

Black Americans of Achievement
LEGACY EDITION

Aretha Franklin

SINGER



Heather Lehr Wagner

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Muhammad Ali

Maya Angelou

Josephine Baker

George Washington Carver

Ray Charles

Johnnie Cochran

Bill Cosby

Frederick Douglass

W.E.B. Du Bois

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Marcus Garvey

Savion Glover

Alex Haley

Jimi Hendrix

Gregory Hines

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Scott Joplin

Coretta Scott King

Martin Luther King Jr.

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Malcolm X

Bob Marley

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Chris Rock

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Clarence Thomas

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Harriet Tubman

Nat Turner

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Booker T. Washington

Oprah Winfrey

Stevie Wonder

Tiger Woods

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 **CHELSEA HOUSE**
PUBLISHERS
An imprint of Infobase Publishing

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Chelsea House
An imprint of Infobase Publishing
132 West 31st Street
New York, NY 10001

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Wagner, Heather Lehr.

Aretha Franklin : singer / by Heather Lehr Wagner.

p. cm. — (Black Americans of achievement. Legacy edition)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-60413-712-5 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-1-4381-3419-2 (e-book)

1. Franklin, Aretha—Juvenile literature. 2. Singers—United States—Biography—Juvenile literature. 3. African American singers—Biography—Juvenile literature. 4. Soul musicians—United States—Biography—Juvenile literature. I. Title. II. Series.

ML3930.F68W34 2010

782.421644092—dc22 [B] 2009050605

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You can find Chelsea House on the World Wide Web at <http://www.chelseahouse.com>.

Text design by Keith Trego

Cover design by Keith Trego

Composition by Keith Trego

Cover printed by Bang Printing, Brainerd, MN

Book printed and bound by Bang Printing, Brainerd, MN

Date printed: July 2010

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

All links and Web addresses were checked and verified to be correct at the time of publication. Because of the dynamic nature of the Web, some addresses and links may have changed since publication and may no longer be valid.

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In the Spotlight

Early on the chilly morning of January 20, 2009, more than a million people gathered along the National Mall in Washington, D.C., eager to see history being made. The occasion was the inauguration of the forty-fourth president of the United States, Barack Obama, the nation's first African-American president. As the crowds gathered in the vast space between the Washington Monument and the Capitol, many more prepared to watch the inauguration on television or the Internet.

The inauguration began with opening remarks by Senator Dianne Feinstein of California and an invocation, or opening prayer, by minister Rick Warren, founder and senior pastor of the Saddleback Church and author of the popular book *The Purpose Driven Life*. Then, Senator Feinstein returned to the podium to introduce the “world-renowned musical artist Aretha Franklin.”

With these words, Aretha Franklin stepped to the front of the stage and picked up a microphone as the crowd cheered. Elegantly dressed in a silver-gray wool coat and matching hat, which sported a large bow with sparkling crystals, Franklin confidently looked out at the vast sea of people. The gleaming Capitol behind her made an impressive backdrop.

The opening notes of Samuel F. Smith's "My Country 'Tis of Thee" swelled up, and Franklin began to sing. The warm, soaring notes of her vocals gave the traditional song a new interpretation and offered a fitting tribute for the new president from the woman dubbed the "Queen of Soul." It was one more milestone for Franklin. Having sung at the pre-inaugural concert for President Jimmy Carter in 1977 and the inaugural ball of President Bill Clinton in 1993, she was now performing during the inauguration ceremony of yet another president.

At the age of 66, Franklin had experienced many milestones in her career. But her performance at President Obama's inauguration would remind those in attendance and others watching on video of how extraordinary a singer she was and what an amazing career she had enjoyed.

While many in the crowd were visibly moved by Franklin's rendition of "My Country 'Tis of Thee," Franklin later told CNN's Larry King that she was displeased with the final result of her performance, blaming the cold weather for negatively impacting her singing. "Mother Nature was not very kind to me," she said the day after the inauguration. "I'm going to deal with her when I get home. It, by no means, was my standard. . . . [But] I was delighted and thrilled to be there. That was the most important thing, not so much the performance, but just to be there and to see this great man go into office—the promise of tomorrow coming to pass."

As always, her influence extended beyond the power of her vocals. For days afterward, attention focused not only on Franklin's performance but also on her fashion choices. The distinctive gray wool hat with its large, crystal-bedecked



Aretha Franklin performs at the inauguration of Barack Obama as the forty-fourth president of the United States on the steps of the Capitol Building in Washington, D.C., on January 20, 2009.

bow was the subject of intense scrutiny. The hat's designer, Luke Song, received more than 5,000 requests for the headgear Franklin had worn. The original, a custom-made design, had cost more than \$500. After demand for the hat skyrocketed, Song marketed a less expensive version for \$179. The Smithsonian Institution asked Franklin to donate the hat to its exhibit on the inauguration; it would be displayed alongside the inaugural gown worn by First Lady Michelle Obama. Franklin eventually agreed, and following a display at the Smithsonian the hat eventually will be displayed at Barack Obama's presidential library. The hat even earned its own Facebook page, with more than 100,000 fans.

Following the inauguration, Franklin also provided President Obama with several gifts that had deep, personal meaning to her. In interviews, Franklin frequently discusses the importance of her relationship with her father, the prominent Detroit minister C.L. Franklin. At Obama's inauguration, Aretha Franklin presented the president with 17 sermons by her late father, as well as a Bible. She gave Michelle Obama a gold brooch studded with diamonds and presented Obama's two daughters with a collection of gospel/Christian hip-hop music. "My dad's sermons, I thought, would be an excellent gift for the president as he's a fairly young man," Franklin told National Public Radio on March 17, 2009, for the program *Tell Me More*. "They definitely hold a lot of wisdom that I thought would be beneficial for the president."

ANOTHER MILESTONE

Franklin's performance at the inauguration of President Obama was yet another highlight in a career that has spanned more than five decades. *Rolling Stone* describes her as "one of the most influential and important voices in the history of popular music." Her recordings have spanned several different genres of music, including gospel, rhythm and blues (R&B), American standards, pop, and soul. In 1987, she

became the first female recording artist inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. In addition to her soaring vocal skills, she is also an accomplished pianist and songwriter. In fact, several of Franklin's most successful recordings are of songs she wrote herself.

Franklin began performing as a teenager, accompanying her father on tours of the gospel circuit. Signed to a recording contract when she was barely 20, Franklin released several interpretations of slow ballads and standards. It was not until 1967, however, that she found commercial success recording the distinctive songs that would dramatically influence pop music and showcase her unique style. Following the success of popular singles such as "Respect," "Think," and "Chain of Fools," Franklin earned the nickname "Lady Soul." Soon, she would be known as the "Queen of Soul."

During her career, Franklin has made more than a dozen million-selling singles (in fact, more million-sellers than any woman in recording history) and recorded 20 number-one R&B hits. She is cited as a major influence of countless female recording artists, from Mary J. Blige to Mariah Carey to Jennifer Hudson.

Though astonishing triumphs have marked Franklin's career, family tragedies and career setbacks have haunted many of her

IN HER OWN WORDS...

In her 1999 autobiography, *Aretha: From These Roots*, Franklin described the energy and enthusiasm for music that continues to inspire her to record and perform:

I have dreams for the future. . . . God has been so good to me; my life has been and is rewarding, exciting, and creative. And surely the best is yet to come. There are many songs that I want to sing. And sing . . .

greatest accomplishments. Difficulties have beset her from an early age: Her parents separated when Franklin was six years old, and her mother died four years later. Franklin was a single mother of two boys before she was 17 years old. And later, her father was shot by burglars in his home and died of the injuries he sustained during the attack.

Despite these challenges and changing tastes in popular music, Franklin has remained a force in the recording industry. Throughout her career, she has known and collaborated with many of music's greatest stars. Her life story is an inspiring account of the evolution of popular music, of a woman determined to shape her career on her terms, and of a child prodigy whose voice continues to thrill and amaze audiences well into her seventh decade.

Childhood in Detroit

Aretha Louise Franklin was born on March 25, 1942, in Memphis, Tennessee. The fourth of five children born to Clarence LaVaughn Franklin and Barbara Siggers Franklin, she entered a family in which music played an important role long before she first began to sing.

Her father, known as C.L. Franklin, was a dynamic Baptist minister who grew up in a rural Mississippi marked by racism, religious prejudice, and violence against minorities, particularly black Americans. Jim Crow laws—a system of local and state laws in the United States enacted between 1876 and 1965 that segregated the black and white races in all public places—existed throughout the South. The church was one of the few safe havens, and African-American churches provided the center of social life for many in the community.

C.L. Franklin's biological father, Willie Walker, was drafted to serve in the U.S. Army during World War I. After returning

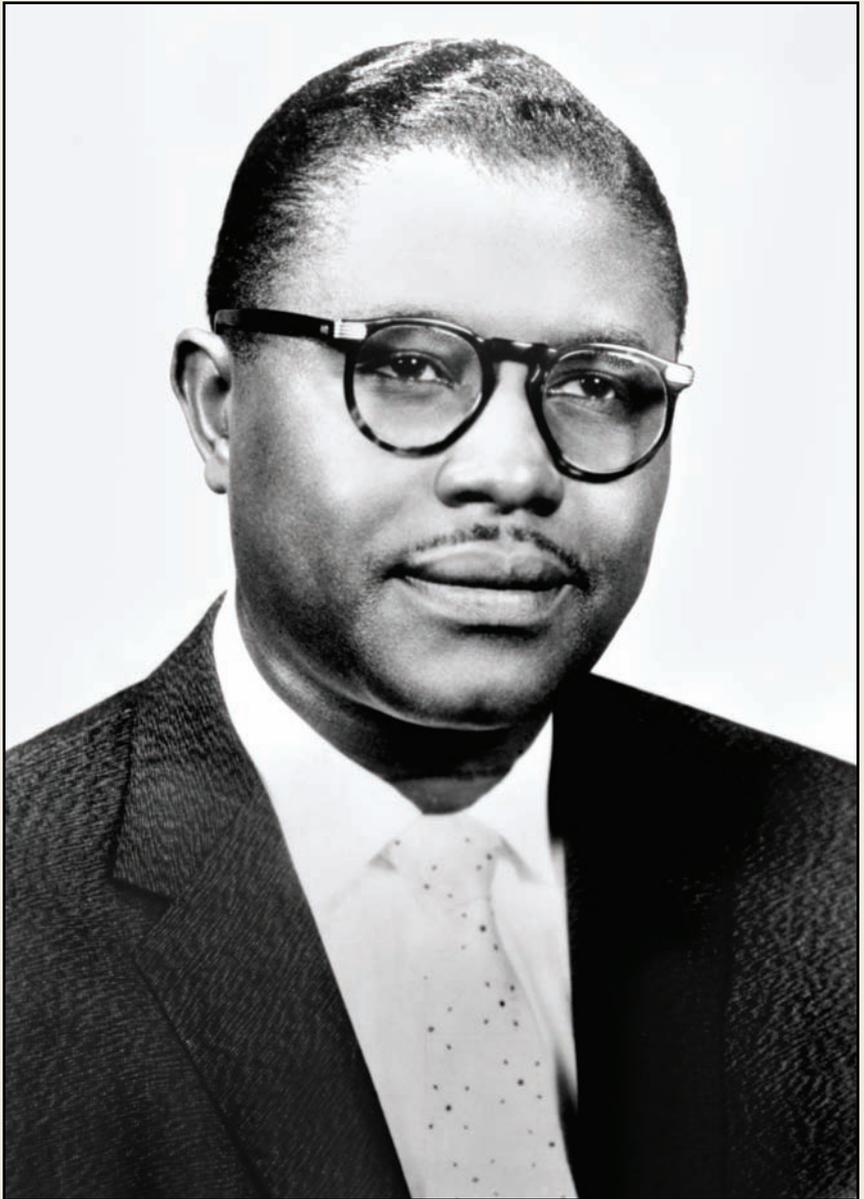
from war, Walker abandoned his family. C.L. was about four years old. He later took the last name of his stepfather, a farmer named Henry Franklin, whom his mother married when he was about five.

The family survived by sharecropping—renting a plot of land, farming it, and paying rent with a share of the crops the land produced. The main crop was cotton. As a teenager, C.L. Franklin was expected to help his family farm the land. But increasingly, C.L. felt called to become a preacher and, at the age of 18, he became the pastor of a small church in Mississippi. As his reputation grew, he became a circuit preacher, traveling between four small churches in rural communities. At 19, C.L. Franklin married his first wife, Alene Gaines. Little is known of the marriage or how long it lasted, but at some point after his first marriage ended, C.L. met Barbara Siggers at a church in Shelby, Mississippi.

The fourth of seven children, Barbara Siggers spent much of her youth in Memphis, where she was exposed to the growing presence of gospel music in African-American churches. By the time her family moved to more rural Shelby, Barbara was in her late teens and had developed a lovely singing voice. It was her singing voice that first impressed C.L. when he met her. The couple shared a passion for music and a dream of leaving rural Mississippi to build a better life for themselves. On June 3, 1936, they married, and C.L. adopted Barbara's young son, Vaughn. Soon after, C.L. became the pastor of the small New Salem Baptist Church in Memphis, where the family relocated.

FROM MEMPHIS TO DETROIT

By the time Aretha Louise Franklin was born in 1942, the family had grown to include two more children—a daughter, Erma, and a son, Cecil. Aretha was named for her father's two sisters. C.L. Franklin had come to Memphis's New Salem Baptist Church as a country preacher, but he developed a



The Reverend C.L. Franklin, Aretha Franklin's father, poses for a portrait circa 1965. An enormously popular preacher, C.L. Franklin would have a recording career of his own because of his influential sermons on the gospel circuit.

more sophisticated speaking style in Memphis. In *Singing in a Strange Land*, a biography of C.L. Franklin, Nick Salvatore writes that C.L.'s clothes, when he first arrived as preacher, were unfashionable and worn, but he was a compelling speaker and had overwhelming charisma, even as a 24-year-old. In addition, his humble country beginnings influenced many in the congregation who nurtured their own dreams of bettering themselves—of moving to a new place and seeking a different life for themselves and their families.

It was at New Salem that C.L. Franklin began to perfect his unique speaking style. He delivered sermons in a distinctive manner that emphasized the idea of the pastor's message being a performance, rather than simply a speech to be read aloud. In this call-and-response style, the preacher would invite members of the congregation to respond out loud to what he was saying. According to *Singing in a Strange Land*, Franklin became such a popular preacher that his church attracted people from all over Memphis. The church had seating for 400 people, but on most Sundays the church was full and people stood in the aisles and in the back to listen.

Shortly after Aretha's birth, the family moved to Buffalo, New York, where C.L. had been invited to lead the Friendship Baptist Church while Barbara served as choir director and pianist. C.L. created a weekly radio program in Buffalo in which his sermons were broadcast on a local radio station. His sermons often reflected his thoughts on what the end of World War II would mean for race relations in the United States, as well as on the idea of social equality. In 1945, the year the war ended, C.L. was invited to speak at the National Baptist Convention in Detroit, Michigan. It would prove a pivotal moment in his career. His speaking style was so impressive in that large setting at Olympia Stadium that he was invited to become the pastor of New Bethel Baptist Church in Detroit. The family moved there when Aretha was about three years old.

A THRIVING COMMUNITY

When the Franklin family arrived in Detroit in 1946, an active African-American community was growing on the city's west side. Many black families had chosen to leave the challenging life of sharecropping they had known in the South and migrate to northern states such as Michigan in search of greater opportunities during the postwar period.

In Detroit, C.L. Franklin quickly became a prominent member of the community. His sermons were recorded and broadcast not only in the city but also on radio stations throughout much of the country. Civil rights activist Jesse Jackson remembered listening to C.L. Franklin every Sunday night on a radio broadcast in his home in South Carolina. In an interview in June 2003 for the Detroit African American History Project, hosted by Wayne State University, Jackson stated:

Before we had television, really before we had cable and all of this, radio and records were the great mediums and Reverend C.L. Franklin's albums were a great source of inspiration. . . . In many ways the first real kind of a superstar, if I may use that kind of language, of Black preaching was Reverend C.L. Franklin. He was by far the most imitated Black preacher. The most emulated. The one looked up to the most.

Jackson recalled listening to many of the great gospel artists who were affiliated with New Bethel Baptist Church. He would later become a friend of the Franklin family and even stay at their home when he was visiting Detroit.

As C.L. Franklin's reputation as a preacher was growing, however, his marriage was falling apart. When Aretha was six years old, her parents agreed to separate. Her mother, Barbara, moved back to Buffalo with Aretha's half brother, Vaughn. Barbara's parents and other family members had moved to Buffalo, and so she lived with her parents and worked as a nurse's aide. Aretha and the other children remained with

their father. In her autobiography, *Aretha: From These Roots*, she suggests that the decision of who the children would live with was made principally for financial reasons:

Mom couldn't afford to raise five children on a nurse's aide's salary. However, she communicated with us by phone and regular visits. She never lost sight of her children or her parenting responsibilities—and her visits continued regularly. She sent us beautiful gifts, and we traveled to Buffalo to spend the summers with her yearly.

Aretha later recalled enjoying those annual visits to her mother's home in Cold Springs, a middle-class African-American neighborhood with wide, tree-lined streets. There was a piano in the back room, and the home was often full of relatives. But the house had only two bedrooms, which were already occupied by Aretha's grandparents, mother, and half brother. So during those annual visits, Aretha and her brother and sisters stayed with a next-door neighbor, who taught Aretha to crochet—a hobby she still enjoys.

While Aretha's mother worked at Buffalo General Hospital, Aretha and her brother and sisters would ride their bikes through the neighborhood or swim in a public pool. Music was an important part of life in both parents' homes, and Aretha's mother was known for her soaring gospel voice. At some point the idea of Aretha staying with her mother may have been considered, since she notes in her autobiography that she attended a public school in Buffalo for a short time. But eventually Aretha returned to Detroit, to its music and the dynamic climate of New Bethel Baptist Church, which would heavily influence her own musical talent and style.

LIFE AT NEW BETHEL

C.L. Franklin and his children lived in the parish house of the church, a six-bedroom home on Boston Boulevard. The

neighborhood was noted for its carefully landscaped lawns. The backyard of the Franklin home boasted several fruit trees, including pear, plum, and apple trees, and offered beautiful flowers in the spring and fruit in the summer.

In the Franklin home, music played a significant role in family entertainment. The house had two pianos, including a grand piano in the living room. Both Aretha and her sisters, Erma and Carolyn, took piano lessons from a piano teacher who came to their home to teach them. Despite the lessons, Aretha never learned to sight-read music; instead she learned to play by ear. Her ability to mimic the songs she heard on the radio by playing them on the piano was the first clue to her father of her talent.

Growing up, Aretha heard many prominent musicians playing in the living room of the Franklin home. The great jazz pianist Art Tatum was C.L.'s friend. Nat King Cole played and sang when he visited. Gospel musician James Cleveland taught Aretha some basic piano chords. When musicians were not performing live in the Franklin home, records and the radio ensured that jazz, blues, and gospel were a constant in the background. Occasionally, after Aretha had gone to bed, her father would wake her and ask her to play the piano and

DID YOU KNOW?

Aretha Franklin spent only a brief time studying piano when she was a girl. She did not enjoy the piano lessons her father had arranged for his three daughters. Instead, she began teaching herself to play by listening to popular songs and the pianists who played at the Franklin home. She then mimicked them, copying their style and slowly working out, note by note, how to play the songs. She became such an accomplished pianist that she often played in her studio recordings, especially during her early work with Atlantic Records. In recent years, she has returned to the piano, taking lessons in classical piano at the prestigious Juilliard School in order to perfect her skill.