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Obituary

Her Majesty, Aretha

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You can find Aretha Franklin's teenage church recordings online. She was a star if not the main attraction at her father's Detroit church, where there were plenty of great singers including the pastor himself. We know in hindsight that she would develop her raw talent to become a music icon. What may have not been known is how she would use her gospel roots in her incredible career.

Towards the end of her life, the unchallenged Queen of Soul went back to performing primarily religious music. But in one sense, Aretha Franklin never really left gospel, just blended it with a secular, not so sublimated eroticism, ecstasy by any other name.

The tug-of-war in African American culture between sacred and secular music is almost as old as the blues itself. Ironically, it's been pointed out that changing a gospel song to a secular song is often as easy as changing the word "God" to the "baby" in a song because there's no serious musical difference between much of R&B and gospel. Aretha along with other great African American artists such as Sam Cooke, Little Richard, James Brown and the Staple Singers made that all too clear. Her mother's death when she was still a child caused her to seek solace in church where she was raised.

She was from the last of a generation to make "crossover" from sacred to secular music at a time when such a move was still a bit controversial in the Black church community. But virtually no one was able to so skillfully and successfully blend the joys of earthly love with a heavenly sound. One of the many tributes summed it up best by saying "Aretha could take you to church even when she was talking about a no good man."

The first piano chords of "I Ain't Never Loved a Man," her pioneering recording on Atlantic Records after the eclectic early years at Columbia, are as iconic as any every played, and as fine an example of no daylight between gospel and blues as can be had. That piano is followed by Franklin in deep, soulful lament. The lyrics are about a ne'er do well lover. The tone is pure Sunday morning blues in the church.

That was an early hit before she covered Otis Redding's "Respect" and turned it into a blockbuster. Singing as a woman of unabashed power, Franklin transformed the song from a request for respect into a demand. Later on, she would team up with Annie Lennox to record an overtly feminist song, "Sister Are Doing it for Themselves." But "Respect" was one an early high points in an illustrious, award laden career where she would stamp material and old familiar work with her unique talent.

From the 1970's Spirit and Dark, another deft unique blend of gospel and funky R&B, to her work with the "Three Tenors," Aretha Franklin commanded the stage with power and presence.

Of course, those of us in Detroit felt a special bond with Aretha not just because she was raised here in her father's iconic New Bethel Baptist Church, but because just as she never really left gospel music, she also never really left Detroit. She lived in the city proper for decades after becoming a superstar and when she returned for shows, she frequently hired Detroit musicians to accompany her, a testament to her loyalty and the pool of Detroit talent that nurtured her.

She was also nurtured by her very gifted father and civil rights leader Rev. C.L. Franklin. Just as Pops Staples of the Staples Singers guided his family from sacred to secular music, so too, did C.L. Franklin approve and guide his

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daughters Carolyn, Aretha and Erma into careers beyond pop music outside the church. He even helped them navigate the often treacherous waters of record label contracts and relations.

But Aretha was the one to take what she found in a great Black Detroit church along with her natural talent and become the embodiment of sacred and secular or as others have put it, the “majesty of the blues.”

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