

Q&A with Aretha Franklin

Conducted by David Nathan for DMI Records

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Aretha Franklin, a household name the world over, has racked up more awards and accolades than virtually any woman in music history—from the much-coveted Presidential Medal of Freedom to being named one of Time magazine’s most important people of the 20th century. Her hit records—“Respect,” “Think,” “Chain Of Fools,” “Daydreaming,” “A Natural Woman”—are timeless classics; her 18 GRAMMY® Awards, a multitude of gold and platinum albums and singles and her induction as the first female artist into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame speak to her global legendary status. And yet, with the 2008 DMI Music release of “This Christmas Aretha,” the undisputed Queen of Soul has achieved another benchmark in a truly illustrious career. The sizzling 11-track collection of traditional and contemporary holiday standards, given the Franklin powerhouse treatment, is Aretha’s first Christmas album.

Q: Ms. Franklin, why is this your first Christmas CD?

AF: Well, the powers that be at other labels told me, ‘Christmas albums don’t sell,’ whenever I suggested it before. But everything is not about the money. I always want to be in the mix and Christmas is a very important time of the year for many people, including myself, because it surrounds the birth of Christ.

Q: How did this project come about?

AF: I was doing something with AARP through Tena Clark (of DMI Music). We began to talk about it and I started recording on June 1 [2008]. I recorded during my off-days from being on the road. We worked in some of the top studios in Detroit—some of the musicians came in from California—and in New York and Los Angeles.

Q: How did the song selection happen?

AF: There were a certain number of traditional songs they wanted and I picked the rest. Donny Hathaway’s “This Christmas” and (The O’Jays’) “Christmas Ain’t Christmas” are songs I look forward to every year. They always get played in my home.

Q: This album is also a family affair.

AF: Yes, my son Eddie is singing on “This Christmas” with me—that’s the first time we’ve done a duet. My son Teddy is playing guitar on “The Lord Will Make A Way.” That’s one of those old time, good time kind of tracks. It’s a traditional gospel song and it’s just smashing. It’s right there on the front burner. That groove...phew...!

Q: You also play piano on a couple of songs?

AF: On “Silent Night” and “14 Angels,” which is from “Hansel & Gretel.” I enjoyed recording this album and everyone was very easy to work with.

Q: Tell me about some of the other songs on the album.

AF: “One Night With The King” is something I heard by [gospel singer] Juanita Bynum and I said, ‘we got to put this in the program.’ I recorded “Ave



This Christmas Aretha is on sale now exclusively at Borders and Waldenbooks stores, as well as on Borders.com.

Maria" once before on my *One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism* album [in 1987]. Other songs like, "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing" and "Angels We Have Heard On High," I heard as a child and I am delighted to now be recording them.

Q: What was Christmas like in the Franklin household when you were growing up?

AF: Christmas in the Franklin household...hmmm...let me see... It was always about good cooking, great smells throughout the house, hustling and bustling, gift giving and, of course, going to my Dad's church for the services and for the Watch meeting on New Year's Eve. For me and my younger sister Carolyn, it was also about wondering how Santa got by us. We had these large French windows and we would look out for the sleigh, look up at the sky and stay up as long as we could to watch out for Santa.

Q: And how do you celebrate now?

AF: Every year I always do the family thing at Christmas and I make sure we have a beautiful time.

Q: How do you feel about "This Christmas Aretha" as an entire piece of work?

AF: I am thrilled with it cut by cut. This new album even goes beyond my personal top ten list of my own recordings. Of course, I'm always critical. I always hear something I could have done better. But I love to play it throughout. It's smashing! I hope people find it spiritually uplifting, comforting and enjoyable.

Q: Did you come up with the words for "'Twas the Night Before Christmas" which is a spoken word piece?

AF: Uh-huh! (laughs). Most of them are mine...I was just having fun!

Q: Will you be performing any of the songs during upcoming shows?

AF: Yes, I'm sure we will include some as part of the program for the rest of the year.

Q: I noticed how good you sound on this album vocally.

AF: You are on the money. I was just getting my voice straightened out when we recorded it. I didn't like what was happening with my voice for a while so I went to see a specialist. I found out I had acid reflux and that was affecting my range and clarity. The doctor said it was too much spicy food, chocolate and bottles of Coke. Now I'm really singing again and this album is the tip of the iceberg!

Q: What have you been up to recently?

AF: Well, as you know, I went to the R&B Foundation show in Philadelphia and I haven't seen a show that good in a long time. [60s singer] Sugar Pie DeSanto was a knockout...I'm going to have her perform at my Christmas party along with The Chi-Lites. I also have a new album ("A Woman Falling Out of Love") on my Aretha's Records label and I'm shopping that. I'm considering releasing it through digital distribution or doing it online.

Q: Do you ever listen to your own albums at home?

AF: All the time. Most recently, I've been listening to a Columbia CD, "The Queen In Waiting." I loved some of those performances, there were some great arrangers and producers. I'm really enjoying it.

Q: You've had such an amazing career. How do you feel about it?

AF: I'm having a good time. I'm still growing in terms of presentation and how to entertain. The best comes with growth and experience.

Q: OK, one last question. How's your life, Ms. Franklin?

AF: It is ever fabulous. I mean, fabulous. I've been so blessed. I'm most thankful for how good God has been to me. When you receive something like the Presidential Medal of Freedom, wow. After God's grace, I'm so grateful for good friends, loyal fans and the love of the music. I treasure real people and I know the ones who have hung in there with me and I am truly thankful.