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THE AMAZING
GRACE OF
ARETHA
FRANKLIN

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50 YEARS AGO, ARETHA FRANKLIN CROSSED BOUNDARIES OF RACE, CLASS, AND GENRE TO CREATE ONE OF THE GREATEST GOSPEL ALBUMS OF ALL TIME.

By Sergio Lopez



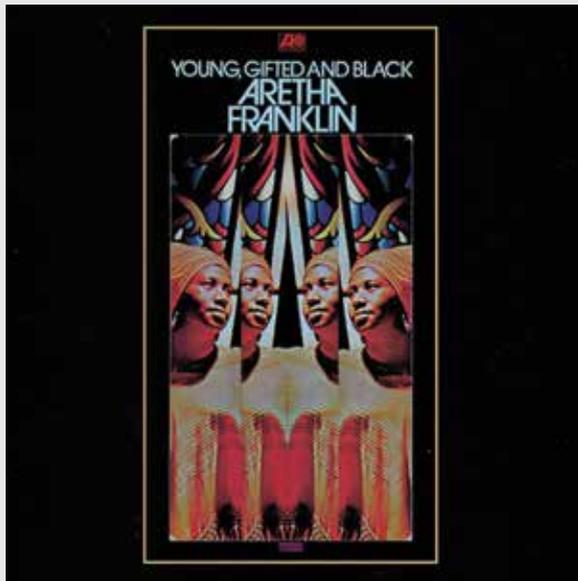
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Toward the end of the film documenting the performance of Aretha Franklin's album *Amazing Grace*, the singer sits at a church piano. Like so many times in her childhood, she begins playing—gradually, almost tentatively—the opening chords to “Never Grow Old.” It was her first single, released when she was 14. As she sings of “a land where we’ll never grow old,” built

Music

by “Jesus on high,” folks in the audience—including gospel pioneer Clara Ward—cannot help but get up and dance. “Never, *never never*”—and then a Franklin trademark: *mmm-mmm-mmm*—“never grow old,” she testifies. You believe her.

This year, Aretha's *Amazing Grace* turned 50. The album—recorded live at New Temple Missionary Baptist Church in Los Angeles with James Cleveland's Southern California Community Choir and one of the greatest backing bands in all of pop music history—blends and crosses boundaries of genre, generation, race, and class. In 1972, *Amazing Grace* was not just a return to Aretha's roots, but a vision of a future—one rooted in the Black experience in the U.S.



The liner notes credited Gene Paul as “assisting engineer.” Today, he is a legendary producer. Paul traces the genesis of *Amazing Grace* to Aretha’s 1972 record *Young, Gifted and Black*. That album’s title track, penned and first sung by Nina Simone, was a breakthrough in the civil rights and Black pride movements. “In the whole world you know / there’s a million boys and girls / who are young, gifted and Black,” the lyrics proclaim. While recording *Young, Gifted and Black*, Paul told *Sojourners*, Aretha began to conceptualize the live recording of a gospel album as a follow-up. When she thought of the potential project, Paul said, she “was smiling, captivated.” To Paul, there is a clear through line from *Young, Gifted and Black* to *Amazing Grace*: The former spoke to the contemporary Black political moment; the latter looked back in time while pulling her spiritual and cultural roots into the present. Both pointed the way to a Black future that was joyous and free.

On the cover of each album, Aretha wears African-influenced garb; in 1972, that was a political statement, signaling the arrival of a new Black aesthetic. (The cover of the latter gospel album was shot while she was on vacation in Barbados, while the former pop album features Aretha in a church!) Aretha was representative of the Black aesthetic of the time—putting an American spin on African-influenced clothing—while also shaping it through her commanding place in popular culture.

PENTECOSTAL POP

Aretha’s father, Rev. C.L. Franklin, a crucial figure in the Black church and gospel community, commented during one of the services captured on *Amazing Grace*: “If you want to know the truth,” he says of his daughter, “she has

**“IF YOU WANT TO
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THE CHURCH!”**

never left the church!” The same could be said about the accomplished musicians Aretha brought with her to Los Angeles: guitarist Cornell Dupree, organist Ken Lupper, drummer Bernard Purdie, and bassist Chuck Rainey. Rainey told *Sojourners* that the whole band went to church together in different cities. “When we were on the road, if it was during a Sunday, before or after the concert, of course we went to church with her,” Rainey said.

Rainey grew up in the Pentecostal church and credits the rhythm of church life with influencing his musical expression—from the stately pace of 12/8 time to the idea that anyone can sing or play. That’s why, when Sydney Pollack—hired to direct the taping of the concert—mused about filming the band “learning” the songs, the experienced musicians were way ahead of him. “Musically, we really did *not* need to rehearse for a whole week,” Rainey says. “[W]e all knew the music very, very well.”

The choir was directed by Cleveland, a childhood acquaintance of the Franklin family who had revolutionized the gospel industry. Over two nights, the band played gospel standards: “You’ll Never Walk Alone,” “What a Friend We Have in Jesus,” “Mary, Don’t You Weep.” But Aretha also blended in contemporary pop hits: Marvin Gaye’s “Wholy Holy,” Carole King’s “You’ve Got a Friend.” Aretha displayed how pop music, as much as gospel, could bring an audience into communion with God. The song selection exemplified the diverse aspects of the Black church. As the performance heated up, Cleveland addressed the audience: “Is there anybody here, in the building tonight, *know anything* about the sanctified church?” The hollers of the primarily Black audience said it all. “When they get the feeling like this is the sanctified church,” he continued, “somebody jump up and say, *Yeah!*”

Later in the service, C.L. Franklin explained the influences that led to his daughter’s inimitable style. Aretha, he preached, was “influenced greatly by James [Cleveland], greatly by Mahalia Jackson [known as the Queen of Gospel], greatly by Clara Ward. But Aretha has done something

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cont'd from page 40 with what she *learned* from James, what she *learned* from Mahalia, what she *learned* from Clara, what she has *learned* from all of the singers that she has *heard*—and brought it into a *synthesis*.” It’s as she sang on “Never Grow Old”: “Our voices will blend.” Aretha sang the songs of her childhood, but the style was wholly her own.

Amazing Grace became the biggest hit of Aretha’s career and the best-selling gospel album of all time.

SINGING WITH EYES CLOSED

Aretha Franklin’s rendition of “Amazing Grace” ranks as one of the greatest gospel recordings ever. Standing behind the podium, beneath a painting of the Christ of the disinherited, her eyes were shut tight. Over the course of a 10-minute performance, she transformed the hymn into something at once familiar and strange. “Amazing Grace” is the lament and the testimony of someone both sinner and saved—“I once was lost, but now am found.” The lyrics echo the words of the gospel of John, in which Jesus gives sight to a man who was born blind. Upon learning about the miracle, the Pharisees approach the once-blind man and critique Jesus for performing the transformative act on the Sabbath. “How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?” the Pharisees ask the man. His response gets at a truth beyond rational knowledge: “I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see” (John 9:16, 24-25). Some truths can only be felt, not known—crossing freely over human-created divisions of race, class, and more.

This is something Aretha must have felt in that Los Angeles church 50 years ago. Screwing her eyes shut, trying to see something beyond sight, lost in her song, her dress and the sweat that drips down her face both glisten. Some audience members weep, some grin. Their eyes are also closed, the better to hear that *voice*—a voice that will never grow old. ✕

Sergio Lopez, a graduate of Yale University and Duke Divinity School, is an author and historian living in Campbell, Calif.

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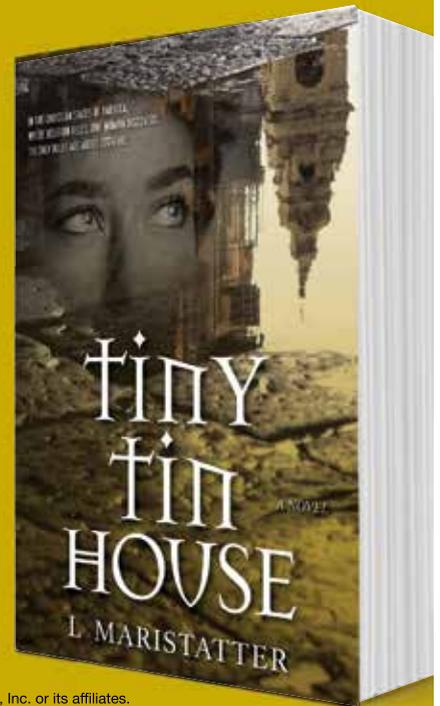
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