

Singspired by

Aretha Franklin

Born 25 March 1942, American singer and songwriter Aretha Franklin, The Queen of Soul!



Aretha! The embodiment of soul music.

I've met a few students over the years who have found Aretha. Those who haven't, I point them to her. Her singing is a masterclass in soul.

Students are immediately grabbed by her bluesy note choices, her virtuosic licks, her incredible range with no perceivable difference in tonal quality throughout. Some pick up on the less obvious elements of her technique; her phrasing, the way she works around the melody using counterpoint, her effortless syncopation, always finding the pulse in the off-beats - thereby giving her vocals bounce and jazz-flavoured forward motion. So, when students have broken all those down in their listening, injected them into their singing, practised and practised they can get close to Aretha's skillset. But, unless they began their singing life in a gospel music church, few will ever come close to Aretha's sound because there is a 'trance-like' state which gospel singers reach. Their singing is about more than singing, more than the song. It is about a connection with their soul and with

eternity. It is a form of prayer; a connection to God. It is a physical form of worship and it relies on a spiritual, emotional and intellectual 'letting go'; allowing something ethereal to take over.

Aretha Franklin grew up listening to her father preaching. C L Franklin was a leading figure in the American Baptist Church and famous among much of the black population of America. In her teens, gifted pianist and singer Aretha would tour the country, performing as a kind of warm-up musical act to her father's famous sermons. The Baptist style of preaching is not dissimilar to gospel singing style. Unlike a typical Anglican vicar, a Baptist preacher is incredibly animated. The voice will soar from low to high in pitch, words will

be sustained, volume will rise and fall, there will be emotion and fervour, important phrases will be repeated and speech will be very slow at times and incredibly fast at others. Words will be articulated with clarity and precision. There will be a 'shape' to the sermon which will often reach an incredibly passionate climax. The congregation will respond freely and enthusiastically in support of the sermon. What better lesson for a budding performer? Aretha watched congregations delight in her father's use of his voice to whip them up into a frenzy.

As a singer, all she had to do was copy her father, but in the context of a song. She used all those virtuosic skills, controlling her articulation, her volume, her range, her tonality, her pace, sustain, phrasing, repetition and combined them, like her father, with passion, conviction and spontaneity.

Of course it helped that top musicians from the soul, gospel, blues and jazz world were also regular visitors to the Franklin household and she would be wheeled out as the resident child prodigy to jam with most of them! So many great artists, be they from the gospel tradition, classical, pop or musical theatre seem to combine that perfect combination of skill and liberty. They appear to us as free spirits, uninhibited by earthly cares, whilst dazzling us with levels of virtuosic 'control'. So, strangely, control of your instrument can help you to let go and become one with the music. Audiences find artists in a state of 'letting go' utterly intoxicating. They come back for more and more. It's like a little glimpse of heaven.

Exercise

Do you know a song really, really well? All the lyrics, all the notes? You must know one. Something you've sung before with friends, school, family? A hymn maybe? Or a childhood favourite Do you feel you sing it well? Not the best. No comparisons needed. Just, do you sing it well enough for you? Do you sing it with love? Do you feel it? Sing it now and feel it. Try to let go like you've never let go before. Try to be a bit more expressive than ever before. Open your mouth a little further, make your dynamic changes a little more pronounced, move your body a bit more, sustain notes a bit more, get a bit faster, slower, deeper, higher, quieter, louder. Play with the song! Go over the top. Why not? No-one's watching. Try to physically show the love you have for the song. Let it be a sensory, whole body experience. Sing with your soul.

If you don't know a song well, today's the day you could learn one. If you don't have much time now, how about just picking a song, any song and learning the first verse. If you don't know a song it's a sign that you have a block. Something's stopping you investing your time in something you love. Well, you're reading this book so you must love singing right? Well, if that's true, put down the book and sing a song! A student once came to me with a bag full of song lyrics. All her favourite songs she'd put

together in a file. But she said "The problem is I don't know any of them well enough to sing them". The size of her love for singing was overwhelming her! It was a mountain and she didn't know where to start climbing it! I said "let's learn one song". And we did. Then she learned another the following week. Now she's a happy singer and runs her own open mic night. She knows hundreds of songs. Music can seem overwhelming. It's such a magical force. But it's reaching out for you and asking you to step inside. Just one step at a time; one song at a time!