

Aretha Franklin: Queen of Soul — a conversation with vocalist Capathia Jenkins

by Mike Telin



With the passing of Aretha Franklin on August 16, 2018, the world lost a musical treasure. One that day, Jon Pareles, chief popular music critic at *The New York Times* wrote in an [obituary](#): “Aretha Franklin, universally acclaimed as the ‘Queen of Soul’ and one of America’s greatest singers in any style, died on Thursday at her home in Detroit. She was 76.” Pareles also noted that “in a musical career of more than five decades, Aretha Franklin had more

than 100 singles on the Billboard charts. But more important, she freed other singers to let their voices fly.”

“That moniker — Queen of Soul — she was literally a Queen,” vocalist Capathia Jenkins said during a telephone interview. “Anyone who has been singing and living on the planet for any length of time has drawn from and perhaps tried to emulate her. She was such an influence on so many.”

Franklin’s musical legacy will be celebrated on Sunday, July 28 at 7:00 pm at Blossom Music Center, when Jenkins and vocalist Ryan Shaw join The Cleveland Orchestra and the Blossom Festival Chorus, under the direction of Lucas Waldin to present *Aretha Franklin: Queen of Soul*. Tickets are available [online](#).

“Aretha had such a varied catalogue,” Jenkins said. “She started in gospel, she sang soul and R&B, then rock and jazz, the American songbook, and musical theater. She also sang patriotic songs and performed for so many presidents. She is a national treasure and it’s really an honor to stand on her shoulders and be able to do an evening-length tribute to her.”

Jenkins is no stranger to Northeast Ohio audiences — Sunday’s concert will mark the fourth time in as many years that her talents have been heard with The Cleveland Orchestra. She has also recently performed with the Cleveland POPS Orchestra and the Youngstown Symphony.

“The Cleveland Orchestra has been so good to me — it’s like a dream you don’t know that you have,” the Broadway star said. “We can’t wait to get to Blossom. The audiences there are always in such a festive mood and ready to have a good time. But there is nothing like that Orchestra. There just isn’t, and I’ve sung with a lot of orchestras. Cleveland is just special.”

Jenkins said that she was first presented with the idea of creating the Franklin tribute by her manager John Such. “It was sort of the brain child of his, Leslie Sabol at the Houston Symphony, and Lucas Walden. The thing is that just prior to that, as I was leaving Blossom last summer, Ilya Gidalevich, the Orchestra’s artistic administrator said to me ‘I want you to come back, what about some soul.’ Ilya has been such a fan and has always been in my corner. So, shortly after he mentioned it this whole thing started.”

Jenkins said that soon after the creative team began building the show from the ground up. “We had to decide how much of her catalogue we would try to cover in an evening to give people a full experience and walk out feeling like they celebrated her. Because that is what the show is about — celebrating her.”

During the evening, audiences will be treated to music from Franklin’s expansive musical catalogue, including her early career in gospel. “We’re really excited about it because the movie *Amazing Grace* is in the theaters now. It’s fabulous, by the way. I tell people that I sat there by myself with my popcorn and twenty minutes later it was popcorn and tears.”

The show also includes music of Otis Reading and Stevie Wonder. “Ryan Shaw is a brilliant soul singer, and even though you’ll hear him singing Otis and Stevie, they were good friends with Aretha and you hear their influences in her work as well.”

One song that Jenkins and Shaw will perform together is *RESPECT*. “We do that as a duet because originally it was Otis Reading’s. He wrote and recorded it. But he famously said that once Aretha got it, it was all hers. So, that’s a fun moment in the show.”

The program leaves plenty of room for the Orchestra to be featured. “I’m excited to hear Cleveland play the overture, which is a true overture in the sense that you will hear songs that you’re going to hear throughout the night. There’s also a Stevie Wonder moment where Ryan gets to stretch out a little bit, and the Orchestra will play *Isn’t She Lovely*, where the horns really get to shine. I can’t wait to hear the Cleveland horns do that chart.”

Jenkins said that what she enjoyed most about being part of the creative team was getting to immerse herself into Franklin’s career. “I remember I was in a hotel room just after she passed. There was a news show on and as they were going off the air they said, we’re going to leave you with a song from Aretha. It was her singing *Skylark*. I thought, I haven’t heard that in so long. She had such a long career, and when you think about the way music has changed over the years, the fact that she was a constant is extraordinary. So, just reminding myself of all of that has been the greatest part of putting this show together.”

While Jenkins encourages the audience to sit back and enjoy themselves, she’s certain there will be moments when it will be difficult to stay seated. “I’m sure at time everyone at Blossom will be up on their feet partying and having a good time celebrating Aretha’s great legacy.”

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