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Playboy Archives: Aretha Franklin at the Playboy Club in Cincinnati, 1960s

CIVIL LIBERTIES

Remembering Aretha's Voice in the Civil Rights Movement

Written by Taylor Crumpton

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In 1960, when an 18-year-old **Aretha Franklin** made her debut at the Chicago Playboy Club, she was earning \$250 a week. Still a relative unknown, she was weaving her way through the night club circuit as a jazz artist and became one of the earlier performers booked for the Chicago venue. It would be one of her first performances for a white audience, and, it being the height of the Civil Rights Movement, would signal the start of what would be decades of crossing racial barriers.

One can write endlessly on what she did for music, fusing gospel and jazz, therefore giving birth to the new sound of soul, but equally remarkable was her activism. For the Queen of Soul, the personal was always political.

Franklin's artistry was influenced by her father, C.L. Franklin, known for his ministry and civil rights demonstrations in Detroit, as well as their family friend, Martin Luther King, Jr.

"Aretha was part of a family that was committed to the movement. It is hard for me to separate her from her father. She had been involved ever since she was a little girl through the work of her father," Rev. Daniel Aldridge, Detroit-based civil rights activist, said to *The Detroit News*. Coached by black singer-activists Dinah Washington and Mahalia Jackson, she learned from a young age how to use her voice as a black woman to uplift her community.

Her activism brought in intergenerational support from communities worldwide and drew eyes to human rights abuses happening in the South. "The Voice of Black America," she toured with Harry Belafonte, a sociopolitical activist and entertainer, to raise funds for Dr. King and Rev. Jesse Jackson for protest efforts. At King's funeral in 1968, she performed "Take My Hand, Precious Lord," a black gospel classic that reflected the black liberation theologies that influenced her, King, and the ongoing struggle against injustice.

Perhaps one of her lesser known acts of heroism was when Franklin utilized her voice to support Angela Davis, a radical black political activist and member of the Communist Party, who was accused of purchasing firearms and charged with conspiracy, kidnapping and murder. While President Richard Nixon referred to Davis as a "terrorist," Franklin came out saying she would gladly post her bail: "Angela Davis must go free...I know you got to disturb the peace when you can't get no peace...She's a black woman, and she wants freedom for black people." Franklin attributed to her financial successes to the black community who supported her career, and felt inclined to redistribute her wealth "in ways that will help our people."

“

In her voice, we could feel our history, all of it and in every shade. She helped us feel more connected to each other, more hopeful, more human.

Her voice possessed the ability to bring people to tears, evidenced by former President Barack Obama during her performance at the Kennedy Center in 2015. Throughout his presidency, Franklin performed several times, from “My Country, Tis of Thee” at his inauguration in 2009 to “Lord Lift Me Up” at the White House in 2015. Her singing and her spirit spoke to countless black Americans who, for generations, could only dream about America having a black president.

“Through her compositions and unmatched musicianship, 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. She helped us feel more connected to each other, more hopeful, more human,” the Obamas said of Franklin’s musical lineage in a statement on Thursday.

As the decades passed, Franklin returned to her hometown of Detroit and contributed to New Bethel, her deceased father’s church where she found her voice, through donations and fundraising concerts. At the age of 75, she headlined the Detroit Music Weekend festival, which stimulated economic and social development in the city for residents. Throughout her career, she always found ways to support the city that raised her.

And though this may be glossed over in the coverage of her passing, Franklin was always here for the black woman, and she never let her crossover appeal to white listeners dilute that. No one will ever forget what is perhaps her most iconic ballad, “Respect,” and how it

quickly became and still remains an anthem for black women. An unblinking demand for dignity, the 1967 Grammy-winning song was a declaration of freedom and a call to action—at a time when black women were expected to forego their own needs for the sake of the larger movement.

Franklin's music provided historic commentary on the black civil right activists who found their humanity in the midst of an overt white supremacist government that targeted and terrorized black leaders. Her discography is filled with themes of womanism and black pride, and enabled listeners to journey through brutal eras of state-sanctioned violence against the community she loved, and was a part of. Franklin sang the American songbook through the voice of black America, and gave birth to a generation of black entertainers who revolutionized their platforms to amplify the silenced and unseen.

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