



HER VOICE: BLACK WOMEN FROM THE SPOTLIGHT TO THE SCREEN

Amazing Grace

The first recorded evidence of Aretha Franklin's glorious voice was captured in 1956, when she performed a string of gospel numbers in her Baptist minister father's Detroit church. She was just 14, and the pop stardom she would achieve during her post-1967 tenure with Atlantic Records was still far ahead. Atlantic, though, kept Franklin well away from the gospel genre for several years, while her epochal soul hits shifted units. The calculation was, presumably, that gospel was just a bit too authentic, a bit too black, and unlikely to get airplay on pop radio.

That industry context is vital to understanding the significance of Franklin's 1972 *Amazing Grace* album, and this decades-delayed release of what was intended as an accompanying feature, shot during live sessions at a Baptist church in Watts, Los Angeles. In the era of Black Power and blaxploitation flicks, the grand soul diva's return to her gospel roots was a major proclamation of cultural pride, facilitated by the recording and film arms of major US media corporation Warner Bros. The resulting double LP proved the bestselling album of her career. But the movie? That's another story...

A series of introductory captions in the newly released film hint at the technical issues that bedevilled the material – shot by Sydney Pollack and his camera crew, no less – over two nights in January 1972. Perhaps worried about impinging on the performers, they neglected to use a clapperboard to synch images and sound, then found themselves with hours of footage, hours of audio and much confusion – they even resorted to lip-reading in the vain hope of matching everything up. The edit now released is thus not necessarily how Pollack himself would have put it together, but with his blessing Alan Elliott, a music industry exec, bought all the raw materials in 2007, mortgaging his own house to do it. Elliott then used the latest digital technology to lock sound and vision at last and assemble this cut, which Pollack (who died in 2008) never lived to see. Given the circumstances, Elliott takes a 'realised by' credit on screen instead of granting himself full directorial status.

The headline, though, is that finally the film is out there, though it took Franklin's death last year to lift the legal objections with which she had previously prevented festival screenings. It's hard to fathom what her objections might have been, since her performance is regal. In the midst of a compact, slightly tatty local church, she leaves the audience suitably spellbound and her fellow musicians clearly moved by the intensity of what they're experiencing. In deliciously grainy 16mm, the filming has a genuine *vérité* feel, with the crew scuttling in and out of shot, and an abiding sense that the power of the event is due to everyone in the room sharing in spiritual communion. The multi-camera set-up moves from close-ups of Aretha in full flight to pick out the people around her: the congregation ladies in the extravagant styles of the day; band leader the Reverend James Cleveland quietly choked by tears; even Rolling Stones Mick Jagger and Charlie Watts taking note in the back row. While there are a couple of Marvin Gaye and Carole King covers, the set list mostly sticks to the key gospel repertoire – including 'What a Friend We Have in Jesus', 'How I Got Over' and 'Never Grow Old' – with Aretha's declamatory prowess insisting on the music's ability to speak for itself without any hint of showbiz gloss.

Her voice is a remarkable instrument, but here in service to deeply held faith, both in God and the primacy of gospel as a musical form over rhythm and blues, rock, soul. Even now, after all these years, it's profoundly moving to witness the occasion, though perhaps with a tinge of regret that a film that would have made history in 1972 emerges in 2019 with the status of historical document, albeit one of powerful intensity.

Trevor Johnston, *Sight & Sound*, June 2019

When Franklin was planning her *Amazing Grace* album, Warner Brothers agreed to film the session in 1972.

Warner Communications, the parent company of Warner Brothers and the Warner, Reprise, Elektra and Atlantic labels, had reaped the rewards of that new buzzword, 'corporate synergy', with the success of the 1970 Michael Wadleigh film and album of *Woodstock*. Warner had paid \$100,000 for the rights and the film grossed \$17 million and the album sold three million copies. Warner Communications hoped for *Amazing Grace* to have that same success.

Warner Brothers' Director of Music Services, Joe Boyd (Nick Drake, Pink Floyd producer), proposed hiring Jim Signorelli, a documentary filmmaker and his team of 16mm cameramen. However, before Signorelli's deal could be signed, Warner Brothers' CEO, Ted Ashley, mentioned the project during a meeting with Sydney Pollack. At the time, Pollack was recently nominated for an Academy Award for Best Director for his film, *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?*. Pollack immediately signed up for the project upon hearing Franklin's name.

Recorded live at Rev James Cleveland's church in Watts, California in front of a lively audience/congregation, *Amazing Grace* would become the highest selling album of Franklin's career and the most popular Gospel album of all time.

However, the film was never released publicly.

Sydney Pollack was a feature film director. When recording, sound is usually post-synched on the backlot. After the remarkable two days of recording, the editors threw up their hands. There were no clappers, no marks to guide the sound into synch with the picture. Pollack hired lip readers and specialist editors but received no luck.

The film languished for almost 40 years before former Atlantic staff producer/Wexler protégé Alan Elliott came to Wexler and ultimately to Pollack. Together, Elliott, Wexler, and Pollack approached Warner Brothers about using new digital technology to match sound to picture and make a film out of the raw footage.

Forty-seven years later, this film is a testimony to the greatness of Aretha Franklin and a time-machine window into a moment in American musical and social history.

Production notes (with thanks to Neon)

Amazing Grace

Realised and Produced by: Alan Elliott
[Concert footage directed by]: Sydney Pollack
Presented by: Neon
Produced in association with: Sundial Pictures
Executive Producers: Stefan Nowicki, Joey Carey, Alexandra Johnes
Producers: Alan Elliott, Joe Boyd, Rob Johnson, Chiemi Karasawa, Spike Lee, Sabrina V. Owens, Jerry Wexler, Tirrell D. Whittley, Joseph Woolf
Co-producer: Stephanie Apt
Editor: Jeff Buchanan
Post Production Services and Supervision: Final Cut USA, Inc
Colour and Balance: Rebecca Arce
Colourist: Kelly Reese
Art Direction and Titles: Mathieu Bitton
Music Mixer: Jimmy Douglass
Original album produced by: Aretha Franklin, Arif Mardin, Jerry Wexler

Audio Project Managers: Bob Heiber, Chris Reynolds, Ron Bonk, Kim Gott
Originally recorded live at: The New Temple Missionary Baptist Church, Los Angeles
Recording Engineers: Ray Thompson, Wally Heider
Special Thanks: Reverend William Barber II, Ari Emanuel, Matt Farmer, Julie Huntsinger, Phil Jackson, Tom Luddy, Sydney Pollack, Peter Sellars

WITH

Aretha Franklin
Rev. James Cleveland
Rev. C.L. Franklin
Alexander Hamilton (*choir director*)
Cornell Dupree (*guitar*)
Kenny Luper (*organ*)
Poncho Morales (*percussion*)
Bernard Purdie (*drums*)
Chuck Rainey (*bass*)
Christine Adams
Alonzo Atkins
Lucy Ayers
James A. Broofield
Eugene Bryant
Syndrul Drahe
Mary Ann Hall
Margerie Luper
Charles May
Ethel Ruth Mcisaac
Odessa L. Mccastle
Stanley B. Miller
Linda Jean Ovenland
Rashi Park

The Southern California Community Choir.

Donna J. Hammond
Darryl Hardy
Betty Hollins
Josephine Howard
Sherman James
Dolores Jones
Johannie Pearl Knox
Linda J. Payton
Diane M. Ratcliff
Gilbert Stanley
Annette May Thomas
Bobby Washington
Aundie Wodson
Barbara Ann Wilson

USA 2019
88 mins

* Uncredited

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Amazing Grace
Mon 17 May 18:10; Sat 29 May 15:15;
Tue 8 Jun 18:10
Whitney: Can I Be Me
Tue 18 May 20:50; Sat 26 Jun 18:10
Siren of the Tropics (La sirène des tropiques)
Wed 19 May 18:10; Sat 5 Jun 12:20
Stormy Weather
Wed 19 May 20:40; Sat 5 Jun 16:00
Dreamgirls
Sat 22 May 17:50; Wed 23 Jun 20:30
Ella Fitzgerald: Just One of Those Things
Mon 24 May 18:10; Sat 19 Jun 15:20
...But Then, She's Betty Carter
Sat 29 May 12:10; Mon 7 Jun 18:00
Sparkle
Sun 30 May 18:40; Thu 10 Jun 20:35
Mavis!
Mon 31 May 16:10; Thu 17 Jun 20:40
Billie
Wed 2 Jun 18:00; Tue 15 Jun 20:40
What's Love Got to Do with It
Fri 4 Jun 18:00; Sat 26 Jun 20:45
Twenty Feet from Stardom
Fri 4 Jun 20:45; Thu 10 Jun 18:20
The Wiz
Sun 6 Jun 12:20; Fri 18 Jun 17:45

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