



That powerful voice: Aretha Franklin performs in Palermo, Italy, in August 1970. Her autobiography is currently being developed for a movie.

A conversation with the queen of soul

Aretha Franklin talks about Martin Luther King, Barack Obama and Halle Berry

WHILE BILLIE HOLIDAY is often associated with the sound of suffering and Nina Simone, rage, Aretha Franklin's music is almost always linked to the nourishing of hope and freedom. In fact, her powerful voice—which has officially been declared a natural resource by the state of Michigan—is forever tied to the U.S. civil rights movement.

Which is probably why major labels continue to make money by reissuing her classic tracks. Columbia Records has invested in two big projects this year. *The Great American Songbook* is an 18-track CD of covers written by legends such as Cole Porter and Billy Strayhorn; the *Take a Look* box set, a 12-disc package of '60s cuts, celebrates the 50th anniversary of her first album.

On a tour bus en route to rehearse for her much-lauded appearance at the Toronto Jazz Festival on June 24, Franklin talked about her performances during that era of social change. "In those early days, myself, Mr. Harry Belafonte and a young gospel singer with a terrific voice by the name of Queen Esther Marrow, did concerts with Dr. Martin Luther King," she said. "I was a teenage girl then, so naturally I was in awe of Dr. King and listened carefully to every word that he said. At that time, *Respect* became a civil rights anthem."

Franklin's version of that song took Otis Redding's manic, testosterone-filled original and made it into one of the most potent feminist anthems of the decade. Trilling "T-C-B" (for "taking care of business") in the chorus of *Respect* gave her version the

high-octane punch it needed to sound like an exuberant womanifesto.

Franklin is equally as exalting in her just-released 38th studio disc, *A Woman Falling Out of Love*. A standout track called *Sweet Sixteen*—originally recorded by B.B. King—is skilfully arranged to mirror the acclaimed '60s sound for which she's revered.

Also on the album (as a bonus track) is a song associated with yet another historic moment. One of the goals the 69-year-old singer set for herself (aside from losing a vast amount of weight after having surgery for an undisclosed reason last December) was to record a studio version of *My Country 'Tis Of Thee*—the song she sang at Barack Obama's inauguration ceremony.

"When I recorded the song, I thought of that great, powerful moment. Who could forget it? It will never happen again in history—he paved the way," she says proudly. Asked how she feels

Obama's team is doing so far, Franklin answers in a protective tone. "I think that he has been doing the very best that he can, with everything that can be done with what was left when he came into office. You see, the country was having problems long before he got there."

Asked about her upcoming biopic, Franklin is happy to weigh in on who should get the starring role. "I do have approval over

who is going to play me," she says. "Ms. [Jennifer] Hudson and Fantasia are two of the people being considered but Halle Berry is back in the game!" she says excitedly. "I just saw her at the curtain of Oprah's farewell event and she let me know that she still wants to play the role and she didn't know that she wasn't expected to sing. I told her, 'No, we never expected you to sing, we already knew you weren't a singer!' However, I do think she could pull it off."

The script, says Franklin, will be based on her 1999 autobiography, *Aretha: From These Roots*. Her mother died when she was 10 and her father was the famed activist and minister C.L. Franklin. Given Franklin had her

first son in her mid-teens and was a musician torn between her church and secular music, the movie should prove as compelling as the Johnny Cash biopic *Walk the Line*. What will be most poignant to see on screen is the

survey of women she helped along the way (Chaka Khan, Gwen Guthrie, Cissy and Whitney Houston were all backup singers for the queen), as well as those who helped her achieve music monarchy: gospel legends Mahalia Jackson (said to have changed Aretha's diapers) and Clara Ward, both family friends. "I learned so much from just watching Clara sing in church," she says, "and I still aspire to sing as well as her." **ELIO IANNACCI**

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