

# Aretha Franklin, musical and political influencer, dies at 76

By The Guardian, adapted by Newsela staff on 08.19.18

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Aretha Franklin performs at President Barack Obama's swearing-in ceremony at the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C., Tuesday, January 20, 2009. Photo by: Ron Edmonds/AP Photo

The great American soul singer Aretha Franklin died Thursday, August 16. She was 76 years old. The singer was reportedly very ill and her family was at her bedside.

"In one of the darkest moments of our lives, we are not able to find the appropriate words to express the pain in our heart. We have lost the matriarch and rock of our family. The love she had for her children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews and cousins knew no bounds," Franklin's family said.

Franklin had been in poor health since 2010, when she was diagnosed with a tumor. Still, she returned to live performances after an operation. She died of pancreatic cancer.

Her last performance was in November 2017. She sang at singer Elton John's 25th anniversary for his AIDS Foundation in New York City. AIDS is a condition where your body can't fight off infections.

## **Popularized Soul Music In 1950s And 1960s**

Franklin was known as the "Queen of Soul." She and other African-American artists popularized soul music in the late 1950s and 1960s. It combines church-style singing, called gospel, with jazz and rhythm and blues (R&B) into a single genre.

Franklin sold more than 75 million records in her lifetime and won 18 Grammy awards. She had 77 entries in the U.S. Billboard Hot 100 and 20 No. 1 singles on the R&B chart.

Her last original recording was "Aretha Franklin Sings the Great Diva Classics" in 2014, which included her take on Adele's "Rolling in the Deep."

## **"American History Wells Up When Aretha Sings"**

"American history wells up when Aretha sings," former U.S. President Barack Obama said at an award show performance in 2015. Obama said Franklin blended African-American church gospel music, the blues, R&B and rock 'n' roll, and her music showed how "hardship and sorrow were transformed into something full of beauty and vitality and hope."

After her death, some of America's best-known figures paid their respects to her on social media. Former President Bill Clinton, at whose 1993 inauguration Franklin performed, said in a joint statement with Hillary Clinton, "She will forever be the Queen of Soul and so much more to all who knew her personally and through her music. Our hearts go out to her family and her countless fans."

President Donald Trump wrote a tribute on Twitter. "The Queen of Soul, Aretha Franklin, is dead. She was a great woman, with a wonderful gift from God, her voice. She will be missed!"

Singer Elton John posted a tribute on Instagram, "The loss of Aretha Franklin is a blow for everybody who loves real music: Music from the heart, the soul and the Church."

## **Family Friend Martin Luther King, Jr.**

Franklin was born on March 25, 1942, in Memphis, Tennessee. The family moved to Buffalo, New York, when Franklin was 2 years old. They settled in Detroit, Michigan, two years later. In Detroit, shortly after her mother's death, the 10-year-old Franklin started singing at church. Her father was a preacher there whose political sermons led civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. to stay with the family when he visited.

Clarence LaVaughn (CL) Franklin began managing his daughter and included her in his church tours. In 1956, he helped Aretha get signed for her first album, "Songs of Faith." In the mid-1960s her career took off. Her incredible run of hit songs included a cover of Otis Redding's "Respect," "(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman" and "I Say a Little Prayer."

Franklin received the Grammy Award for Lifetime Achievement in 1994. In 2005, she received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, and in 2009 she performed "My Country, 'Tis of Thee" at Obama's first inauguration.

In February 2017, Franklin said stepping back from performing was one of the most challenging things she had to do. "This is what I've done all of my life."

In June 2017, Franklin told Billboard magazine she was working on an album that included music stars Stevie Wonder, Elton John and Lionel Richie. However, that album hasn't yet been released. Singer Jennifer Hudson is set to play Franklin in the upcoming movie "Queen of Soul."

### **Musical Influence Impossible To Measure**

Franklin's musical influence is impossible to measure. "The soulfulness comes from the gospel," Beyoncé once said. "It comes from Aretha, who listened to all of that, who sang in the Church." Other musicians have used her music in their songs, including Kanye West, Outkast and Alicia Keys.

Her musical reach is almost matched by her political influence. Her father helped Martin Luther King, Jr. organize the Walk to Freedom in Detroit. Franklin performed at King's funeral in April 1968. "Respect," meanwhile, became a defining song of both the women's and civil rights movements.

Franklin was the mother of four sons. She gave birth to her first, Clarence, when she was 13, and her second, Edward, at age 14. Ted was born in 1964, followed by Kecalf in 1970.

**Quiz**

- 1 Which sentence from the section "Musical Influence Impossible To Measure" supports the idea that Aretha Franklin's influence spread beyond the music industry?
- (A) Franklin's musical influence is impossible to measure.
  - (B) Other musicians have used her music in their songs, including Kanye West, Outkast and Alicia Keys.
  - (C) "Respect," meanwhile, became a defining song of both the women's and civil rights movements.
  - (D) She gave birth to her first, Clarence, when she was 13, and her second, Edward, at age 14. Ted was born in 1964, followed by Kecalp in 1970.

- 2 Read the conclusion below.

*Aretha Franklin was an important and successful musical artist.*

Which selection from the article provides the BEST support for the statement above?

- (A) The great American soul singer Aretha Franklin died Thursday, August 16.
- (B) She had 77 entries in the U.S. Billboard Hot 100 and 20 No. 1 singles on the R&B chart.
- (C) Singer Elton John posted a tribute on Instagram, "The loss of Aretha Franklin is a blow for everybody who loves real music: Music from the heart, the soul and the Church."
- (D) "The soulfulness comes from the gospel," Beyoncé once said. "It comes from Aretha, who listened to all of that, who sang in the Church."

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*"American history wells up when Aretha sings," former U.S. President Barack Obama said at an award show performance in 2015. Obama said Franklin blended African-American church gospel music, the blues, R&B and rock 'n' roll, and her music showed how "hardship and sorrow were transformed into something full of beauty and vitality and hope."*

Why did the author include this description?

- (A) to show how Aretha Franklin played a key role in creating a new genre of music, known as soul music
  - (B) to explain why Aretha Franklin is respected by both musical artists and political figures
  - (C) to describe how Aretha Franklin jumped from the world of music to become a civil rights leader
  - (D) to suggest that Aretha Franklin's influence was at its peak when she passed away
- 4 Which sentence from the section "Musical Influence Impossible To Measure" BEST introduces Aretha Franklin's musical influence?
- (A) "It comes from Aretha, who listened to all of that, who sang in the Church."
  - (B) Other musicians have used her music in their songs, including Kanye West, Outkast and Alicia Keys.
  - (C) Her father helped Martin Luther King, Jr. organize the Walk to Freedom in Detroit. Franklin performed at King's funeral in April 1968.
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**Answer Key**

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