

“Respect”--Aretha Franklin (1967)

Added to the National Registry: 2002

Essay by Meredith Ochs (guest post)*



Aretha Franklin

When she fell in love with Otis Redding’s “Respect,” Aretha Franklin didn’t know that her version would become one of the most important recordings of the 20th century.

She wasn’t thinking about its place in the vortex of social movements--Civil Rights, women’s equality, Black Power. To her, it was a mainly relationship song, the opening track of a collection of relationship songs: “I Never Loved a Man the Way I Love You,” her tenth album, and her Atlantic Records debut.

There’s no question that “Respect” (which made it into the first class of the National Recording Registry in 2002) became a universal anthem for anyone or any group fighting for recognition, for equality, for justice. “But when I recorded it, it was pretty much a male-female kind of thing,” Aretha said.

It was, however, “the right song at the right time,” she said. And she was the right medium. Aretha grew up singing in the Baptist church, raised by one of its most prominent leaders, the Reverend C.L. Franklin. The living room of their Detroit, Michigan, home was a revolving door of artists and activists deeply involved in Civil Rights. Among them was Martin Luther King, Jr., who road-tested his “I Have a Dream” speech alongside Reverend Franklin at Detroit’s 1963 Walk to Freedom two months before King gave its definitive version in Washington, DC. From a very early age, Aretha absorbed the notion that respect was not only a core principal of the Civil Rights movement--it was at her core as well. “Respect” may have started as a feminist declaration that expanded with the times, but the fact that “I Never Loved a Man” begins with it and ends with Sam Cooke’s “A Change is Gonna Come” shows that she was keenly aware of the zeitgeist of the 1960s and how to deploy it in her music.

So perhaps it’s no coincidence that “Respect” was Aretha’s first number one single, topping “Billboard’s” Hot 100 on June 3, 1967. It was the cusp of the Summer of Love, but not so much for the singer. Her first marriage, to the domineering Ted White, was unraveling; they separated within a year and divorced within two. White had derailed an initial attempt at recording “I Never Loved a Man” during a session in Muscle Shoals, Alabama, that lasted only one day. He argued with a studio musician and, later on, drunkenly brawled with FAME Studio head Rick Hall. The couple took off, and Aretha went AWOL for a week and a half.

Shortly thereafter, she reappeared in New York City to resume recording with the Swampers, the core Muscle Shoals musicians who'd been flown in to complete the sessions. They shared Aretha's background in gospel, and their approach to studio work was more about "feel" than playing note-for-note off sheet music, which suited Aretha, an innate virtuoso. She'd spent most of the 1960s polishing her act at Columbia Records, recording pop and jazz standards alongside the best bandleaders and musicians in the country. With just a smattering of success to show for it, she left Columbia when her contract was up. Her new label, Atlantic, sought to recontextualize her voice with a return to her gospel roots. It was the right call. In addition to being her first colossal hit, "Respect" won Aretha her first two Grammys and launched her most resonant period as an artist.

Beyond the unmatched voice--the soaring melisma, the gospel gut-punch--"Respect" also showcased Aretha's genius for musical arrangement, and her incisive knack for tapping into the current of popular culture at any given time. She'd been playing the song in her live show for nearly two years and had overhauled it with a funky backbeat and the patois of inner-city Detroit. Mind you, Redding was backed by Booker T. and the M.G.'s, the legendary Stax house band that played on numerous R&B hits, but Aretha had a more compelling vision. She scrapped the quarter-note stomp and rat-a-tat snare drum fills, showing her studio musicians how to play exactly what she heard in her head. The coronation-worthy horns of the original were replaced by a horn section that grooved behind a twangy guitar riff with an elongated string bend. It sounded very much of the era, yet it remains classic. Redding was invited to the New York studio to listen in as they re-worked "Respect" and amiably commented, "Well, she took my song from me."

And she had, setting her lyrical tweaks in a dynamic arrangement that amplified the message. The instruments are pared down during the verses, giving the vocals a spotlight--not only because that resplendent voice needed no dressing up, but because Aretha, who by that time had three sons with as many fathers and one volatile marriage, had a lot to say about women and men. Redding's pleas became her mandate for relationship parity; the entire band stops playing when she sings "*R-E-S-P-E-C-T/Find out what it means to me.*" And, lest things get too heavy, she and her backing singers--sisters Carolyn and Erma Franklin--played with vernacular, adding "*Sock it to me,*" "*TCB*" (Take or Taking Care of Business), and "*Give me my propers when I get home.*" "I do say propers," she said, "I got it from the Detroit street. It was common street slang in the 1960s."

Incongruously, she didn't receive credit for producing or arranging, and would not on any of her records until she took the helm of 1972's "Amazing Grace." But in the years that followed her 1967 breakthrough, Aretha made the idea of respect the centerpiece of her public persona. In the rare interviews she gave, she spoke purposefully, prudently answering questions that made sense to her and challenging those she deemed impertinent. She used honorifics when referring to people, even friends and close colleagues. When asked about someone she didn't care for, she tended to deflect. But if she felt disrespected, she'd open fire. No one messed with the Queen.

Throughout her life, Aretha performed at political events, from gigs at the 1968 Democratic Convention to the inaugurations of Presidents Carter, Clinton, and Obama, yet she managed to stay above the fray. When offered the Presidential Medal of Freedom by George W. Bush in 2005, she gladly accepted. Some celebrities have turned it down if they didn't share the politics

of the sitting President, but for Aretha, it was about country, not party. It was about respect.

Aretha left this world on August 16, 2018. At her funeral, a sea of family and friends was thick with celebrities of all sorts, from pop stars to former US Presidents, but there were no private entrances for famous guests. Everyone walked through the same church doors. It was a great leveler, like death itself, and a fitting tribute for the woman who used her platform to redefine respect and remind us that everyone deserves it. “We all require and want respect, man or woman, black or white,” she said. “It's our basic human right.”

Meredith Ochs is a broadcast journalist, musician, and author. Her books include “Aretha: The Queen of Soul” and “Rock-and-Roll Woman” (Sterling Publishing). She is a longtime NPR commentator and contributes to numerous print and online publications.

* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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