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## **Aretha Franklin, America and the origin of the 'spirit feel'**

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The gospel-truth, if you believe most of the history books: Aretha Franklin didn't really find her true voice until she began working with producer Jerry Wexler at Atlantic Records in 1967.

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"My idea was to make good tracks, use the best players, put Aretha back on piano and let the lady wail," Wexler wrote in his autobiography, "Rhythm and the Blues: A Life in American Music" (1994). Indeed, Franklin's 1967 Atlantic debut album, "I Never Loved a Man (The Way That I Loved You)," is considered a soul masterpiece.

But the Aretha before and after her soul golden age often gets short shrift. Anthony Heilbut offers, among other things, a reassessment of her pre-Atlantic era in a fascinating chapter, "Aretha: How She Got Over," from his latest book, "The Fan Who Knew Too Much" (Knopf). Heilbut knows his stuff; his 1971 book, "The Gospel Sound: Good News and Bad Times," is among the best ever written on the musical genre that is the foundation of Franklin's career. And "How She Got Over" outdoes Franklin's 1999 autobiography with David Ritz, "Aretha: From These Roots," for insight into the Queen of Soul's accomplishments. Heilbut argues persuasively that even before Aretha walked into a studio to record with Wexler, she had already begun to change the game for women, African-Americans and music culture.

Franklin's "role was such that a history of black America could well be divided into pre- and post-Aretha," he writes.

As the daughter of one of the most powerful ministers in America, Rev. C.L. Franklin, Aretha already had a platform at Detroit's New Bethel Baptist Church to showcase her extraordinary multi-octave, multi-hued voice.

At 14, she was not just recording gospel, but in harrowing testimonials such as “There’s a Fountain Filled with Blood” imbuing it with drama and depth of feeling that were miles behind her years. Still, in her late teens she was touring the gospel circuit alongside the Staple Singers and Sammie Bryant second-billed to her father, the star preacher.

Franklin was raised in the church, and her voice embodied its passions, but the gospel world of the ‘50s was also bedeviled by infighting, jealousy and hypocrisy, Heilbut writes. The world that raised and shaped Franklin, he asserts, was also one “she had to escape.”

She signed to Columbia Records in 1960, a move widely interpreted as her leaving gospel to pursue wealth and fame on the wider stage of pop. But unlike other gospel performers who “crossed over” into the “devil’s music,” such as Sam Cooke and Bobby Womack, Franklin got a pass. Her father approved of the changeover, and his voice carried immense weight with his numerous followers. Franklin herself made a persuasive case in 1961, when she framed her transition in the context of the emerging civil-rights movement, a viable means of expression that didn’t repudiate her gospel roots so much as expand them.

Heilbut goes a step further. He suggests that Franklin didn’t bend to pop, so much as bend pop toward her: She “was really the first gospel star to switch fields without switching styles.”

Decades of received thinking have told us that Franklin’s Columbia years were something of a bust. Legendary talent scout John Hammond signed her with the aim of turning her into a sophisticated pop and ballad singer, taking on everything from jazz standards to show tunes in the manner of a Sarah Vaughan or Dinah Washington. None of the recordings she made at Columbia had the commercial impact of her later Atlantic soul singles and albums.

But the Franklin who would soar at Atlantic was already fully formed at Columbia, Heilbut insists. Her first Columbia session, documented on the 2011 box set, “Take a Look: Aretha Franklin Complete on Columbia” (Columbia/Legacy), produced “Today I Sing the Blues.” Franklin’s agile phrasing and relaxed-yet-intense delivery over gospel-soaked piano chords (played by Ray Bryant) points a straight line toward her breakthrough song with Wexler a few years later, “I Never Loved a Man (The Way That I Love You).”

With Ernie Hayes’ swinging gospel organ and Gary Chester’s counterpunching drums, Franklin pays tribute a few recording sessions later to Washington, one of her idols, on a swooping “Nobody Knows the Way I Feel This Morning.” It’s a performance every bit as riveting as anything she recorded with Atlantic – “one of the triumphs of her career,” Heilbut says. She turns time elastic, emphasizing different words and syllables with each pass, a performance that still feels combustible decades after it was recorded.

That virtuosity – the “spirit feel,” as Heilbut calls it – imbued a number of her Columbia sessions, as she transformed standards into deeply personal statements. Because of her background in the church – from improvising on the piano while her father preached to riffing vocally in response to an enraptured congregation – Franklin wasn’t bound by the strictures of pop. Yet she was a pop connoisseur, conversant with the key nonsecular singers of the past and present (Billie Holiday, Little Jimmy Scott, even Judy Garland), and bringing nuances and inflections from each to her repertoire.

Her spontaneity was channeled into pop hits at Atlantic by the “head arrangements” favored by Wexler and the Southern rhythm section he imported to New York. Gospel undergirded her biggest hits, from the call and response of Otis Redding’s “Respect” to the hymn-like depth she brought to her interpretation of the Dusty Springfield hit “Son of a Preacher Man.”

In 1972, she released a live album of the gospel standards that shaped her youth, “Amazing Grace.” It remains one of her best-loved and best-selling recordings. In his recent book, “Aretha Franklin’s ‘Amazing Grace,’” critic Aaron Cohen calls the recording at New Temple Missionary Baptist Church in Los Angeles less a return to her roots than a reaffirmation of their continuing presence in her life and art.

The legacy, Heilbut says, is mixed – not because of anything Franklin did wrong. She remains one of the singular singers of our time, and also one of the most influential. But influence cuts both ways. Heilbut points to Franklin’s dizzying melisma, her gospelized penchant for bending and stretching notes to delirious extremes, as the basis for “the new excess” of the “American Idol” generation of singers.

“Not for the first time in popular art,” he dryly notes, “does very good seep into very bad.”

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