, a young Beyoncé could sing “Bootylicious” and “Jesus Loves Me” on the same album without drowning in cognitive dissonance. And when the megapastor T. D. Jakes published a book called *God’s Leading Lady*, he chose neither his own mother nor Jesus’ as his first example, but Lady Soul herself.

A proud grandmother, she remained a natural woman. Thus her most recent album, released in 2011, would be titled *A Woman Falling Out of Love*. Not since Mae West has a prominent female so insisted on remaining a romantic player. Increasingly few remembered that she had once been a slim girl who released photos of herself in a ballet tutu—but Aretha was clearly among them. Then again, she was also promising to record an album of classical music, entering in later life a field that is usually barred to anyone older than twenty-five. Having inaugurated her career with “Never Grow Old,” she continued to live by its principles.

Aretha turns seventy on March 25. She remains an inescapable presence, and a presiding figure in gospel. The music, of course, has changed dramatically. You will now hear echoes of Prince and Michael Jackson, of university chorales and garage rock. But on a good or even half-decent day, Aretha still sounds better than her spiritual

daughters. She is now truer to the tradition she had previously bowdlerized than anyone still performing. And in recent years, she has taken that tradition into settings her father would scarcely have dreamed of.

In July 2005, she sang a very moving “Amazing Grace” at the funeral of her friend Luther Vandross, whom she generously called the premier vocalist of our time (adding, in that cosmopolitan style of her later years, that “he had *savoir faire*”). She and he were oddly chosen prophets of love, both subject to huge shifts in weight, neither of them conventionally graceful figures: she the preacher’s daughter who transformed lovemaking into a sacred act; he the gay man who succeeded the Reverend Al Green as America’s proudest “baby-maker.”

But she had a greater gift in store. On October 23, 2011, precisely a week after singing “Precious Lord” at the unveiling of the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial in Washington, D.C., she traveled to New York to perform at a same-sex wedding. As the grooms danced, she saluted them with Whitney Houston’s “I Will Always Love You,” thereby reminding any haters that nobody could out-sing the queen. Her appearance must have mortified the many pastors who had customarily embraced her, forcing them to reconcile their Aretha-worship with her tacit embrace of gay rights—God’s leading lady, indeed. But elsewhere, the many gay men and lesbians who had been the architects and arbiters of the gospel sound were beaming. “Go ahead, girl!” they hollered. “*Let Him use you!*”

Having so long challenged Mother Nature and declared herself the victor in high notes and sex appeal, Aretha had all reason to shout the victory. To paraphrase James Cleveland’s first hit: What kind of woman was this? A holy woman? A natural woman? After fifty years, the answer remained the same. Her own woman. That’s why, when challenged by the talk-show host Wendy Williams to name her successors, she could think of none. As the eternal ages rolled, there would be, as Lady Soul put it, only Aretha and Aretha and Aretha. Her father’s daughter. Safe thus far.

How did she get over? By dragging a lot of people along with her. ■

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