

"The Making of Aretha Franklin's 'Amazing Grace'", directed by Sydney Pollack

Sydney Pollack's heretofore unearthed film of Aretha Franklin's landmark live recording of her "Amazing Grace" album is the most important filmed document of American soul/gospel music ever made.

"Amazing Grace" features Aretha Franklin and Sydney Pollack- two American masters- at the peak of their creative powers. Filmed at Reverend James Cleveland's church in Los Angeles, the film, which has been held in Warner Bros. vaults for 38 years, is immaculate. A vibrant Ms. Franklin is at the apex of her career. The band is electric. The choir is beyond emotive. Visually, this film is like time traveling- shot in 1971, it feels like it was made last night. And the album, released as a double LP in 1972, "Amazing Grace" is the bestselling gospel album of all time and Ms. Franklin's only million selling album at Atlantic Records.

"Watching this is like seeing the Sistine Chapel as it was being painted."- David Ritz, co-author of Ms. Franklin's autobiography.

"Amazing Grace" was recorded with a loving audience in the pews, with legendary producers Jerry Wexler and Arif Mardin and with an equally legendary band of Bernard Purdie, Chuck Rainey, Cornell Dupree, Poncho Morales, Kenneth Lupper- some of the greatest session men of all time- men who came from the church, who played and toured with (amongst others) Sam Cooke, King Curtis, Donny Hathaway, Quincy Jones, Steely Dan- and were brought back into the church for this one-time only event. Equally exciting is the Southern California Community Choir under the direction of Ms. Franklin's mentor Rev. James Cleveland- all looking resplendent in their 1971 best.

As Rev. Cleveland mentions through out, "Amazing Grace" was indeed a homecoming. At the time, Ms. Franklin had won six Grammy Awards and had ten Top-10 pop and soul singles -- she was unquestionably the most influential female vocalist of her generation. It was representative of her influence and popularity at the time, that Ms. Franklin could indeed break from the conventions of her "Muscle Shoals in New York" style and record a live two-album Gospel recording- and have her biggest hit with it.

Throughout "Amazing Grace," Ms. Franklin seamlessly weaves together traditional sacred sings such as "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" and "Amazing Grace" and compositions of her black contemporaries such as Marvin Gaye ("Wholly Holy") and Inez Andrews ("Mary, Don't You Weep"). But Ms. Franklin also took on decidedly "mainstream" material, recording Rodgers and Hammerstein's "You'll Never Walk Alone" and a brilliant rendition of Carole King's "You've Got a Friend" (King wrote Ms. Franklin's signature "Natural Woman") interspersed with Thomas Dorsey's "Precious Lord, Take My Hand". Ms. Franklin's performance is melismatic, intensely emotional, pure and completely singular. More than a return-to-the-roots record, the set is an inspired gospel-soul showcase of Ms. Franklin's's strongest singing ever.

In the liner notes to the original recording, legendary producer John Hammond wrote "This will be the album that I suspect will go down as Aretha's shining hour."