

Aretha Speaks

There are some people in California who are so deeply into astrology, they can tell your sign by the shape of your face. They *know* that Johnny Carson is a Libra, because Johnny Carson's face has that "Libra" shape.

Well, I just don't see it.

And then I met Aretha Franklin.

I was free-lancing for Rolling Stone in 1971 when I heard that Aretha was coming to play the Fillmore Auditorium. I asked my boss, Jon Carroll, if I could interview her for the magazine.

Aretha defined the soul sound of that era with hits such as "Respect," and chain, chain "Chain of Fools." There was the wailing "Dr. Feelgood" in the morning, and the women's anthem, "Do Right Woman," among many others.

Jon laughed at my request. He told me that Aretha was said to be a tough interview; it was not easy to get her to open up. Rumor had it that she felt mistreated by a 1968 cover story in a major weekly magazine, and she was talking to the press even less than usual.

That didn't bother me; I idolized Aretha and asked Jon to set it up.

He set it up.

Jon sent the renowned photographer Annie Leibovitz to do the shoot. I was certainly glad he was sending a pro like Annie, because standing there outside the Magenta Suite of the Fairmont Hotel where Aretha was staying during her gig, my knees were literally shaking.

But I had done my homework. I had chased down a dozen Aretha Franklin albums, listened to them carefully and drawn up a list of questions to ask her: questions about her recordings, her music, ... her life, in a well-prepared, two-hour interview.

Annie and I knocked and were let in by someone who was probably hired to do just that. Immediately, our eyes were assaulted by magenta everywhere we looked. Rugs, walls, furniture ... everything was a shade and design of magenta.

And there was Aretha, seated in a magenta lounge chair, surrounded by an entourage of twenty people. I had never seen an entourage before, but as soon as I saw this group of people hanging on Aretha's every word, I knew: *this* was an entourage.

Annie and I made our introductions and while she started clicking away furiously, I got out my notebook, switched on the tape recorder, and started to interview Aretha Franklin, the Queen of Soul.

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