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ARETHA RETURNS TO GOSPEL

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After Ten Years Aretha Brings it All Back Home

Story by Judy Spiegelman
Photos by Regina Jones, Judy Spiegelman, & Norris Starkey

Outside the small store-front Church on Washington Boulevard in Los Angeles there were youngsters, bikes, roller skates, and a long Black limousine. Inside there was gospel, love, a choir, ham sandwiches, and Aretha Franklin, Reverend C.L. Franklin's little girl, singing her heart out to the Lord.

Aretha — the name conjurs an image larger than life — hardship, success, guts, fears, miracles of music, and a little girl inside of a woman, a proud Black woman. Aretha is pride, pride in all of the things that have made her the total essence of womanhood today — a whisper of voice when she speaks, a bellow of life when she sings — and she sang in the church with that choir for a solid week preparing and recording a new gospel album for the first time in ten years.

You really have to be deeply into Aretha Franklin and her music to recall the first record she ever made for Chess in 1956. The fourteen year old singer already had over ten years of experience singing in the choir of her father's church, The New Bethel Baptist Church of Detroit.

Aretha cut "Never Grow Old" and "Precious Lord." The young girl did not earn any gold records along the gospel circuit, but she warmed many hearts with her deep, rich delivery and her apparent devotion to God.

By 1960, Aretha had decided that singing was her life and she went to New York to study music and dance. There she hired Jo King to manage her career and within one year had a five-year contract with Columbia Records. Later, she found her present manager, Ruth Bowen.

She recorded standards, jazz, and novelty tunes and while she often seemed just a breath away from stardom, it never happened. During the five year period she recorded nine albums, among them, "Laughing On the Outside" came closest to a classic example of the deep, mysterious gift Aretha's voice would be to the world.

Although she appeared at several concerts and night clubs, most of her engagements during this period were along the "chitlin' circuit," where some of the clubs were so rough, the frightened young lady often sang to the floor. In this period Aretha developed a segment in her act which gave her a refuge. She would move to the piano and accompany herself, while singing her toe-tapping, hand-clapping, gospel-flavored songs, several of which she wrote herself.

It was this style that impressed Atlantic Records' Executive Vice President, Jerry Wexler when he signed her in 1966 and began to personally supervise her every

At rehearsals in Reverend Cleveland's Cornerstone Baptist Church, the choir sat enraptured with Aretha's talents

Young organist Kenneth Lupper took the assignment very seriously

recording session. Her first single on Atlantic, the legendary Ronnie Shannon tune, "I Never Loved A Man," was an immediate 1,000,000 seller. The record had gospel changes, background voices that came in like a church choir, and the powerful, driving emotion-laden voice that is Aretha's freedom and womanhood bursting forth.

From that point on she has been legend. Aretha — only the one name is needed — is known the world over for hit after hit that touch the heart and move the soul. More recently she has been "covering" tunes of other artists, recording her own way songs that others have made into hits. When she does this, she doesn't merely cover them, she reupholsters them. Few singers have enough nerve to cover one of Aretha's tunes, some even wish to stop singing hits of their own after she's recorded them.

Of Aretha's recent self-written tunes, "Spirit in the Dark," perhaps best exemplifies the turning point in her career and in music in general.

Clara Ward and Rev. C.L. Franklin beam with pride at the Aretha they have watched grow up

The song seemed to demonstrate a renewed faith Aretha had found, and from that point on her career soared to even greater heights.

The rest of the music world seemed to take heart also, and everyone with a mouth began to seek God and salvation in music, through recording . . . but no one could do it like Aretha. Even the friendship in "Bridge Over Troubled Water" became a religious experience in her hands, so it is only with a moot question one can view her ten-year cycle and return to gospel — "What took so long?"

Throughout the two years since Rev. Cleveland formed the Southern California Community Choir, Aretha has always greeted him with, "James, when are we going to get together and do that album?" And for two years, Cleveland smiled and replied, "Whenever you're ready, Baby."

Last November, the same conversation took place, but James Cleveland was most surprised to hear from Atlantic Records one week later. First a date was chosen, then contracts drawn up, then a place chosen. "Pretty soon," laughes Rev. Cleveland, "I decided I'd better call Aretha and see what she wanted to sing.

"She gave me a list of thirty tunes, then her secretary called to add six more, then she called back with four more. Of course she gave me a final list two weeks ago.

"On Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday we rehearsed, with no arrangements. Aretha just told us what she wanted and we tried to do it. Thursday we recorded. We've never done anything like this before."

The choir expects some recognition and travel may come of the session, but they are most satisfied with being chosen by Aretha to work with her, that means more than anything else.

Rehearsals

"Aretha has always sung gospel," said Clara Ward, standing in the doorway of Reverend James Cleveland's Cornerstone Institutional Baptist Church, where the rehearsal was going on. "She's kept her same style since she was a child, only the words were different." Clara Ward had come by to hear the arrangements of her "Old Landmark" and "How I Got Over" that Aretha had selected for the new album.

Carolyn Franklin bounded in next, and made a bee-line for the fried chicken, the usual mischief twinkling in her eyes. "No, I'm not gonna sing on this one," she laughed. "I'm gonna try to keep my mouth shut and just watch and listen."

It was Wednesday evening, and the last rehearsal session before the recording sessions would begin at New Temple Missionary Baptist Church on Broadway in the heart of L.A.'s ghetto, and everyone was ready to let loose.

Aretha wandered around the room shyly, smiling here, chatting there, politely avoiding any deep conversations. She sat for a while with an acquaintance discussing children and offering coffee, and then returned to the microphone. The choir was seated and the band took to their instruments . . . Chuck Rainey on bass, Bernard Purdy on drums, Cornell DuPree on guitar, Dick Richards on congas. Reverend Cleveland was at the piano, and eighteen year old Kenneth Lupper rotated with Dave Crawford on organ.

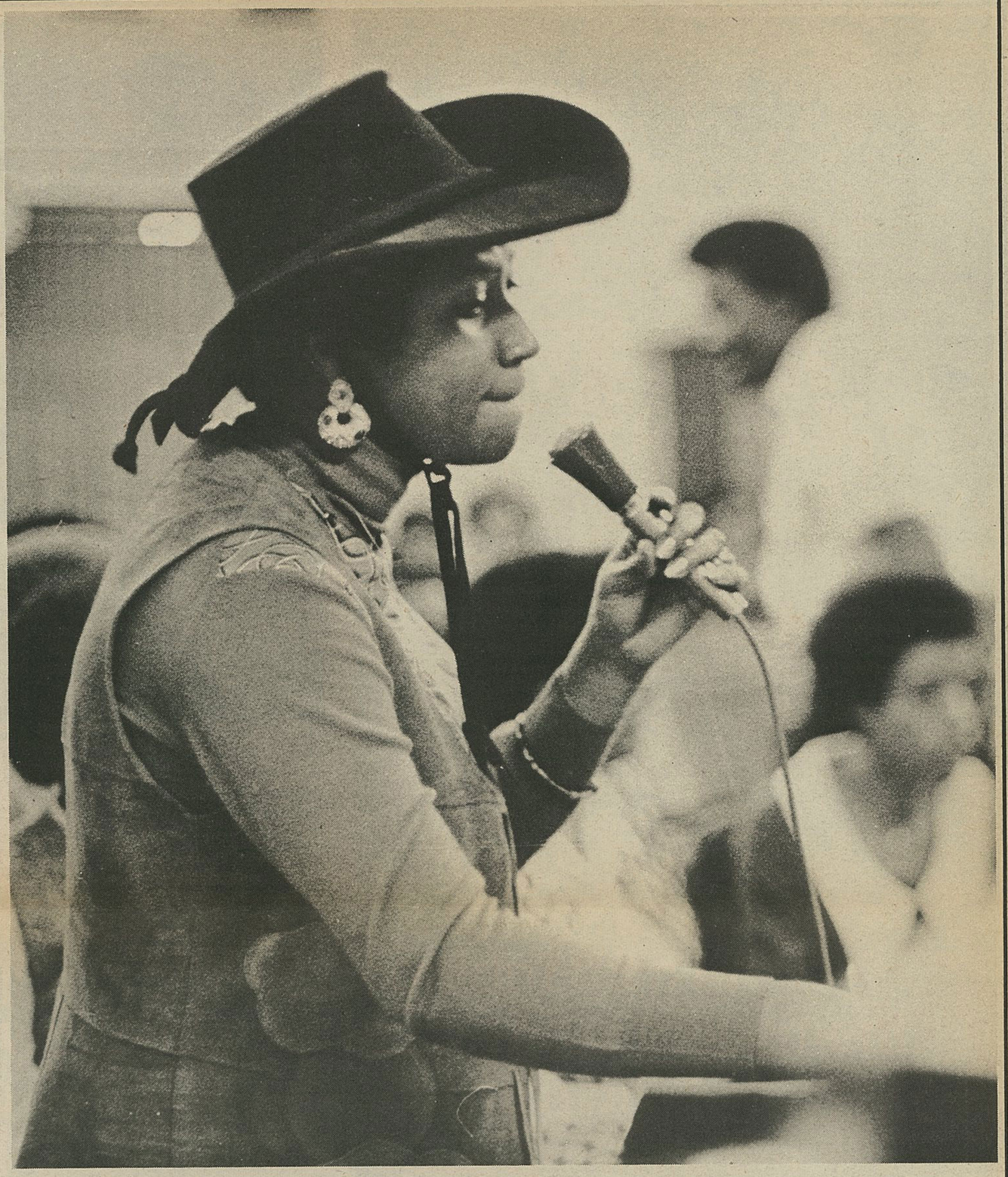
Kenny is the church organist and has been playing piano and organ for fifteen years, mostly in church. He studies music in college, occasionally going on the road with a singer and seeking studio work. He plays remarkably.

The choir director, Alexander Hamilton, took command and the rehearsal began. Aretha sang softly, as did the choir, using the opportunity to find their notes and learn the arrangements, saving the vocal power for Thursday night. Producer Jerry Wexler was nowhere to be seen.

Suddenly a tune stood out from all the others. Aretha began the familiar lyrics of "You've Got A Friend." Well, that has a religious feeling, one thinks, it kind of fits, but this was supposed to be an all gospel album, surely the tune could have been held.

And then the "something special" happens; the choir begins to come in with "Precious Lord." To say it was a chilling experience is to underrate it badly. The potential of that well-used pop tune had never before been so fully realized, not even in the version recorded by it's author Carole King (who also wrote Aretha's hit "Natural Woman").

Thursday evening found many



During rehearsals Aretha mapped out the arrangements with the band and choir. Nothing had been previously written out

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Recording at New Missionary Baptist Church, Aretha wore African influenced gowns of silk

Rock star Mick Jagger joined Jerry Wexler in studious appreciation of Aretha's style

people at the New Temple Missionary Baptist Church surprised. The converted movie theater was wired for sound, lights, and camera as the entire session was recorded by Warner Brothers Studio on film for an as yet unspecified use.

Jerry Wexler greeted guests and ticket-holders at the door. By eight-thirty the show, for that's what it really was, had begun. Candice Bergan, Altovise Davis (Mrs. Sammy), Mira Waters, and Carolyn Franklin were all in the audience. The film crew, press photographers, and record technicians were all scampering about, vying for positions as Reverend James Cleveland rose to the pulpit.

Addressing the assemblage he asked God's blessing on the venture, and profoundly thanked Aretha for her choice of his choir to record with her.

The choir marched down the aisle and then Aretha entered, and the magic of the evening began. Rev. Cleveland's choir lived up to its reputation. The voices, rich and splendid, gleamed almost visually as Alexander Hamilton's ballet-like directorial style guided them through the arrangements. At times, he seemed rather to float on their voices, somewhere above them.

The song "Amazing Grace" highlighted the first recording session, seconded by "You've Got A Friend," and then, too soon, it was over . . . until Friday night.

Rehearsal was called for 2:30 on Friday. Rough spots were worked out of the filming operation and some of the tunes. A rear camera was set up above the Baptismal behind and beneath a magnificent mural and the choir stand.

Aretha wore African styled gowns both nights, her hair in the neat and most becoming natural she has been wearing lately. The second night, Aretha's audience included her father, Reverend C.L. Franklin, who flew out after hearing about what Thursday night was like. He sat with Clara Ward, whose mother was also there. The two ladies remember Aretha from infancy and both beamed with pride at her talents.

One of the tunes Aretha chose was "Never Grow Old" and the spirit seized the church. Aretha "went in" and drew with her Clara Ward and most violently her mother, who ran to the singer, moved by the music and the spirit. All was captured on film and the depth of the reality of the church feeling is all there . . . a Black

Choir Director Alexander Hamilton clutches Aretha's hand near the conclusion of the recording sessions

Jerry Wexler and Carolyn Franklin watch the audience respond to Aretha's breathtaking performance

experience seldom shared by whites. The song itself was a rare experience with Aretha singing at ballad tempo, something she should do more often. The film's director and members of the crew were frequently drawn in and moved to clap to the beat. Seldom finding it, they proved an amusing diversion . . . but they showed a lot of heart in trying.

Rev. Franklin was invited to speak and his voice broke with pride as he praised his daughter's talents, which he helped to develop. Aretha has often told of his patience with her, "teaching me to take my time with a song and working with it until it was mine."

Reverend Franklin emphasized that Aretha takes the church with her wherever she sings. "The way she sings in this church tonight, is the way she sings any place she sings." Aretha sat, moved with pride.

On Thursday night, Aretha sang without stopping. Friday, a mechanical problem was announced from the pulpit and Aretha went through a rear door to rest, apparently, until it was cleared up.

Behind the pulpit, in the backstage area of the converted theater, a color TV set was on low. Aretha, Carolyn, Ken Cunningham, Rev. Franklin, and a few close friends were gathered around to watch her dramatic debut on the "Room 222" series.

She was good and seemed pleased with her performance, not elated, just satisfied. Along came Rev. Cleveland, who reported, "'Retha, looks like we lied up on a problem. When you left the stage, you knocked over a cup of water, and it soaked some lines and blew out a few things."

"That'll teach you to lie in church," someone quipped.

The highly sensitive, sophisticated equipment involved included the 16-track board and tape deck in the sound truck parked outside, as well as the 16-track mixing board inside the church used to blend the sound for the performance.
performance. In a matter of minutes, however, the problem was solved.

Producer and Executive V.P. of Atlantic Records, Jerry Wexler, explained the recording technique. "We're recording here tonight in the same way people worked before multi-track tape. Nowadays, in the studio, a producer is like a painter putting down the background in layers (the rhythm), and then blocking out the basic shapes (vocals, horns, melody).

"Tonight, we're recording live musix, voices and artist all at once. I feel there will be a lot more live recording in the future."

Live was right . . . and is right. This album will live a classic. Aretha proved three things with this performance. First, that she really comes alive when she's singing. Second, that her voice is magnificent singing slowly. And, third, that she is the Queen of Soul in any sense of the word.

James Cleveland holds mike while Aretha's "goin' in"

Taken by the spirit, Aretha hums through repeated choruses of "Never Grow Old"

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