



Remembering the American Queen: Aretha Franklin (1942-2018)

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Abstract

In this relational vignette Watson recalls growing up in and around Detroit as Aretha Franklin and other great local singers, many with Motown, rose to prominence. Franklin's style was informed not only by her childhood singing gospel songs in her father's church but also by her musical passion and activist politics. Unable to attend any of the informal tributes in Detroit around Franklin's memorial service because she was out of the country, Watson relates how a Berlin gathering became a spontaneous memorial to Franklin's musical genius.

Keywords: Aretha Franklin, Aretha Franklin funeral, Queen of Soul, Aretha Franklin in Detroit

An occupational hazard of working in life narrative is catching the disease--becoming so reflective about life, others' and one's own, that the mind starts framing the past in autobiographical stories. Or maybe that's just an effect of getting old[er], as occurs with so many writers looking back on their lives? I've been writing short memoir pieces for a few decades now, although not on the scale of such full-fledged works as Tom Couser's *Letter to My Father: A Memoir* or the relational narrative that Sidonie Smith co-wrote with her late husband Greg Grieco, *Canio's Secret: A Memoir of Ethnicity, Electricity, and My Immigrant Grandfather's Wisdom*. But, as one publisher's wry remark quoted in *Reading Autobiography* observed, 'Everybody's got one in 'em'. For me, there are nuggets of several stories, a few of them published over the years--on Ben Franklin, on 'Pieces of My Heart'. More are in progress, including reflections on the first year of Covid that brought things to a grinding halt. This piece, part of a larger project on living in Berlin, is a relational sketch.

It is four years since Aretha Franklin passed away--crossed over, some would say--on August 16, 2018, outside Detroit. As someone just a few years younger who grew up in Detroit and its suburb, Royal Oak, I was knocked out when I first heard Aretha sing. 'You Made Me Feel Like a Natural Woman' surely did. The focus of her lyrics on struggles with men who could be possessive, dominating, or abusive was the experience of so many of us coming of age in the Sixties. And her soaring voice and pulsating rhythms took back the power that those relationships seemed to steal. Granted I'm a white woman and I never attended Detroit's New Bethel Baptist Church (on what is now called C.L. Franklin Blvd.) where Aretha sang gospel songs as a teenager and her famed father C.L. regularly preached, though I've heard recordings of his extraordinary sermons. But I regarded Aretha as Ours--a Detroiter who didn't like to travel, who was implicated in the thrilling rise of Motown even if she didn't record for it and has a different style on the Atlantic recordings she laid down in Mussel Shoals. Along with Martha Reeves, Diana Ross, and Mary Wilson, she defined the Sixties and forever stained with passion my memories of the decade.

Everyone knows that Aretha was and always will be the Queen of Soul, up in the pantheon. That's why, although I've lived in Columbus, Ohio for the last quarter-century--as close to Michigan as I could get as an academic--after she passed away, I wanted to go up to Detroit and be among the crowd at Bethel Baptist during the week of paying tribute to her. Or stand outside the memorial service at Greater Grace Temple, where on August 31, 2018, she was laid to rest, her costumes changed throughout the day, in a gold-plated bronze casket surrounded by thousands of pink roses, as over a hundred pink Cadillacs lined up along West 7 Mile Road to pay

homage. Smokey Robinson, Rev. Jesse Jackson, Cicely Tyson, Gladys Knight, Ariana Grande, Bill Clinton, and former NBA Piston Isiah Thomas were among the many luminaries attending. From what I saw on television, the eight-hour ceremony must have been magnificent. The tributes culminated with Stevie Wonder calling for a movement ‘to make love great again’ and singing his song ‘As’ – ‘I’ll be loving you always’.

What gets mentioned less is that Aretha meant a lot to women. I can’t speak for Black women, much less for Black Detroit women in music. But I felt her power, although I grew up in an area of East Detroit saturated with Polish immigrant families and went to an elementary school where Polish was taught. (The only word I remember is ‘Dupka’--ass.) When, one Friday in fall 1962, at the start of my freshman year at Western Michigan University, I met Diana Ross, Mary Wilson, and Florence Ballard, who would become the Supremes, in my Draper Hall dorm where they were visiting B.K., the girl next door, they were skinny, scrappy teenagers like me. They came to the Hoekje (pronounced Hokey--you can’t make these things up) Hall mixer that night to try out a new song--my memory is that it was ‘Baby Love’, but that doesn’t seem possible, as it wasn’t recorded till 1964. In any case we thought their music wasn’t that good to dance to; we preferred the Contours singing ‘Do you love me . . . now that I can dance’. And Aretha didn’t break through until late 1967, with ‘I Never Loved a Man (the Way That I Love You)’. But the passion and, yes, pain in how she sang crossed boundaries between gospel, soul, and pop music at a time when Freedom Riders and protest marchers were challenging them locally and nationally.

Aretha was politically active in her own way. Martin Luther King repeatedly saluted her for her sustained support of the Civil Rights Movement, and the two remained close until he was murdered in 1968. In 1970, Aretha offered to post bail for activist-feminist philosopher Angela Davis, who was being held in jail on trumped-up charges. After she passed away, Davis praised that offer as an example of who Aretha ALWAYS was.¹ In fact, Aretha was considered politically so active that the FBI tracked her for forty years, from 1967 to 2007, using ‘false phone calls, surveillance, infiltration and highly placed sources’ in attempts – which never succeeded – to show she was a radical, ‘militant Black power’ activist.² Although Aretha could be difficult about song and image rights, she supported other Black artists in myriad ways. Intriguingly, at her memorial service Reverend Al Sharpton responded to a boast by Donald Trump that she had ‘worked’ for him, by saying, ‘No. Aretha used to *perform* for you. She worked for us’.³

Perhaps Aretha's politics are best conveyed by the 1972 concert, *Amazing Grace*, recorded live in January 1972 at the New Temple Missionary Baptist Church in Los Angeles and released as a documentary in 2018. There, Aretha sang her own arrangement of 'Amazing Grace' and several other hymns, backed by gospel singer James Cleveland and the Southern California Community Choir, to a rapt crowd that included Mick Jagger and other rock luminaries.⁴ Its gospel songs express a yearning for liberation, release from suffering, and joy in coming together that epitomize African American experience over four centuries.⁵

When Aretha passed away in August 2018, though I grieved like so many, I couldn't go to Detroit to stand outside her memorial service or the preceding week of paying tribute at New Bethel Church. Because I'd agreed to be part of a workshop in Berlin at the end of August, I would be out of the country. How could I bear witness to the greatness of the Queen of Soul?

In Berlin, I spent a few weeks participating in a Free University 'pathographics' workshop and seeing friends. One Sunday, Gudrun and Gerhard proposed that we visit a new Wall museum and walk the long stretch of Bernauer Street marking where it formerly separated East Berlin from West--with an electrified wall, guard towers with search-lights, and dogs on chains. We walked from there to Prenzlauer Berg, a gentrified part of the eastern sector, and on to the vast Mauerpark flea market and outdoor concert arena nearby. On that hot, sunny afternoon it was packed with people of all ages, many of them the street-folk who throng parts of Berlin.

We stopped to watch a black-clad group of young men breakdancing on the stage. They did amazing flips and pretzel gyrations as they waved at the large, seated crowd who watched and cheered. Then they stopped dancing to introduce themselves as Bronx break-dancers, and announced that for their next number they needed quiet. A hush fell over the crowd as the speakers began playing a Dionne Warwick song that Aretha had covered in 1967 and made her own—'I Say a Little Prayer for You'. The dancers linked arms in a circle, bent over deeply, and remained unmoving throughout the entire song. Even before a German crowd with little idea of who Aretha was, it was a tribute. I stood glued to the spot as my eyes filled with tears, pierced with the sadness and solemnity of a memorial.

Respect.

About the Author

Julia Watson is Academy Professor Emerita of Comparative Studies at The Ohio State University, a former Associate Dean of Arts and Sciences, an affiliated professor of Germanic Languages & Literatures and Women's, Gender, & Sexuality Studies, and a core faculty member of Project Narrative. With Sidonie Smith she has co-authored *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (2nd. ed., 2010) and *Life Writing in the Long Run: A Smith & Watson Autobiography Studies Reader* of their collaborative and solo essays (2017, open access). They have also co-edited four collections of essays and a volume of short texts, and coauthored several essays, recently in the areas of testimony, online life narrative, and archives. Watson's most recent essays are on autoethnographic film, online publishing, and women's graphic memoirs, including Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* and Miriam Katin's *Letting It Go*. She has lectured and taught in 20 countries.

Notes

¹ www.democracynow.org/2018/8/17/angela_davis

² See 'Aretha Franklin Was Tracked By the FBI for 40 Years. Here's What's In Her File.' *Rolling Stone*. Jenn Dize, Afeni Evans. October 2, 2022. Her file, first received through the Freedom of Information Act in 2018, is 270 pages long. 'Despite the four decades of surveillance and hundreds of pages of notes, the bureau ultimately never discovered anything linking Queen of Soul to any type of extremist or "radical" activities.' <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/aretha-franklin-fbi-file-surveillance-1234602217/>

³ Cited by Valerie Lee in *Sisterlocking Discourse: Race, Gender, and the Twenty-first Century Academy*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2021, 131. She notes that videos of Sharpton's speech are easily accessible online.

⁴ The live recording of the *Amazing Grace* concert was released as a double album in 1972 and awarded the 1973 Grammy for Best Soul Gospel. But, for complex technical and legal reasons, the film, directed by Sydney Pollack, was only released as a concert-documentary after Franklin's death in 2018.

⁵ There are also the 2021 film *Respect* starring Jennifer Hudson as Aretha and the--in my view much stronger--television series *Genius* starring Cynthia Erivo, who is compelling and moving in the role. But no one else can embody the depth and charge of Aretha's heart-rending performances.