



Remembering Aretha Franklin: Michael's Rock and Roll Posse

Aretha Franklin, RIP

I am bereft. Many Posse members and friends have already noted, weighing in with condolences, starting a few days when word of her deathbed watch began to circulate, several calls, and a CD of her gospel hits awaiting me on my arrival back in Houston after spending a summer in Santa Fe. It is as if a close relative, perhaps a favorite Tia had been ill when we all thought she would live forever. I had such a Tia (Tia Teresina Martinez Valdez), who seemed very old from the time I first remembered her when I was a child, and she was framed in that beautiful visage and welcoming face forever, until she passed away, more than 100 years old.

But despite her lifelong battle with weight and other health problems, Aretha is frozen in my mind in two beautiful photographs, which I squirreled away over the years, knowing I would one day have this sorrowful task. I could have chosen her youthful face, either from recording sessions at Atlantic or even better, her Muscle Shoals studio sojourn—the two places where she made her most sublime mid-career music. I say “mid-career” due to her extensive early gospel career. But, like life generally, she had ebbs and flows, and in 1980, she was in a lull musically and professionally, until the great movie **THE BLUES BROTHERS** resurrected her career and that of James Brown, both of whom had set pieces that revived them, giving them a second wind that blew for the rest of their lives.

And although she sang at the inaugurations of Presidents Carter and Clinton, it was her last one, singing in front of our young African American President Barack Obama, where she transcended being

Aretha, and even being the Queen of Soul. She was Mother and Voice of the United States, at least for me, with that spectacular hat (her “crowning glory”) and her own wonderment at the occasion.



But for me, being in her audience was the whole point, and I was privileged to see her six times, in DC, Houston, and Columbus. I would have seen her twice more, but she became erratic and missed shows. Even though I was irked, I forgave her immediately, and even used one massive no-show as the subject of my NPR show (attached above, as a special fit to readers), a case where she was sued for not appearing as she had promised, to star in a Broadway show about Mahalia Jackson, one of her earliest influences, especially in her gospel period. I will not spoil it for you, but I will say that this story closes with my own mother, who died at the age of 44, in January, 1967, when I was 15 years old, and had just learned of Aretha, after her switch to pop, soul, and rock and roll. When I was very young, perhaps 7 or 8, she gave me my first three LPs: “Camelot” and “My Fair Lady,” with Julie Andrews, and “You’ll Never Walk Alone,” by Mahalia Jackson, whose songs she would sing in the house. My mother was born in Yazoo City, Mississippi—hence the gospel roots, although she later converted to Catholicism, and was very happy that I was in the Catholic seminary, studying to become a priest. I was a seminarian for 8 years, until I left after college seminary. I was at the point where I would be taking vows within a year, and I decided I was much better at afflicting the comfortable than I was at comforting the afflicted.

But I digress. I do not believe my mother ever knew of Aretha, at least in her more secular career, and I never heard Aretha’s gospel music until I fell in a deep love affair by about 1970, after her first burst of the music most of us know in our REM sleep. I always had assumed she was from the South, as had been Mahalia Jackson and so many other Black gospel singers. As we all now know, she was from Detroit, where she passed last night.

In this blur of memories, for me, is the unexpected linking of my own mother and Aretha, who now can converse about the boy who loved them both, and who will always love them. On my mind, and on my streaming service for the next week: nothing but Aretha and Mahalia. And my mother.

Michael

PS: I recommend today's New Yorker and Rolling Stone to Posse readers, for their thoughtful coverage of Aretha's life and music. They were obviously ready with their stories, but I was not. (They also have some glorious pictures of her, not all of which I had seen.) As it happens, I was scheduled to have cataract surgery today, but my surgeon yesterday said she did not recommend my having the left eye operated on. I had the right cataract removed in May, and she is so satisfied with my progress that she said we should put off removing the slowly-growing cataract in my left eye. I respect my doctors, so I am given a reprieve, while waiting for a pair of glasses, which I will wear for the first time in my life. So I write this obituary with the extra two days given to me, minus the surgery.