

ARETHA FRANKLIN



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1956-2014</i>	<i>Soul</i>	<i>Rock Steady (1971)</i>

Only Solitaire

Artist: *Aretha Franklin*

Years: *1961*

George Starostin's Reviews

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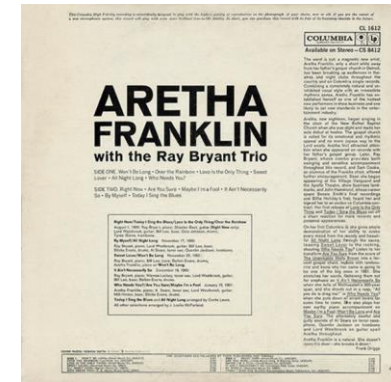


ARETHA

Album released:
February 1961

V A L U E
2 4 3 3 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) Won't Be Long; 2) Over The Rainbow; 3) Love Is The Only Thing; 4) Sweet Lover; 5) All Night Long; 6) Who Needs You?; 7) Right Now; 8) Are You Sure; 9) Maybe I'm A Fool; 10) It Ain't Necessarily So; 11) (Blue) By Myself; 12) Today I Sing The Blues.

REVIEW

Strictly speaking, **Aretha** was not Aretha's first album; that honor belongs to Side 1 of **Spirituals**, a 1960 compilation that combines a couple of singles previously released in 1956 and 1959 with a few more gospel performances by Sammie Bryant and Aretha's own father, the Rev. C. L. Franklin, on Side 2. However, since Aretha's tracks would be later combined with a few more of her previously unreleased outtakes and issued in 1965 as **Songs Of Faith** on the Checker label, we shall bypass them for now — merely noting that (a) Aretha had already been fully formed as a powerful gospel singer by the age of 14, and (b) her decision to «sell out» as a pop singer, inspired by her admiration for Sam Cooke, has to be perceived as an act of individual strong will, given that she was most likely being «groomed» by the Reverend for a strictly gospel career. Then again, the Reverend, by all accounts, was very much a man of the flesh (Aretha's mother notoriously left him for his infidelity), and it is hardly likely that his daughter's penchant for the secular could have bothered him all that much — not to mention the far more lucrative aspects of such a career.



Conventional narrative holds it that Aretha Franklin truly became Aretha, Queen Of Soul, only upon joining the Atlantic label in 1967, and this is clearly supported by the chart data; prior to 'Respect', Aretha was just one of the many black soul singers that would largely be interchangeable in the public conscience. However, there was no one single life-changing event in Aretha Franklin's life where one evening she would go to bed as a conventional soul performer and the next morning she would rise as a completely changed towering diva. In fact, listening to her debut on Columbia makes it fairly difficult for me to tell the difference between Aretha's singing technique, vocal and emotional range in 1961 and in 1967. What truly makes the difference is the context — the songs she sang, the arrangements that were offered, and, perhaps most importantly, the social and historical environment that finally caught up to her by 1967.

While in general, it is not a crime to ignore pre-Atlantic Aretha Franklin the same way people typically ignore pre-1972 Stevie Wonder (except for a small bunch of hits like 'Uptight' and 'For Once In My Life'), doing so will both diminish your understanding of her talent and personality *and* block you from quite a few pleasant experiences — and this is *particularly* true in the case of 1961's **Aretha**, unquestionably her best record prior to 1967. The fact that it did not chart at all (although two out of three accompanying singles, admittedly, did enter the R&B Top 10), in my mind, proves not that in 1961, Aretha Franklin was not yet ready for success in America, but only that in 1961, America was not yet ready for the success of Aretha Franklin. Because, honestly, this stuff still *totally* blows contemporary Ray Charles out of the water.

Although the LP most assuredly gives us a young woman's world, it would be nothing without a whole lot of men, such as the legendary talent scout John Hammond (who did not exactly «discover» Aretha, but did take her under his wing and served as producer on this and the next album); the moderately talented songwriter John Leslie McFarland, who wrote six new songs for Aretha to sing during the sessions; and the jazz pianist Ray Bryant, whose own «Ray Bryant Combo» was used as the primary backing band for Aretha. (Special mention should probably be made of Bill Lee on bass — the same Bill Lee who was so very much responsible for the unique gloomy flavor of Odetta's early albums; almost every track on which he appears with Aretha is automatically elevated by his very presence).

This combination gives **Aretha** a classy, tasteful feel — what separates a high quality Aretha Franklin album from a low quality one is almost never the singer's presence (for the first fifteen or so years of her pop career, there was hardly a time when you could accuse Aretha of slacking), but always the intrinsic quality of the songs *and* their arrangements. The songs here are maybe not the greatest that the lady has ever been presented with, but they fit her character and her mood swings, as do the arrangements, emphasizing the «feisty» and «daring» aspects of Aretha's personality over the sentimental. No

strings appear anywhere on the record; the horns are restricted to supporting roles; and most of the «bombast» actually comes from piano playing — although, I regret to say, most of the piano playing is provided by Ray Bryant rather than Aretha herself, who is credited only on four tracks, plus, apparently, on a piano duet with Ray on the opener ‘Won’t Be Long’. (Although why «regret»? Aretha has not really gone down in history as a great piano player, and Bryant has pretty damn good synergy with the girl).

The six songs penned by McFarland are probably the central matter of attention here. McFarland was a talented, but rather unlucky songwriter, whose main claims to fame had been several lesser-known titles written for Bill Haley (like ‘Rockin’ Rollin’ Rover’ and ‘Teenager’s Mother’) and co-writing Elvis’ ‘Stuck On You’ with Aaron Schroeder — no idea who of the two had the lion’s share on this particular occasion. His involvement with the first two Aretha Franklin albums were probably the first time he managed to get a chance to really put his own mark on an aspiring new artist, and he did good: the titles aren’t particularly «feminist», but Aretha Franklin could just as easily stand by her man as she could dropkick his ass (whatever the situation called for) — as long as the song could allow her to properly kindle that fire inside.

The fire then became The Voice, and while we may very well be astonished at how such a mature, confident, fully grown-up voice could materialize within an 18-year old girl, it is also worth remembering that the «girl», already back in 1960, was not so much a «girl» as a mother of two children (yes, she had her first at the age of 12), having lived through more thrills, turbulence, and abuse in her teen years than most of us do today. If she sounds like a powerful matron ready to snap you in two, this is because she’d already gone through her own private hell, and came out tough as nails.

But there is also a sense of balance to Aretha’s voice, a kind of «middle ground» that tries to take the best from both worlds of the great black female singers. She’s got plenty of power on ‘Won’t Be Long’, but she is not going for the «tough mama» barking style of a Big Mama Thornton or an Etta James; compared to the other big talent emerging at about the same time — Tina Turner — Aretha’s phrasing is softer and much less hysterical. At the same time, she has no business showing herself as too vulnerable, too romantic, or too vixenish; her voice never tries to seduce the listener (not intentionally, at least), or to fish for our empathy. This, more than anything else, is perhaps why she never managed to find a mass audience until 1967 — her singing did not correctly align with public preferences, and she made no attempts to artificially find such an alignment. She just waited for public preferences to change, biding her time.

Anyway, ‘Won’t Be Long’ announces Aretha’s arrival with a solid R&B piano bang and an assured vocal presence that feels... *different*, at least for the likes of 1961. It is not so much the power or the range in themselves, but (a) the sensation of

somebody being in total, absolute control and (b) a rather unprecedented degree of *realism* in the vocal delivery that stand out. "*Baby, here I am / By the railroad tracks / Waiting for my baby / 'Cause he's coming back / Coming back to me / On the 503 / And it won't be long / No it won't be long*". Simple and melodically unchallenging (really, this is just a poppier variation on 'Come On In My Kitchen'), but I try to imagine how the great R&B divas of the Fifties would have sung that — Ruth Brown, LaVern Baker, etc. — and I can only imagine them all being much more playful, overacting the emotions with a bit of that charming, but artificial, vaudeville spirit from the old days. By contrast, Aretha's delivery sounds *modern*. This kind of vocal track could just as easily have been recorded in 2020 as it was in 1961 (well, technically, it would probably have Autotune all over it in 2020).

In a way, it could be said that Aretha sings R&B as if it were rock'n'roll — her delivery here is not so much «soulful» as it is aggressive and defiant, what with all those rising and falling pitches on the last syllables, so much so that one line can sound like a battle-axe being raised in menace ("*when the whistle blows...*") and then the next line has it swiftly landing on your head ("*...that it won't be LONG!*"). Look at the lyrics once again and realize that, based on the words alone, this is a song of longing and yearning. Now listen to it and realize that, in reality, this is a song of frustration and determination: the lady has her *needs*, and she ain't budging one inch until those needs are satisfied. That "*long-gone rooster*" sure is going to find himself occupied for a long time when he gets back to his "*lonesome hen*". And yet, there are also tender notes to be found in abundance; Aretha's skill in balancing between «emotional taking» and «emotional giving» is her great gift that she would later expand on in her Atlantic years — few singers can sound strong and vulnerable at the same time, but she would make that mix work on a fairly regular basis.

Another angle, of course, is sexiness: in some respects, the 18-year old Aretha can sound naughtier and more frivolous than in her diva days — songs like 'Dr. Feelgood' would mainly make you blush because of the lyrics (the actual vocal delivery of them would be more gospel-like), but here we have the long-forgotten 'Sweet Lover', a rather simplistic blues tune that Aretha transforms into a veritable sex anthem, exploiting every seductive trick she can think of. The basicness of the rhythm track, free from the rigid confines of pop melody, just hands her the reins and tells to work it with the freedom of an Ella Fitzgerald, except that Ella would never allow herself to behave in such an «unlady-like» fashion before the microphone. (We're still talking standards of 1961, of course, not even the late Sixties or early Seventies).

Admittedly, McFarland was a pretty lightweight composer, and whatever material he gave to Aretha was hardly deserving of the depths she *already* could reach in 1961, let alone five years later. The lyrics are always trite, the melodies predictable

and standard, and the primary purpose is superficial commercial entertainment, rather than a desire to make a statement. But then again, it's not as if every one of Aretha's big hits during her prime years would be on the level of 'Respect' or 'Chain Of Fools' or 'I Say A Little Prayer'; and if we still play and love albums like **Please Please Me**, I see no reason for a record like **Aretha** to be treated as if it didn't even exist. The songs may not be all that good — but what about the burning desire to prove yourself and make a difference in the heart of an excited 18-year old girl with talent and passion to burn? By 1967, when the hits would start pouring in, she was already a professional with years of experience; **Aretha** gives you the joy of the original self-discovery, which can be much more inspirational under the right conditions.

In a way, I think I prefer McFarland's wimpy originals to the small bunch of classics that Aretha mixes in for the sake of diversity and, uh, recognition? 'Over The Rainbow' is a song that never ever ever worked for anybody except Judy Garland, and *only* when you slip into the 1939 spirit and join Toto on the farm. Technically, it's a good enough performance, but coming right off the power-punch of 'Won't Be Long', it's like an ice-cold shower to remind us that show business is still show business. 'It Ain't Necessarily So' from *Porgy And Bess*, another perennial favorite, is nowhere near as off-putting, but again, Aretha does not quite understand what to do with the song and how to turn it to her advantage. She just sings it, she can hardly be said to «live it» as she does — surprise surprise — with those McFarland ditties.

Where she is completely in her element is on this album's sole gospel number, Meredith Willson's 'Are You Sure'. With gospel so deep in her blood, there is no way she could flunk this, and I love the clever buildup of the song, beginning with some quiet African percussion rhythms and Aretha singing in almost a (perfectly accentuated) whisper, slowly leading the song to the explosive chorus of "*raise your voices high*". It's possible that the Reverend forced her to do at least a single gospel number on the album, but somehow I doubt it — mixing the sacred and the secular would always remain the normal way of life for Aretha, even long after she'd become completely independent of her father. In any case, I'm glad the song is here, as it is one of the unquestionable highlights.

To sum up: **Aretha** is everything we could expect out of a debut record for Aretha Franklin in 1961, and maybe even a little more than that. Each single LP she would record for Columbia in the next five years would be, at best, slightly inferior, and at worst, embarrassing, as the label ceaselessly tried to mold her into something she had no interest in becoming, failing to understand that not all black girl singers can be fitted into the mold of Diana Ross or Dionne Warwick. But *this* album, fortunately cut at the very beginning when the record executives were not yet quite clear about what to do with their newest talent acquisition, is a happy exception to the rule — and as far as I am concerned, its reputation and status are in sore need

of repair, to let everybody know just how much the Queen of Soul was deserving of her title years and years before it would actually be given to her.

As one last illustration, you can compare [the original version](#) of the slow-burning ‘Today I Sing The Blues’, composed for Aretha by Curtis Lewis, with the later [Atlantic era re-recording](#) for **Soul ’69**. The latter is «bigger» in every respect — it is longer, it has a weightier, brass-heavy arrangement, and, as was common for the times, it features Aretha in near-constant screaming mode. The original, driven by Ray Bryant’s light piano playing and an inobtrusive electric guitar lead, is much more reserved and subtle, giving the song a more intimate flavor — «living room Aretha» vs. «stadium Aretha», if you wish; and I am really at a loss about which version I prefer. I *definitely* do know, though, that the re-recording never strikes me as presenting a more «mature» Aretha (other than the added penchant for screeching and the inevitable timbre evolution in eight years) than the original version, which is every bit as self-confident and convincing as the later one. And when you can sing the blues so convincingly at the age of 18, it sort of feels a little unfair how people only started taking you seriously after you hit 25, doesn’t it?

