

ARETHA  
FRANKLIN,  
1968



Embodying  
a Legend  
Franklin sparked  
in blue at New  
York City's  
Madison Square  
Garden (left).  
Hudson re-creates  
the performance  
in *Respect* (right).

JENNIFER  
HUDSON,  
2021

Liesl Tommy, director of the new Aretha Franklin biopic *Respect*, can recall the moment when she knew she had the perfect Queen of Soul in Jennifer Hudson. It was the first time the Oscar winner sang live in character in front of the film's crew. "There were grown, hardened grips crying," Tommy recalls of Hudson's tear-jerking rendition of a Franklin classic. "I think that's part of why people worked so hard [on the film]. They understood how much she was giving, how hard Jennifer was working. She would sing and sing and sing and sing on those days. It was astounding."

In *Respect*, which follows Franklin's rise from child gospel singer to global R&B and pop superstar, Hudson, 39, channels the spirit of the icon, who died of pancreatic cancer in 2018 at age 76. Hudson says she steered clear of mere "imitation" in embodying the Rock &

*Jennifer  
Becomes*

# *Aretha*

HOW AN AMERICAN IDOL  
CONTESTANT TURNED  
OSCAR AND GRAMMY  
WINNER NAILED THE MOVIE  
ROLE OF A LIFETIME:  
THE QUEEN OF SOUL  
*By* NIGEL SMITH

Roll Hall of Famer. “Even when I do a tribute, I like the people [I’m honoring] to be able to see themselves how we see them,” she explains. “They never really get to see themselves. So it’s like, ‘How can I help you get to see how we see you?’” Hudson had no problem capturing Franklin’s vocal talent, but she had to work harder to nail her physical presence. Tommy, a Tony-nominated stage director who makes her feature film debut with *Respect*, describes the moment when it finally happened on-set: “We were doing a rehearsal, and she just dropped into a physical movement. We had been watching Aretha videos, and we were all like, ‘Oh my God, that’s it. That’s it! That’s Aretha right there.’”

‘Aretha understood what Jennifer was bringing [to the role]’

—RESPECT  
DIRECTOR  
LIESL TOMMY



### Aretha Through the Decades

1. Franklin (second from left) and her siblings (from left, Erma, Carolyn and Cecil) with their father, Reverend C.L. Franklin, in 1956.
2. Holding one of her 18 career Grammys in 1972.
3. Standing in for an ailing Luciano Pavarotti to perform the Puccini aria “Nessun dorma” at the 1998 Grammys.

## WHO'S WHO IN RESPECT



### Aretha Franklin: Jennifer Hudson

*Respect* culminates in the recording of Franklin’s seminal 1972 gospel album *Amazing Grace*, which sold more than 2 million copies and won a Grammy for Best Soul Gospel Performance. The live album was recorded at South Los Angeles’s New Temple Missionary Baptist Church, and Franklin’s family and closest friends—as well as the Rolling Stones frontman Mick Jagger—were in the audience.



### Reverend C.L. Franklin: Forest Whitaker

Aretha’s dad, played by the actor-director who won an Oscar for *The Last King of Scotland*, was the esteemed pastor of the New Bethel Baptist Church in Detroit. His oratorical skills earned him a reputation as the man with the “million-dollar voice.”



Hudson's rigorous approach didn't go unnoticed by her costars. Six-time Tony winner Audra McDonald, who plays Franklin's mother Barbara in the film, praises Hudson as "a very generous, brilliant, open actress with no ego whatsoever," adding, "She's just about serving the story." To further get into character, the mother of one (David Otunga Jr., 12, with her ex David Otunga) had to pull off some show-stopping period looks, from '50s-era pencil skirts to bold '70s-style prints. "It taught me more about her," she explains. "I couldn't help but to feel like the queen herself in those fabrics." Hudson, who turns 40 on Sept. 12, one month after the film's Aug. 13 debut, is already generating Oscar buzz for her performance. Potential accolades aside, the mother of one says she already feels "grateful and blessed," adding, "I'm the happiest I've ever been."

With reporting by **JEREMY PARSONS**



Jennifer Hudson was performing in *The Color Purple* on Broadway in 2015 when she found out she'd won the role of Aretha Franklin, via a phone call from the legend herself. When the two had first spoken about the possibility nearly a decade earlier, Franklin offered stern directions. "I'm the Queen of Soul. Now I want you to play me, but you need to be clear that I am the queen," Hudson recalls Franklin telling her. Hudson's response: "Ma'am, I know—you ain't got to tell me twice."



**Jerry Wexler: Marc Maron**  
The *GLOW* actor portrays Franklin's longtime music producer, who was cohead of Atlantic Records from 1953 to 1975. After Franklin's contract with Columbia Records expired in 1966, Wexler signed her and helped craft her star-making hits, including "Respect."

**Dinah Washington: Mary J. Blige**  
The Grammy winner portrays the self-proclaimed Queen of the Blues, who would perform at the family piano while Franklin was growing up. Franklin's fifth album, 1964's *Unforgettable*, was a tribute record dedicated to her idol who had died one year before.

**Ted White: Marlon Wayans**  
The *White Chicks* actor brings an aura of dangerous intensity to the role of White, Franklin's first husband and the father of Ted White Jr., one of Franklin's four sons. He managed her at the start of her career and was said to be abusive toward the singer during their marriage. They divorced in 1969 after eight years together.