

RESPECT

Screenplay by

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INT. FRANKLIN HOME, ARETHA'S ROOM - NIGHT (1952)

Sounds of a party. We hear music and people chattering and laughing. Ten-year-old ARETHA FRANKLIN sleeps soundly in bed, cradling a black doll. There is a picture of Aretha with her mother, Barbara, on the bedside table, along with a clock that reads 1:15. Outside her window is a large oak tree. The door opens. A MAN in an impeccable suit and tie comes and sits on the side of the bed. He gently shakes Aretha awake.

MAN

Ree, Ree, wake up, baby.

Aretha opens her eyes to see her father, C.L. FRANKLIN (37). She wipes the sleep from her eyes.

C.L.

They want to hear you sing. You want to sing?

ARETHA

(nods)

Yes, please!

C.L. smiles at Aretha.

INT. FRANKLIN HOME, STAIRCASE/LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Aretha, in a bathrobe and slippers, holds C.L.'s hand. She is happy, smiling. This is her element. He walks her down the staircase packed with beautiful, hip BLACK MUSICIANS and ARTISTS. People smoke (cigarettes and weed), drink, laugh. Welcome to Aretha's world. A WOMAN comes over to C.L.

WOMAN

(To C.L.)

Clarence, Ella is looking for you.

C.L.

(To Aretha)

Wait here baby, I'll be right back.

C.L. walks away. ART TATUM is playing on the piano. There is a group of folks around the piano listening to him as Aretha walks over to them.

MAN

(To Aretha)

How does a man with one eye play like he has four hands?

Aretha sits next to Art on the piano bench and watches his hands move lightening fast on the keys. Art winks at Ree.

ART
You been practicing?

ARETHA
(nods)
Yes. Mr. Tatum.

Aretha mimes Art's movements on the piano. Art laughs and plays faster. Aretha keeps up her shadow playing then gets up and walks through a sea of legs and bodies, searching for her father. She passes TWO GAY BLACK MEN (30's) who are flirting with each other.

OLIVER
You know you the finest cat here,
right?

JACKSON
Nigger, I know that. What else you
got?

She sees SAM COOKE who is surrounded by half a dozen BEAUTIFUL BLACK WOMEN. Sam waves at Aretha.

SAM
Hi, Ree.

ARETHA
Hi, Uncle Sam.

Aretha walks through the crowd. She sees DINAH WASHINGTON, drunkenly and loudly holding court. CLARA WARD stands next to her.

DINAH
I said to them, "I'm so happy to be performing in England, but just remember. There's one heaven. One earth. And one Queen. Me! Dinah Washington! That Elizabeth on y'all throne is an imposter.

CLARA
You didn't!

DINAH
Oh, yes I did! And I made the audience bow before me!

Dinah sees Aretha.

DINAH (CONT'D)
Look out, y'all! The entertainer's here!

Aretha sees C.L. who stands talking to ELLA FITZGERALD, DUKE ELLINGTON and BILLY ESKSTINE. Aretha looks at Ella, Duke and Billy.

ARETHA
Hi, Aunt Ella, Uncle Duke, Uncle
Billy.

C.L.
(To Aretha)
You ready, Ree?

Aretha nods.

C.L. (CONT'D)
Excuse me everyone!

The Guests quiet.

C.L. (CONT'D)
For those of you visiting my home
for the first time, this is my
daughter, Aretha. She'd like to
sing a little something for you.
(turns to Aretha)
What do you want to sing, baby?

She whispers in his ear. A FEMALE GUEST turns to CLARA WARD.

FEMALE GUEST
How old is she?

CLARA
Ten, but her voice is going on
thirty, honey.

C.L. nods at Aretha. He looks at his Guests.

C.L.
Aretha would like to perform, "My
Baby Likes to Bebop."

Random applause.

DINAH
Damn, I was gonna record that on my
next album.
(to Aretha)
Can we do a duet?

Laughter. Art Tatum plays while Aretha sings "My Baby Likes to Bebop" with the voice and confidence of an adult. Dinah watches with envy and admiration.

During the interlude, Aretha plays along with Art then finishes singing the song with a flourish.

The room gives a standing ovation, but Aretha only wants her father's approval. C.L., beaming, watches the applause, takes it as if it's for him. He prods her to take a bow. Aretha, thrilled that her father is happy, curtsies.

C.L.
(to Aretha)
Back to bed with you.

The Guests laugh and keep clapping.

INT. FRANKLIN HOME, TV ROOM - DAY

Aretha, Cecil, Erma, Carolyn and Mama Franklin are watching the CLARA WARD SINGERS performing on *The Danny Thomas Show*. Aretha is enraptured with Clara Ward. They are singing "When the Saints Go Marching In" in front of an all white audience. Aretha starts singing along with Clara.

ARETHA
*Oh, when the saints go marching
in...*

Cecil, Erma and Carolyn join in.

CAROLYN, ERMA, CECIL
*I want to be in that number, When
the saints go marching in...*

On TV, Clara does a praise dance. Mama Franklin laughs.

MAMA FRANKLIN
Those white folks don't know what
to do with her.
(beat)
Sock it to 'em, Clara!

CECIL, ERMA, CAROLYN, ARETHA
Sock it to 'em! Sock it to 'em!

The kids do a praise dance. The doorbell rings.

ARETHA
Momma's here!

Aretha runs to the door and runs out to BARBARA (35) who is now standing by the car. Barbara holds onto her tightly.

BARBARA

Oh... I missed you so much.

The other kids run out and hug Barbara.

BARBARA (CONT'D)

My babies. My babies.

Mama Franklin and C.L. stand on the porch and look at Barbara. Aretha looks longingly at C.L., then at Barbara, hoping for some kindness between them. C.L. stares Barbara down. Barbara smiles at Aretha.

BARBARA (CONT'D)

Let's go!

The kids run to the car.

ERMA

(O.S.)

Bye Grandma!

Mama Franklin waves goodbye.

INT. MODEST HOUSE, DETROIT - LIVING ROOM - AFTERNOON

Aretha leans against Barbara as she plays and sings "I'll be Seeing You" on a simple upright piano. Through the window, we see Cecil, Carolyn and Erma playing on the lawn. Aretha claps at the end of the song. Barbara smiles.

ARETHA

Sing another one, Momma.

BARBARA

Ree, that's the third song, now.

ARETHA

Please?

BARBARA

I want to talk.

ARETHA

Pll---eee---aaa--sss---eee!

BARBARA

What if I sing-talk?

Barbara plays a chord on the piano, then sings --

BARBARA (CONT'D)

How is Aretha doing?

ARETHA
I love singing.

BARBARA
I know you do. But you...
(chooses her words
carefully)
Singing is sacred. And you
shouldn't do it just because
somebody wants you to.

Aretha stares back. The thought of disobeying C.L. is insane.

BARBARA (CONT'D)
Your daddy doesn't own your voice,
Ree. Nobody does but God. You don't
have to fear any man.
(beat)
You understand?

Aretha struggles to understand.

BARBARA (CONT'D)
You are worthy, Ree. Never let
anybody tell you otherwise.

ARETHA
Yes, Momma.

Barbara looks out the window. A moment.

EXT. FRANKLIN HOME - DAY

Barbara stands outside holding a crying Aretha. She looks in the doorway and sees C.L. standing, watching.

BARBARA
Don't cry, Ree. I'll see you for
your birthday.

ARETHA
(holds tighter)
Three weeks is a long time.

BARBARA
I know. But I'm with you all the
time. Even when I'm not there.

Barbara wipes Aretha's tears away, kisses her. Aretha reluctantly goes towards the house with her suitcase. She goes towards the door, looks at a smiling C.L. She looks back at her mother, who is driving away. Aretha drops her bag and runs into the street.

C.L.

Ree! Get back here!

Aretha waves and blows kisses at the car as Barbara drives away.

INT. NEW BETHAL BAPTIST CHURCH - SUNDAY MORNING

A large and well-appointed church packed with over a thousand Congregants. We see SEVERAL PEOPLE from the Saturday night party, bleary eyed and hungover, in the pews. A 50-member CHURCH CHOIR marches down the aisle singing "Marching to Zion." Clara Ward, standing at the front of the church, sings lead while James Cleveland accompanies on the piano. C.L., impeccable in a three piece suit, holding a bible, follows in procession behind the Choir. The other Franklin children ERMA (14) CECIL (12), and CAROLYN (8), and C.L.'s mother, MAMA FRANKLIN (50s), follow behind them. Aretha is behind Erma and Cecil. C.L. pulls Aretha from the back, takes her hand, and walks with her. Erma sucks her teeth.

ERMA

I'm the oldest. I should be in front.

MAMA FRANKLIN

(to Erma)

Hush.

INT. NEW BETHAL BAPTIST CHURCH - LATER

C.L., his collar askew, wiping the sweat from his brow, is in the middle of preaching a fiery sermon, whipping the church into a frenzy. He's "whooping," a style of preaching that is half-speaking, half-singing. Cleveland plays chords on the piano. C.L. bangs on the pulpit.

C.L.

We have nothing to fear, church...
 what is the white man compared to
 God... Oh, Lord... What is any law,
 any injustice, compared to the
 power of our Lord... He will
 deliver us from the den like
 Daniel... And Daniel... Daniel went
 into that lion's den... do you hear
 me, church?

Aretha watches as Nurses in white uniforms attend to WOMEN fainting and overcome with emotion, feeling the spirit. She sees WORSHIPPERS jumping up and down, running around the aisles. She looks at her father who is causing all this emotion and chaos.

C.L. (CONT'D)
 Daniel went into that lion's den...
 not yelling nor fussing... not
 crying nor complaining....

C.L. is full on whooping/singing now until the end of the sermon.

C.L. (CONT'D)
...praising the Lord... oh...
 yes... praising His name... because
 he knew the Lord was with him... he
 feared no man... nor animal. Oh,
 yes... oh... yes...

ANGLE ON Aretha. Mama Franklin stands and lifts her hands, praising God. Aretha stands up and imitates her. Mama Franklin smiles at Aretha.

ANGLE ON C.L.

C.L. (CONT'D)
I wish somebody would pray with me.
 He will... He will... He will...
 shut the jaws of segregation and
 any man, person or institution who
 would dare to stand against us...
 He took us from slavery, took us
 through the valleys of
 reconstruction.

C.L. starts a call and response with the congregation.

C.L. (CONT'D)
 Freedom!

CONGREGATON
 Freedom!

C.L.
 Freedom!

CONGREGATON
 Freedom!

Aretha stares at C.L. in awe, amazed at how he can inspire.

ARETHA
 Praise Him! Praise him.
 (beat)
 Preach, Daddy! Preach!

EXT. FRANKLIN HOME - NIGHT

Another raucous party, usual suspects driving up, entering, exiting. Lights blazing on the first floor, dark upstairs.

INT. FRANKLIN HOME, ARETHA'S ROOM - NIGHT

Aretha is sound asleep in bed, holding her black doll. The sounds of the party downstairs trickle into her room. The bedroom door opens. A BLACK MALE TEENAGER (17) comes in and sits on the side of the bed. He is wearing a ring. He gently shakes Aretha awake. Aretha sits up and rubs the sleep out of her eyes.

TEENAGER

Why you not singing tonight?

ARETHA

(shrugging)

My Daddy didn't ask me too.

He touches Aretha's doll.

TEENAGER

My sister has a doll just like this. What's your doll's name?

ARETHA

Dee.

TEENAGER

That's a pretty name.

(beat)

You're pretty, too.

(beat)

What's your boyfriend's name?

ARETHA

I don't have a boyfriend.

TEENAGER

I'll be your boyfriend. Would you like that?

Aretha is confused.

TEENAGER (CONT'D)

We'll have fun.

Aretha doesn't respond. He goes towards the door. Aretha sees partygoers right outside her door as he closes it. He goes towards her.

Aretha is paralyzed with fear.

INT. FRANKLIN HOME, ARETHA'S ROOM - TIME CUT - LATER

The Teenager is gone. Aretha anxiously sits in bed. Sounds of the party still going on downstairs. Aretha gets up and puts a chair under the doorknob. She gets back in bed and stares.

INT. FRANKLIN HOME, KITCHEN - NEXT MORNING

Aretha, holding her doll, lost in thought, sits in a stool, waiting to get her hair straightened as Mama Franklin finishes straightening Carolyn's hair. Cecil is playing underneath the table. Erma, hair freshly straightened, sits nearby. Mama Franklin is almost finished with Carolyn's hair. She indicates Aretha should get in the chair.

MAMA FRANKLIN
(to Aretha)
Come on, Ree.

ARETHA
I don't want to.

MAMA FRANKLIN
Ree, I will beat your behind.

Aretha looks at Mama Franklin. She puts her doll down, bends over the chair waiting for her beating. Mama Franklin is taken aback.

MAMA FRANKLIN (CONT'D)
What are you doing?

ARETHA
I don't care if you beat me. I don't want my hair done.

ERMA
Don't you want to look pretty for church tomorrow?

ARETHA
No!

Mama Franklin is frightened. Something is really wrong.

MAMA FRANKLIN
(to the kids)
Y'all wait in the living room.

Erma, Cecil and Carolyn quickly scramble away.

MAMA FRANKLIN (CONT'D)
 (to Erma and Carolyn)
 Don't sweat out all my work! That's
 gotta last you all week.

Mama Franklin looks at Aretha.

MAMA FRANKLIN (CONT'D)
 You want to tell me what's wrong?

Aretha shakes her head, "no."

MAMA FRANKLIN (CONT'D)
 Ree-Ree...

Aretha is silent.

MAMA FRANKLIN (CONT'D)
 I know you don't want to tell me
 but you can always tell the Lord,
 Ree. He loves you no matter what.

Aretha just stares at Mama Franklin.

INT. FRANKLIN HOME, C.L.'S STUDY - NEXT DAY

C.L. is sitting on a chair, drink in hand. He's listening to
 the Sam Cooke & the Soul Stirrers song "How Far Am I From
 Canaan?". Aretha comes in wearing her nightgown.

C.L.
 You supposed to be in bed.

Aretha stands there.

C.L. (CONT'D)
 Come sit with me a while.

Aretha sits on her father's lap. They listen to the music.

ARETHA
 What if I wasn't here?

C.L.
 What do you mean by that?

ARETHA
 (considers)
 I don't know.

They listen to the music. The phone rings in the other room.
 We hear Mama Franklin answer it, followed by muffled talking.

C.L.

See how nice their voices are
blending? They let Sam take the
proper lead. Too many members of
our choir try to stand out instead
of supporting the soloist.

Mama Franklin comes in the room. She looks troubled.

MAMA FRANKLIN

Clarence, come to the phone.

C.L. hands Aretha a record.

C.L.

Play this next.

ARETHA

Ok.

C.L. follows her out of the room. The song ends. Aretha
overhears Mama Franklin and C.L. talking.

C.L.

How?

MAMA FRANKLIN

Heart attack.

C.L. looks at Aretha.

C.L. (O.S.)

I'll tell them in the morning, Ma.

MAMA FRANKLIN (O.S.)

No! You can't wait until tomorrow
to tell them their Momma is dead.

Aretha absorbs this. She sits there a moment. It can't be
true. She stands up quickly, knocking a glass over. C.L.
looks at Aretha.

C.L.

Ree...

EXT. FRANKLIN HOME, STREET - CONTINUOUS

Aretha, completely distraught, runs into the street and
stands at the same spot she stood when she waved goodbye to
her mother in the previous scene. C.L. runs over to her.

C.L.

Ree!

C.L. holds Aretha as she sobs uncontrollably in his arms.

C.L. (CONT'D)
I'm sorry, baby.

He gently picks her up, carries her back home.

INT. FRANKLIN HOME, DINING ROOM - DAY (MARCH 1953)

Aretha stares blankly as Clara Ward brings in a cake filled with candles, and places it on the table. Mama Franklin, JAMES CLEVELAND and C.L. are behind her.

They sing "Happy Birthday." Aretha looks at the cake, says nothing.

MAMA FRANKLIN
Come on, now.

CLARA
She just miss her momma.

MAMA FRANKLIN
They all missing her but.. how long she gonna keep silent? Going on three weeks. She gotta...

JAMES
She just needs a little time, that's all.

C.L.
Ree, Miss Clara made this beautiful cake. And Rev. James came especially for you. What do you say, Ree?
(beat)
Do you say thank you? Do you say something?

Aretha doesn't respond. C.L. bangs the table in frustration. Everyone but Aretha jumps at the noise. Clara puts her hand on C.L.'s back. C.L. shrugs her hand off.

CAROLYN
Make a wish, Ree.

Aretha has only one wish, for Barbara to be alive. She bursts into tears. Carolyn, triggered by the grief, starts to cry.

C.L.
I can't do this.

C.L. walks out. Cecil blows out the candles. Aretha continues to cry.

EXT. FRANKLIN HOME - LATER - DUSK - ESTABLISHING

INT. FRANKLIN HOME, LIVING ROOM - LATER - DUSK

Aretha stands in the doorway and watches James Cleveland play "What a Friend we Have in Jesus" on the piano. James sees her.

JAMES

Why you hiding over there? Come on over here and have your lesson.

Aretha sits next to James at the piano.

JAMES (CONT'D)

I'm teaching this to the choir tonight.

James plays "What a Friend we have in Jesus."

JAMES (CONT'D)

You know this one. I'll be the choir. You play the lead.

She joins him. They play four-hand call-and-response piano. C.L. stands in the door. He watches them for a moment. James sees C.L.

JAMES (CONT'D)

Ree is helping me with my arrangements.

C.L.

I see.
(to James)
Has she spoken to you?

JAMES

(singing)
We ain't gotten that far.

C.L.

You think you can stay silent forever, Ree?

James and Aretha stop playing. C.L. goes over to them.

C.L. (CONT'D)

Look at me.

C.L. (CONT'D)
 We must honor the gifts that God
 has given us, Ree.
 (beat)
 You will be singing in church
 tomorrow.

Aretha, terrified at the thought, shakes her head "no" and
 backs away from C.L. C.L. turns to James.

C.L. (CONT'D)
 (to James)
 James, can you prepare her?

JAMES
 Yes, sir.

C.L.
 Thank you.

C.L. looks at Ree a moment and then exits. Aretha is on the
 verge of tears. James faces her.

JAMES
 Don't let nothing come between you
 and your music, Ree. Music will
 save your life.

Off Aretha, absorbing this.

INT. ALABAMA CHURCH - DAY (1956)

C.L. is finishing up a sermon at the pulpit.

C.L.
 God holds our hand! Though him we
 can do anything! He's a catcher, a
 dream catcher! Amen!

CONGREGATION
 Amen!

C.L.
 And now, my daughter Aretha, will
 bless us with song.

Fourteen-year-old Aretha steps up to the microphone to sing.
 As we hear the first few lines "There's a Fountain Filled
 with Blood" and we CUT TO...

INT. ALABAMA CHURCH - DAY (1960)

...Eighteen-year old Aretha singing "There's a Fountain
 Filled with Blood" in front of a congregation.

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. (30) is sitting on the dais. C.L. sits in the front pew next to OTHER MINISTERS. The Congregation, inspired and greatly moved, stands and cheers for Aretha. C.L. goes to Aretha and wipes her sweaty brow as she continues to sing. While Aretha goes to her seat on stage, C.L. faces the congregation.

C.L.

I wonder do you feel alright!

The Congregation cheers.

C.L. (CONT'D)

Then let's give my daughter Aretha another hand!

The Congregation cheers.

C.L. (CONT'D)

Amen. Amen.

(beat)

I'm ecstatic to report that the day before yesterday we filled up the jail.

The Congregation claps.

C.L. (CONT'D)

We have already won a victory here in Birmingham due, in no small part, to the valiant work of our leader, a man I'm honored to call my friend, the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

King stands and hugs C.L. warmly.

INT. ALABAMA CHURCH - DAY - LATER

Martin Luther King, Jr. is in the middle of preaching. Aretha watches him with awe and admiration.

MARTIN

Some people think we are crazy for taking on this fight. But the forces against us are strong and they are determined to stop us. But we are just as determined to go on, non-violently with love, as long as it takes to win our freedom. And Jesus is here with us every single step of the way.

ARETHA
Yes, he is. Amen

EXT. ALABAMA CHURCH, STREET - DAY

Aretha and Martin walk and talk. There is a easy familiarity and comfort between them.

ARETHA
Uncle Martin...

MARTIN
Don't call me Uncle Martin anymore.
Makes me feel old.

ARETHA
I want to march.

Martin looks concerned.

ARETHA (CONT'D)
Don't look at me like I'm still a
child.
(beat)
I'm not afraid.

MARTIN
You not? Well, damn. Then you need
to be leading this movement and
teaching me how to not be terrified
of these crazy white folks.

ARETHA
Martin...

MARTIN
Why do you want to march?

ARETHA
Why? After all this time traveling
with you? After all the horror
we've seen? What kind of question
is that?

MARTIN
You running from your Daddy?

ARETHA
No.

MARTIN
You tell him you want to march?

ARETHA
 I don't have to. It's my decision.
 (smiling)
 I'm a grown woman, remember?

MARTIN
 You ready to orphan your kids?

ARETHA
 Are you?

MARTIN
 No.

ARETHA
 But you do it anyway.

MARTIN
 I have to.

ARETHA
 And I don't?
 (beat)
 Singing for the movement, sending
 folks into battle with a song is
 not enough anymore. I need to be
 with them.

They arrive at the tour bus. C.L. is waiting outside for them. Aretha's demeanor changes. She smiles at C.L.

C.L.
 (to Aretha)
 You have a good talk?

ARETHA
 Yes.

Aretha gets on the bus. C.L. turns to Martin. *Well?*

MARTIN
 It was a good talk.

C.L.
 Brother, come on.
 (beat)
 She's restless I can tell.

MARTIN
 I don't know if it's restless.
 (beat)
 Wants to do more.

C.L.
What kind of more?

EXT. FRANKLIN HOME, FRONT PORCH - DAY

The Tour Bus comes down the street. It stops across the street from the house. Aretha comes off the bus followed by C.L. and SEVERAL MINISTERS and MUSICIANS. While C.L. chats with them, the front door opens. Mama Franklin comes outside with Aretha's children, CLARENCE (5) and EDWARD (3).

ARETHA
Clarence! Eddie! Where are my babies?!?

CLARENCE (5) and EDWARD (3) run towards her.

CLARENCE
Momma!

EDWARD
Momma!

In his enthusiasm, Clarence pushes Edward who falls to the ground and starts wailing. Aretha runs over to them and comforts Edward.

ARETHA
Baby, are you alright?

Mama Franklin comes outside.

MAMA FRANKLIN
Clarence go in your room and wait for me.

Clarence leaves. Edward runs to Mama Franklin.

MAMA FRANKLIN (CONT'D)
(to Edward)
It's alright, baby. You're alright.

Edward calms down. Aretha, heartbroken, watches Edward getting comfort from Mama Franklin. Mama wipes Edward's tears.

ARETHA
(To Mama Franklin)
Every time I come back, they want me less.

MAMA FRANKLIN
That's not true.
(beat)
(MORE)

MAMA FRANKLIN (CONT'D)

They talk about you all the time.
Every night I show them where you
are on the map.

(To Edward)

One cookie.

Edward runs into the house. Mama Franklin goes over to
Aretha.

MAMA FRANKLIN (CONT'D)

(to Aretha)

Fix your face now. This party is
for y'all.

C.L. walks over to them. Several Ministers trail behind him.
C.L. kisses Mama Franklin.

C.L.

How you, Mama?

MAMA FRANKLIN

God is good!

C.L.

All the time!

MAMA FRANKLIN

Amen!

C.L.

Let's eat! I'm starving.

They head into the house.

EXT. FRANKLIN HOME, BACKYARD - DAY - LATER

The Franklin family is having a barbecue. Aretha is sitting
with Erma (now 22) and Carolyn (now 16). They are drinking
out of plastic cups.

ERMA

So where y'all heading?

ARETHA

We go to Tennessee, then Georgia,
then North Carolina, then back to
Alabama, I think.

ERMA

Damn. Martin's tour schedule is
busier than Daddy's.

ARETHA

Erma, sometimes we'd hit two states
in one day.

CAROLYN

What was that story about Aunt
Mahalia not paying you?

ARETHA

She said I would receive my reward
in heaven.

The sisters laugh. Aretha doesn't react because she is
staring at TED WHITE (28), standing across the lawn looking
hip, dapper and handsome. Carolyn and Erma notice.

ERMA

No, Ree. Uh-Uh.

Aretha goes towards him. Ted notices Aretha looking, smiles.
SMOKEY ROBINSON (20) along with CECIL, intercepts Aretha.

ARETHA

Smokey!

CECIL

(re: Smokey)
He's got some news, Ree.

They hug warmly. Aretha is still checking Ted out.

ARETHA

I heard you were cutting a record.

SMOKEY

I am. With Berry at Motown.

CECIL

They got some nice sounds, Ree.
They're signing a bunch of folks
from the neighborhood.

SMOKEY

We trying to put Detroit on the
map. You got to join us.

ARETHA

I would love that. Cecil, let me
talk to Daddy about it. Don't bring
it up until I say.

SMOKEY

Let Berry talk to him.

CECIL

Or better yet his sister. She can
talk ice out of the devil's mouth.

Aretha looks down at her cup, sees it's almost empty. When
she looks up she sees Ted White.

TED

What are you drinking?

ARETHA

Iced tea.

TED

Just iced tea?

ARETHA

With a little bourbon.

Ted takes out a flask, discretely pours it into Aretha's
glass. Cecil and Smokey roll their eyes and walk away. C.L.
sees Aretha talking to Ted.

TED

You look like a bourbon girl.

They don't take their eyes off each other.
It's delicious.

TED (CONT'D)

How long are you in town for?

ARETHA

A week. Then I return to Tennessee.

TED

Well, then, I won't waste any time.
I'd like to take you out.

ARETHA

I'd like you to take me out.

TED

How about tonight?

C.L. whispers to Mama Franklin. Mama Franklin calls out to
Aretha.

MAMA FRANKLIN

Ree, come help me set this table.

ARETHA

(to Ted)
Yes, to tonight.

(MORE)

ARETHA (CONT'D)

(beat)

Excuse me a moment.

Aretha walks away. C.L. comes over to Ted.

TED

Reverend.

C.L.

I put up with you coming to my house all these years 'cause you were friends with my friends, but I don't want you around here anymore.

TED

May I give you some council, Reverend? Ephesians 6:4 says: Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord."

C.L.

(laughing)

Lord, give me strength. Are you serious?

TED

You may want to loosen your grip on Aretha. Every minister's daughter I've ever known has had a rebellious streak because...

C.L. steps closer to Ted.

C.L.

Nigger, you don't want to mess with me... or mine.

SEVERAL GUESTS look over at Ted and C.L. Ted glares at C.L. Cecil goes over to C.L. to see if he needs help. A moment of tension then Ted leaves.

C.L. (CONT'D)

(to Cecil)

I got this.

(Beat)

I got it.

Aretha looks over and sees Ted leaving the party.

EXT. FRANKLIN HOME, BACKYARD - DAY

The party is in full swing. GUESTS are eating, dancing, etc.

C.L.
Everyone! Everyone! Please gather
around. Aretha will you join me,
please?

People gather around C.L. Aretha stands next to him on the
porch.

C.L. (CONT'D)
This party is not just a
homecoming. It's also an
announcement. God is moving us on
to our next chapter. I've been
talking to a number of record
producers about Aretha. There were
many who were interested in working
with her.

C.L. hands Aretha an envelope.

C.L. (CONT'D)
Tell everyone what it is.

She opens it. She's shocked.

ARETHA
A plane ticket to New York City.

Guests ohhh and ahhh. Cecil and Smokey are visibly
disappointed. The Guests applaud.

C.L.
Congratulations, Ree.

Aretha hugs C.L.

ARETHA
(To C.L.)
Thank you!

EXT. WOOLWORTH BUILDING - DAY

C.L. and Aretha stand outside the iconic building in awe of
its beauty and grandeur.

C.L.
This is it.

ARETHA
Wow.

INT. WOOLWORTH BUILDING, LOBBY - DAY

Aretha's jaw drops as she looks up at the vaulted mosaic ceilings and ornate, cathedral-like decorations. C.L. stops at the front desk and talks to the RECEPTIONIST.

C.L.

(O.S.)

Excuse me. I have a meeting with
John Hammond of Columbia Records.

Aretha walks around, taking in the majesty of the building. After a moment, C.L. walks over to Aretha and guides her to the elevator. The elevator arrives.

C.L. (CONT'D)

You ready?

Aretha, facing the enormity of the situation, inhales deeply, then nods and smiles at C.L.

ARETHA

I'm ready!

INT. COLUMBIA RECORDS OFFICE, JOHN HAMMOND'S OFFICE - DAY

C.L. and Aretha are meeting with JOHN HAMMOND (50), a tall, handsome, down-to-earth WASP, in his large, tastefully decorated office.

C.L.

I've always seen Aretha as more
than a gospel singer.

HAMMOND

Clearly from her demo she is so
much more.

Aretha glances around the office and sees gold and platinum records on the wall.

C.L.

Stand up, Ree. Turn around.

(beat)

There can sometimes be a lack of
effortlessness of the kind you find in
a Lena Horne or Dorothy Dandridge, but
what Aretha lacks in formal education,
she has more than made up for in
experience.

Aretha walks around the office and looks at all the gold records and artists photos on the wall. She's impressed and badly wants that success and validation.

C.L. (CONT'D)

She has performed before every type of crowd imaginable, from small churches to an audience of thousands.

(beat)

You can sit now, Ree.

HAMMOND

(to Aretha)

I'm curious. Who are your favorite artists?

ARETHA

Dinah Washington, Ella Fitzgerald, Sam Cooke.

C.L.

All family friends. Sam very much wants Aretha to sign with R.C.A.

HAMMOND

(looks at C.L.)

Well, we can't have that.

He reaches his hand out to Aretha.

HAMMOND (CONT'D)

Welcome to Columbia Records.

Aretha smiles but C.L. shakes Hammond's hand.

INT. COLUMBIA RECORDING STUDIO, LIVE ROOM - DAY - LATER

A FULL ORCHESTRA of woodwinds, percussion, brass, and strings, all white men, sits in front of music stands with sheet music. C.L. is in the control booth. Hammond walks Aretha over to the glass isolation booth.

HAMMOND

Prove yourself as a jazz artist and everything else will follow.

ARETHA

I understand.

Aretha goes inside. Hammond goes inside the control booth with C.L.

HAMMOND

(on mic, to Aretha)

Are you ready, Aretha?

ARETHA

Yes, Mr. Hammond.

HAMMOND

Wonderful. The Conductor will point at you when it's time to begin.

The Conductor starts up the orchestra. After a few bars he points at Aretha, who sings "**Accentuate the Positive.**" C.L. and John Hammond watch Aretha from the booth. C.L. is loving it. He taps his feet and bops his head.

C.L.

She sounds wonderful, doesn't she?

HAMMOND

She does.

They listen for a few more beats.

C.L.

Like a black Judy Garland.

Hammond looks at C.L. *Is that what he wants?*

MONTAGE OF ARETHA'S COLUMBIA JAZZ ALBUMS FROM 1961 TO 1964.

EXT. VILLAGE VANGUARD - NIGHT (1962)

NEW YORKERS and TOURIST hang out outside, smoking, talking, etc...

INT. VILLAGE VANGUARD, STAGE - NIGHT

A JAZZ TRIO is on stage waiting to play.

ANNOUNCER (O.S.)

Ladies and Gentlemen, the Village Vanguard is proud to present...
Miss Aretha Franklin debuting her latest record, *Unforgettable*.

Aretha enters from the wings and sits at the piano. She looks over the audience and sees Dinah Washington, who smiles at her.

ARETHA

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen.
We hope you enjoy the show tonight.
I see an old family friend, Dinah Washington, is in the audience, and I'd like to sing a song in honor of her great artistry and talent.

Aretha whispers to the Trio. They nod. Aretha sings "**This Bitter Earth.**" She doesn't get very far before there is an earth-shattering crash from the audience. Aretha stops.

All eyes turn to the source of the crash: An enraged Dinah behind the table she overturned, plates and glasses shattered all around her. She points at Aretha.

DINAH

Bitch, don't you ever sing the Queen's songs when the Queen is right in front of you!

Aretha, mortified, runs off the stage, crying.

INT. VILLAGE VANGUARD, ARETHA'S DRESSING ROOM - NIGHT

Aretha is crying. Dinah Washington burst in.

DINAH

What the hell were you thinking?

ARETHA

I'm sorry.

DINAH

You want to take me on?

ARETHA

No.

DINAH

Liar. You wouldn't be here if you didn't want to replace me and every other bitch singing out here.

(beat)

How many albums have you had?

ARETHA

Four.

DINAH

And no hits.

ARETHA

No.

DINAH

You're out here, but I can see you still that little girl in your Daddy's living room. You singing everything and anything. "Shoop Shoop" one day, "Skylark" the next. Then some Billie Holiday blues. You all over the place. What do you want to sing?

ARETHA
I don't know.

DINAH
You don't know?

ARETHA
I want hits. I just want hits.

DINAH
You need to let go of that "up with
the race" Booker T. Washington
proper Negro shit. That's not you.
Your Daddy likes to pretend that's
who he is, but that's not him
either. Y'all church folks are the
nastiest people out here. Ray
Charles told me the best sex he
ever had was when he was singing on
the gospel circuit.

(beat)
Honey, find the songs that suit
you. That move you. Until you do
that, you ain't going nowhere.

Aretha takes that in. Dinah notices Aretha's eyes are swollen
from crying.

DINAH (CONT'D)
Put some tea bags on that to get
that puffiness down.

Aretha grabs a tissue and continues to cry.

DINAH (CONT'D)
How's Big Mama?

ARETHA
She's alright.

DINAH
The kids?

ARETHA
They're good.

DINAH
Child, you ever gonna tell us who
their Daddy is?

Aretha looks at Dinah.

CHYRON: 1962

EXT. ARETHA'S APARTMENT - DAY/NIGHT

INT. ARETHA'S APARTMENT - DAY

The apartment is a mess. Dirty dishes, empty liquor bottles and debris are everywhere. Aretha hasn't showered or moved for a couple of days. She sits on the edge of the bed, haunted by memories.

A SERIES OF FLASHBACKS:

INT. FRANKLIN HOME, ARETHA'S ROOM - NIGHT (1952)

Ten-year old Aretha sits on the edge of her bed and stares at her closed bedroom door, terrified of who might enter.

INT. FRANKLIN HOME, KITCHEN - DAY (1952)

Mama Franklin tries to get Aretha to talk after refusing to get her hair straightened.

MAMA FRANKLIN

Ree, Ree, you want to tell me
what's wrong?

Aretha shakes her head, "no."

ARETHA

I can't.

INT. ARETHA'S APARTMENT - NIGHT (1963)

The phone rings. Aretha ignores it.

INT. FRANKLIN HOME, KITCHEN - DAY (1953)

Eleven-year old Aretha, visibly pregnant, drinks a glass of milk.

INT. ARETHA'S APARTMENT - NIGHT (1963)

Aretha curls up on the bed while the phone rings and rings.

INT. COLUMBIA RECORDING STUDIO, LIVE ROOM - DAY

Hammond has just called Aretha.

HAMMOND

(To C.L.)
No answer.

C.L.

Call her again.

Just then they see Aretha enter the Live Room. Aretha is surprised to see C.L. there.

ARETHA

I didn't know you were coming in today, Daddy.

C.L.

(glares)

You are sixty-eight minutes late. Mr. Hammond asked me to come in. You've been skipping interviews and gigs.

(beat)

That demon is back.

(to Hammond)

Ree has a tendency to indulge in her pain.

ARETHA

Can we talk about this somewhere else?

C.L.

(to Hammond)

John, it's important that you understand that her behavior is not a reflection of her upbringing or her race.

HAMMOND

I worked with Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday. Aretha is a saint in comparison.

C.L.

She wasn't raised in whorehouses like them. She was raised in a proper home with every convenience and luxury. But still there was this darkness that would descend on her. I called it the demon. She locks herself away, won't speak, eat or move. She just... wallows... in whatever imaginary pain...

Aretha, in anger, knocks down music stand, then immediately regrets it. C.L. and Hammond are taken aback. They've never seen such emotion from her.

C.L. (CONT'D)

You told me before we came out here you had it under control.

ARETHA
 (barely above a whisper)
 I have control.

C.L.
 You keep complaining about not
 having hits. This is why you don't
 have hits. Acting like a trifling
 nigg...

C.L. stops himself, takes a breathe.

C.L. (CONT'D)
 Apologize to Mr. Hammond.

HAMMOND
 I don't need an apology. Let's just
 forget about this and...

ARETHA
 That's not why I don't have hits.
 (beat)
 You don't pick good songs for me.

C.L. slaps Aretha. Hammond looks away. Aretha does not cry.
 She touches her cheek, looks at Hammond.

ARETHA (CONT'D)
 I apologize for being late, Mr.
 Hammond. It won't happen again. I'm
 ready to record whenever you are.
 Please excuse me for a moment while
 I go to the ladies' room.

Aretha walks out.

EXT. HARLEM BROWNSTONE - NIGHT

Party goers talk and linger on the steps.

INT. HARLEM APARTMENT - LATER THAT NIGHT

It looks like a thousand people are in there. Folks are
 stoned, drunk, and having a great time. Music plays on a
 cheap record player cranked up high. People are dancing
 wherever they can. Aretha is in the corner of the room with,
 VANESSA.

VANESSA
 So you want to go with us this
 weekend?

ARETHA
 I have a gig.

VANESSA

We can go after your gig.
(beat)
You work too hard.

ARETHA

Not according to my Daddy.

VANESSA

You need some fun.
(beat)
Come with us!

Vanessa looks at Aretha, who is staring at something across the room. Vanessa follows her eyes to... Ted White, looking dapper as ever. He stands with a black man, VERNON (20s). Ted has spotted Aretha. He smiles at her.

INTERCUT between Ted and Aretha.

VANESSA (CONT'D)

Can you introduce me to his friend?

ARETHA

I don't know him.

Ted and Aretha go towards each other when A MAN accidentally knocks over the record player. The music stops. The GUESTS groan. Ted and Aretha don't take their eyes off each other as the music starts back up and everyone dances again. Ted takes Aretha's hand and hurriedly leads her out the door.

EXT. HARLEM STREETS - LATER

Ted and Aretha walk.

ARETHA

You were supposed to take me out in Detroit.

TED

One of my singers ran into trouble out of town. Had to take care of it.

ARETHA

I think my father said something to you, made you reconsider.

TED

That's a nice little fable you have going on in your head.

ARETHA

I know what you do. It doesn't bother me.

TED

Oh, I know it doesn't bother you.

(beat)

You like it, rebelling against your daddy.

Aretha starts to protest.

TED (CONT'D)

I don't mind. Listen, you want to use me for my body.

(twirls around)

Use me baby. Wring me dry.

Aretha looks at Ted.

TED (CONT'D)

You and me been through it. We can move past all the flowers and promises and love bullshit and just have some fun.

ARETHA

I like fun.

TED

And we're going to have it.

(Beat)

I just want one thing from you.

ARETHA

What?

TED

To hear you sing. Just for me.

ARETHA

(considers)

And what do I get in return?

TED

Best night of your life.

Ted kisses Aretha. It is passionate, hot. After a beat, they pull away and walk a bit, both surprised by the intensity.

Ted hails a cab. Aretha gets in. Ted stands outside. Aretha is confused. Ted bends down to the window and talks to her.

TED (CONT'D)

I want you to think about me when
you sing tomorrow.

ARETHA

You not coming home with me?

TED

No.

ARETHA

What about the best night of my life?

TED

I didn't say it would be tonight.

Ted throws the cabbie some money and walks away. Aretha
watches him walk away and smiles.

INT. COLUMBIA RECORDING STUDIO, ISOLATION BOOTH - DAY

There is a Full Orchestra. Aretha is in the middle of singing
"Nature Boy." Hammond is in the Control Booth with an
ENGINEER.

ARETHA

*There was a boy/A very strange
enchanted boy/They say he wandered
very far, very far/Over land and
sea*

Aretha is thinking of Ted and that kiss.

ARETHA (CONT'D)

*A little shy/And sad of eye/But
very wise/Was he*

Ted, Ted, Ted, Ted, Ted. Aretha stops.

ARETHA (CONT'D)

I'm sorry.

HAMMOND

(on mic)

You want to take a break, Aretha?

ARETHA

No. I'll get it right this time.

HAMMOND

(on mic)

Fingers crossed. Take Twelve.

EXT. HARLEM STREET, SUBWAY STOP - NIGHT

Ted waits outside a subway stop. Aretha bounds up the stairs. He smiles and starts to greet her but before he can get a word out she kisses him passionately. She backs him up against a pole. HARLEMITES stare, smile, and disapprove.

EXT. TED'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Aretha and Ted walk in. They are all over each other.

INT. TED'S APARTMENT, BEDROOM - NEXT MORNING

Aretha wakes. There was clearly a night of passion. She gets out of bed, wrapping a sheet around herself, and goes into...

INT. TED'S APARTMENT, LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Very clean, organized and tastefully decorated, with modern art on the walls. Bookshelves filled with books, a state of the art record player and albums in every kind of genre stacked neatly in every corner. Ted and Aretha's clothes, have been strewn all over the place on the way to the bedroom. Aretha goes through Ted's albums. After a moment, Ted comes in. He immediately starts picking up their clothes off the floor.

ARETHA

You've got all my records.

(Beat)

You like them?

TED

I bought them.

ARETHA

Which one you like best?

Ted struggles to answer.

TED

They've all got something.

Aretha hold up one of her albums.

ARETHA

Is this your favorite?

Ted takes it from her. Aretha shows him another album.

ARETHA (CONT'D)

Or this one?

(holds up another)

Or this?

TED

What are you doing?

ARETHA

(holds up another)

This one made it to sixty-four on the charts.

(holds up another)

You didn't even open up this one.

Ted takes the albums from her.

ARETHA (CONT'D)

You don't like them.

TED

I didn't say that.

ARETHA

Then say it.

(beat)

I won't be upset. No one likes them.

Ted takes the unopened album from her.

TED

First, I've listened to all your albums including this one, more than once. As you can see, I like things neat and clean so I keep it in the plastic so it doesn't get scratched.

(beat)

Secondly, I love music. I take it seriously. I managed my first artist when I was fifteen.

(beat)

Thirdly, what you experienced yesterday, seventeen takes on one song? That happens to me every time I listen to you sing. My brain gets all... muddled.

Aretha smiles.

ARETHA

Well, first, my apologizes for putting you through so much pain. Secondly, you shouldn't have told me about your Achilles heel...

Aretha goes towards him.

ARETHA (CONT'D)
... on our first date...

She holds him, sings intimately into his ear.

TED
Ah... damn it.

Ted melts into her.

INT. FRANKLIN HOME, DINING ROOM - SUNDAY AFTERNOON

Aretha, Carolyn and Erma are setting the table for dinner. Aretha is wearing a sexy, hip outfit. Aretha puts down an extra plate at the table.

ERMA
I didn't think you were coming home
for two weeks.

ARETHA
I missed my babies.
(beat)
And y'all.

Aretha puts a plate on the table.

CAROLYN
Who's that plate for?

ARETHA
(hesitating, then)
Ted.

CAROLYN
Oh... sweet Jesus... are you crazy?

The doorbell rings. Mama Franklin goes to answer it.

ERMA
What are you thinking, Ree?

ARETHA
Please help me with Daddy.

Mama Franklin, looking ashen, comes in with Ted White, who has a bouquet of flowers.

TED
Good Sunday, everybody.

Mama leaves to get C.L. Ted kisses Aretha as C.L. and Mama Franklin enter.

C.L.
What the hell is this?

TED
(to Aretha)
You didn't tell them I was coming?

C.L.
I don't know what you think you're
doing here. I don't care. Just
leave now.

TED
Aretha asked me to come.

Ted looks at Aretha.

TED (CONT'D)
Aretha can ask me to leave.

C.L. looks at Ree.

ARETHA
I want him to stay.

C.L.
This is my house. Since when do you
get to tell me who can be in my
house, Ree? Huh?

ARETHA
I want you to get to know him. He's
not what you think.

C.L.
You pregnant again?

ARETHA
No! We just want to be together.

Ted looks at Aretha.

TED
I love your daughter, Reverend.

Aretha looks at Ted. That's the first time she's heard that.

TED (CONT'D)
I think she loves me.

ARETHA
I do.

MAMA FRANKLIN
Oh, my Lord.

CAROLYN
No! No! No!

ERMA
Oh, Ree...

C.L.
(to Ted)
Didn't I tell you not to mess with
me or mine?

C.L. pulls out a gun and points it at Ted.

C.L. (CONT'D)
Didn't I tell you?

Mama Franklin gets in between C.L. and Ted.

MAMA FRANKLIN
Clarence! Don't you put your church
and your soul in jeopardy over this
man.

Mama Franklin takes the gun away. C.L. steps back.

TED
Reverend, we have to figure this
out. I'm not going anywhere.

C.L. looks at Ree.

C.L.
You can't see through this hustler?

TED
You the greatest hustler I ever
seen. Every night she picks herself
apart because of you. She thinks
it's her hair, her body, her voice.
She worries about failing you but
it's your failure. Dressing her
like a forty-year old woman, making
her sing the same ten standards
over and over.

C.L.
Get out! Get out!

Aretha goes over to C.L.

ARETHA
(To C.L.)
I know you're busy, Daddy. You have
so much going on all time.
(MORE)

ARETHA (CONT'D)
 Running your church, speaking
 engagements, managing Carolyn...

Aretha looks at Carolyn. Carolyn didn't know she knew.

ARETHA (CONT'D)
 I know about your contract at
 Horizon Records.

CAROLYN
 I was going to tell you.

ARETHA
 When? When the damn album came out?

ERMA
 Nobody can tell you anything, Ree.
 You get so jealous.

ARETHA
 Jealous? Of you two?

CAROLYN
 You saying we're not as good as
 you?

ERMA
 That's exactly what she's saying.

They bicker.

C.L.
 Quiet!

They are silent.

C.L. (CONT'D)
 (to Ree)
 You are not leaving this family for
 this piece of trash.

ARETHA
 I need a change.
 (beat)
 I want to sing what I want to sing
 and dress like I want to dress.

Aretha comes to a realization.

ARETHA (CONT'D)
 And I want Ted to manage me.

This is news to Ted. A moment as C.L absorbs this.

C.L.

He's not worth the shit on the bottom of my shoe. So that means you think I'm worth less than that. After all we been through. After all I've done for you.

ARETHA

I have to do this, Daddy.

C.L. is taken aback by her boldness. He's humiliated, hurt, enraged.

C.L.

You gonna beg for me to take you back, but I won't. I won't.

C.L. leaves. Aretha watches him go.

ARETHA

(To Mama Franklin)

I'm gonna say goodbye to the kids and then we'll go.

Aretha goes to her kids, Mama follows closely behind. Erma and Carolyn glare at Ted.

TED

Y'all not gonna fix me a plate?

Erma and Carolyn storm off.

CHYRON: 1966

BEGIN MONTAGE:

INT. TED'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Aretha has moved into Ted's apartment. There is a wedding photo of them on a side table. Ted comes in. Aretha is trying to feed TED, JR.(2), by moving the food around on a fork towards his mouth like it's an airplane.

Ted throws bloody money in Aretha's pocketbook then goes straight to the kitchen and ices his bloody knuckles.

ARETHA

If you keep beating these club owners up, there won't be any other clubs left for me to sing at.

TED

No one disrespects us.

INT. COLUMBIA RECORDS OFFICE, JOHN HAMMOND'S OFFICE - DAY

Aretha and Ted meet with Hammond. Aretha looks devastated.

HAMMOND

It's my failure. Not yours. I just don't know what else to do. After nine albums...

INT. TED & ARETHA'S APARTMENT - MORNING

Aretha, in her nightgown, sits at the piano. There is a glass with whiskey on it. Aretha watches Ted who paces back and forth talking on the phone.

TED

This is Ted White. I'm trying to reach Mr. Whitfield.

(beat)

Uh-huh. I want to speak to him about Aretha Franklin.

INT. TED'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Aretha is sitting on Ted's lap. They are still trying to get Ted Jr. to eat.

TED

(singing to Ted Jr.)

Mommy can't cook either...

Aretha laughs and playfully hits Ted.

END MONTAGE

INT. ATLANTIC RECORDS OFFICES, JERRY WEXLER'S OFFICE - DAY

Ted and Aretha meet with JERRY WEXLER (48). He is the polar opposite of John Hammond, all nerves and energy. The man has trouble staying in a chair.

JERRY

I'm gonna be honest with you. Your version of "Skylark" is one of my favorite songs.

ARETHA

Thank you, Mr. Wexler.

JERRY

Call me Jerry. You know what Etta James said to me when she heard it?

(MORE)

JERRY (CONT'D)

She said that you "pissed all over that song," and she would never sing it again. You ruined that song for her, it was so good.

(beat)

And I'm not bullshitting you. These guys out here will say anything to get into your drawers. But I...

(off her blushing)

I'm sorry. I'm crude. You're a church girl and I should watch my mouth.

Aretha looks at Ted.

JERRY (CONT'D)

You can talk, don't you? Not just sing?

(off her smile)

You are the sweetest thing, Aretha.

Aretha doesn't like his instant familiarity.

ARETHA

I'd like you to call me Miss Franklin.

JERRY

Alright then, Miss Franklin. What songs do you want to sing?

ARETHA

I want hits.

Jerry waits for more.

TED

We're done with standards. We want original songs made for Aretha only.

JERRY

We are speaking the same language right now, my man.

TED

One of the songwriters I represent wrote a good song for Aretha, "I Never Loved a Man."

JERRY

I've got the perfect place for you to record. I've been working with this little studio in Alabama.

TED

Aretha has only recorded in New York.

JERRY

Which is part of the problem. It's overproduced, too polished. These boys down there...

TED

Boys?

JERRY

Don't be offended. I call them boys because they're young like Areth... Miss Franklin, not because they're Negroes. But they're the best musicians I have ever worked with in my life. They know how to riff and play off each other. They don't need to read charts. They just feel it out.

(beat)

What do you think?

ARETHA

That sounds fine.

JERRY

I'm not controlling like Hammond. I'm gonna give you plenty of room to do your thing. This is your show Miss Franklin. Your record.

INT. CAR - ALABAMA - DAY

Ted and Aretha are in the backseat of a car on the way to FAME Studio. A BLACK MAN (40s) drives them. Aretha and Ted look out the windows. Aretha is anxious, lost in her thoughts. Ted looks out the window and sees BLACK SHARECROPPERS picking cotton. Dirt drifts in the car. Ted rolls up the window, looks at Aretha.

EXT. FAME STUDIOS - DAY

Aretha and Ted pull up to FAME Studio. They get out of the car and stare at the small, depressing studio. There are THREE WHITE MUSICIANS smoking outside.

TED

This is it?

ARETHA
 What did all the glamour at
 Columbia get me?

They walk towards the door.

INT. FAME STUDIO, LIVE ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Rick and Jerry are screaming in each others faces. The
 Musicians stare.

RICK
 You don't like it! Leave!

JERRY
 Do you know who your messing
 with?

RICK (CONT'D)
 Do you know who your messing
 with, Jerry.

JERRY (CONT'D)
 You trying to screw me
 over?!?

RICK (CONT'D)
 You're in my town, buddy!

JERRY (CONT'D)
 (screaming)
 Why couldn't you just do what
 I asked of you!

RICK (CONT'D)
 This is mine! All of this is mine!
 You....

Just then, Aretha and Ted enter. They stare at a red-faced
 Jerry. Jerry goes over to them.

JERRY
 Welcome! Welcome. This is uh...

RICK
 (stepping forward)
 I'm Rick. This is my place.

Ted and Aretha come face to face with the Muscle Shoals band.
 To Ted, they look like a bunch of white hillbillies who could
 easily lynch him. The Band don't quite know what to make of
 Ted and his fancy, expensive clothes.

TED
 You don't have any Negro musicians
 in this town?

RICK
 Not today.

JERRY
 We were just discussing that.

TED
 Not today?

JERRY

There was some miscommunication.

TED

Negroes only allowed to pick cotton
in these parts?

A moment of tension.

RICK

Percy Sledge had that same look on
his face when he came in here the
first time, then he heard 'em play
and he was very satisfied with his
record.

Rick takes a bottle of liquor from his back pocket.

RICK (CONT'D)

I think you will be too.
(beat)
Drink?

JERRY

(appalled)
We don't have time for that.

Ted takes a sip. Rick smiles.

RICK

I like your style. Where can I get
a jacket like that?

TED

You'll have to come to Harlem.

RICK

I always wanted to go to Harlem.

INT. FAME STUDIO, LIVE ROOM - LATER - DAY

The liquor bottle's on the table. Everyone listens to the
demo recording of "I Never Loved a Man (The Way I Love You)"
sung by the songwriter, a black male. It is a slow mediocre
blues record, nothing at all like the iconic version. It's
obvious Rick and the Musicians, which in addition to Jack
includes ROGER HAWKINS (Drums) TOMMY COGBILL, JIMMY JOHNSON
(Guitar), CHARLIE CHALMERS (tenor sax), JOE ARNOLD (sax), and
DAVID HOOD (trombone) hate it.

RICK

Who's this singing?

TED
The songwriter.

The Musicians laugh.

JIMMY
He sings like a writer.

ROGER
Rick, you want drums on this or you
just want to keep it boring?

RICK
I don't know Roger. You know any
good drummers around here?

ROGER
I don't...actually.

JIMMY
(re:song)
Just... slow. A little slow.

The Musicians nod in agreement.

JERRY
Come on, guys. Hang with me. It's a
good song.

TED
It's a great song.

RICK
It is what it is.

The demo ends. Aretha sits down at the piano.

JERRY
Let's see what we can make of it.

RICK
Spooner, you think we should keep
the shuffle or straighten it out?

SPOONER
Let's straighten it out.

RICK
(To Musicians)
Straighten her out.

Chips plays a riff.

CHIPS
Put some fatback on it.

JIMMY
A King Curtis deal?

Jimmy plays a riff.

ROGER
That's groovy, man.

Roger twirls his sticks, is about to hit the drums when Aretha plays a B7 chord on the piano that draws everyone's attention. Rick, Ted, Tom and Jerry go into the Control Booth.

CHIPS
Alright! Let's go with that.

Chips answers with a soulful guitar riff. Aretha plays a gospel version of the song. Roger joins in with a backbeat and soon all the players settle into a tempo. Aretha sings an inspired version of the song that is clearly better than the demo. Jerry interrupts.

JERRY
(on mic)
Hold it. Hold it.

The Musicians stop.

JERRY (CONT'D)
(on mic)
Sounds like Sunday service.

RICK
(on mic)
I was just about to say it's too churchy.

Jerry glares at Rick.

JACK
(looking at Aretha)
I liked it.

RICK
Come on, let's find another pocket.

ARETHA
Something that swings more.

HAWKINS
Speed it up.

ARETHA
 No. Don't speed up.
 (Beat)
 Follow me.

Aretha hits a chord on the piano.

INT. FAME STUDIO, LIVE ROOM - LATE AFTERNOON

They've been at it a couple of hours. Ashtrays are filled to the brim. Still haven't found it. Jack is notating parts for the horns.

ARETHA
 Stop. Stop.

Aretha stops playing. The Musicians stop.

ARETHA (CONT'D)
 It's too busy. Let the song do the work.

TOM
 (on mic)
 Stop showing off, guys.

JERRY
 (To Musicians)
 You boys trying to impress me? It's not working.

RICK
 (To Musicians)
 More importantly. It's ticking me off.

TED
 Maybe we should try something closer to the original arrangement.

Nah.

RICK

JERRY
 No. That's done.

Aretha starts playing the song again. Spooner watches Aretha. They exchange glances.

CHIPS
 (To Jimmy)
 You kept stepping on me.

JIMMY
 (To Chips)
 You were all over the neck. I couldn't tell what you were doing.

ROGER

Pick your lane, Jimmy.

JIMMY

Look whose talking. They could hear
your crash in Texas.

Aretha continues to play, oblivious to everyone else. Spooner
watches her closely.

JACK

Well, my horn arrangement is
killer. Y'all let me know when
you're ready for it.

TOMMY

You think you gonna save the song,
Jack?

JACK

As I have on many an occasion.

Aretha starts humming along with the tune she's playing.

Spooner plays what Aretha is humming on his Wulitzer and we
hear one of the most famous song intros in recorded music.
The Band and Aretha look at each other. They know this is
what the song was missing.

CHIPS

Spooner's got it! Spooner's got it!

Spooner continues to play his riff while Tommy supports him
with a simple pulsing baseline. Roger finds his groove on the
drums. While the rhythm section settles on a beat, Jack
finishes his chart and silently shows the horn players their
cues. Aretha eyes each musician and nods approval. She looks
last at Jack who smiles as she begins to sing.

ARETHA

*You're a no good heart breaker
You're a liar and you're a cheat
And I don't know why
I let you do these things to me
My friends keep telling me
That you ain't no good
But oh, they don't know
That I'd leave you if I could*

Jack's eyes are locked on Aretha as he cues the horn section
to enter at the B section. The saxes and trumpet provide the
perfect counterpoint as the vocal continues. Ted watches all
of this with jealousy and admiration.

ARETHA (CONT'D)
*I guess I'm uptight
 And I'm stuck like glue
 Cause I ain't never
 I ain't never, I ain't never, no,
 no (loved a man)
 (The way that I, I love you)*

The song bleeds seamlessly into the next scene where...

INT. FAME STUDIOS - LATER - LATE AFTERNOON

Everyone is listening to the recording. Aretha is smoking and pacing, absorbing every sound.

JERRY
 That is rocking.

TED
 Sound pretty good.

ARETHA
 I think I could do better.

JERRY
 It's the perfect mixture of blues,
 gospel...

JACK
 And sex! Baby, that's some of the
 best singing and playing I ever
 heard.

Jack puts his arm around Aretha. Aretha, still thinking about the song, is not paying attention, and her arms remain limply at her side. Jack does not remove his arm from around Aretha until she turns to Jerry, shaking his arm loose.

ARETHA
 I want to overdub some backup
 vocals on the chorus.

JERRY
 I was just thinking that. We'll
 find some local talent.

ARETHA
 No, I want to do it.

JERRY
 Even better. Save me some money.

TED
 Jerry, let me talk to you a moment.

JERRY
Uh... alright.

EXT. ALABAMA HOTEL - NIGHT

Cars in the parking lot.

INT. ALABAMA HOTEL, TED & ARETHA'S ROOM - EVENING

Aretha and Ted are in a full on fight. Ted is drinking liquor straight from the bottle.

ARETHA
I wasn't looking at nobody. I was trying to do my work!

TED
He was looking at you.
(beat)
Thought he was gonna get him some nigger tail. Pack the bags.

ARETHA
It sounded good. Real good. It was really coming together and you had to show your ignorant ass!

TED
I oughta leave you here and let these crackers have a go at you.

Aretha takes that in.

ARETHA
That's the best I ever sounded. Couldn't you hear that?

TED
We gonna finish this in New York with my musicians.

ARETHA
Your musicians ain't shit.

Aretha goes to the door.

ARETHA (CONT'D)
You not gonna mess this up for me! I waited too long for this.

Aretha goes to the door.

TED
Where the hell you think you going?

Ted slams the door and pushes Aretha against the wall. He starts choking her when there's a knock at the door.

RICK (O.S.)
Ted, It's Rick Hall. Open up.

Ted bolts to the door.

TED
This cracker here.

Ted opens the door. Rick is drunk.

RICK
Good evening. May I come inside?

TED
No.

Rick slips in before Ted can slam the door.

RICK
I thought we should talk.

TED
I got nothing to say to your
hillbilly ass.

RICK
I wish you wouldn't call me names.
Do I call you names?

TED
What name would you like to call
me, whitey.

RICK
I came here to make peace.

TED
I don't want to make peace with
you, cracker.

Rick tries to keep his shit together, steps away from Ted.

RICK
(To Aretha)
I came here to tell you I fired that
horn player that was troubling you.

TED
How did it feel to take orders from
a nigger?

RICK

(To Ted)

I don't hate you because you're a...

(wait for it...)

... Negro. I hate you because you're a giant asshole. Don't step foot near my studio ever again.

(to Aretha)

Miss Franklin, you are welcome at any time.

TED

Don't speak to my wife, cracker.

RICK

You keep pushing me...

TED

What you gonna do, redneck?

RICK

... and pushing me.

TED

Peckerwood.

RICK

You gonna "redneck" me one more time, gonna "whitey" me one more time, and I'm gonna "nigger" you...

Ted hits Rick. Aretha screams. They go at it. Aretha watches in the corner, trying not to get caught in the melee. It's brutal and bloody.

INT. ALABAMA HOTEL, TED & ARETHA'S ROOM - NEXT MORNING

The room is a wreck. Aretha has a black eye and has slept in her clothes on what's left of the bed. She wakes. No Ted. She looks around the room. She's alone, truly alone. She's terrified. She gets up, starts packing her bag.

EXT. FRANKLIN HOME - DAY

Aretha, exhausted, demoralized, her bruised face covered with make-up emerges from a taxi, holding Ted Jr. She looks at her childhood home with relief and shame.

EXT. FRANKLIN HOME, FRONT PORCH - DAY

Aretha opens the door. Mama Franklin is there. She looks at her bruised face, hugs her tenderly.

MAMA FRANKLIN
You hungry?

ARETHA
I'm alright.

They walk inside the house.

INT. FRANKLIN HOME, FOYER - DAY

MAMA FRANKLIN
(calling out)
Ree is home!

Carolyn and Erma come into the room, see the state Aretha is in. Erma and Carolyn hug Aretha.

ERMA
That bastard.

CAROLYN
I'm gonna kill him.

Aretha cries. C.L. comes into the room. He looks at Aretha. His heart breaks for her, but... his pride is strong. They look at each other a moment.

C.L.
You here for long?

ARETHA
Not sure.

C.L. nods.

INT. FRANKLIN HOUSE, LIVING ROOM - DAY

Aretha is playing with Clarence, Ted, Jr., and Edward. Otis Redding's "Respect" is playing on the radio. Holding a microphone as a mic, she playfully stomps around like an angry man while singing.

ARETHA
*Hey, little girl/You're so sweet
little honey/Give me all your
money!*

The kids laugh and imitate her. Mama Franklin and Erma watch.

ARETHA (CONT'D)
Come on, Big Mama! Sing with us!

The Kids pull Big Mamma in their game. The phone rings. Carolyn answers.

CAROLYN

Hello?

Carolyn looks irritated.

CAROLYN (CONT'D)

She's not here.

(whispering)

If you ever touch her again...

(beat)

Go to hell.

She hangs up the phone and goes over to Aretha and the kids.

CAROLYN (CONT'D)

Can I be a backup singer with y'all?

ERMA

Me too! Me too!

Aretha smiles appreciatively at her sisters. They dance around. After a moment, C.L., holding Ted Jr., stands in the doorway and watches.

INT. ATLANTIC RECORDS OFFICES - DAY

Jerry Wexler comes into the office. He looks like he hasn't slept in days, and he hasn't.

JERRY

Has Aretha Franklin called?

SECRETARY

No.

JERRY

Call her. If you can't get her,
call Ted White. If you can't get
him...

Jerry hands the Secretary a crumpled piece of paper.

JERRY (CONT'D)

Start calling everybody on that
list.

Jerry goes into his office.

EXT. DETROIT, HASTINGS STREET - DAY

Aretha, Cecil, holding hands with a BEAUTIFUL WOMAN (20's), Erma, with her two kids, THOMAS (12) AND SABRINA (8), Carolyn, Clarence, Edward, Ted, Jr., C.L., and Mama Franklin walk down the busy commercial street. The kids have ice cream cones. C.L. points to a store.

C.L.

(to Ted Jr.)

Your Momma cut her first record at that store. "Jesus be A Fence."

Aretha looks back at C.L.

C.L. (CONT'D)

Folks lined up around the block to buy it.

ARETHA

They lined up to buy your records too.

C.L.

I'm about to tell him that story now.

Aretha laughs. "I Never Loved a Man (The Way I Loved You)" blasts from the record store. At first no one hears it, then...

CLARENCE

Momma, ain't that...?

ARETHA

Don't say "ain't."

CLARENCE

But ain't that you singing?

Everyone stops to listen. They look at the car blasting the song. DRIVER and PASSENGERS are rocking out to it.

CAROLYN

That's your song?

ARETHA

They released it?

ERMA

God, Ree... You sound so damn good.

CECIL

It's a hit! That's a hit!

CLARA
 It's wonderful, Ree.
 (To C.L.)
 Don't you think so, honey?

They listen for a bit. They love it. Aretha looks at C.L.,
 She still longs for his approval. C.L. listens, then smiles.

C.L.
 It's amazing, Ree.

Aretha's smiles, relieved.

INT. FRANKLIN HOME, LIVING ROOM - MORNING

Aretha holds the phone to her ear. It's ringing.

INT. ATLANTIC RECORDS OFFICES, JERRY WEXLER'S OFFICE -
 MORNING

Phone rings. Jerry hurriedly answers, fumbling the receiver.

JERRY
 Hello?

ARETHA
 Mr. Wexler, I'm ready to record.

Jerry sags with relief.

JERRY
 Thank God.

ARETHA
 I want to work with the Muscle
 Shoals band. Those boys have soul.

JERRY
 Yes, they do.

ARETHA
 I'll provide the back up singers.

EXT. ATLANTIC RECORDING STUDIO - DAY

Aretha, Erma and Carolyn walk into Atlantic Studios like they
 own the place.

INT. ATLANTIC RECORDING STUDIO, LIVE ROOM - DAY

Aretha, Carolyn, Erma, and the Muscle Shoals band record,
 Aretha at the piano, Erma and Carolyn singing backup. Jerry
 and Tom Dowd are in the Control Booth. Ted is not there.

Aretha sings "Do Right Woman, Do Right Man."

ARETHA

*Yeah, yeah, they say that it's a
man's world/But you can't prove
that by me/And as long as we're
together, baby/Show some respect
for me/If you want a do right, all
days woman/You've got to be a do
right, all night man*

EXT. TED & ARETHA'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

INT. TED & ARETHA'S APARTMENT - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

Aretha looks out the window. She's working out a melody in her head and quietly sings the lyrics to what will become the song "Dr. Feelgood"

ARETHA

Sitting around me and that man...

INT. TED & ARETHA'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Aretha is at the piano. She's playing the chords that will become the song "Dr. Feelgood."

ARETHA

*(singing)
Be it my mother, my brother or my
sister...*

Ted walks in the front door. A moment.

TED

I'm sorry.

ARETHA

You can't treat me like that...

TED

I know. I know. I know.

(beat)

I got demons too. Help me fight
mine like I help you fight yours.

ARETHA

I will, baby.

He slowly cups her face, tenderly kisses her nose. She presses her face into his neck. He squeezes her tight.

TED

I love you so much.

ARETHA

I love you too.

They kiss passionately.

EXT. RIVERSIDE PARK - DAY

Aretha, Erma and Carolyn are walking through the park. Erma and Carolyn are nervous about discussing Ted with Aretha. Aretha is anxious about them bringing it up. Erma and Carolyn exchange glances. Aretha sees it. Carolyn starts to speak. Aretha interrupts.

CAROLYN

Ree... We've been talking...

ARETHA

How is Clara doing?

ERMA

She's fine.

CAROLYN

Good.

ARETHA

Is Daddy ever gonna marry Clara?

Carolyn and Erma laugh.

CAROLYN

I can't believe she's stayed this long.

ARETHA

Why would she leave? They're church royalty.

ERMA

Same reason they all leave.

CAROLYN

Same reason Mama left.

ERMA

Same reason you need to leave Ted.

A moment of tension.

ARETHA

Ted is nothing like Daddy.

CAROLYN

The way you two go at it...

ERMA
Just like Momma and Daddy...

ARETHA
Momma and Daddy didn't fight.

Carolyn and Erma laugh and then they realize Aretha is serious.

ERMA
Wait...

CAROLYN
You're not joking?

ARETHA
Joking about what?

ERMA
You don't remember?

CAROLYN
Even I remember and I was just
three or four.

ARETHA
Remember what?

Erma looks at Aretha in disbelief.

ERMA
Aretha!
(Beat)
We used to hide up on the roof and
sing as loud as we could to drown
them out.

CAROLYN
How could you forget that?
(beat)
I still have nightmares about it.

A moment as Aretha absorbs this.

ERMA
I was glad when Mama finally left.

A moment as Aretha absorbs this.

INT. TED & ARETHA APARTMENT, BEDROOM - NIGHT

Aretha sits at the edge of the bed, smoking. Ted is sound asleep.

FLASHBACK

INT. MODEST HOUSE, DETROIT - LIVING ROOM - AFTERNOON

Aretha sits next to her mother at the piano.

ARETHA
Why did you leave?

BARBARA
You don't remember?

ARETHA
Remember what?

BARBARA
Nothing.

Barbara hugs Aretha.

INT. TED & ARETHA APARTMENT, LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Carolyn is asleep on the couch. Aretha sings and plays a few chords from "Respect", waking Carolyn.

CAROLYN
What are you doing?

ARETHA
Get Erma.

Carolyn goes to get Erma from another room. Aretha keeps playing like she's possessed. After a moment, Carolyn drags a groggy Erma into the living room to see Aretha singing "Respect."

ARETHA (CONT'D)
(singing)
*All I'm asking for is a little
respect when you get home...*
(beat, to her sisters)
Give me...
(singing)
Just a little bit...

They sing while Aretha plays.

CAROLYN
Just a little bit.

ERMA
Just a little bit.

ARETHA
(to Erma)
Sing a third below Carolyn.

Erma sings a third below Carolyn.

CAROLYN
Just a little bit.

ERMA
Just a little bit.

ARETHA
That's it.

INT. TED AND ARETHA APARTMENT, LIVING ROOM - NIGHT - LATER

The Franklin sisters continue to work on the song. They've had a few drinks.

ARETHA
Is give it to me when you get home...

CAROLYN
Just a little bit.

ERMA
Just a little bit.

ARETHA
Yeah, baby...

CAROLYN
Just a little bit.

ERMA
Just a little bit.

ARETHA
Sock it to me!

They crack up laughing.

ERMA
Awww. Big Momma.

A groggy, grouchy Ted comes in.

TED
What the hell? It's 3 am!

ARETHA
We're writing a hit song.

TED
That's Otis Redding's song.

ERMA
Just a little bit!

The Sisters laugh. Ted storms out the room.

ARETHA
You really like it?

ERMA
It's great!

CAROLYN
It's wonderful, Ree!

ARETHA
You sure...? Don't just tell me...

CAROLYN
Uh-uh. Don't do that. I love it!

Carolyn and Erma go to either side of Aretha at the piano to reassure her.

ERMA
We love it, Ree-Ree!
(sings)
Ree-Ree

Carolyn imitates Erma.

CAROLYN	ERMA (CONT'D)	
(singing)	(singing)	
Ree-Ree...	Ree-Ree	*

INT. TED AND ARETHA APARTMENT, LIVING ROOM - NIGHT - LATER

Aretha listens as Erma and Carolyn, still sitting on either side of Aretha, play chords and sing...

CAROLYN	ERMA
Re-re-re-re-re...	Re-re-re-re-re...

They are singing Aretha's nickname in the iconic chorus!

ARETHA
That's really good!

INT. ATLANTIC STUDIOS, LIVE ROOM - DAY

Aretha is accompanying Carolyn and Erma on the piano as they work out the tag for the Muscle Shoals band. Jerry, Tom and Ted listen around the piano as the iconic song, still bare bones, takes shape. It's a party and recording session all at once. Roger joins in on drums playing a funky beat. Tommy joins in playing a boring baseline.

ARETHA
I need a Harlem baseline Tommy, not Alabama.

Tommy smiles. Roger laughs.

TOMMY
I ain't been to Harlem yet but how's this?

Tommy plays something closer to the baseline we know.

ARETHA
 (To Tommy)
 That's nice!

Aretha points to Chips. He plays a lick.

ARETHA (CONT'D)
 That's rocking!
 (To Spooner)
 Come on in, Spooner. What you got?

Spooner plays.

SPOONER
 I'ma keep it simple.

ARETHA
 Like you always do.
 (Beat)
 That's groovy.

Angle on Tom and Jerry.

JERRY
 It's her song now! Otis who?

Aretha looks at Charlie and the horns. Charlie plays a riff on the saxophone.

Chyron: 1968 Madison Square Garden

EXT. MADISON SQUARE GARDEN - NIGHT

As RESPECT continues to play,

INT. MADISON SQUARE GARDEN - NIGHT

Aretha, with the Muscle Shoals band, belts out the anthem. Carolyn, Erma and her cousin BRENDA sing backup, the INTERRACIAL CROWD of thousands lose their minds.

BEGIN MONTAGE

EXT. ROCKEFELLER CENTER - NIGHT

Aretha exits a limo draped in furs and diamonds, Ted in tow.

INT. ROCKEFELLER CENTER, RAINBOW ROOM - NIGHT

Cameras flash as Aretha and Ted enter the Rainbow Room where there is a surprise birthday party for Aretha.

James Cleveland, Erma, Carolyn, Cecil, Smokey Robinson, Jerry, along with HUNDREDS of CELEBRITIES, DIGNITARIES, and monied ELITE all standing, smiling at her screaming, "Surprise" etc. Aretha looks at Ted, shocked. They kiss.

INT. ROCKEFELLER CENTER, RAINBOW ROOM - NIGHT - LATER

Aretha walks through the party greeting WELL WISHERS, FRIENDS and SYCOPHANTS. Smokey comes over to her.

ARETHA

Smokey!

Aretha hugs Smokey warmly.

SMOKEY

Nobody's talking about Motown anymore. All they want to talk about is Aretha Franklin!

(emotional)

You did it, Ree.

ARETHA

I did it.

Ted whisks Aretha onto the dance floor. This is like a first dance at a wedding. The entire room is admiring them.

INT. RAINBOW ROOM - NIGHT - LATER

Aretha admires a giant cake filled with candles with the words "**HAPPY 25TH BIRTHDAY REE**" on it. She closes her eyes, makes a wish, then blows out the candles.

TED

What'd you wish for?

ARETHA

More hits!

Everyone laughs and cheers.

CUT TO:

JERRY LOOKING ON AS ARETHA HOLDS UP A SIGNED CONTRACT WITH ATLANTIC RECORDS

B96 A MAGAZINE PICTURE OF ARETHA HOLDING UP TWO GRAMMY AWARDS B96

D96 A PHOTO OF ARETHA, TED AND JERRY HOLDING UP PLATINUM RECORDS D96

END MONTAGE

INT. ATLANTIC STUDIOS, LIVE ROOM - DAY

A WHITE MALE REPORTER with a microphone talks to the camera. He walks while he's talking...

MALE REPORTER

Soul Music has taken over the charts. But what is Soul Music? The musician having the biggest influence on this genre is Grammy winning soul singer, Aretha Franklin.

He goes over to where Aretha and Ted sit on the piano bench. Ted is sitting very close to Aretha.

TED

From a very young age, I saw that Aretha possessed an extraordinary talent.

ARETHA FRANKLIN

Ted is my husband, manager.
(Beat)
And favorite critic.

Aretha smiles at Ted.

TED WHITE

(to Aretha)

Right now gospel is the main influence on contemporary rhythm and blues and that's due to Aretha. Others have mixed gospel and so-called secular music before her, but Aretha puts a unique spin on it that people can relate to.

INT. ATLANTIC STUDIOS, LIVE ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Jerry is being interviewed by a Reporter.

JERRY

It's always great when families sing together because there is a language between siblings that you can't recreate with just hired hands. "Ain't No Way" is a song written by Carolyn for Aretha and something Aretha can relate to because, I think, they know each other so well.

INT. ATLANTIC STUDIOS, LIVE ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Aretha is at the piano with Carolyn and Erma. The Muscle Shoals band is there along with Charlie Chalmers, a FOUR PIECE HORN section Ted, Tom Dowd and Jerry Wexler. Carolyn is teaching Aretha "Ain't No Way," Aretha is playing the verse chords.

ARETHA

Show me how the melody goes in the verse.

Carolyn and Erma sing while Carolyn claps out the rhythm.

CAROLYN AND ERMA

*Ain't no way / For me to love you /
If you won't let me.*

Aretha, following Carolyn's instruction, plays. Ted, Tom Dowd Chips and Jerry go around the piano to see what Aretha is doing.

CAROLYN

(to Aretha)

Uh-huh. That's it.

Tom, clearly digging the song, hums the background melody to Ted. Ted nods, smiles.

ARETHA

Let me try.

Aretha starts the song from the top and sings "Ain't No Way." Carolyn and Erma sing chorus. The Muscle Shoals band along with CHARLIE CHALMERS and a FOUR PIECE horn section accompany her. Carolyn and Erma glare at Ted. *This song is about you, motherfucker.* Carolyn and Erma sing harmony with Aretha.

ARETHA (CONT'D)

And then it just fades out here?

CAROLYN

(To Aretha)

That's it. You genius you.

ERMA

You're really feeling this song, huh, Ree?

ARETHA

I love it.

ERMA

Uh-huh. I can tell.

Ted glares at Carolyn and Erma.

INT. ATLANTIC STUDIOS, LIVE ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Aretha and Ted are at the piano bench.

TED

She's just being completely honest in the song about what she feels at any given moment. I think that's why the audience relates to her.

ARETHA

I'm still trying to figure out who I am. I'm not sure yet, but I want to find the answer.

EXT. DETROIT ARENA, COBO HALL - NIGHT

There is a sign outside with a picture of Aretha. Over her photo is sticker that says: SOLD OUT.

INT. DETROIT ARENA, COBO HALL - NIGHT

Aretha is on stage with Martin Luther King, Jr. Ted, C.L., Cecil, Erma, Carolyn, James Cleveland, Mama Franklin, Clarence, Ted, Jr., are in the audience. Martin is holding a proclamation.

MARTIN

I'm not just here as a family friend. I'm here to honor Aretha, or "Ree," as I like to call her --
 (laughter from the audience)
 -- for her tireless work for the civil rights movement. Every time I ask Aretha to sing at a fundraiser, church event or conference, she shows up. No matter where she is, what she's doing. She answers the call. I am so honored to present Aretha with this proclamation today. I wish everyday was Aretha Franklin day.

Martin gives her the proclamation and a tender hug. Aretha takes the microphone from Martin, speaks to the crowd.

ARETHA

Well, after all that there's only one thing I can say, right?

Aretha sings "Natural Woman."

INT. DETROIT HOTEL, LOBBY - NIGHT

Later that night. Ted holds Aretha's hand as they walk towards the elevator. People stare at Aretha and point. A BLACK WOMAN goes over to Aretha.

WOMAN

I don't mean to bother you Miss Franklin.

ARETHA

It's alright.

WOMAN

I just have to tell you. When you sing, I feel like you're talking about my life. When I'm happy, when I'm sad, when I'm mad, you have a song for all of it. It makes me... It helps me 'cause it's hard out here and you understand. And... I just want to thank you, Miss Franklin.

Aretha, greatly moved, hugs the Woman.

ARETHA

Stay strong, alright?

The Woman nods.

TED

(To Woman)

We have to go now. Thank you.

Ted leads Aretha to the elevator.

ARETHA

I'm flying to Atlanta tomorrow to do a benefit for Snick.

TED

Cancel it. I've got some meetings and interviews scheduled.

ARETHA

Hell no. Martin and Daddy asked me to help. I'm going.

The elevator arrives. They get in, stand at the opposite ends.

INT. ATLANTIC RECORDS OFFICE, CONFERENCE ROOM - AFTERNOON

Aretha comes in with Ted. The ENTIRE OFFICE gives them a standing ovation as they head towards the conference room. TWENTY WHITE MALE EMPLOYEES and one handsome black man, KEN CUNNINGHAM, sit around a conference room table. Jerry greets them.

JERRY

Aretha!

ARETHA

Jerry!

JERRY

I love it when you call me Jerry,
means you're not mad at me.

(Beat)

Hello, Ted.

TED

Jerry.

She sits at the head of the table next to Ted. Clearly there is tension between them.

JERRY

First up for discussion. European
tour. Ken, tell us what you've set up.

KEN

Everyone wants you, Miss Franklin.

Aretha smiles. Ted doesn't like it.

KEN (CONT'D)

We've got interest in France,
England, Germany...

JERRY

No need to name every country. All
of Europe. The continent wants you,
Aretha. We want to schedule
something...

TED

We should schedule a tour to
coincide with the new album.

JERRY

We could do that. Or... we could
send her out now and increase the
appetite for the new album.

KEN

I think that's best. I have six venues ready...

TED

And who are you... brother?

KEN

Ken Cunningham. I'm the tour manager.

TED

Tour manager?

(to Jerry)

So you already booked the tour?

JERRY

No, not booked...

TED

He said the venues were ready.

JERRY

They're available if we want them. We have to gauge interest early so...

TED

I know how tours work.

(beat)

No.

JERRY

No? No, what?

TED

No European tour now. We have some TV dates we want to schedule first.

JERRY

With who?

TED

I'm getting calls every hour about it. Carol Burnett, Andy Williams, Mike Douglass.

JERRY

Those shows will all be here when she gets back. We have a chance here to expand Aretha's reach all over the world. To become a global superstar. You know how rare an opportunity that is?

TED

I'm considering some movie offers
as well.

JERRY

Movies? You want to act, Aretha?

ARETHA

I think I could.

TED

Of course you could, you can do any
damn thing you want to.

Jerry tries to keep his shit together.

TED (CONT'D)

You thought you could just bring us
in here, tell us where to go, what
to do and send us on our way? You
should know by now, Jerry, that's
not how I do business.

JERRY

Ken, how much would Aretha make
from this tour?

KEN

I don't have firm numbers.

JERRY

Estimate.
(beat)
Please.

KEN

A quarter of a million.

JERRY

(to Ted)
Carol Burnett is not paying that.
Movies are not paying that.

Ted considers.

TED

We'll consider it, with the right
band.

JERRY

The Muscle Shoals guys have started
their own label. But I've got King
Curtis ready to go.

ARETHA
Curtis is rocking!

JERRY
He's perfect for you.

Everyone looks at Ted.

TED
Curtis is good.

Jerry sighs in relief.

TED (CONT'D)
But I've got some people lined up
too.

JERRY
Five minutes ago you didn't even
want to go on this tour but now
you've got people lined up.

TED
Check your tone.

JERRY
I'm sorry, Ted. Forgive me for my
tone.

(beat)
What musicians do you have lined
up, Ted?

TED
George Davidson, Miller Brisker...

Jerry can't hide his disdain.

TED (CONT'D)
Russell Conway...

JERRY
(calmly)
Ted, you cannot have the premier
singer of our time touring Europe
with a ragtag bunch of amateurs
suitable for backing up a third
rate blues singer in some bucket of
blood in loserville, Louisiana.

Ted is about to explode. Aretha puts her hand on Ted's to
calm him.

ARETHA

I want to use Ted's musicians, Mr. Wexler.

Ted smiles at Aretha.

JERRY

Mr. Wexler? Oh, God... Aretha... please...

ARETHA

Let's move on to the next item on the agenda.

JERRY

(defeated)

Whatever you say, Miss Franklin.

Ted looks at her with gratitude. Aretha smiles.

CHYRON: 1968 EUROPEAN TOUR

EXT. THE CONCERTGEBOUW BUILDING - NIGHT (1968)

Marquee reads: "Queen of Soul Aretha Franklin - ONE NIGHT ONLY"

INT. THE CONCERTGEBOUW BUILDING, BACKSTAGE HALLWAY - NIGHT

We follow Aretha and Ted as they enter backstage closely followed by Ken. Aretha is holding a bouquet of flowers. They walk past SECURITY, MUSICIANS, PHOTOGRAPHERS, REPORTERS. Aretha nods to musicians and fans.

KEN

(To Aretha and Ted)

So they do this funny thing in Amsterdam. When they really love a performer, they pelt them with flowers. I warned them not to get to crazy with it but you might get hit with a few.

INT. THE CONCERTGEBOUW BUILDING, STAGE - NIGHT

Aretha, Erma, Carolyn and Brenda walk onstage as the band plays "Chain of Fools." They're surrounded on all sides by a standing room only audience of THOUSANDS who hold up her albums, her picture, scream her name and pelt her with flowers. Aretha tries to sing as flowers are thrown at her by the 100s. A WHITE FAN tries to put a wreath of flowers around Aretha's neck. A SECURITY GUARD pushes him away.

More and more flowers are thrown. Ted goes on stage and tries to calm the crowd and gets aggressively pelted.

EXT. THE CONCERTGEBOUW BUILDING - NIGHT

REPORTERS from all over the continent surround Aretha as she and Ted, holding hands, leave the theater with Erma, Carolyn and Ken Cunningham. They shout questions through a FEMALE INTERPRETER, who translates to Aretha, then to Reporters.

INTERPRETER

Can you comment on the recent *Time Magazine* cover story?

ARETHA

I haven't read it yet, but it is a great honor to grace the cover of such a prestigious magazine.

Reporters shout more questions.

INTERPRETER

They want to know about the part in the article that says that your husband beat you?

ARETHA

Excuse me?

Reporters shout.

INTERPRETER

The *Time* article says that your husband beat you in a hotel lobby?
(beat)
Is this true?

Aretha is shocked and embarrassed. Ted rushes her away.

KEN

No more questions.

Ken gets in front of them, protects them from Reporters.

KEN (CONT'D)

Make way! Make way! No more questions.

EXT. AMSTERDAM HOTEL - NIGHT - ESTABLISHING

INT. AMSTERDAM HOTEL ROOM - NIGHT

Ted is on the phone screaming at his lawyer. Aretha is standing and drinking.

TED
 It's a lie. A dirty lie.
 (beat)
 That's too low. I want ten million
 dollars.

Aretha watches him rant and rave. She recalls:

FLASHBACK:

INT. DETROIT HOTEL, ELEVATOR/LOBBY - NIGHT

Just as the elevator door closes, we see Ted raise his hand to strike Aretha. The door opens again. Aretha runs out of the elevator, her nose bleeding. Ted grabs her arm, tries to drag her back. She struggles to get away from him.

END FLASHBACK

INT. AMSTERDAM HOTEL ROOM - NIGHT

Ted slams the phone down.

TED
 They gonna be sorry they wrote that
 shit.
 (pacing)
 Your daddy doesn't come across too
 good either. He might sue 'em his
 damn self.

ARETHA
 How are you going to prove that you
 didn't hit me?

Ted is taken aback.

ARETHA (CONT'D)
 You did. And everybody saw it.

Aretha moves away, goes to the door, starts to open it. Ted slams the door shut.

TED
 Another man would have killed you
 by now, the crazy way you act.

ARETHA
 Get out of my way!

Ted doesn't move.

ARETHA (CONT'D)
 I mean it!

TED

What you gonna do?

She goes to the phone, picks it up. Ted takes it from her, slams it down.

TED (CONT'D)

You would still be singing some Al Jolson shit if it wasn't for me. I wrote half your hits.

Aretha laughs grimly.

TED (CONT'D)

You laughing at me?

Ted gets in Aretha's face. She stands firm.

ARETHA

You know damn well you didn't write one word, one note of anything. I just let you put your name on it to keep you from throwing a fit.

TED

"I Never Loved a Man" came from me. My songwriter.

ARETHA

That song was nothing until I rearranged it and I sang the hell out of it because it was about you. A lying, no good, useless, psychopath...

Ted goes to hit Aretha.

ARETHA (CONT'D)

NO!

The force of her words startles Ted. He puts his hand down.

ARETHA (CONT'D)

I'm done with you.

TED

You've said that before. Wait until that demon comes back.

ARETHA

After living with you, I'm ready for him.

Aretha walks out the door.

EXT. OLYMPIA - PARIS - NIGHT

Marquee says (in French) QUEEN OF SOUL: ARETHA FRANKLIN

INT. OLYMPIA, BACKSTAGE - PARIS - NIGHT

Aretha goes toward the stage with Erma and Carolyn who walk on either side of Aretha with their arms around her, gently guiding her along. Aretha walks onstage to cheers.

INT. OLYMPIA, STAGE - PARIS - NIGHT

ARETHA

This song is for anyone who has
ever felt mistreated.

She performs "Think" with power and intensity. The audience is losing their minds. Aretha sings joyfully and defiantly. A broken Ted watches Aretha sing her goodbye to him.

INT. TED & ARETHA'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Aretha walks in the door. The DOORMAN brings in her suitcases. While he puts her things down, Aretha stands there and takes in the uncomfortable silence.

INT. TED & ARETHA'S APARTMENT, LIVING ROOM - LATER

Aretha has pulled out all of Ted's belongings and put them in a dozen garbage bags.

ARETHA

(on phone)

I have some garbage I need taken
downstairs. Yes, right now, please.
Thank you.

INT. TED & ARETHA'S APARTMENT, LIVING ROOM - LATER

Aretha is sitting on the couch drinking a glass of wine. She has been drinking for a while and her face is puffy from crying. She's on the phone.

ARETHA

Just come over.

(beat)

I know.

(beat)

I don't care.

(beat)

Just... be with me.

INT. TED & ARETHA'S APARTMENT, APARTMENT DOOR - NIGHT

Aretha stands by the door in anticipation. There is a knock on the door. Aretha takes a deep breath, steels herself, smiles and opens to door to... Ken Cunningham.

INT. TED & ARETHA'S APARTMENT, BEDROOM - NEXT MORNING

Ken wakes up. Aretha is asleep next to him. Ken spoons Aretha. She tucks into him.

INT. TED & ARETHA'S APARTMENT, KITCHEN - NIGHT

Aretha is cooking dinner. Ken is there along with Cecil who is there with another gorgeous girlfriend, WILMA. They are drinking, laughing having a good time. Cecil watches Aretha put an ingredient in the pot.

CECIL

You sure that's not too much, Ree?

ARETHA

Listen, you about to have the meal of your life.

KEN

Uh-Uh. She put her foot in it. You hear what I'm saying to you...

The phone rings. Ken goes to answer it.

KEN (CONT'D)

(on phone)

Hello?

ARETHA

This meal right here would bring Big Mama to her knees.

CECIL

You going to hell for that!

Ken is distraught.

KEN

(on phone)

No, no, no, no, no.

Cecil goes to Ken

CECIL

(To Ken)

What's wrong?

Ken, too upset to speak hands the phone to Cecil.

CECIL (CONT'D)
 (on phone)
 Hello?
 (Beat)
 What?.... What?

Aretha sees Ken is upset.

ARETHA
 What?

KEN
 (To Aretha)
 It's Martin... They... they shot
 him.

EXT. JACKSON STREET, ATLANTA - DAY (STOCK FOOTAGE)

Aretha, Cecil, Erma, Carolyn, C.L., Mama Franklin, Clara Ward, and hundreds of MOURNERS walk towards Morehouse Auditorium.

INT. MOREHOUSE AUDITORIUM - DAY

Aretha sings "Precious Lord" at King's Memorial Service in Atlanta. Tears stream down her face as she sings.

INT. ATLANTA HOTEL, BAR - LATE NIGHT

C.L. and Aretha sit at the nearly empty bar, tipsy, drinking.

C.L.
 He kept telling me they were going
 to get him but I said, Martin, the
 Lord has more for you to do. You're
 going to be alright. But he knew.
 (beat)
 He knew.

A moment. Aretha has never seen C.L. vulnerable.

C.L. (CONT'D)
 Other ministers were jealous of
 him, but I never was. He was my
 friend. I ministered him, advised
 him, prayed with him more times
 than I can count. I loved him, Ree.

ARETHA
 He loved you.

C.L.
 Whose gonna lead us now?
 (beat)
 They don't listen to me anymore.

ARETHA
 You still have the biggest church
 in Detroit.

C.L.
 I still know how to get them going.

Clara comes in the bar looking for C.L., comes over to them.

CLARA
 Can I join you?

C.L.
 No!

ARETHA
 Daddy!

CLARA
 It's alright. It's alright.

C.L.
 I just want to talk to Ree. Can I
 do that?

CLARA
 Of course. I'll be over there when
 you want me.

Clara walks to the other side of the bar. Aretha watches her
 slink away. A moment.

C.L.
 They need leadership, Ree. You
 should see the way these fools are
 stepping over Martin's body to be
 in charge. I don't want no part of
 that. And these young
 revolutionaries out here don't want
 any part of what we built.

ARETHA
 They want to free our people.

C.L.
 They're all talk.

ARETHA
 Not all of them. I like Angela Davis.

C.L.
 The communist?

ARETHA

She's more than that. She doesn't care about public opinion. She's not afraid to speak her mind and stand up to these pigs or anybody else.

C.L.

Pigs?

C.L. looks at Aretha like she's insane.

ARETHA

Yes. Pigs. You saw what they did to us during the rebellion.

C.L.

Riots.

ARETHA

Why shouldn't we fight back?

C.L.

And start a full on war? You think we can win that?

ARETHA

We're tired of getting our heads kicked in.

C.L.

Nonviolence got us our civil rights, the right to vote.

ARETHA

At what price to our souls? Our dignity?

A moment.

C.L.

I been thinking... We should hit the road again.

Aretha is taken aback.

C.L. (CONT'D)

Why not? We can start in Detroit, then go to Watts, Chicago. A Northern tour. Me preaching. You singing.

C.L. can see Aretha is conflicted.

C.L. (CONT'D)
Think on it. You don't have to
decide tonight.

ARETHA
(a moment, then)
I'm not going to do that, Daddy.

C.L.
I know you have a very busy touring
and recording schedule. I won't
interfere with that.

ARETHA
No.
(beat)
I'm done with that. I can't go back
to headlining with you.

C.L. is shattered. She's rejecting him again.

C.L.
You're not walking in the spirit
anymore.

Aretha is devastated.

ARETHA
That's not true.

C.L.
I been noticing it more and more.
You're drinking, whoring around...

ARETHA
Same as you.

C.L.
You still not too old for me to...

C.L. stands up and stumbles off the bar stool. Clara runs
over to them.

CLARA
Is everything alright?

C.L.
Mind your damn business.

ARETHA
Don't talk to her like that.

C.L. and Clara look at Aretha, shocked.

C.L.
Have you lost your damn mind?

ARETHA
Maybe.
(beat)
Maybe I found it.

CLARA
Come on. Let's get you to bed.

Clara tries to help C.L. out of the bar. He shoos Clara away.
Aretha and Clara watch him stumble off.

CLARA (CONT'D)
I heard your conversation.

ARETHA
I'm not sorry.

CLARA
You got nothing to be sorry for.
(beat)
Just do your thing, Ree. Do it as
as big and as loud and as long as
you can.

CHYRON: 1970

EXT. ARETHA'S LOS ANGELES MANSION - DAY - ESTABLISHING

INT. ARETHA'S LOS ANGELES MANSION - DAY

Aretha is at piano. Ken and Cecil are there along with Jerry.
Ken is watching TV.

JERRY
Listen to it again. I've got a
great feeling about this song. The
Beatles are getting restless. They
say they'll do it if you won't.

ARETHA
The song's Catholic. I'm a Baptist.

Ken calls out.

KEN
They caught Angela Davis!

ARETHA
What? No, no, no, no.

Aretha goes over to Ken and watches TV.

NEWSCASTER

(on TV)

Angela Davis, the young black militant who has been hunted for nearly two months on murder and kidnapping charges was arrested yesterday at a hotel in midtown Manhattan by agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Aretha looks at Angela Davis in handcuffs on TV.

INT. PRESS CONFERENCE ROOM - DAY

Aretha talks to DOZENS OF REPORTERS. Cecil and Ken are there.

ARETHA

Angela Davis must go free. Black people will be free. My daddy says I don't know what I'm doing. Well, I respect him, of course, but I'm going to stick by my beliefs. I know you got to disturb the peace when you can't get no peace.

INT. ARETHA'S LOS ANGELES MANSION, LIVING ROOM - DAY

The room is filled with Aretha's Grammys, awards, and gold records along with pictures of her with Presidents, dignitaries, movie stars and royalty. Ken is there with Mama Franklin, Teddy (8) and CALF (2), her son with Ken. Erma and Carolyn are also there. Aretha storms in the room with a date book in her hand. She throws it at Cecil.

ARETHA

What the hell is this tour schedule?!?

ARETHA (CONT'D)

Half the dates are gone!

CECIL

Alright. Alright.

CECIL (CONT'D)

We were just about to have a talk with you about this.

Aretha looks at her siblings.

ARETHA

We?!?

(Beat)

Oh... We're not just having a family barbecue. This is one of Ken's hippy talk things.

CAROLYN
(To Ken)
I told you it wouldn't work.

KEN
(To Carolyn)
Just...

Ken takes a deep breath.

ERMA
Ree, you need a break.

Aretha ignores Erma.

ARETHA
(To Cecil)
Put the dates back!

KEN
Don't do it, Cecil. Listen, Ree...

ARETHA
You work for me, Cecil.

CECIL
You overbook, don't show up for
half the dates. Then I have to deal
with the fallout.

ARETHA
That's your damn job!

CAROLYN
We're trying to help you!

ERMA
You need to slow down.

ARETHA
Stop for five minutes and they
forget about you!

ERMA
That's ridiculous.

ARETHA
How would you know, Erma? You
barely had one hit.

KEN
Ree, you haven't slept in months!

CAROLYN
And you look like it.

ARETHA
You don't want me to tell you what
you look like, Carolyn!

ERMA
Next time you break down and go to
the looney bin, don't call us,
alright?!?

ARETHA
Oh, I won't.

Mama takes the kids out of the room.

MAMA FRANKLIN
Come on. Let's go outside.

ARETHA
And don't you call me when you need
a gig, or want me to write liner
notes on your jive ass albums, or
want me to introduce you to some
producer! Or just need to borrow
some cash that you never pay back.
(Beat)
If I don't work, y'all don't eat.

They take that in.

ARETHA (CONT'D)
Right.
(Beat)
Put the damn dates back, Cecil.

Cecil puts the dates back.

CECIL
Three venues in three states in
three days. You happy now?

ARETHA
Yes. I am. And don't you ever pull
that bullshit again. I know how to
run my business.
(To Erma and Carolyn)
You just want to take my crown.

Oh God...

CAROLYN

Please...

ERMA

KEN

Ree, think about our son. This is not good for him.

ARETHA

Don't tell me I'm a bad mother.

KEN

I never said that!

CAROLYN

Here comes the paranoia!

The Maid brings another drink. Ken turns to her.

KEN

Olga, bring Miss Franklin a fruit juice.

ARETHA

(to Olga)

Don't you dare!

Olga is frozen.

ARETHA (CONT'D)

What are you staring at? Bring me some lunch.

Olga runs off.

ARETHA (CONT'D)

(To Erma and Carolyn)

Tell me you don't want what I got!

Cecil packs up his things.

CECIL

Forget it. I can't talk to you when that demon takes hold.

ARETHA

Y'all have no idea what I been through. What I go through.

CAROLYN

Tell us, then!

ERMA

We been asking for twenty years.

CECIL

We love you, Ree.

CAROLYN
Why can't you see that?

Carolyn tears up. Aretha can't take the emotion.

ARETHA
Get the hell out of my house!

KEN
No! Nobody move! We're going to
deal with this, Ree!

ARETHA
Out! Out! Out!

She goes over to the piano and plays, "Young, Gifted and Black." There is no artistry in it. She just wants to drown everything out.

KEN
Come on, baby... Don't...

Aretha plays louder.

ARETHA
Teddy, Calf, come here and help
Mommy sing!

Teddy and Calf run into the room. They get on the piano bench and sing along with Aretha, off key and loudly. Big Mama goes over to Ken.

MAMA FRANKLIN
I'm gonna take the kids back to
Detroit with me.

Cecil and Ken nod.

KEN
I think that's best.

INT. ARETHA'S LOS ANGELES MANSION, BEDROOM - DAY

Aretha and Ken sit on the bed. He's staring at her.

KEN
What are you thinking right now?

ARETHA
Just... things.

KEN
What things?

ARETHA
Private things.

KEN
After all this time, you still
keeping stuff from me?

ARETHA
Don't you keep stuff from me?

KEN
No.

ARETHA
You should.

KEN
Why? I trust you. Don't you trust
me?

ARETHA
Sometimes.

KEN
What do I have to do to make it all
the time?

ARETHA
Just let me be.

KEN
I know what to do.

Ken gives Aretha a foot massage. She loves it. Ken laughs.

KEN (CONT'D)
Uh-huh. You gonna tell me all your
business in a minute.

Aretha relaxes, takes a deep breath.

KEN (CONT'D)
Feels good, right?

ARETHA
Uh-huh.

He rubs her feet more.

KEN
Just let go, Ree. Be here with me.
Try not to think about anything.
Just let your mind go quiet for a
moment.

ARETHA
That would be easier if you stopped
talking.

Ken laughs. Rubs her feet. A moment. Aretha's mind quiets.
It's too much. She suddenly sits up.

KEN
What's wrong?

ARETHA
Nothing... I...

Aretha gets up.

ARETHA (CONT'D)
I have to make some calls.

KEN
Now? To who?

Aretha stands up. Ken gently pulls her back down.

KEN (CONT'D)
You don't have to call anybody,
Ree.

ARETHA
You don't know what I have to do.

Ken holds Aretha.

KEN
Don't go to that dark place. Tell
me what's wrong, baby.

A moment. Aretha struggles to communicate. He talks gently in
her ear.

KEN (CONT'D)
You're shaking.

Aretha cries. A moment. Aretha sinks into Ken.

KEN (CONT'D)
You act all tough but I can see the
little scared girl in you.

That's too much. Aretha jumps up, accidentally hitting Ken in
the nose.

KEN (CONT'D)

Shit!
 (his nose bleeds)
 Shit! Shit! Shit!

ARETHA

I'm sorry... I'm so...

She pulls away and curls up in a fetal position while Ken bleeds.

INT. ARETHA'S LOS ANGELES MANSION, LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Aretha lies on the couch. Ken, sitting beside her, is on the phone with Cecil.

KEN

She can't do it, Cecil.

CECIL (O.S.)

Put her on the phone.

Ken looks at Aretha. Aretha shakes her head, no.

KEN

She's asleep right now. Her migraine.

CECIL (O.S.)

Man, who you think you
 bullshitting? Tell Ree she's gonna
 get sued again.

Cecil hangs up.

INT. ARENA #3, BACKSTAGE - CONTINUOUS

Cecil and Ken hold up a very drunk Aretha as she walks towards the stage. She stumbles. They pick her up.

Aretha manages to make it on stage. She starts singing **"I Say a Little Prayer."**

She walks to the footlights. Disoriented by the lights, she falls off stage, breaking her arm. She cries out in pain. Ken runs to her, gently picks her up and carries her offstage. Tears in his eyes, he whispers in her ear.

KEN

I can't do this anymore.

INT. ARETHA'S LOS ANGELES MANSION, BEDROOM - DAY

The place is a mess, liquor bottles and full ashtrays everywhere. Aretha wakes.

She puts a cigarette in her mouth and reaches for a bottle. All of them are empty or half empty.

INT. ARETHA'S LOS ANGELES MANSION, ENTRYWAY - NIGHT

Aretha moves through the living room, halls, and into the bedroom, sees all the empty liquor bottles and food. She comes across a full bottle. Stares at it. Opens it. Smells it. She takes a sip. Then another. Another. She guzzles it all down then slides to her knees to pray. The words won't come. The song won't come.

ARETHA

Please.... Please... I...

Aretha is in a dream state. Everything is hazy, unclear. Aretha feels a hand on her shoulder. She reaches out to the hand. It's Barbara. Barbara gets down on her knees next to Aretha, gently wraps her in her arms and sings "Amazing Grace," a capella. After a moment, Aretha starts to pray.

INT. ARETHA'S LOS ANGELES MANSION - EARLY MORNING

Aretha hasn't slept all night but she looks better. Her eyes are clearer and she is lighter. A burden has been lifted. She hears a key in the door. Ken comes in. They look at each other a moment then Aretha gets a garbage bag and put the liquor bottles in it. Ken watches her a moment, then helps her.

INT. NEW TEMPLE MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCH - AFTERNOON

James holds choir rehearsal with the SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA CHOIR. He sits at the piano. ALEXANDER HAMILTON (30s) stands in front of the choir. Aretha wearing a fur coat and sunglasses walks down the aisle towards them. The Choir stares at Aretha in awe. James smiles.

JAMES

(To Aretha)

You always did know how to make an entrance.

Aretha takes her sunglasses off. James can see Aretha is troubled. He reaches out his hand to her and squeezes it.

JAMES (CONT'D)

You sit.

Aretha sits at the piano

ARETHA

What y'all want to sing?

INT. JERRY WEXLER'S OFFICE - NIGHT

Jerry and Aretha and Ken are having a meeting. Aretha is holding Calf in her lap.

JERRY

An all gospel album has very limited appeal.

ARETHA

I don't care.

JERRY

You do. Six years ago you sat in my office and told me you wanted hits and you still do.

ARETHA

(considers this, then)

I'm making this album, Jerry.

Ken takes a fussy Calf from Aretha, stands up and paces to calm him.

JERRY

Just hear me out please.

ARETHA

I'm making this album, or I'll never make another album with you again.

Jerry takes this in.

ARETHA (CONT'D)

All I want to do is drink right now.

JERRY

I can get you in a program.

ARETHA

I'm in a program but I need church. I need the spirit. It has always gotten me through and it will get me through again.

JERRY

(moved)

Alright, can we at least...

ARETHA

This album is not for me or you or anybody else.

(MORE)

ARETHA (CONT'D)
It's for God and you can't jive
God, Jerry, so stop trying.

Ken laughs.

JERRY
I'm not trying to jive you or
Jesus. OK?

Jerry paces.

JERRY (CONT'D)
A gospel record.... It's 1972 for
Christ's sake. Sorry... I....
(Pause)
Hey! How about we make a
documentary to go along with the
album?

ARETHA
Why?

JERRY
So your international fans and the
hippies and atheists like me can
see you in your element and
understand this music that made
you.

ARETHA
You mean for white people? That's a
great idea.

Jerry laughs.

JERRY
So you're not going to leave me?

ARETHA
We're not done yet. I want to
produce the album too.

Jerry sighs.

EXT. NEW TEMPLE MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCH - NIGHT

The CHOIR is coming in for rehearsal.

INT. NEW TEMPLE MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCH - LATER

Choir rehearsal. Alexander is at the piano. Aretha is pacing
in front of the choir, paying attention to every phrase.
James leads the choir in "Precious Memories."

CHOIR

*Precious memories/How they linger/
How they ever flood my soul.*

ARETHA

Hold.

The Choir stops singing.

ARETHA (CONT'D)

You have to do something with these long notes. You're not giving yourself anyplace to go. Start straight, then hit your vibrato halfway through.

ALEXANDER

(To Choir)

Tension and release, y'all.

JAMES

(To Choir)

This song is a lot more... deliberate.

ARETHA

Take it from where we left off.

Alexander plays. The Choir sings.

CHOIR

*In the stillness/Of the midnight/
Sacred secrets to unfold.*

This time they are technically perfect and emotionally powerful. After a moment, Aretha hums along with them. Memories, both good and bad, flood her mind. Overcome with emotion, she sings.

Aretha starts "whooping" and improvising lyrics like C.L.

ARETHA

Oh, I remember. I remember so many things. Oh, Lord, you were with me. I know you were with me. Through the precious, the precious memories good and bad. Oh, Lord.

James, Alexander, and the Choir are moved. They praise God. Aretha, overwhelmed with emotion, stops singing and sobs.

ARETHA (CONT'D)

Lord. Oh. Lord.

James stops rehearsal.

JAMES
Let's take ten.

James goes over to Aretha. Alexander stays at the piano working out an arrangement.

JAMES (CONT'D)
You alright?

Aretha nods.

ARETHA
I can't make a fool of myself.
There's gonna be a film crew up in
here. If I break down like I did
just now, they'll think I lost my
damn mind.

JAMES
The spirit is the spirit and it
moves when it moves. What do you
want us to do? Behave like
Episcopalians?

Aretha smiles.

JAMES (CONT'D)
What's really bothering you?

Aretha considers.

ARETHA
You told me once that music will
save my life.

JAMES
Yes, I did.

ARETHA
What if it doesn't? The demon is
strong.

James considers.

JAMES
There's no demon haunting you, Ree.
There never was. Just the pain you
been running from your whole life.

Aretha is shocked to hear that.

JAMES (CONT'D)

You've got to let it go, Ree. Give it to God. It wasn't your fault. And He knows that.

Aretha looks at James.

JAMES (CONT'D)

I can't tell you what's gonna happen at the concert, with the documentary or the album, or anything after that, but you in church right now, Ree. You safe. So let's just have church.

Aretha takes that in.

EXT. NEW TEMPLE MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCH - NIGHT (1972)

We see a mostly BLACK AUDIENCE coming into the church. They are excited and enthusiastic.

INT. NEW TEMPLE MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCH - NIGHT

The FILM CREW is recording as people settle into their seats and the BAND warms up. We see SIDNEY POLLACK there along with Jerry.

INT. NEW TEMPLE MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCH, BACKSTAGE
- NIGHT

Aretha waits backstage for her cue to go on. She's nervous. We hear the sounds of the band playing and an audience chattering in anticipation. Aretha waits for her cue.

She closes her eyes and prays. She feels a hand on her. Aretha reaches out to the hand, slowly turns around. It's C.L. A moment.

ARETHA

Hi, Daddy.

C.L.

It's good to see you.

(beat)

We were in California and heard you were...

C.L. tries to find the words.

C.L. (CONT'D)

Clara dragged me here.

ARETHA

Clara can't make you do anything.

C.L.

She's gotten feisty since you last saw her.

ARETHA

I'm glad you came.

C.L.

That surprises me. We haven't been getting on as of late.

ARETHA

You told me I wasn't walking in the spirit.

C.L.

I was angry.

(beat)

You are with God. You always have been.

ARETHA

He was with me. I tried to run from him but he brought me back.

C.L.

Like Jonah.

ARETHA

Like Jonah.

(beat)

You taught me every song I'm singing today.

C.L.

I did my best.

(beat)

You have exceeded every dream I had for you. I'm about to bust wide open and you've only just started. I can't imagine what you'll do next because you can do anything, Ree.

INT. NEW TEMPLE MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCH, SANCTUARY -

James is at the pulpit.

JAMES

First giving honor to God who is the head of all of our lives.

(MORE)

JAMES (CONT'D)

I'm sure you've all noticed the cameras by now. Don't get distracted by it. We're here to have church, right?

Congregation says "amen" etc.

JAMES (CONT'D)

This is the first religious recording by our first Lady of Soul. Give a warm round of applause for Miss Aretha Franklin.

INT. NEW TEMPLE MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCH - NIGHT

Aretha enters the sanctuary to applause. As she walks down the aisle, she reaches out to touch Cecil, Carolyn, Erma, Mama Franklin, Calf, Ted Jr., Clara, and Ken Cunningham.

Aretha sings "*Amazing Grace*." With every note, she is healing herself and the audience at once. C.L. starts crying, full of pride. He finally sees her as her own person. As the crowd catches the spirit, too, we see Aretha being made whole as her voice soars.

THE END