Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Cynthia Erivo as Aretha Franklin

Elisa Leonelli · Wednesday, March 24th, 2021



Cynthia Erivo as Aretha Franklin © National Geographic/Richard DuCree

Cynthia Erivo, who was born in London to Nigerian parents, then moved to Brooklyn, and is now living in Los Angeles, is playing Aretha Franklin in the *Genius-Aretha* TV series, singing the Queen of Soul's signature songs in her own powerful voice. She first received critical acclaim for playing Celie in the 2015 revival of the 2005 musical adaption of *The Color Purple* on Broadway, based on the 1982 novel by Alice Walker and the 1985 movie directed by Steven Spielberg starring Whoopi Goldberg.

Cynthia Erivo (c) Armando Gallo-HFPA 2019

I did not see her in that stage performance because I live in Los Angeles, not New York, but I was impressed by her powerful presence and singing voice when I saw her in *Bad Times at El Royal* (2018), acting opposite Jeff Bridges, and I first interviewed her. She quoted these singers as inspiration for her character: “Diana Ross was the fashion model for me, she was a style icon. I listened to Aretha Franklin for the way she made music and how she would tell a story through her songs. Her voice is incredible and she is one of my favorite singers. And then Barbara Streisand, because she’s a true renaissance woman, who was able to make music and then do films.”

In 2018 I also saw Erivo in *Widows* by Steve MacQueen with Viola Davis and Daniel Kaluuya, and featured her in my article about Young Faces in Movies.



Cynthia Erivo, Aria Brooks-HARRIET (c) Glen Wilson-Focus Features

I interviewed her again for *Harriet* (2019), directed by Kasi Lemmons, and included that film in my article about women directors. She said about abolitionist Harriet Tubman, “I was surprised by her cunning and determination, by her strength and her bravery. She’s an icon in American culture, but with this movie she is also a rediscovery for the world, a really inspirational character for women in general. When you are brought up as a black girl in the United Kingdom, you are often subject to racism, so I can understand what it means to be discriminated against. That taught me to grow a thick skin, to really discover who I am, to be strong and confident in myself.”

When Erivo was nominated to a Golden Globe as best actress in a drama for *Harriet*, I wrote her profile.



Cynthia Erivo (c) HFPA 2021

When we were finally allowed to go back to movie theaters in Los Angeles on March 15, after the easing of the coronavirus pandemic lockdown, I immediately went to see *Chaos Walking*, the science fiction movie directed by Doug Liman (shot in 2017), where Erivo plays the good mayor of a human settlement on a distant planet in the year 2257, with David Oyelowo playing a preacher.

As I began to watch *Aretha*, the third installment of the Genius series after *Einstein* played by

Geoffrey Rush and *Picasso* played by Antonio Banderas, I realized how much this singer's life and career mirrored the goals of the Black Power movement in the 1960s and 70s, that I had examined in my three recent articles: *One Night in Miami*: the actors, Black Panthers in Movies, The FBI vs Black Power.



Cynthia Erivo, Malcolm Barrett-ARETHA (c) National Geographic/Richard DuCree

Her preacher father (played by Courtney Vance, Angela Bassett's husband) was an influential figure in the African-American community through his recorded sermons, but he was also a drunken womanizer. Aretha started singing gospel at his Baptist church in Detroit, she had two children before she was 14, then at 19 married an abusive husband who beat her and managed her career. Her situation was similar to that of Billie Holiday, as explained by Andra Day, "Louis McKay, who was her last husband before she passed away, whom she was trying to divorce, was horrible, he was a pimp, and he really set her up to go to prison." Read my interview Andra Day, Golden Globe Winner. Not coincidentally the TV show's creator is playwright Suzan-Lori Parks, who wrote the script for *The United States vs. Billie Holiday* directed by Lee Daniels.

When I interviewed Erivo this year about *Aretha*, I asked her if black British women are victims of male abuse like African-American women. She said: "Definitely. I mean, human beings are human beings, so it doesn't pertain to me being American or English. Women go through these experiences with men, and it hurts a lot of people. What's changed is that women are now less afraid of speaking about that pain, which is important, because it allows us to heal and to get to a stronger space for ourselves. The more we can have that conversation, hopefully we will get to a point where we can forgive one another."

Aretha Franklin met and supported Martin Luther King by singing at his fund-raiser concerts, before he was murdered in 1968. She advocated for the release of Angela Davis from jail in 1970, wore her hair in the symbolic Afro, raised the Black Power fist during public appearances, recorded the protest album *Young, Gifted and Black* (1972).

A movie titled *Respect* with Jennifer Hudson playing Aretha will be released in August.

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