

Beloved musical icon Aretha Franklin dies at 76

By The Guardian, adapted by Newsela staff on 08.20.18

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

The great American soul singer Aretha Franklin died Thursday, August 16 at the age of 76, her representative has said. She was reported to have been gravely ill with her family 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. However, she returned to live performances after an operation. She died of pancreatic cancer.

Her last performance was in New York City during Elton John's 25th anniversary celebration for his AIDS Foundation in November 2017.

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

75 Million Records, 18 Grammy Awards

Franklin sold more than 75 million records in her lifetime and won 18 Grammy awards. She had 77 songs in the U.S. Billboard Hot 100 and 20 No. 1 hits 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," former U.S. President Barack Obama said at an award show performance in 2015. Obama said Franklin blended African-American spirituals, the blues, R&B and rock 'n' roll, and showed how "hardship and sorrow were transformed into something full of beauty and vitality and hope."

Prominent Figures Pay Respects

With news of her death, some of America's most prominent figures have also paid their respects. 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 calm 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!"

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."

10-Year-Old Sang Solos At Church

Franklin was born on March 25, 1942, in Memphis, Tennessee. The family moved to Buffalo, New York, when Franklin was 2 years old, and settled in Detroit, Michigan, two years later. It was in Detroit, shortly after her mother's death, that the 10-year-old Franklin started singing solos at New Bethel Church, where her father was a preacher. His political sermons led civil rights leader Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. to stay with the family when he visited Detroit.

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

Presidential Medal Of Freedom

Franklin continued to release albums and perform through the 1990s, and received the Grammy Award for Lifetime Achievement in 1994. In 2005, she was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, and, in 2009, she performed "My Country, 'Tis of Thee" at Obama's first inauguration.

Franklin announced her retirement from performing in February 2017 (though she did return to the stage), saying that stepping back from performing was challenging. "This is what I've done all of my life."

In June 2017, Franklin told Billboard magazine she was working on a new 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." Franklin had described Hudson as one of her first choices.

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." Her music has been a part of other musicians' songs including Kanye West, Outkast and Alicia Keys.

Musical And Political Influencer

Her musical influence was almost matched by her political influence. Her father CL helped Martin Luther King, Jr. organize the Walk to Freedom, and she performed at King's funeral in April 1968. "Respect," meanwhile, was hailed as a defining song of both the feminist and civil rights movements.

In a 2015 interview, Franklin said the song wasn't recorded with political intentions. "I was asked what recording of mine I'd put in a time capsule, and it was 'Respect.' Because people want respect — even small children, even babies. As people, we deserve respect from one another."

Franklin is survived by 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 Kecalp in 1970.

Quiz

- 1 Which section from the article BEST explains how Aretha Franklin's story and her music will continue to affect people after her death?
- (A) "75 Million Records, 18 Grammy Awards"
 - (B) "Prominent Figures Pay Respects"
 - (C) "10-Year-Old Sang Solos At Church"
 - (D) "Presidential Medal Of Freedom"

- 2 Read the following statement.

Aretha Franklin's work frequently intersected with movements to make the United States a more just country.

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

- (A) "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!"
 - (B) Franklin's musical influence is impossible to measure. "The soulfulness comes from the gospel," Beyoncé once said.
 - (C) "Respect," meanwhile, was hailed as a defining song of both the feminist and civil rights movements.
 - (D) In a 2015 interview, Franklin said the song wasn't recorded with political intentions.
- 3 Why was the development of soul music unique?
- (A) Soul music combined elements of a number of other musical styles.
 - (B) Soul music was the first type of music developed primarily by African-American artists.
 - (C) Soul music was specifically designed to carry political messages about equality and justice.
 - (D) Soul music later was used by other types of musicians in their work.

- 4 How did Clarence LaVaughn affect Aretha Franklin's musical career?
- (A) He supported her when her career was not going well.
 - (B) He helped her secure her first record deal.
 - (C) He pushed her to become active in the civil rights movement.
 - (D) He encouraged her to only sing gospel music.

Answer Key

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