

After Ten Years Aretha Brings it All Back Home



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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