

THE QUEEN

ARETHA
FRANKLIN

1942-2018

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Franklin onstage
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I THINK OF ARETHA as Our Lady of Mysterious Sorrows,” Jerry Wexler once said of Aretha Franklin. Wexler was the Atlantic Records producer who, in 1967, helped raise the singer to her sudden and incomparable soul heights. “Her eyes are incredible, luminous eyes covering inexplicable pain. Her depressions could be as deep as the dark sea. I don’t pretend to know the sources of her anguish, but anguish surrounds Aretha as surely as the glory of her musical aura.”

Those doleful eyes were sometimes mistaken for shyness. That was how a group of white musicians viewed her in a first meeting at FAME Studios in Muscle Shoals, Alabama, on January 24th, 1967. Wexler thought the exploding Southern style of soul would bring out the best in the 24-year-old Aretha’s still-under-recognized artistry, even though she’d been making records since 1956. These were experienced session men: Most had played with Wilson Pickett at Wexler’s behest. Aretha didn’t enter FAME with a reputation as a soul singer, and she certainly wasn’t overbearing, as some thought Pickett could be. “And just suddenly,” said FAME songwriter Dan Penn, “she walks over to the piano, she sits down at the piano stool, and I’m watchin’ her. She kinda looks around, like, ‘Nobody’s watchin’ me.’ I thought she thought for just a second, ‘Is this not my session?’ And with all the talent she had, she just hit this unknown chord. Kind of *kawunka-kawunka-kawung!* Like a bell ringing. And every musician in the room stopped what they were doing, went to their guitars and started tunin’ up.”

That day and night would end up as the most eventful in Aretha Franklin’s career – an unprecedented musical triumph and a near-terminal disaster. Franklin would later have little to say about the events. But then, she often proved reticent over the years. Yet others recalled Franklin as anything but timid. Mavis Staples – who had toured with her during their teen gospel years – thought Franklin was in fact inclined to “devilment” out of the public eye: “One time she hid behind the tree with a baseball bat to knock her own sister on the head. . . . Aretha was tough.”

Which is to say that Aretha Franklin was paradoxical – and learned to be at a young age. From childhood on, she saw as much pain as she did glory. Her mother left her family when the girl was six; she had babies while still a child herself; she married a man who dominated her career and publicly battered her; she became a superstar, only to watch her matchless and lustrous career slide for

Contributing editor MIKAL GILMORE wrote the *Chuck Berry* cover story in April 2017.

too many years, to the indifference of almost everybody who had once applauded or empowered her. And then she witnessed deaths – too many: first her mother; then her father, after lingering for years in a coma from gunshot wounds; then three siblings, all lost to cancer.

Aretha Franklin’s voice – bred from gospel, blues and jazz, American traditions that reached indelible glory because they had to overcome America itself – made all the difference. It was how, in the words of a gospel song she loved, she got over. “You had a number of gospel singers who were filled with the spirit,” said writer Peter Guralnick. “She translated that spirit into the secular field. . . . She translated that feel and fire.” More than that, Franklin’s voice raised and defined her. Nobody came close to touching it, though she emboldened many others to follow her – Patti LaBelle, Gladys Knight, Natalie Cole, Chaka Khan, Whitney Houston, Alicia Keys and Beyoncé among them. More than any of them, Franklin possessed a roar that wasn’t merely technically breathtaking; it was also a natural and self-derived instrument that testified to her truths in ways she otherwise refused to address. Some say Franklin was insecure at times in her gift, but with something so fearsome moving through their body, mind and history, who wouldn’t be both daunted and proud?

Upon learning of her death in August, at age 76, from pancreatic cancer, Barack and Michelle Obama said in a statement, “Aretha helped define the American experience. In her voice, we could feel our history, all of it and in every shade – our power and our pain, our darkness and our light, our quest for redemption and our hard-won respect.”

The late keyboardist Billy Preston – who started in gospel and went on to play with Franklin, the Beatles and the Rolling Stones – put it in more rough-hewn terms: “She can sing all kinds of jive-ass songs that are beneath her. She can go into her diva act and turn off the world. But on any given night, when that lady sits down at the piano and gets her body and soul all over some righteous song, she’ll scare the shit out of you. And you’ll know – you’ll swear –

that she’s still the best fuckin’ singer this fucked-up country has ever produced.”

That singer gave nerve to people when they were being beaten down and killed – she saved a lot of lives. She probably even saved her own, for as long as possible.

TO GET TO Aretha Franklin, you have to go through her father. The Rev. Clarence LaVaughn Franklin possessed an almost blueslike incantatory style that became known as “the squall”; the bluesman Bobby “Blue” Bland credited it as a considerable influence on his own vocal style, and C.L.’s mastery of the form bore deep influence on Aretha. But C.L. and Aretha shared more than a

“Aretha looked like a lost child. But when she got up to sing, this sound came out — gospel filled with frighteningly strong, mature blues.”



vocal flair. Both were confident, ambitious, proud – even imperious – and both were dedicated to marking their place in history. Her father had bred her to be significant.

C.L. was born in Mississippi in 1915 to sharecroppers who picked cotton for white landowners. His father abandoned his wife and child when Clarence was about four, and his mother married Henry Franklin, also a farm laborer. C.L. didn’t want to be a farmer. By 18, he was a Baptist circuit preacher, and in 1936 he married Barbara Siggers in Memphis. Barbara was a skillful pianist, and according to Mark Bego’s *Aretha Franklin: The Queen of Soul*, “[as] a gospel singer, Barbara Siggers was in the same league with Mahalia Jackson and Clara Ward.”

In 1939, C.L. secured a pulpit of his own at New Salem Missionary Baptist Church in Memphis,



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where he began to develop his legendary sermonic style. Following a subsequent ministry in Buffalo, New York, the Franklins moved to Detroit in mid-1946. The New Bethel Baptist Church had issued a calling: It wanted C.L. to become its new pastor. By this time, he and Barbara had four children of their own: Erma (born in Shelby, Mississippi, 1938), Cecil (Memphis, 1940), Aretha (Memphis, March 25th, 1942) and Carolyn (Memphis, 1944). Barbara also had a son from a prior marriage, Vaughn, and C.L. had fathered a daughter outside the marriage, Carl Ellan Kelley, with a 12-year-old parishioner in Memphis. The family settled into a mansion on East Boston Boulevard. Miracles would happen in Detroit, and also devastation

The A Team

In the studio with several collaborators, including members of the FAME Studios band, 1968

– all essential to the making of Aretha Franklin.

In Detroit, C.L. helped develop what became known as black liberation theology, and became a friend and colleague to Martin Luther King Jr. C.L. proclaimed to his parish, “We are black, not because we are cursed, for blackness is not a curse... [White people] conditioned you that way because they used this as a means to an end, to give you a feeling of inferiority.” Aretha absorbed all this, and those implicit meanings would underlie much of what she would sing and how she would sing it.

Starting in the early 1950s, C.L. recorded a series of sermonic albums – more than 70 in all – and eventually leased the masters to Chicago blues

label Chess Records; he was called “the man with the million-dollar voice.” C.L. was adamant in his faith, but he was also worldly. He dressed in flashy suits and drove Cadillacs. Rumors attached to him; one involved gospel singer Clara Ward, with whom C.L. had an on-and-off years-long affair. Two years into the grand new life in Detroit, Barbara abruptly packed up and, accompanied by her son Vaughn, moved back to Buffalo. Erma told biographer David Ritz in *Respect: The Life of Aretha Franklin*, “I do know that my parents’ relationship was stormy, and that my father had a violent temper. I never saw him strike her, but we were all very conscious of not inciting Daddy’s wrath.”

Aretha was six when Barbara left. During summer vacations, Aretha, Erma, Carolyn and Cecil visited their mother and Vaughn in Buffalo, where the

two lived in what Aretha described as a pleasant, middle-class black neighborhood. Cecil later said, "As much as Aretha adored our father, she would have been thrilled to live with Mother. . . . Dad made it clear that wasn't an option."

All three sisters – Erma, Aretha and Carolyn – had significant musical talents, but Aretha in particular developed as a prodigy. C.L. hired a piano teacher to polish his daughter's skills, but Aretha hid when the teacher visited. "Playing by ear," she wrote, "has allowed me to develop a rather personal and signature style, which I treasure and would not give up for anything or anyone." Smokey Robinson, a friend of Cecil, told Ritz, "There was a grand piano in the Franklin living room. . . . When Aretha sat down, even as a seven-year-old, she started playing chords – big chords. . . . Mind you, this was Detroit, where musical talent ran strong and free. Aretha came out of this world, but she also came out of another far-off magical world none of us really understood."

C.L. pegged Aretha as the family's likeliest star. She was flattered to be performing for late-night house guests who sometimes included famed entertainers: Dinah Washington, Oscar Peterson, Nat Cole, Sarah Vaughan, Arthur Prysock and Dorothy Dandridge were reportedly among visitors to the house. So were Ella Fitzgerald and Duke Ellington and gospel great Clara Ward. It was Ward, more than anybody else, who influenced Aretha to become a singer. Aretha claimed she was around 10 when she sang her first solo at New Bethel, trembling beforehand, standing on a little chair, singing "Jesus Be a Fence Around Me." Afterward, parishioners told C.L., "Oh, that child sure can sing!"

In Buffalo, Barbara had been sick on and off. Though she was a nurse, nobody could figure out what the problem was. On March 7th, 1952, on his way home from school, Vaughn saw an ambulance speeding by. His grandmother told him his mother had died only minutes before – a heart attack. Back in Detroit, C.L. gathered the children into the kitchen on East Boston and gave them the news. "I just stood there, stunned," Aretha wrote in her memoir, *From These Roots*. "I cannot describe the pain. . . . Pain is sometimes a private matter, and the pain of small children losing their mother defies description." The children visited Buffalo to attend the funeral; C.L. did not.

"Let me tell you about the kind of child Aretha was," Ruth Bowen, who later became the singer's publicist, told Ritz. "She was a traumatized child." Seeing Aretha in her father's church, Bowen said, "she looked like a lost child. Her eyes were filled with sadness. . . . Then when she got up to sing, this sound came out. It was gospel filled with blues. I mean, frighteningly strong blues, beautifully mature blues. After she sang, she sat back down and withdrew into her own little world." Her brother Cecil put it this way: "Insecurity invaded her spirit at an

early age. . . . I think that basic insecurity has never left her. In fact, I believe it defines her – that and her soaring talent."

C.L. Franklin gave Aretha pride, stubbornness, faith and a kind of hubris. Barbara Siggers gave her a lacuna in which the greatness had to pass through to find voice. C.L. was the gospel. Barbara was the source of the blues, in all its haunting and transcendent ways. The blues is a way of feeling hurt and defying it, taking life as it is, living in the full hollow of it, yet going on. Aretha Franklin took her pain and transmuted it into something that moved the land with her voice.

At age 12, Aretha became pregnant. This did not, by all accounts, blow up into a major family drama. "[C.L.] was not judgmental, narrow or scolding," she wrote. "In my fifth or sixth month, I dropped out of school. My family supported me in every way." On January 28th, 1955, she gave birth to her first child, Clarence. Aretha always refused to divulge the father's full identity, and he didn't stay active long in her life anyway. Then at age 14, in January 1957, she gave birth to a second child, Edward. She also declined to name this baby's father.

At the same time, Franklin was maturing as a gospel singer. In the mid-1950s her father launched a successful gospel caravan, which toured the country – including in the Jim Crow South, where the troupe often had to take back roads and could not patronize segregated hotels and diners. The traveling members also gathered for after-show rites in which a different zeal burned. In Ritz's *Respect*, Ray Charles and Billy Preston referred to the gospel circuit as "a sex circus." Charles said, "I loved the church singers. . . . When it came to pure heart singing, they were motherfuckers. When it came to pure sex, they were wilder than me – and that's saying something. . . ."

Was Aretha exposed to these occasions? As Nick Salvatore wrote in *Singing in a Strange Land: C.L. Franklin, the Black Church, and the Transformation of America*, "What arrangements C.L. made to shield her from the tour's nocturnal activities are not known, but her very presence unavoidably exposed her to experiences well beyond her

years." But, as Salvatore wondered, "Can imperfect people perform good deeds? Can a flawed minister lead others to salvation? C.L. certainly thought so."

In 1956, when Aretha was 14, she released her first album, *Songs of Faith*, with C.L. managing her. Because the music was mostly recorded at New Bethel with Franklin accompanying herself on piano before an open microphone, her vocals took on an incorporeal quality – world-weary and mystical at the same time. As Aretha wailed "Precious Lord," a listener in the audience called out, "Listen at her!" A great career in the gospel world was there for the wonder child's taking.

Aretha was also smitten with secular black pop music. "The new rhythm & blues," she said, "couldn't be turned off." In particular, two artists

had a formative impact on her, and she knew both as visitors to her father's home: Dinah Washington and Sam Cooke. Neither fit any single genre – both started in gospel but proved endlessly transformative. Amalgamate the two and you pretty much have the alchemy for Aretha Franklin.

Between 1948 and 1955, Washington had 27 R&B Top 10 hits, and she became a pop star with 1959's epochal "What a Difference a Day Makes." She could be commanding, and she liked mink coats, parties and pills, and in December 1963 she died in her sleep from an overdose of barbiturates. Cooke was an even bigger star, and Aretha saw a lot of him, because his group, the Soul Stirrers, sometimes joined C.L.'s gospel tours. On one occasion, after a show in Atlanta, Aretha visited Cooke in his hotel room. The two were sitting on his bed talking, "when a thunderous knock came at the door. It was Daddy. Sam and I froze in our tracks. 'Aretha, I know you're in there,'" Aretha wrote. At first chance, she shot out of the room, "just when the conversation between me and Sam had taken another turn. Daddy never knew that with his intimidating knock he changed the course of history."

If Cooke and Washington could cross over from gospel to pop, Franklin reasoned, so could she. When she told her father what she wanted to do, he didn't balk. "The plan was to make her a star," said Carolyn, "and make it happen quickly." Motown founder Berry Gordy and his songwriting partner Billy Davis wanted to sign Aretha. "Everything that she sang was with such emotion that you felt every word," said Davis. "She had just terrific control over her expressions." C.L., though, thought that Gordy and Davis' ambitions were too local.

To hit the big time, they decided that Aretha should move to New York, where she initially lived in cheap hotels. She left her children in Detroit under the care of her grandmother Rachel – effectively leaving them behind just as her mother had surrendered her at a distance. She was 18.

She and C.L. hired a new manager, Jo King. In early 1960, King introduced C.L. to Phil Moore, an arranger and jazz pianist. Moore sat down with Aretha at the piano, and they played a few songs. Then he turned to C.L. and made the most prescient statement anybody ever made about Aretha Franklin: "Your daughter . . . does not require my services. Her style has already been developed. Her style is in place. It is a unique style that, in my professional opinion, requires no alteration."

C.L. told Moore that he'd been thinking of trying to place Aretha with Columbia Records, and Moore knew the ideal producer: John Hammond, who had supervised Bessie Smith's last recording sessions and had discovered 17-year-old Billie Holiday. Hammond visited King's studio to meet Aretha and hear a demo she had recorded. He didn't need much convincing. He later said he thought Aretha was "an untutored genius – the best voice I've heard since Billie Holiday." He signed her on the spot. Hammond produced her first Columbia album and had a clear idea of what he wanted Aretha to sound like. "My vision for Aretha had nothing to do with rhythm & blues," he said. "I saw her as a jazz/blues artist."

The singer's Columbia debut, *Aretha: With the Ray Bryant Combo*, was released in late February 1961. She was 18. If the intent had been to cast

"One time Aretha hid behind a tree with a baseball bat to knock her own sister on the head," Mavis Staples said. "Aretha was tough."



▼ The Million-Dollar Voice

C.L. Franklin with his daughters Aretha (left) and Carolyn in 1965. The reverend possessed an almost blueslike preaching style described as “whooping,” and he became famous in his own right, recording a series of sermonic albums — more than 70 in all.



▲ You Send Me

Aretha with Sam Cooke (right) in 1961. Cooke’s gospel group, the Soul Stirrers, appeared on C.L. Franklin’s gospel caravan, and Cooke became a model for young Aretha. “Oh, I loved that man,” she later said.



▲ Aretha the Activist

Franklin with the Rev. Jesse Jackson (left) in New York, 1972, at an event for Operation Push, the Jackson-founded social-justice and civil-rights organization. Just behind Jackson is Betty Shabazz, Malcolm X’s widow.



◀ New York Groove

The marquee at the Apollo, when Franklin played in 1971. Her father sent her to live in New York as a teen, although she later moved back to Detroit.

▲ The Producer

With Jerry Wexler, who signed Franklin to Atlantic Records in 1966. After her first recording session, Wexler was stunned: “I had to get used to that kind of greatness!”

Franklin for an audience that appreciated Lena Horne, Carmen McRae and Nancy Wilson, Franklin instead arrived with a distinctive edge. The single “Won’t Be Long,” which peaked at Number Seven on the R&B chart, worked as a précis for her later resplendence. Franklin performed it in her first national TV appearance, on *The Steve Allen Show*, and there she was: all the greatness already in place, as apparent as it would ever be. She hit the song off with big gospel chords on piano and sang with a witty, rousing, vocal majesty, in the last minute roaring startlingly.

It was around this time that Aretha met the man who, other than C.L. Franklin and Jerry Wexler, would prove the most significant figure in her career — for good and bad. Ted White would recall meeting Franklin at a club in Detroit, the 20 Grand.

Her sister Erma had been talking to him around that time. “She also told me,” Aretha wrote, “he considered me among the most beautiful women in the world.”

White dominated Franklin’s career, and schooled her in how to present herself in public. Franklin refused to discuss White much in later years, though in *From These Roots*, she wrote, “I didn’t realize I was in way over my head... [Ted White] was a take-charge kind of guy.”

Aretha’s brother Cecil said that their father “knew Ted was something of a shady character — and he thought the association would hurt Aretha.” Motown producer Harvey Fuqua told Ritz, “Anyone who didn’t see Ted White as a straight-up pimp had to be deaf, dumb, and blind... It took someone that slick to get a great talent like Aretha in his

stable.” Within six months of their first date, Aretha and White married. C.L. was bitterly opposed to the whole deal; he counted White as an enemy.

In pop criticism, it became accepted wisdom that, with the exception of *Unforgettable: A Tribute to Dinah Washington*, from February 1964, Franklin’s Columbia years were miscast by both the singer and the label. In truth, the Columbia recordings were rife with songs of heartbreak and rapture, sung in a voice that even then was untouchable. But none of Franklin’s Columbia albums were hits, and their mix of styles — show tunes, torch songs, blues, standards, novelties, pop and quasi-R&B — didn’t fit any easily identifiable demographic of listeners. “It wasn’t really me,” Franklin said later. When it was apparent she would not renew her contract, the label assembled unissued recordings into stopgap

albums. The label called one 1966 release *Soul Sister*, but it wasn't soul at all. The real soul sister, though, was just months away.

Wexler was a co-owner of New York's Atlantic Records, along with Ahmet Ertegun, and was feeling restless about the label he had helped build. Both Atlantic and Wexler were well-regarded. Through the 1960s the label helped advance a more tenacious form of rhythm & blues that became increasingly identified as soul. Wexler produced some of the most important artists himself. In 1966, he was in a recording session in Muscle Shoals, trying to stop a fight between Wilson Pickett and Percy Sledge, when he got a phone call from a friend, a gospel DJ, who told him, "Aretha's ready for you. Here's her phone number."

Wexler had had his eye on Franklin for a long time. "The voice," Wexler wrote, "was not that of a child but rather of an ecstatic hierophant.... On Aretha's first recording, her singing was informed with her genius. From the congregation, a man cried out, 'Listen at her... listen at her!' And I did." He called and spoke with Ted White, and in November 1966, she and White sat down in Wexler's office and made a handshake deal. "I felt a natural affinity with the Atlantic sound," Franklin said. "To me, Atlantic meant soul."

Wexler had become enamored of FAME Recording Studios in Muscle Shoals. It was owned and run by producer Rick Hall, who used sidemen whom Wexler admired: keyboardist Barry Beckett, bassist David Hood, drummer Roger Hawkins and guitarist Jimmy Johnson; they were occasionally augmented by prominent session musicians like organist and pianist Spooner Oldham and guitarist Dan Penn — all of them white. FAME, Wexler decided, was where he would record Franklin's first music for Atlantic.

White wasn't convinced. The Ku Klux Klan was active near Muscle Shoals (and still is). But Wexler insisted, and he met White and Franklin at FAME on January 24th, 1967. The day that Franklin recorded in Muscle Shoals proved the most momentous in her history — it blasted open her future, then fell into a nightmare.

Wexler played the musicians a demo of "I Never Loved a Man (The Way I Love You)," a song by White's friend Ronnie Shannon. At first the band didn't know what to do with it. "The song didn't have a specific meter, really," said Oldham. It was Oldham who turned it around. He sat down at a Wurlitzer electric piano and devised a new voicing — an odd slant of chords and cadence — to open the song. "Spooner's got it! Spooner's got it!" said Chips Moman, a songwriting partner of Penn. Aretha sang the opening line — it was the first time some of the musicians had heard her voice. "From there it was like sparkles and shine," Penn said. "After everybody heard her sing, 'You're no good, heartbreaker,' she had five instant fans. I can tell you, she was getting all the respect one person can get from those cats." Shortly, Penn and Moman went into a closet to complete a song they had been working on: "Do Right Woman - Do Right Man." Wexler and the songwriters thought it might suit Franklin's remarkable voice.

COMPLETING "I Never Loved a Man (The Way I Love You)" took only a few hours. "I couldn't believe it was that good," Wexler remembered. "I had to get used to that kind of greatness!" Then things went wrong: More than 50 years later there are still mysteries surrounding that day and night — and nobody has ever been able to gather the full truth. Tension had been building between Wexler and Hall: Whose session, after all, was this? "Hall could be belligerent," Wexler wrote. "So could Ted White. And so, as it turned out, could one of the trumpeters." The musician had been a last-minute add-on to the horn section. Also, there had been drinking — something Hall tried to forbid in his studio. White was drinking too, sharing a bottle with the trumpeter. This is where various accounts start to vary. The banter between White and the horn player resulted in animosity when, White said, the latter began to use racist terms — "a redneck patronizing a black man," Wexler put it — and White told Wexler he wanted the musician fired on the spot. Since this was Hall's studio, Hall would have to do the firing, yet he resented being dictated to on his own property. Most of the musicians were oblivious.

Wexler and Hall went back to Wexler's motel to toast the session, then White called from another room. He told Wexler that he and Franklin would be leaving in the morning, heading back to New York; he wasn't going to stand for this. Meantime, said one witness, "Rick sees it going down the tube and decides to mediate.... He shouldn't have done it tipsy." Wexler told Hall flat-out not to do it — he'd only make it worse — but Hall wasn't a man to be bossed. "That evening euphoria turned to horror," wrote Wexler. "It was *Walpurgisnacht*, a Wagnerian shitstorm." Only three people were present in Franklin's hotel room, but nobody has ever given a uniform account. "I went to Ted and Aretha's room," Hall later said. "That just led to a bunch more yelling, with Ted telling me how he never should have brought his wife down to Alabama to play with these rednecks. 'Who you calling a redneck?' I said. 'Who you calling a nigger?' 'I'd never use that word.' 'But you were thinking it, weren't you?' 'I was just thinking that you should go fuck yourself.' That led to Ted taking a swing at me... and before I knew it, I was in a full-blown fistfight with Ted White."

According to one account, Franklin hid out in the bathroom as all this went down. Another has it that she got involved in the fight and helped throw Hall out of the room. In *From These Roots*, she wrote, "I vaguely recall loud noises and voices shouting and doors slamming. I never learned the details." Hall reportedly called White from the motel lobby, suggesting he get out of town come the morning. Wexler told one interviewer there had possibly been gunshots.

"The very thing I had worked so hard to avoid was racial animus," Wexler said, "and that's exactly what the night session had excited.... Ted, though, could not be consoled. 'You were the one who said Muscle Shoals was soul paradise,' he said. 'Far as I can see, Muscle Shoals is soul shit. These honkies down here are some nasty motherfuckers. I will

Key Player

In the studio, 1973. "Playing [piano] by ear," Franklin wrote, "allowed me to develop a rather personal and signature style."



THE QUEEN



DAVID GAHR/
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never submit my wife to circumstances like these. We're outta here.'"

The events of that night, as much as the liberating recording session during the day, amounted to breakthroughs for Franklin. She wanted out of Muscle Shoals, no question, and – probably not for the first time – wanted out of her marriage as well. There had been troubling rumors about the couple, but for a time Franklin put up with White's rule. Etta James said, "Ted gave her an edge she needed. And if things went bad for Aretha later on, welcome to the party. That was the story of how it went with most of us and our men. . . . They dressed us and trotted us out to the stage. . . . though, we became stars."

The only major player on January 24th, 1967, in Muscle Shoals who did not fuck up was Franklin. White fucked up. Hall fucked up. Even Wexler fucked up. Not Franklin. Yet she disappeared, like a suffering ghost, pondering its heart through the mists. Wexler could not find her. He was angry and embarrassed; how could such a gift get fractured? He knew that he and Franklin were on the verge of something exciting, but an aborted contract would kill off that possibility. Wexler finally realized: "She had been traumatized by this incident, and she was hiding someplace." Clearly, Franklin was making a statement: She wanted due regard.

By the time Franklin showed up at Atlantic Studios in New York, she had insisted on the presence of the Muscle Shoals band – plus saxophonist King Curtis. She also brought in her sisters, Erma and Carolyn, for harmonies. White was not with Franklin for this occasion – just as well given the drama of the previous month. On February 8th, 1967, Franklin put finishing touches on "Do Right Woman – Do Right Man," the song that Penn and Moman had been working on at FAME before all hell broke loose. Wexler now had a single – "I Never Loved a Man (The Way I Love You)" – with a B side, and released the pair two days later. "I Never Loved a Man" peaked at Number One on *Billboard's* R&B Singles Chart on April 15th, and at Number Nine on the pop chart.

Though Franklin had not written either side, the material now identified her. In "I Never Loved a Man (The Way I Love You)," you can hear Franklin's rumination on her increasingly troubled marriage to White. "You're a no-good heartbreaker," she sang. "You're a liar, and you're a cheat/And I don't know why/I let you do these things to me. . . ./How could ya hurt me so bad/Baby, you know that I'm the best thing/That you ever had/Kiss me once again." The lyric might read like a piteous confession, but the voice – that was something else, full of both woe and tenacity. Few singers had brought a voice like this to such words of hardship. Many great black female singers had emanated blues – Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, Dinah Washington. But gospel singer and friend Mahalia Jackson wouldn't grant the blues any sway. "Anybody that sings the blues," Jackson said, "is in a deep pit, yelling for help." She added elsewhere, "With the blues, when you finish, you

still have the blues." But that was not what Franklin would allow for herself.

FOR MILLIONS, The Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* was the big cultural marker of 1967 – a quintessence of the emerging culture and its values. Looking back, though, it's apparent that if the year had a cultural marker that truly changed things, it was Franklin's debut Atlantic album, *I Never Loved a Man (The Way I Love You)*, released March 10th. It called to several audiences at once: It was a bold and unanticipated claim to pride that spoke to and for a black audience and for a nascent women's movement.



To Barack, With Love

Franklin singing "My Country, 'Tis of Thee" at Barack Obama's first inauguration, in January 2009. Along with her voice, the big-bowed hat she wore that day famously stole the show, earning its own Facebook page.

In 1965, when Otis Redding wrote and recorded "Respect," he was already being cited as the king of the new fervent style of R&B. Franklin had been singing her own rendition for some time in her nightclub shows. In Redding's version, the song was a man's plaint to the woman he loved, but when Franklin recorded "Respect" for her next single, she gave it a twist of her own: "I'm about to give you all of my money/And all I'm askin' in return, honey/Is to give me my propers." It wasn't a yearning plea – it was a demand.

Franklin and her sisters served it up with style and humor (they used the title to reiterate the singer's nickname, "Ree, Ree, Ree"), and they added a bridge that both became legendary and gave the song new identity: "R-E-S-P-E-C-T/Find out what it means to me/R-E-S-P-E-C-T/Take care, TCB/Oh (Sock it to me, sock it to me, sock it to me, sock it to me)." In Franklin's voice, "Respect" was no longer a man's petition; it was something of a threat that switched gender tables. It was something wholly new. When Wexler played the new version for Redding, he said, "I just lost my song."

"Respect" and "I Never Loved a Man (The Way I Love You)" were enough to put Franklin forever on the American stage. Author Guralnick remembered the day the single "I Never Loved a Man (The Way I Love You)" was released, February 10th, 1967. "I had gone over to Skipppy White's Mass Records: Home of

the Blues," he wrote in *Sweet Soul Music*, "and the little speaker over the door that was beamed to the sidewalk trade was filled with Aretha. People were dancing on the frosty street with themselves or with one another and lining up at the counter to get a purchase on that magic sound."

Franklin's "Respect" made plain a woman could do more than just hope for it: She could command it on her own terms. Poet Sherley Anne Williams said, "Aretha was right on time. . . . When she even went so far as to spell the word 'respect,' we just knew that this sister wasn't playing around." Franklin herself, though a lifelong Democrat and civil-rights advocate, admitted she didn't record the song with that purpose in mind. "I don't think I was a cata-

lyst for the women's movement," she said. "Sorry. But if I were? So much the better!"

"Respect" came to represent other shifts underway in black culture and politics. Franklin, like her father and his friend Martin Luther King Jr., favored nonviolence in the struggle for civil rights, but others were beginning to feel their wait had gone on too long. There were activists in the streets and on the campuses, and then there was Franklin on the radio every hour, proclaiming change in a voice that nobody – black or white – could ignore. Franklin later wrote, "I don't make it a practice to put my politics into my music or social commentary. But the fact that 'Respect' naturally became a battle cry and anthem for a nation shows me something."

In 1967 and 1968, Franklin scored four Top 10 albums (*I Never Loved a Man*, *Aretha Arrives*, *Lady Soul* and *Aretha Now*) and nine Top 10 singles. All were produced by Wexler (sometimes with Arif Mardin). The songs were often augmented by saxophonist King Curtis and Franklin's sisters or the Sweet Inspirations; many featured some of the same Muscle Shoals band as on her first single. The music was either hard soul – "Chain of Fools," "Baby, I Love You," "(Sweet Sweet Baby) Since You've Been Gone" – or deep blues ("Drown in My Own Tears," "Ain't No Way"), sexy ("Dr. Feelgood") or even, in a way, devotional: the transcendent "(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman," by Gerry Goffin and Carole King.

The overnight fame came at a cost. "She'd been using booze to numb the pain of her lousy marriage," said her publicist Ruth Bowen. At a show in Columbus, Georgia, in May 1967, Franklin fell off the stage and broke her arm. She later claimed she'd been blinded by stage lights, but Bowen had been told it was caused by alcohol.

Two incidents in 1968 changed Franklin forever. The first was the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. on April 4th. C.L. Franklin and his children had been close to King for years; they had socialized and campaigned together. Riots erupted in more than 100 cities across America. Aretha attended King's funeral in Atlanta and visited with his widow, Coretta Scott King. On May 2nd, she released "Think," the keynote of her upcoming album, *Aretha Now*. The song seemed in part a response to the terrible times:

"People walking around every day/Playing games, taking scores/Trying to make other people lose their minds/Ah, be careful you don't lose yours."

The other troubling 1968 event was more personal. On June 28th, *Time* placed Franklin on its cover, declaring her the face of soul music. The article praised her talents but also portrayed her as despondent and described "Dr. Feelgood" as the tale of "a woman [who] works all day cooking and cleaning a house for white folks... Sex is the only thing she's got to look forward to." The implication was that the singer was paying some dues – a platitude commonly applied to blues singers. "What one of [Franklin's] burdens might be," *Time* disclosed, "came out last year when Aretha's husband, Ted White, roughed her up in public at Atlanta's Regency Hyatt House Hotel. It was not the first such incident."

Franklin resented *Time's* representation of her. As she herself noted, there was always much more to her voice than the accommodation or even transcendence of pain. There was also a lot of sass and demand of freedom; there was moral attestation. After both *Time's* story and the troubles of her marriage, Franklin gained a new reputation that she never shook, and perhaps never wanted to: She was now seen as aloof and unforthcoming, and that seemed fine with her.

Franklin was a battered woman whose voice gave a lot of other women recognition and courage. She divorced White in 1969. Until then, he still managed some of her business and tour dates and was credited as the co-writer of a handful of her songs. White also found "I Never Loved a Man" for Franklin. She was always reticent on the subject, though she later admitted, "Alcohol played a destructive role." Rod Hicks, a bassist who toured with Franklin at the time, told *Vanity Fair*, "[White] didn't have no pussycat. He had a tiger on his hands when that girl got drunk."

What some have called Franklin's golden era at Atlantic ran from early 1967 to early 1972. During that time, she was unquestionably the top solo female singing star, while also manifesting ongoing changes in black America's consciousness. "The black revolution certainly forced me and the majority of black people to begin taking a second look at ourselves," she later said. "But I must say that mine was a very personal evolution – an evolution of the me in myself... I've gained a great deal of confidence in myself."

Between 1970 and 1972, Franklin released her deepest series of recordings – three studio works (*This Girl's in Love With You* and *Spirit in the Dark*, both from 1970, and *Young, Gifted and Black*, 1972) and two live sets, *Aretha Live at Fillmore West* (1971) and *Amazing Grace* (1972). But these years also proved intense and variable for the singer. She was still in the aftermath of her volatile marriage to White while starting a new relationship with her road manager, Ken Cunningham (in March 1970 she gave birth to their son, Kecal). As a result, Franklin's live appearances were infrequent. "The sudden disappearance of Aretha was a frequent occurrence," said Wexler. "No one used the words 'nervous breakdown,' but we knew." But when Wexler got Franklin into his Miami studio, it resulted in what he described in his autobiography as "the sanctified sessions that produced *Spirit in the Dark*."

The album was perhaps Franklin's most inspired studio work – "a motherfucker," as Wexler put it – and felt more personal than anything prior. Like most clues in her life, it was made of polarities: wounded ("Don't Play That Song") at the same time it was bitter ("When the Battle Is Over"); devoted ("You and Me," "Honest I Do") yet betrayed ("One Way Ticket"); and sensual yet mystical ("Spirit in the Dark"). On one magnificent track, "The Thrill Is Gone (From Yesterday's Kiss)," Franklin sang of a disillusion that reflected on both her failed marriage and America's ongoing mistreatment of its black people. Yet Franklin also reaffirmed hope on 1972's *Young, Gifted and Black*, in a church-choir-like cover of Nina Simone's title song: "When you're feeling real low/Here's a great truth you should remember and know/That you're young, gifted and black/You got your soul intact – and that's a fact." Franklin arrived at her worldview through the prism of gospel politics. The suffering and hope in those songs wasn't simply a promise of freedom in heaven, but ultimately freedom on Earth.

The same year Franklin released *Young, Gifted and Black*, she also recorded her gospel tour de force, *Amazing Grace*. Some had criticized her for switching to secular music in 1959, and gospel audiences were notorious for shunning singers who had taken that route. In 1961, Franklin wrote a column for New York's black newspaper *Amsterdam News*, saying, "I don't think that in any matter I did the Lord a disservice when I made up my mind two years ago to switch over... After all, the blues is a music born out of the slavery-day sufferings of my people. Every song in the blues vein has a story to tell of love, frustrations and heartaches. I think that because true democracy hasn't overtaken us here that we as a people find the original blues songs still have meaning for us."

Franklin recruited the Rev. James Cleveland as pianist and moderator for the event, as well as his Southern California Community Choir for the performances at the New Temple Missionary Baptist Church in Los Angeles, plus she brought in her core electric band – an anomaly in a church setting. Over two nights in mid-January 1972, Wexler recorded the live services for a double-length album. New Temple had an ambience no studio could ever have provided, and more important, it had a fully involved audience who knew what true gospel music was. (Mick Jagger and Charlie Watts attended one of the evenings, and the music influenced *Exile on Main St.*)

Franklin paired secular songs with Martin Luther King Jr.'s favorite song, "Precious Lord, Take My Hand." She also sang hallowed spirituals such as "Climbing Higher Mountains," "Amazing Grace" (a 1779 Christian hymn by an Anglican clergyman and slave trader who believed God would grant forgiveness for his sins) and "Mary, Don't You Weep." The latter is among Franklin's most haunting vo-

cal, delivered at New Temple as a deathly, rocking march with the ghostly thunder of the choir pressing her on.

Amazing Grace was Franklin's most ambitious effort and most meaningful creation. With it she connected antebellum black history with modern-day black existential dread and its need for hope. It was a spiritual and political declaration, as well as a commercial triumph: Contrary to expectations, it became the singer's best-selling album. It capped what had been called "the Age of Aretha" – a spirit of optimism that was also informed by the knowledge of suffering. It was Franklin's own summation of, in the words of a Clara Ward song on the album, how she "got over," how she made it through a wondrous yet tumultuous period: "My soul look back and wonder how I got over." That had to be some comfort, because *Amazing Grace* was also one of the singer's last great successes for a long time. The age of Aretha was over.

AROUND 1972, Franklin had developed a friendship with Quincy Jones and wanted to work with him; he had a wide-ranging and impeccable sensibility. "The problem," said a miffed Wexler, "was that Quincy took forever and a day to cut the sides, well over a year, a critical period when Aretha could ill afford to be out of the spotlight." The album that finally resulted in June 1973, *Hey Now Hey (The Other Side of the Sky)*, was the most controversial of Franklin's career – although its complex ambitions have weathered the test of time, making it perhaps Franklin's lost masterpiece.

Wexler returned for three of Franklin's mid-1970s albums, but while they weren't as terrible as some claimed, they were pro forma and never reached for new heights. In 1975, Wexler left Atlantic and worked largely as a freelance producer. Franklin herself enjoyed a fleeting resurgence in 1976 with *Sparkle*, a soundtrack album. Written and produced by Curtis Mayfield, it was the sort of wonderful one-shot soul-school miracle that made plain that Franklin could still find those heights with the right material. Instead, after *Sparkle* her quality bottomed out.

Franklin, like her father, was a complicated person, but she didn't want anybody to know just how much. Several close to her – including family – described her as depressive. Shortly after Franklin moved into a Manhattan townhouse in 1973, she fell into nightmares. "[Aretha] was really off-kilter," said Carolyn Franklin. "Ultimately, we had no choice but to get her to a hospital." Franklin was furious when the incident was reported, and she pressured *Jet* magazine to run an article portraying her positively, under the title ARETHA BURIES RUMORS ABOUT "GOING CRAZY." Soon after, though, according to her brother Cecil, "Aretha fell back into depression... I

"The sudden disappearance of Aretha was a frequent occurrence," Wexler said. "No one used the words 'nervous breakdown,' but we knew."

couldn't figure out how to break her out of the blues. These blues were deep." Said Erma, "Here's the thing about my sister. You think these breakdowns are a pervasive pattern. And in a sense, they are. Ultimately, though, she doesn't stay down. . . . It may take her a while, but her commitment to her career is strong as steel."

In the winter of 1975, Franklin moved to Encino, California, with her boyfriend Ken Cunningham. In June 1977, *Jet* ran another feature: STILL ON A THRONE, ARETHA LOSES WEIGHT, LOOKS AHEAD. She had lost 40 pounds and was proud of it. Clearly, she believed she still had a regal reputation to uphold, and breakdowns or not, she wanted to appear happy and assured to the public. Cunningham helped Franklin curb her drinking and bore influence on her sense of black pride. The couple had a son together, but never married, and came to a cordial parting within a year of moving to the Los Angeles area. In January 1977, Franklin started a new relationship with actor Glynn Turman. The two married in April 1978 at her father's church in Detroit, with C.L. officiating. At the time she told *Jet*, "I have no emotional hang-ups. No problems. Just those of everyday nature that all people have. . . . Above all, I am happy."

Some saw this as a front. "If you read the version of her life that Aretha gives to the magazines," said her younger sister, Carolyn, "you'd never think she had a care in the world. I know that was her heart's desire. . . . But if you think she stopped thinking about how to get her career back on track, you're wrong. And if you also think there weren't career clashes between her and Glynn, you're doubly wrong."

In June 1979, Franklin got offstage in Las Vegas and learned that her father had been near death at his home on LaSalle in Detroit. He had confronted a team of robbers invading the house, and one had shot him in the right knee and right groin. C.L. had lain on the floor for some time, bleeding. The preacher had already been on a decline. Though he was still royalty in Detroit, he was no longer formidable. "Toward the end, sickness and drink ravaged the once-brave voice," wrote Anthony Heilbut in *The Fan Who Knew Too Much*. "On a rare healthy Sunday, he could still manage to whoop, holler, and shout the house." When Franklin arrived at the hospital, the reverend was in a coma that he would never emerge from.

C.L. Franklin died at home on July 27th, 1984. For three days, mourners stood in the city's sweltering heat so they could pass his coffin and pay their last respects. The funeral itself, on August 4th, at New Bethel, was among the largest in Detroit's history. The Rev. Jesse Jackson – who had known the family for years and who had campaigned that spring for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination – was the first to speak. He told the gathered that C.L. "was a prophet" and that his voice had uplifted black Americans for decades.

AS SOME CLOSE TO Franklin knew well, the singer's grief could turn into anger. A short time after their father's funeral, her sister Carolyn told an interviewer the family was worried whether Aretha could survive C.L.'s death. "My mouth fell open," Aretha wrote in *From These Roots*. "Had she forgotten about my faith and trust in God? We were all raised by the same father, who instilled in us the spiritual strength to survive the most trying times." Franklin wouldn't talk to her sister for months after that.

Meanwhile, there had been tensions between Franklin and Turman. He was an actor, and adjusting to second place behind Franklin hadn't been easy for him. During her father's years in a coma, Franklin eventually moved back to C.L.'s house, effectively declaring that the family and her career were now paramount. In the summer of 1982, Franklin suddenly and enigmatically separated from Turman; they divorced in 1984. Some saw it coming. Franklin would never comment on the dissolution. In his biography of Franklin, Mark Bego wrote, "The most widely circulated rumor stated that Aretha – allegedly – discovered Glynn having an affair with someone who was quite close to her, and that it instantly marked the end of their relationship."

In 1980, Franklin signed with Clive Davis' label, Arista. Whereas Wexler was respected and daunting, Davis was beguiling and had the golden touch. If anybody could rejuvenate Franklin's puzzlingly stuck career, it was Davis. He brought in Arif Mardin, who'd worked with Franklin at Atlantic, and Chuck Jackson (who'd helped launch Natalie Cole's career) to co-produce her October 1980 kick-off for the label, *Aretha*. "Aretha and Clive were very clear in that they wanted this record to have a certain sheen," said Mardin. Both *Aretha* and its 1981 follow-up, *Love All the Hurt Away*, were clearly transitional: She was trying to find her voice and soul amid bigger and slicker arrangements. However, the musical framing fit the fashion of the early 1980s, at the cost of too often containing her vocals.

Franklin was on Arista Records from 1980 to 2007: 27 years, a much longer period than with Atlantic. Davis believed that the right production team made all the difference – psychologically as much as musically. Franklin wasn't receptive to producers who told her how and when to sing. In 1981, Davis brought in Luther Vandross, whose mellow, silken-voiced solo debut, *Never Too Much*, was sailing near the top of the charts. Franklin was standoffish at first – "formal," said Vandross. "Miss Franklin wanted to know if Mr. Vandross had any songs that were suitable for her. . . . Clearly, I had to audition." It turned out that Mr. Vandross had "Jump to It" for Miss Franklin: a song that awakened her gospel sensibility but sublimated it through layers of sound that were rich, pulsing, tuneful and savvy to the moment. The result yielded her first Top 40 hit

in years, and an album of the same title that peaked at Number 23. *Jump to It* fit the times – rather than embodying them – but that was just enough at a crucial moment: Franklin was back.

The problem was, along with all that greatness came Franklin's temperament and the deep mystery of her selves – one she claimed, one she concealed; one self that raised her, another that sabotaged her. Vandross came to know them all. In 1983, as they recorded *Get It Right*, the follow-up to *Jump to It*, said Vandross, "Anytime I gave the slightest comment, she screamed, 'If you think you can do it better, then you sing the damn thing.' 'Fine,' I finally said. 'I'll see you later, Miss Franklin. . . .' 'Just apologize,' said Clive. 'That's all she wants.' I listened to the man and apologized." He and Franklin had an up-and-down relationship from then on, but after Vandross died on July 1st, 2005, from a heart attack, Franklin sang at his funeral.

By that time, a plane trip wasn't a simple effort for Franklin. In 1983, eager to return home to Detroit after some shows in Atlanta, she decided to take the last flight out – a two-engine prop. The plane did a couple of drastic drops (and, Franklin claimed, turned upside down at one point), provoking fear in everybody aboard and opening an everlasting anxiety for Franklin. She felt terrorized by the incident and never flew again. To get to Vandross' New York funeral, she traveled by bus.

Franklin both flourished and floundered in the years after her fear of flying set in. In 1984, she recorded *Who's Zoomin' Who?*, with Narada Michael Walden as primary producer. It would become her first platinum album. Walden was imaginative and diverse: He had drummed with John McLaughlin and the Mahavishnu Orchestra and with Jeff Beck, and had made R&B-dance-pop of his own for Atlantic. He co-wrote the album's two Top 10 hits, "Freeway of Love" and the title song. *Who's Zoomin' Who?* also included a third hit single, "Sisters Are Doin' It for Themselves," a feminist declaration, sung with Eurythmics' Annie Lennox. Wexler, watching from afar, said, "[Walden] helped Aretha move into what became the most profitable chapter of her career. But when I listen to their work together, I don't hear her voice soaring. I hear her screaming. . . . As a vocalist, you age gracefully. Did Aretha do this? I'm afraid not."

In 1987, Franklin returned to the source of her greatest glory, gospel music, for another live double album, *One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism*, recorded this time at the family's New Bethel Baptist Church, and produced solely by the singer. But this gospel outing disappointed. In part it was the flow – too many guest singers and sermons – and some tracks ambled then faded unnaturally. Behind the scenes, the album also illustrated traits that Franklin had increasingly become known for: her mistrust of others and her perplexing discourtesy. Franklin had sung a live duet with Mavis Staples on "Oh Happy Day" at New Bethel, but Franklin – worried that Staples outperformed her – re-recorded the vocals in the studio.

Sometimes Franklin's feuds became as fabled as her singing. Over the years she had tensions with Martha Reeves, Diana Ross, Natalie Cole, Mavis Staples, Whitney Houston, Tina Turner, Dionne Warwick and Patti LaBelle. In fact, Franklin and LaBelle refused to be onstage together. [Cont. on 96]

"Anytime I gave the slightest comment," Luther Vandross recalled, "she screamed, 'If you think you can do it better, you sing the damn thing.'"

ARETHA'S UNSTOPPABLE SPIRIT

Inside Her Final Years

By David Browne

LESS THAN A WEEK before her death, Aretha Franklin was on the phone with a friend, planning her next record. “I knew she was under the weather,” says Harvey Mason Jr., an R&B producer and session pro known for his work with Whitney Houston, Michael Jackson and Justin Timberlake. “But she said, ‘Harvey, when are we going to start recording? I want hit records! I want stuff that’s going to be on the radio!’”

The Queen of Soul had been outrunning her own mortality since December 2010, when she underwent surgery for what was later revealed to be pancreatic cancer. The same illness that took the life of Steve Jobs, it’s a slow-moving killer; Jobs lived with it for years, and Franklin held on for eight. “Even in 2014, the diagnosis was there,” says Kenny “Babyface” Edmonds, who worked on her *Sings the Great Diva Classics* album that year. “She would say, ‘I’ve got some health issues I’m fighting. But I’m-a push on.’”

For Franklin, that meant a slew of big plans that might have overwhelmed many younger artists, including several possible new albums and a biopic. She spoke with both Mason and Edmonds about working on what she hoped would be her first album of new material since 2011. In her quest to remain relevant, Franklin was determined to make a radio-friendly set featuring new songs written for her by Edmonds, Stevie Wonder and Elton John. “She was competitive and creative to the end,” says Tracey Jordan, Franklin’s friend and former publicist. “She was always listening to the radio and wanting to know what the kids were listening to. It kept her going.”

According to Jordan, Franklin enjoyed Ariana Grande’s music, but was particularly “feisty” on the subject of other younger singers who used Auto-Tune. “She felt that was kind of cheating,” Jordan says. She was a constant texter – “like crazy,” Edmonds says. (Friends could tell she’d recently done her nails by the missing letters.) In her free time, she was also a devoted viewer of *The Haves and the Have Nots*, a TV series on the OWN network about three Savannah, Georgia, families and their secrets.

Franklin kept a presence on the touring circuit, playing roughly one concert a month for the first nine months of 2017 – always at venues that could be reached by bus, due to her fear of flying. She was forced to cancel a summer date in Toronto on doctor’s orders, but she made it to the Mann Center for the Performing Arts in Philadelphia, where she’d last performed in 2010. Mann CEO Catherine Cahill was struck by how much weight she’d lost as her illness advanced: “It was a dramatic change. There was concern that she wouldn’t make the show.”

Yet the concert became a mighty testament to Franklin’s unbreakable spirit. Dressed in a white dress with a chinchilla sweater despite the August heat, she danced gently during a 90-minute set that spanned decades of hits, from “Respect” to “Freeway of Love.” She offered up a stirring gospel tribute to her mentor, the late Clara Ward, and dug into the blues with a sultry version of B.B. King’s “Sweet Sixteen.” All night, Franklin ignored a plush red armchair that the venue had set up in case she needed it. But when she sat down at the piano, she sounded melancholy as she recalled playing long-gone local clubs. “Life’s been good to me,” she said. In her dressing room afterward, she seemed particularly tired.

By last November, when she sang her final, short set at Elton’s AIDS Foundation benefit in New York, the cancer had returned and spread. Franklin canceled her remaining dates and began spending more time at her condo at Detroit’s Riverfront Towers. Frequently in pain and sleeping during the day, she only rarely went out for walks.

When she was able, Franklin continued to call and text friends and colleagues about all the work she still hoped to do. “She was optimistic,” says Mason. “Maybe that was a disguise. But she never said, ‘I feel like I have limited time.’” She and Mason were in regular contact

about the movie of her life; Franklin told him she hoped to sing on the soundtrack along with the announced star, Jennifer Hudson. She also talked about making her first gospel record since 1987, and she was in almost weekly touch with Clive Davis, who was planning a tribute concert for this fall at Madison Square Garden. “I’m going to be there,” she informed a close friend this summer.

In her last few days, Franklin was surrounded by family: her son Eddie, her niece Sabrina Garrett Owens, her cousin and backup singer Brenda Corbett, and her boyfriend, Willie Wilkerson, a retired Detroit firefighter. As word got out that she was near the end, friends including Wonder, Jesse Jackson and her second ex-husband, Glynn Turman, flew to Detroit to visit. With Jackson, whom she had first met as the teenage daughter of the Rev. C.L. Franklin, she held hands and prayed. “We had a good talk,” says Jackson. “I thought she was ready. It was a miraculous moment.” By then, Franklin was awake but unable to speak much, and the calls and texts had stopped. “She lived all the way, always,” says Edmonds. “The only thing that was going to stop her was God. Other than that, she was going to live.”

Additional reporting by Elias Leight



Franklin at her final performance, November 2017