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The audacity of Aretha Franklin—a voice for Black liberation

Tiffany M. Hobbs · Wednesday, August 22nd, 2018

I hope Jesus doesn't look like the white man on the wall.

That flowy-locked iteration of the Messiah they wanted Black people to believe in would find his alabaster skin colored with surprise as Ms. Aretha Franklin entered the gates and demanded payment—her heavenly reward—upfront.

Her blessings must be plentiful, as she packed her 76 years on Earth with many lifetimes worth of work. As was custom in living, her time must be rewarded in death—that proverbial package neatly placed inside of her pocketbook which she would surely lay upon the first piano she could find, as long as it was within eyeshot.

I imagine Ms. Aretha scanning the crowd for familiar faces, stopping to admire family and friends who anticipated her arrival. There would be her mother, having readied the apology for her absence in Aretha's life. Her father, the Reverend C.L. Franklin, who would congratulate his daughter on a job well done while standing shoulder to shoulder with his friend, the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. There might be Etta James, Prince Rogers Nelson, or Michael Jackson, Nina Simone, Mahalia Jackson, or a healthy Ray Charles, all waiting with bated breath for their band's celebrated vocalist.

All the while, Aretha would be centered and calm, but expectant, that her arrival into this holy realm would be met with more than waves of adoration or other emotions built on attachment. Aretha, as below, would expect respect above, so Jesus better had secured the bag if He wanted Aretha to speak, let alone sing.

By the age of 15, Aretha Franklin had proven an urgent sense of resiliency to herself, having pushed her body to the limit through the birth of two children, released her first album, and accompanied her father during stretches on the road to civil rights with Martin Luther King, Jr.

Everyone knew this young girl—Ms. Thing from Detroit—could sing. She did that as easily as she talked. But, what fascinates is how much autonomy Aretha Franklin knew she was due well before she even hit her sweet 16. She was her own advocate, challenging what a young Black church-going girl should be. Her father, Rev. C.L. Franklin, himself immersed in a radical autonomy that threatened the projected status quo of Blacks in the 1960s, exposed his daughter to activism through his alignment with the civil rights movement.

She developed a penchant for individuality, her voice unique, and her personality strong and

unwavering. **Aretha learned through the lens of sermons and sacrifices that voices were an instrument of change, and hers would become one of the strongest weapons to defend and protect her people.**

Aretha's people didn't look like the Jesus on the walls of the churches she sang in, or the owners of the clubs that booked her. Gracious and professional, Aretha managed her business as a singer with the poise of someone always much older than her years, often acting as her own promoter, and what she was cultivating within this method of performance was the discernment of a mother protecting her children.

Aretha established that her people were those she sat next to in church, or the beauty shop, or in the rooms of artists, singers, actors, and activists who, charged by a growing, loving, Black nationalistic autonomy, began to look inward at shared experiences and color, forming a familial bond that was necessary to the preservation of Blackness and Black lives then, as it is now.

As Blackness continued to be the subject of white, racist vitriol, Aretha's voice grew louder, working to protect the Black people she loved, and was loved by, so dearly. **She knew she could sing—they did, too—but what they didn't yet know is how well she could yell.**

In 1970, a young activist from San Francisco named Angela Davis was jailed on accusations of kidnapping and murder. Two years younger than Aretha and also invested in the imperativeness of autonomy, Davis was a powerfully prominent member of the Black Panthers who encouraged Black folks far and wide to thrive independently of whiteness.

She found herself, like the organization, at the center of national attention as J. Edgar Hoover deemed them to be the "...greatest threat to internal security of the country." At the time of Davis's arrest, Aretha was preparing to head to the Caribbean. Hearing the news along with the rest of the country, Aretha decided that it was again time to speak, not sing. With opposition from her own father, Aretha [offered to post bail for the jailed activist](#).

"My daddy says I don't know what I'm doing. Well, I respect him, of course, but I'm going to stick by my beliefs. Angela Davis must go free. Black people will be free. I've been locked up (for disturbing the peace in Detroit) and I know you got to disturb the peace when you can't get no peace. Jail is hell to be in. I'm going to see her free if there is any justice in our courts, not because I believe in communism, but because she's a Black woman and she wants freedom for Black people. I have the money; I got it from Black people—they've made me financially able to have it—and I want to use it in ways that will help our people."

When Davis became eligible for bail, Aretha was already in the Caribbean, and wiring money was virtually impossible. Still, Davis made bail by other means and thanked Aretha wholeheartedly for her efforts, acknowledging how impactful to the Black Panther Party such an offer was. The two would never meet in person but they shared a loving relationship to Blackness that further enveloped Aretha in the arms of the Black struggle in America and abroad.

Aretha had yelled at those used to hearing her sing, and now, she was confidently and unabashedly yelling for Black liberation, not for her own record sales or the consumerism of her image but for the equitable treatment of her people. And she had been heard loud and clear. Aretha would

continue to [sing and yell for Black people](#) until the day she died.

On her day of transitioning, I imagine Aretha would be perched atop a piano bench, high above the noise of her beloved Detroit, her head wrapped, each thread being a piece of her history. She would look around at the audience of faces, all on the verge of combustion—they'd been waiting on this moment.

She would position her hands for the spell to come. Looking over at her Maker, she would motion to be joined in a duet, only to have her invitation humbly declined. Even God understands that this is her throne.

Her mother has never seen her perform. The notes begin and the words bellow out into the universe.

“And the river was deep

I didn't falter

When the mountain was high

I still believed

When the valley was low

It didn't stop me, no no

I knew you were waiting

Knew you were waiting for me...”

(This article originally appears in [Black Youth Project](#). Reprinted with permission from author.)

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