

Cynthia Erivo – we think it’s fair to say – is doing rather well. The actor and singer was nominated for two Oscars last year for her portrayal of anti-slavery activist Harriet Tubman in *Harriet*, and for best original song, *Stand Up*, which she co-wrote for the film and performed at the award ceremony. Prior to that, she had already received an Emmy, Grammy and Tony award for her performance in the Broadway show *The Color Purple* from 2015 to 2017.

And as if one legendary figure wasn’t enough, Erivo has since taken on the lead in NatGeo’s miniseries *Genius: Aretha*, which was released in March 2021. She’s also established her own production company, is set to launch her debut album this year, and is even releasing a children’s book. Suffice to say, we have a lot of R-E-S-P-E-C-T for her. So what goes into playing such a monumental role as the Queen of Soul herself?



“When you take on an icon that people know so well, there is some pressure to do it as well as you possibly can, and as truthfully as possible” says Erivo. “There’s no point trying to mimic the person who already existed – no one can be a better Aretha than Aretha – but you can try and pour as much detail and research and heart as possible into the character, to give as much life to the person as you can. There is some pressure, some nervousness, but more than anything, there’s a huge weight of responsibility.”

Erivo had the good fortune of meeting Aretha Franklin on two occasions: once backstage during the Broadway run of *The Color Purple*, and once again before Erivo went on to perform at the Kennedy Center Honors in 2016. “It’s really strange meeting your heroes, but it’s even stranger when your heroes are really funny. Aretha was hilarious, and she remembered me the second time, which was really cool,” she beams. “A week after the Kennedy Center Honors, I watched the video back of my live performance, and at one point, the cameras cut to Aretha sitting in the audience, singing along, eyes closed, head back, having fun. It’s such a special moment for me.”

For Erivo’s previous role of Harriet Tubman, perhaps the research and detail-gathering required to do her life justice were an even greater undertaking, given the events of Tubman’s life are very much confined to historical memory. There was certainly another weight of responsibility attached. As is the case with so many historic Black heroes, there is an urgent issue of representation to be addressed. During Obama’s administration, actions were put in place to include Tubman’s portrait on the 20-dollar bill, which would have made her the first ever African-American to be featured on a banknote. Unsurprisingly, Trump’s time in office saw this action abruptly delayed until 2026. Even the film, which was released in 2019, is the very first to tell the story of her life.

And what a story it is. Born into slavery in Maryland in 1822, Tubman escaped to freedom by making a daring 100-mile journey north entirely on foot. She then returned a total of 19 times to lead another 70 enslaved people into freedom. During the American Civil War, she served as a spy for the Union Army, and led an armed raid which freed a further 700 enslaved people – making her the only known woman to lead a military expedition during the war. In later life, she became active in the women’s suffrage movement, and was 91 years old when she died. “Harriet was a huge personality – a huge moment in history,” says Erivo. “It’s just one of

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The role was an emotionally and physically demanding one to shoot, with plenty of action sequences, from running and horse-riding to leaping off bridges and scaling up rock faces. “I trained for it to make sure I was fit enough, and continued to work out while on set. My stunt double did one or two of the stunts in the film, but everything else was me, and that was because I wasn’t *allowed* to do those other ones,” she smiles. “It was a huge undertaking, with lots of late nights and cold temperatures – we were filming in Richmond, Virginia in November. It was a tough journey, but such a fulfilling one to be a part of.”

Surprisingly, portraying Harriet Tubman also drew on Erivo’s ability as a singer as well as an actor. During Tubman’s missions to free enslaved people, she would sing to communicate to workers in the field to orchestrate their escape. “She would use certain songs to signal that she was there, that it was safe to leave, that it wasn’t safe to leave, that they were to leave at midnight,” says Erivo. “It’s such an interesting and lesser known part of her story.”

Erivo, who grew up in London and now lives in LA, is incredibly humble, and seems to exude a sense of calm, quiet confidence. She also possesses a wonderful, exuberant sense of style. At the time of our conversation, she’s wearing a grey sweater, a chunky necklace, long lacquered fingernails, and an unknowable amount of earrings. “I’ve loved jewellery ever since I was a kid watching my mum wear it,” Erivo says. “She would always have big old earrings on, and a ring or two on her fingers, and would wear big costume pieces for parties. I just loved the idea you could express yourself by wearing different pieces of jewellery. I think there’s been this trend where people are always discouraged from wearing too much. And I just don’t subscribe to that at all. As long as the individual

pieces are different and cool and fit with who you are, I am all for wearing them.”

Erivo is also fond of bold spectacles. “For me, it’s like makeup – another creative way to dress, another accessory to add to my outfit. I’ve worn them at events, on the red carpet – I love them.” She is so fond, in fact, she is currently working on a bespoke pair with Cubitts. Their design draws on Erivo’s statement jewellery, with a cut out at the bridge echoing a nose ring she often wears. “We were thinking, ‘how can we incorporate a lot of the things I already have into these frames, so they feel very much like me?’ Once I understood how much scope there was, I could really let loose. I think people are so often encouraged to make the least amount of noise with their spectacles, because we don’t want to draw attention to our faces – but why not? Get a pair that makes you smile, that makes you feel good. And nine times out of ten, someone will compliment you on your spectacles.” Unless, of course, they are made by Cubitts. That would be ten times out of ten, naturally.

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Cynthia Erivo, Cubitts Bespoke+



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01 **Cynthia’s Spectacles** – Cynthia worked closely with Cubitts designer Romain Caillaud to create her bespoke spectacles. The frames are constructed from different pieces of coloured acetate that have been fused together, with an angular form along the bottom of the lens contrasting with the more organic curves of the top. The lenses are screwed into place, allowing them to appear to float above the frame, while an icon of a cloud and the sun appear at the tips of the temples, which are coloured green and pink, to suggest flowers. Along the temple, the words ‘à la poursuite du bonheur’ are engraved, which means ‘chasing happiness’.