

Jesse Jackson on Aretha Franklin's quiet but profound civil rights legacy

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Death knocked on Aretha Franklin's door numerous times over the past few years. And she shut the door in his face.

She had too much to do.

Some people might have thought it was the supper club she had planned to open downtown, not far from where she lived privately and quietly in Riverfront Towers on the Detroit River.

Some might have thought it was because she had that last album to finish, the one she talked to me about last year, the one that would feature her friend, Stevie Wonder, who visited her Tuesday.

But many folks might not know that Aretha Franklin has persevered, survived and stayed, because she also was needed in a civil rights struggle that her father, the Rev. C.L. Franklin, helped lead, that his fellow soldiers like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Ralph David Abernathy knew would last longer than their lives — and that she quietly and anonymously helped fund for decades.

"When Dr. King was alive, several times she helped us make payroll," said the Rev. Jesse Jackson, her friend of more than 60 years, who planned to visit her Wednesday. "On one occasion, we took an 11-city tour with her as Aretha Franklin and Harry Belafonte ... and they put gas in the vans. She did 11 concerts for free and hosted us at her home and did a fundraiser for my campaign. Aretha has always been a very socially conscious artist, an inspiration, not just an entertainer.

"She has shared her points of view from the stage for challenged people, to register to vote, to stand up for decency," said Jackson, who said he has visited with her nearly a dozen times in the past "two or three years during the course of her illness.

"I was with her a few weeks ago. I was at one of her last Christmas parties, the one she throws every year."

Jackson and I speak of Ms. Franklin in the present, not discussing obituaries, but tribute. Not sadness, but triumph. Anyone but God saying when the Queen will leave the throne is talking above their station. Still, Jackson said, "I'm very sad. I'm very sad."

Aretha Franklin and Jesse Jackson through the years

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Aretha Franklin and Jesse Jackson join Detroit Mayor Coleman Young at a rally for the Mayor in New St. Paul Tabernacle Church of God in Christ on Nov. 3, 1989. Hugh Grannum/Detroit Free Press

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Other ministers and civil rights activists concurred with Jackson's assessment of the socially conscious singer's contributions to the movement and to helping others, something she did nationally for decades without credit and something she did locally through New Bethel Baptist Church, without fanfare.

"First of all, she was very philosophic, not only in terms of the movement, but she also put her resources where the movement's needs were," said the Rev. Jim Holley, pastor of Little Rock Baptist Church and a friend of Ms. Franklin's for 45 years.

"Whenever there was a tragedy with families, any civil rights family, she was always giving," Holley said. "I wish I had the words to express it. She's a very special person in a sense that she sung the blues, but she never lost her roots with the church and her relationship with God. She used her talent and what God gave her to basically move the race forward. A lot of people do the talking but they don't do the walking. She used her talent and her resources. She was that kind of person, a giving person.

"Obviously, her father was very much with the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., and her generation was with the Rev. Jesse Jackson," he said. "I think that's how she helped Jesse. He was more relevant to her generation in terms of what he was doing economically and with entertainment, making sure entertainers were represented in what we call this justice movement."

Jackson and other ministers watched Ms. Franklin grow up in the church, becoming an international star while never leaving the church. He said he watched her rise from gospel to rhythm and blues to soul — all while continuing her father's work.

"She was the fountain of love, particularly on giving," he said, treating fellow activists like family and young singers like younger brothers and sisters who just needed a platform.

The family friends who came to her house as a child — and who visited her apartment in recent weeks to pray and reminisce — weren't just family friends. They were human rights soldiers and civil rights generals and dedicated ministers across the country, some of whose names weren't on the nightly news. As one activist described it, there were "ministers in the suites and ministers in the streets."

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For decades, Ms. Franklin helped the ministers and activists in the streets, doing everything from providing support for the families of jailed patriarchs to bridging the gaps between a rally planned and a rally happening.

She easily stepped into the very large shoes her father, the late Rev. C. L. Franklin, wore as one of the northern tentpoles of a movement that was largely based in the South but spread nationwide thanks to Franklin and others.

Ms. Franklin talked to me about it five years ago, explaining how the June 1963 Detroit Walk to Freedom, the precursor for the March on Washington two months later, almost didn't happen.

That spring, her father worked hard to convince the city's traditional community and religious leaders to embrace his idea of a massive demonstration to bring national attention to racial discrimination. Most of the city's preachers and the leaders of the NAACP didn't want him to plan or lead it.

"Many pastors whom he invited to our home to discuss it were not on board," she said in that 2013 interview. "They didn't think it was a good idea."

The singer was living in New York working in the third year of her contract with Columbia Records, but keeping up with what her father was doing back in Detroit. And she watched her father pull off what would become the largest civil rights demonstration in U.S. history until the March on Washington.

Detroit's traditional leadership didn't come on board until Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. — Franklin's friend and the rising star of the movement — convinced them.

"He had his vision, and yes, it was under his control," Ms. Franklin said. "It was his vision of what he wanted it to be and of course, it set the stage for the march (on Washington)."

But while her entertainment star was rising publicly, something else was happening privately: Aretha Franklin was going to work. Her father's mission lit a fire under the young singer, who began living parallel lives as global star and private civil rights activist.

Holley, who visited and prayed with Ms. Franklin last week, said they had a great conversation about life. He said Ms. Franklin was particularly helpful to black ministers in the movement across the country.

"She really helped people who didn't have that notoriety, but nevertheless were very involved in the struggle. You wouldn't know. All you (would) know is you could always depend on her, and she gave so much to black preachers. I wish I could tell you by name, but I don't want to embarrass anyone."

Rev. Jesse Jackson speaks to reporters at the Operation PUSH Soul Picnic at the 142nd Street Armory in New York, March 26, 1972. Left to right are Betty Shabazz, widow of Malcolm X; Jackson; Tom Todd, vice president of PUSH; Aretha Franklin; Miriam Makeba and Louis Stokes, rear right. PUSH stands for People United to Save Humanity. (Photo: Jim Wells, Associated Press)

"A lot of times in this civil rights movement, you'll have tragedy or death. She was always there. She was always giving."

Shahida Mausi is a concert promoter who met Ms. Franklin when Mausi was an appointee of Mayor Coleman Young and executive-produced the celebration at Tiger Stadium during Nelson Mandela's visit to Detroit in 1990 after he was released from prison. Ms. Franklin performed in a concert at the stadium that raised \$1 million for the African National Congress.

"From the time I was a little girl in my grandmother's basement, Aretha's call for respect has rung and been writ large," said Mausi.

"She called for respect, as a woman, as a businessperson, as an artist of excellence, as a reliable stalwart in human and civil rights," Mausi said. "Sometimes, you need a Queen. If the cause is just, the Queen answers the call and always has. And she never told a soul. She never said 'I did this' or 'I did that.' She just did."

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