

# Roberta soul

Roberta Flack talks to *Prime Time* about her 40-year music career and brand-new Beatles tribute album

BY ELIO IANNACCI

**I**F ARETHA FRANKLIN is the queen of soul music, Roberta Flack—with her intense vocal delivery and silky, sensual tones—is surely the genre's grandest of grand dames. Flack was born in North Carolina in 1937 and schooled in the prestigious Howard University in Washington, D.C. Her career took off after she was discovered by jazz virtuoso Les McCann in 1968 while she was playing piano at a club in Washington, D.C. One year later, her debut album, *First Take*, which was recorded in less than a day, reached the top of the U.S. pop and R&B charts and gave her an instant global fan base.

Although *First Take* produced Flack's first hit, "The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face" (which charted again last year, performed by Flack fan Leona Lewis), the lady's soulstress status wasn't solidified until two albums later, with *Killing Me Softly* and its No. 1 smash single title track.

Almost 40 years later, with 20 albums behind her, a world tour underway and a new disc of Beatles standards slated for winter release, Flack is definitely back.

**You've been singing "Killing Me Softly" for over three decades—how do you keep it fresh?**

"Killing Me Softly" was so hip and before its time. It's hard to hear a song these days that comes close to it. Millions of people have that "aha!" feeling when I sing it. A lot of young artists don't want to go back to their past hits because they have been unsuccessful in creating something original. They've revisited Stevie Wonder's past and Donnie Hathaway's past. They revisit my past. Many of them keep revisiting because what they are making today does not feel unique. The world is still waiting for another Stevie Wonder.

**Are you pleased with the way artists have covered you lately?**

Kanye West sampled one of my songs on "Hey Momma," a tribute to his mother who unfortunately passed away shortly after it was recorded. When he performed it on *Oprah*, it was a really big deal for me.

**What can we expect with your new disc?**

Some piano-driven arrangements to Beatles classics, tracks like "In My Life," "Here Comes the Sun" and "Come Together." I used to sing some of these songs before I started even making records.

**You've always had such amazing outfits and hair styles on stage—especially in the '70s. Did you ever feel like a trend-setter?**

I never saw myself that way at all. I never did have a body that was designed to display fads—even when I was a size 6. Recently, I saw old photos of me on Johnny Carson's show. I was wearing really ethnic, African-looking clothes—I was trying to look like the Zulu people. If I had a daughter who looked like that, I would probably suggest she wear something else.

**Is it hard to date you?**

Oh honey, it's difficult to date anybody! I would love to have a gorgeous guy around, though, someone who I can be anything and everything to. He needs to be aged between 45 and up. I don't think I'm a good person to marry. I think I choose good people to love but when it comes to marrying... Both of the relationships with my two ex-husbands went very wrong.

**When you watch shows like *American Idol*, do you cringe when you catch someone singing your songs?**

No, as long as they are singing.

**What happens if you're having a bad day and you have the studio booked?**

I don't do anything; I cancel. You can't pretend to feel soul. So I don't record.

**Any lessons you want to pass on to someone who wants to grow up to be Roberta Flack?**

Be yourself instead of me. And be humble. Don't criticize someone else's talent. Use music to communicate—it's the language of lust and love. Respect it and yourself.

EXCLUSIVE TO PRIME TIME

For a full transcript of our interview with Roberta Flack, visit [thestar.com/primetime](http://thestar.com/primetime)



Roberta Flack

## Set your night to music Finest Flack tracks

- **"The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face"** Covered by more than 20 artists—including Johnny Cash, George Michael, Elvis Presley and Céline Dion—Roberta Flack's version was the longest-running No. 1 hit by a female soloist in the '70s, partly because it was in the soundtrack to Clint Eastwood's movie *Play Misty for Me*.
- **"Killing Me Softly with His Song"** Flack's crown jewel, it hit No. 1 in February 1973. Few people know that the song was actually about Don McLean, the folkster who wrote and recorded "American Pie," and was based on a poem by singer/songwriter Lori Lieberman, who'd seen McLean in concert. The song topped the charts again in 1996 when The Fugees re-recorded it.
- **"Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow?"** A down-tempo version of The Shirelles' 1961 hit. Flack replaced the girl group's harmonies with dramatic violins and slow, sensual piano chords.
- **"Feel Like Making Love"** Self-produced, this song topped the charts in 1974.
- **"Where is the Love?"** and **"The Closer I Get to You"** Two of Flack's most successful duets with R&B legend Donny Hathaway. Shortly after these were recorded, Hathaway committed suicide and Flack stepped out of the public eye for a while.
- **"Tonight, I Celebrate My Love"** This duet with Peabo Bryson was a top-10 radio favourite in the mid-'80s, notably because the ballad was used in *Days of Our Lives* as a love theme for that soap's characters Bo and Hope.
- **"Set the Night to Music"** Another duet, with reggae star Maxi Priest, taken from Flack's 1991 album of the same name. Although she recorded three studio albums after this disc's release, "Set the Night" is Flack's last big chart hit to date.