

# Living and Singing Soul with Aretha: Respecting Our Awesome and Soulful Selves

guest editorial

by

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photo of Aretha Franklin in the early 1970s by Andrew Kent

Whatever others may say in clearly deserved praise and homage to Aretha Franklin, it is vitally important that we, as persons and a people, speak our own special cultural truth about her and make our own unique assessment of her music, life, service and meaning to us. Here I mean not letting others' descriptions of her and her music serve as an orientation and framework for our own praise and proper due, but rather reaching inside ourselves and understanding and speaking of her in a multiplicity of meaningful and praise-worthy ways drawn and distilled from the depths of our own hearts and our own culture.

This is only right and duly respectful of our special relationship and shared lived-reality with her as a people, as a community in which she was born and came into being, was nurtured and nourished, and learned to live, love, long, hope, struggle, sing and serve. In this we take nothing from others who acclaim her as great and meaningful for them, but we also do not deny or diminish the special identity and common ground we share with her as a people. After all, if Aretha is the Queen of Soul Music, there must be a soul people from which she and her soul music come.

And this soul people is an African people, an African American people, a Black people, shaped by the rigors and realities, the excellences and achievements, the suffering, tragedies and transcendence reflected in our history, culture, oppression and righteous and relentless resistance.

It is out of the burdensome, beautiful and ever transcending march through human history that we are uniquely forged, find meaning, create space for freedom, beauty, creativity and other goodness we need. And it is in this history and culture Aretha is rooted and raised and then rises to unique heights of soulful excellence.

There are at least four fundamental traditions within Black culture that Aretha is rooted in and rises from: the Black music tradition; the Black church tradition; the Black activist-artist tradition; and the Black womanist tradition. Aretha as a singer and musician is rooted deeply in the musical tradition of her people, known world-wide for excellence in music. It is a versatile, deep and beautiful expression of the varied range of human thought, emotion, speech and practice. It is self-named by our people as soul music, not soul in the sense of the spirit form, but soul as a unique quality of personhood and peoplehood, expressive of a unique composite of sensitivity, creativity, impulse and will to freedom. Our music from field, work, church, street, stadium, concert hall and home always had a liberational, redemptive, resilient, resistant and rising up quality in it, expressing our determination not to be defeated, dispirited or diverted and to love, to seek happiness and to be free in the fullest sense of the word. And Aretha embraces and enriches this tradition.

Aretha also emerges in and builds on the activist-artist tradition, expressed also by Paul Robeson, Nina Simone, Harry Belafonte, Lena Horne, Curtis Mayfield and a host of others. They recognized the reality of Robeson's statement that in the context of oppression, "the battlefield is everywhere; there is no sheltered rear." In his eulogy for her, Rev. Jesse Jackson noted "Aretha has always been a very socially conscious artist, not just an entertainer." And therefore, "She wears a jeweled crown of song and service." She learned early from her parents and people, especially her father, Rev. C. L. Franklin, a minister and pillar in the Black Freedom Movement, to respect the fact that she was born in the midst of oppression and thus, in the midst of resistance to it. And in the midst of this resistance, she produced her signature songs.



Indeed, Aretha early took the position that “Black people will be free” and she sanctioned and supported the Black Freedom Struggle and its strategy of disrupting the peace of the oppressor, saying “I know you got to disturb the peace when you can’t get no peace.” In a word, as her people chanted, “No justice no peace!” Moreover, she gave her money freely to the struggle, declaring, “I have money, I got it from Black people. They made me financially able to have it and I want to use it in ways that will help our people.”

Aretha also was rooted in the Black church tradition and there she gained her moral and social consciousness and the roots, rhythm and raising up in righteous self-assertion reflected in her music. The church has been a key center of our soulness for centuries and it was the first and primary source of the songs Aretha would sing and the moral and social stands she would take. This is one of the most important aspects of her music, her preservation of that liberational, longing, redemptive and soulful sound. She kept it in the midst of not only a changing of Black music to sound like and appeal to others in a less depthful and meaningful way and also as the church in many quarters changed itself and its focus from social gospel to the gospel of prosperity, fostering a materialistic individualism which contributes to the erasure of the communal context in which our lives and music are rooted and attain their soulfulness.

Finally, Aretha is rooted in and rises up in the tradition of Black womanism, the tradition of all the great and everyday women who wove the beautiful resilient and resourceful fabric of our culture in various forms of partnership, love and struggle with Black men. Her womanism compelled her to fight to secure the rights, dignity, freedom and equal respect of women, her people and all people. Aretha tells us that her father and the Movement cultivated her self-consciousness as a person and part of a people, a great and beautiful people for whom she sang and to whom she sang especially. She says, “Daddy had been preaching Black pride for decades and we as a people had rediscovered how beautiful Black truly was and were echoing ‘Say it loud. I’m Black and I’m proud.’” And her pride in being Black was not only a deep emotion of respect and appreciation, but also a practice of serving, celebrating and singing the people.

She demanded and sang respect for herself, all women, her people and everyone, especially the most vulnerable. She said, “Women absolutely deserve respect. I think women and children and older people are the three least respected groups in society.” And she dedicated herself to helping to empower them and to win their freedom. As an African woman, she wore her natural and African clothes proudly as a part of the Black Power phase of the Black Freedom Movement which insisted with Malcolm that we return to the source and appreciate the wholeness of who we are.

Sometimes we forget who we really are; we lose our way and consciousness of our real and greater selves. We bow down at the altar of compromise and convenience, doing things that break our commitments to ourselves and others, and that hide us from ourselves and make us abandon or give less to those and that we love most and live for—the good, the right and the possible. Indeed, having broken our commitments to ourselves and others, we no longer recognize or even respect ourselves rightly; and we accept less than we deserve and give others less than they are due, especially those we care about and love.

And it is here that someone speaks words or sings a song that reminds us of our soulfulness, the goodness, right and possibility of ourselves, the beauty of being who we are as a person and a people. Aretha and others did this and do this for us. And so, let us honor her, the people and culture in which we are all rooted, by each day living and singing soul with Aretha, recognizing, raising and respecting our awesome and soulful selves in the most ethical, beautiful and expansive ways.



Aretha Franklin singing at the inauguration of President Obama at the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C., January 20, 2009 (public domain photo by Cecilio Ricardo of the U.S. Air Force, photo in the public domain in the U.S.).