

TWO AMERICAS • LUMINARIES • CELEBRITY

Spelling It Out

Aretha Franklin and the Song She Made Her Own

Prepared for the Two Americas Archive

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Contribution Track • ERA VI–VII • Memphis, Tennessee & Detroit, Michigan

Who She Is

Aretha Louise Franklin was born March 25, 1942, in Memphis, and raised from about age five in Detroit, where her father, the Rev. C.L. Franklin, pastored New Bethel Baptist Church and became one of the era's most prominent Black ministers. Her mother, Barbara Siggers Franklin, a pianist and vocalist, died when Aretha was not yet ten; she began singing solos at New Bethel afterward, touring on her father's "gospel caravan" circuit as a teenager, with sisters Erma and Carolyn Franklin providing background vocals throughout much of her later career.

Respect, Rebuilt

Franklin signed with Columbia Records at eighteen in 1960, but the label, by its own later admission, never fully understood how to record an artist rooted in gospel; her commercial breakthrough came only after producer Jerry Wexler brought her to Atlantic Records in 1967, recording "I Never Loved a Man (The Way I Love You)" at FAME Studios in Muscle Shoals, Alabama. That February, working with her sister Carolyn, Franklin recorded her version of Otis Redding's "Respect" — reworking a song about a man's demand for a wife's deference into one that reversed the gender terms entirely, adding the now-iconic "R-E-S-P-E-C-T" spell-out (credited by engineer Tom Dowd chiefly to Carolyn Franklin) and the "sock it to me" ad-lib the sisters built together. The recording became a number-one hit and, almost immediately, an anthem of both the civil rights and feminist movements; it entered the Library of Congress's National Recording Registry in 2002. The exact division of credit between Aretha and Carolyn for the song's new elements remains disputed across sources and is not reflected in its official songwriting credit, which lists Redding alone.

"We all require and want respect, man or woman, black or white. It's our basic human right." —
Aretha Franklin

A Movement's Own Singer

Franklin had toured with Martin Luther King Jr. from age sixteen, and on February 16, 1968, received the SCLC's Drum Beat Award for musicians directly from King, roughly two months before his assassination; she sang at his funeral that April. In 1970 she publicly offered to help post bond for activist Angela Davis, telling *Jet* magazine, "Angela Davis must go free... I'm going to see her free if there is any justice in our courts." In 1987 she became the first woman inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, and on January 20, 2009, she sang "My Country, 'Tis of Thee" at Barack Obama's presidential inauguration. In 2019 she became the first individual woman awarded a Pulitzer Prize Special Citation, honored "for her indelible contribution to American music and culture for more than five decades."

Franklin died August 16, 2018, at her Detroit home, of a malignant pancreatic neuroendocrine tumor, at seventy-six. Her estate became the subject of an extended legal dispute after handwritten documents were found in her home following her death; a Michigan jury in 2023 determined which of two handwritten pages constituted her valid will. This entry states that a dispute occurred and was resolved by a jury verdict without detailing every particular of the case, out of respect for its status as a family legal matter — readers seeking the full record should consult Michigan probate court filings directly.

NC Local Lens

No documented connection between Aretha Franklin and North Carolina, Fayetteville, or Cumberland County was found in this research pass. This entry claims no NC connection while noting that Fayetteville Observer archives and Fayetteville State University event records — the sources most likely to hold a record of a tour stop or honorary recognition, if one exists — could not be checked here, and the question should remain open for future research.

Sourcing Caveats for Future Sessions

Otis Redding's reaction to "Respect": a widely quoted remark about "losing" the song to Franklin appears in slightly different wordings across sources — do not publish a specific version as verbatim without a primary interview or documentary source.

Estate/will dispute: this entry deliberately does not detail every particular; if expanded, verify all specifics directly against Michigan probate court records rather than secondary press accounts.

Citations

Chicago Notes-Bibliography style, primary and institutional sources.

1. David Ritz, *Respect: The Life of Aretha Franklin* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2014).
2. "Aretha Franklin," Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, inducted 1987, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.rockhall.com/>.
3. "Aretha Franklin," Recording Academy / GRAMMY.com, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.grammy.com/>.
4. "Respect," National Recording Registry, Library of Congress, inducted 2002.
5. "2019 Pulitzer Prize Special Citations and Awards," The Pulitzer Prizes, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.pulitzer.org/>.

Prepared by the Two Americas research process. Verify all figures against primary sources before publication if stronger originals become available.