

the curious position of having to defend themselves for not being "black" enough for some of their critics and for being too militant for others, their success undeniably helped to break down color barriers in the pop scene, evidenced by the breakthrough of the first major black solo female artist, Aretha Franklin, who burst onto the pop charts in 1967 with four Top 10 hits.

Aretha Louise Franklin was born in Memphis in 1942, but grew up in Detroit, where she moved with her family as a child. She became involved in music at a young age, as her father, Reverend Clarence LaVaugh Franklin (known as C. L. Franklin), was the pastor of Detroit's New Bethel Baptist Church. Reverend Franklin's electrifying sermons regularly drew packed houses and were eventually broadcast on radio and released on Chess Records.

Aretha began playing piano at age eight, initially taking lessons but stopping when she found them too constricting—she preferred teaching herself. She was soon appearing in church alongside her father, singing her first solo at age twelve, where she was an instant success; she also played piano for the church choir and sang in a gospel quartet with her sister Erma. When her father put together a traveling show, featuring singing acts and a sermon, Aretha joined them on the road during school vacations. At fourteen, she recorded her first album, *Songs of Faith*, for Chess.

Aretha's musical apprenticeship was further enhanced by the house guests her father entertained, many of whom were significant black performers, including Mahalia Jackson, Clara Ward, Art Tatum, Sam Cooke, Dinah Washington, and Reverend Cleveland, who taught Franklin how to play piano by ear. Franklin credited Ward with giving her initial inspiration: "Clara knocked me out!" she told Mark Bego in *Aretha Franklin: The Queen of Soul*. "From then on I knew what I wanted to do—sing! I liked all of Miss Ward's records." Dinah Washington was another favorite, as was Sam Cooke, whose successful shift from gospel to pop was a move that Franklin began considering for herself.

In early 1960, she made her decision and moved to New York City to try and make it as a blues singer. Shortly after her arrival, she recorded a demo of "Today I Sing the Blues," produced by Major "Mule" Holly, a bass player for pianist Teddy Wilson and a friend of her father. The song's author, Curtis Lewis, then brought the demo, along with other songs he'd written, to John Hammond, then working for Columbia Records. Hammond, who had produced Bessie Smith's last recordings and had discovered and produced Billie Holiday, was impressed with Franklin's performance and signed her to Columbia. Her first album, *Aretha*, was released the following year, the first of ten albums she would record for the label. But though a number of the songs she recorded were hits on the R&B charts, only one would land in the pop Top 40, and none of her albums would have any crossover hits.

Columbia initially decided they wanted to present Franklin as a jazz artist, and following the release of *Aretha* she toured on the nightclub circuit and appeared at the Newport Jazz Festival in 1962. But as she began working with different producers, the songs she recorded spanned a wide range of material that included jazz, blues, show tunes, standards, and ballads: "God Bless the Child," "Over the Rainbow," "Ol' Man River," "Why Was I Born," and "Try a Little Tenderness." Her sole Top 40 hit on Columbia came in 1961 with "Rock-A-Bye Your Baby with a Dixie Melody," which reached number 37. She also recorded cover versions of contemporary hits like "My Guy," "Walk on By," "Every Little Bit Hurts," and Betty Everett's "The Shoop Shoop Song (It's in His Kiss)" as well as a tribute album of Dinah Washington songs, *Unforgettable*, released in 1964 after her idol's death the previous year. Her albums also featured some of her own piano work and included backup vocals from the Warwick Singers, run by Dionne Warwick's sister Dee Dee and featuring Cissy Houston (Whitney Houston's mother) and Myrna Smith; later Houston and Smith would form their own group, the Sweet Inspirations, who would provide backup for Aretha's records at Atlantic.

Franklin's first husband, Ted White, was also her manager during her years with Columbia. Franklin met White when he visited her father's house while traveling with Dinah Washington. They married in 1961 and had two children; Franklin also had a son she'd given birth to at age fifteen. Once White became Franklin's manager, he was frequently in conflict with Columbia over the direction her career should take. He also attended her recording sessions, where some of the producers, particularly Clyde Otis, who became Franklin's producer in 1964, found his presence inhibiting to Aretha: "He'd come in, and if she wanted to have a little bit of fun by cutting loose, he'd look at her, and that was it," Otis told Mark Bego. For his part, White found Otis a "dictator" who wanted to push Franklin in the wrong musical direction. The one thing everyone did agree on was that when Franklin's contract with Columbia ran out in 1966 she would not re-sign with the label, and after leaving Columbia she was immediately picked up by Atlantic Records' Jerry Wexler.

Wexler had been following Franklin's career since her Chess Records days and felt what she lacked during her stay with Columbia was a clear focus. He also wanted to push her as a major R&B artist, a direction Aretha was eager to pursue. After signing Franklin, Wexler arranged for her to record at the Fame Studios in Muscle Shoals, Alabama, to add an authentic southern sound to Franklin's music. Unfortunately, the recording session lasted a single night; while recording "I Never Loved a Man (The Way I Love You)," White got in an argument with one of the white trumpet players, and the next morning both White and Franklin returned to Detroit. Franklin ended up

recor
on a
W
releas
reach
single
numb
been
phras
have
and s
with
her p
burn
"F
Brow
of se
their
four-
alcol
visio
out i
Davi
broa
fren
just
B
A
succ
Re
(Y
196
wal
mar
20
fun
for

recording the rest of her Atlantic debut album in New York, again playing keyboards on a number of cuts, using her sisters Erma and Carolyn as backup vocalists.

When "I Never Loved a Man" (also the title of her first Atlantic album) was released in February 1967, it quickly found success on both the pop and R&B charts, reaching number 9 and number 1, respectively; the LP went to number 2. Her second single, "Respect" (written and recorded by Otis Redding, whose version went to number 35 in 1965), did even better, topping both charts. Aretha and Carolyn had been working on their own arrangement of "Respect" for some time, incorporating the phrase "sock it to me" ("Another in the long list of sexual terms from blues or jazz that have passed into respectable everyday language," *Time* magazine would helpfully note) and spelling out the song's title. The contrast of Franklin's subdued work at Columbia with the passionate new songs she was recording for Atlantic was immediately apparent; her powerful voice, which sang out with a clear purity in her Columbia work was now burning with a fire that the public found irresistible.

"Respect" hit a potent nerve in 1967, the same year Black Power activist H. Rap Brown became the new leader of SNCC. Riots broke out in the black neighborhoods of several cities across America throughout the summer; the Vandellas were performing their "inflammatory" number "Dancing in the Streets" in Detroit on the very night a four-day riot was sparked by the arrest of seventy-four black men charged with drinking alcohol in an unlicensed establishment after-hours. "Newspapers, periodicals and television commentators pondered the question of 'Why?' as Aretha Franklin spelled it all out in one word, *R-E-S-P-E-C-T!*" wrote Phyl Garland in *The Soul Scene*, and *Ebony* writer David Llorens dubbed 1967 "the summer of 'Retha, Rap and Revolt!'" But "Respects'" broad appeal was also due to the fact that the song could be read in a number of different ways. "It could be a racial situation, it could be a political situation, it could be just the man-woman situation," Tom Dowd, the recording engineer for the song, told *Rolling Stone*, adding, "Anybody could identify with it. It cut a lot of ground."

After spending most of the decade well out of the public eye as far as commercial success was concerned, Franklin spent the next few years making up for lost time. "Respect" was followed into the Top 10 by "Baby, I Love You," Goffin-King-Wexler's "(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman" and the LP *Aretha Arrives*. She began 1968 with a smash hit single and album, "Chain of Fools" (which featured Ellie Greenwich on backing vocals) and *Lady Soul*; each went to number 2 in the charts. During the rest of 1968 and 1969 she would have eleven further Top 40 singles, three more Top 20 albums (including the live set *Aretha in Paris* and a greatest hits package), and win the first two in a string of ten consecutive Grammy awards. In addition to their work on her records, Aretha's sisters were also signed to record labels, Carolyn recording for



Aretha Franklin
June 1969 at Caesar's Palace, Las Vegas, Courtesy of the
Las Vegas News Bureau

his status as a "burden" was to be short-lived, for the couple divorced in 1969. If groups of the time were often perceived as being easily manipulated—as the girl groups had been—the problem was magnified for a solo performer, particularly those managed by spouses or relatives who were assumed to have more of a "genuine" interest in working for the performer's benefit. Women, traditionally expected to maintain a subservient role even if they were stars, were in an even weaker position to question whether the authority over their careers might be misplaced. In Franklin's case, her divorce from White allowed her to fully establish her own identity and give full rein to her musical talents.

RCA and Erma recording for the Shout and Brunswick labels; Erma would have a Top 10 hit in the R&B charts in 1967 with "Piece of My Heart," later recorded by Janis Joplin.

By the end of the decade Aretha Franklin was clearly one of America's top female singers and an international star. But problems in her personal life continued to intrude on her professional life. In 1968, she was traumatized by a cover story in *Time*, which painted a picture of Franklin as the shining, if "chunky," star suffering from the pain inflicted by her "private demons," quoting her as saying, "I might be just twenty-six, but I'm an old woman in disguise—twenty-six goin' on sixty-five." The article also identified White as one of her primary "burdens," alleging that he had assaulted Franklin in public. White sued the magazine over the statement (the case was later dismissed), but

I
and
dest
wor
nor
ally
Tur
fam
teen
olde
of
cian
reco
Brer
King
the
T
gott
autc
men
nigh
blew
said
ban
Top
T
enlis
sion
cred
two
R&B
Rev
reco
ance
afici
Mo
arra