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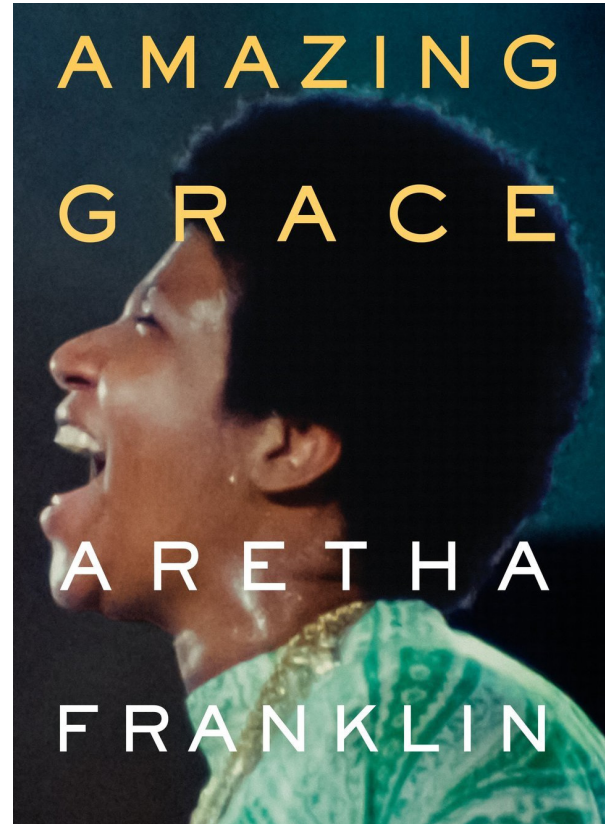
“My Soul is Satisfied”: *Amazing Grace*, At Last

Mark Burford

A project promised for years by Atlantic Records producer Jerry Wexler, Aretha Franklin’s double LP *Amazing Grace* garnered instantaneous acclaim upon its release in June 1972. Notable for being Franklin’s first gospel album, *Amazing Grace* generated extra buzz for being recorded live over the course of two nights (13–14 January 1972) at New Temple Missionary Baptist Church in Los Angeles with the backing of the Southern California Community Choir, founded in 1969 by the kingpin of black gospel Reverend James Cleveland. *Amazing Grace* was a smash both commercially—going double platinum and becoming the best-selling album of Franklin’s career—and critically, receiving the 1973 Grammy for Best Gospel Soul Album.

Despite, and perhaps because of, the rapturous response to the album, longtime African American staff writer for the *Washington Post* Hollie I. West pumped the brakes on anointing Franklin a banner gospel artist. “As a contemporary pop singer, Miss Franklin is unequalled,” West wrote in his review of *Amazing Grace*. “But when she sings the gospel classics, she must stand in comparison with the great gospel performers, and in that she comes off a distant second” (9 July 1972). Franklin’s delivery of gospel standards on the album “pales when next to those of Mahalia Jackson or Marion Williams” and she too often “seems to be just performing just another song rather than recounting her personal deliverance.” He concluded: “This celebrated album is good but not great gospel.” West’s exceptional view may very well have been intended as less a curmudgeonly smackdown of Franklin than a genuine effort to re-direct the singer’s global legion of fans to black gospel’s underrecognized master practitioners who charted the path to soul. Wherever one might stand regarding the letter of West’s skeptical reception of the album, the spirit of reading Franklin’s performance in relation to the black gospel field is a good place to start in assessing *Amazing Grace* (2018), a ninety-minute film directed by Sydney Pollack that documents those two historic nights at New Temple.

The beleaguered *Amazing Grace* was put on ice for decades, first because of the difficulty synching the images and the sound and then because of Franklin’s reluctance to have the film released. Viewed nearly a half-century later, the documentary is extraordinary for the number of story lines it offers, one of which is how we might rethink the original album. Two months shy of her thirtieth birthday, Franklin was a megastar with twenty albums, five Grammys, and eleven consecutive number one hits to her credit. Complementing the choir and Cleveland on piano is Franklin’s own band, with Cornell Dupree on guitar, Kenny Lupper on organ, Chuck Rainey on bass, Poncho Morales on congas and percussion, and Bernard Purdie on drums.



“My Soul is Satisfied” (cont.)

Pollack opens with aerial and street-level shots that immediately situate the viewer in urban Los Angeles. It is difficult not to feel *Amazing Grace* in counterpoint with *Wattstax*, the remarkable documentary chronicling a massive benefit concert at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum commemorating the seventh anniversary of the Watts Rebellion. *Wattstax* took place on 20 August 1972, just seven months after and four miles north of Franklin’s sessions at New Temple. Both films tap and showcase the rituals and cultural-political energies of soul-era South L.A., *Wattstax* extrovertedly in an open-air stadium and *Amazing Grace* with more intimacy in the pews and at the pulpit.

The fourth wall is by definition broken at a live gospel performance, but *Amazing Grace* dissolves a fifth by making its production so explicitly a part of the film. Pollack, the Oscar-winning director whose subsequent résumé would include *The Way We Were*, *Tootsie*, and *Out of Africa*, is seen repeatedly throughout *Amazing Grace*, conferring with his crew, gesturing toward promising shots, and stalking the sanctuary aisles. The give-and-take of process and product emerges from footage ranging from musicians tuning up, rehearsal flubs and in-performance do-overs, camera operators hustling into position during performances, and Cleveland playfully admonishing the audience to deliver when the tape recorder and camera are rolling, to mesmerizing moments that can make the viewer forget that they are watching a film. Cleveland is often the gatekeeper between these two worlds. At one point, a cup of water spills on a bundle of microphone wires, bringing things to a halt. “Everybody say ‘Amen’ for the technical difficulties,” a puckish Cleveland tells the audience from the piano as he resumes the program. “Alright, let’s go back to church.”

Over the course of the two nights, Franklin sang fourteen songs, four of which she repeated both nights and two of which were performed as a mashup. The documentary includes eleven of these, which can be sorted into three categories: venerable Christian hymns (“Precious Memories,” “What A Friend We Have in Jesus,” “Never Grow Old,” and “Amazing Grace”); black gospel standards (“Take My Hand, Precious Lord,” “Let Us Go Back to the Old Landmark,” “How I Got Over,” “Oh Mary, Don’t You Weep,” and “Climbing Higher Mountains”); and recent pop hits (Marvin Gaye’s “Wholy Holy,” with Franklin singing from the piano, and Carole King’s “You’ve Got a Friend”).

Franklin is undoubtedly the star of the show, but in many ways Cleveland, who lived at the Franklin home for a time during their youth, is the beating heart of *Amazing Grace*. Gospel programs typically have a non-performing emcee who pilots the proceedings and manages the tone, finding a sweet spot between spiritual nourishment and satisfying entertainment. A pianist, singer, prolific composer, ordained minister, and creator of the Gospel Music Workshop of America, Cleveland fills this role, but on this evening he is also the principal pianist and logistical liaison between Franklin, the musicians, Pollack’s crew, and the audience. Cleveland would have been the first to tell you that his voice was not in Franklin’s class, but his conviction, timing, and complete idiomatic mastery make his vocals irresistibly compelling. He begins the program singing lead as the choir marches in from the back of the church to their processional song, Cleveland’s own composition “We Are On Our Way.” One of the most captivating performances in the entire film is the hymn “Precious Memories,” sung during Night One at an inexorably deliberate tempo with Cleveland, for the only time, occupying the main solo space. Especially for those who grew up knowing the song—surely most of the audience—this rendition of “Precious Memories” casts a spell of intense, bone-deep, shared familiarity that is only heightened by the extraordinary chemistry between Franklin’s celestial fire and Cleveland’s ministerial gravitas.

Two other Baptist hymns mark powerful centers of gravity in the film. Night One culminates with “Amazing Grace,” taken in the exaggeratedly slow, unmetered manner indebted to the style of lined-out congregational hymnody known as Dr. Watts singing. Franklin renders “Amazing Grace” mostly without the choir, opening a space for the singers to respond freely to her performance. The camera zooms in on one visibly moved member of the choir who wipes tears from his eyes. Meanwhile, Cleveland, overcome with emotion, hands off the piano mid-song and buries his face in a towel, but then recovers enough to

“My Soul is Satisfied” (cont.)

take over direction of the choir for the song’s conclusion. In a poignant moment, Cleveland moves beside Franklin, clutching the back of her robe as if to steady her as she reaches an emotional climax. The film ends where Franklin’s recording career first began, with her singing “Never Grow Old,” accompanying herself on piano. Franklin recorded the song as a fourteen-year-old at Detroit’s New Bethel Baptist Church, where her father, Reverend C. L. Franklin, was its illustrious pastor, and her deep connection to the song is palpable. In a brief and slightly bizarre scene toward the end of “Never Grow Old,” Ward Singers founder Gertrude “Mother” Ward, feeling the spirit, appears to be trying to get to Franklin, but is physically restrained by her daughter Clara and other audience members. The juxtaposition of the slightly chaotic struggle, filmed from below, and the unperturbed Franklin at the piano provides a taste of the unpredictability and equilibrium of a gospel program.

The gospel songs offer something old and something new. Beginning Night Two, Franklin’s performance of “Oh Mary, Don’t You Weep,” kicked off by the choir’s tramping chant, is directly modeled on the famous 1958 double-sided single by the Caravans with Inez Andrews on lead. Franklin seems to offer a shoutout to gospel connoisseurs when she begins the song’s lyrically improvisatory section by singing “We’re going to review the story of two sisters called Mary and Martha,” a clear reference to the opening of Andrews’s own sermonic vamp (“Mary and Martha were two sisters...”). Franklin’s reading of “How I Got Over,” written by Clara Ward but most closely associated with Mahalia Jackson who sang it at the March on Washington, is more of an update, set to a driving seventies funk bass groove and the choir’s shifty interpolated responses. The next song mates a pair of unlikely bedfellows: Thomas A. Dorsey’s “Take My Hand, Precious Lord” and Carole King’s “You’ve Got a Friend.” If the former was canonic, the latter was hot off the presses, recorded the previous year by King and more famously by James Taylor but also by Barbra Streisand and Dusty Springfield. There must be something about a tune that is amenable to bohemia, Britpop, blue-eyed soul, Broadway, and the Baptist treatment. At first, combining the two songs—Franklin sings “You’ve Got a Friend” while the choir sings the words of “Precious Lord,” then they switch—feels slightly gimmicky (the performance does not appear on the LP), and yet it works, especially during the concluding vamp. These numbers and the documentary as a whole demonstrate Franklin’s utter fluency with the gospel-specific craft of verbal improvisation in performance.



*Aretha Franklin, Reverend James Cleveland, and the Southern California Community Choir
screenshot from Amazing Grace (Sydney Pollack, 2018)*

Among the most outstanding benefits the documentary offers that the LP cannot are visuals that add aesthetic and emotional texture to the sound of the record. Even West may have been struck by how strongly Franklin appears to identify with her repertory, as the camera often shows her continuing to sing to herself after she takes her seat during the applause. The on-screen images reveal the incongruity between the magnificence of Franklin’s voice and

“My Soul is Satisfied” (cont.)

her unimaginably demure onstage presence. Notably, Franklin leaves all of the between-song commentary to Cleveland and hardly cracks a smile—that is, until her father shows up. Reverend Franklin was in attendance the second night and, along with Clara Ward, is given a grand entrance from the back of the church. Toward the end of the evening he is asked to address the audience. Franklin praises his daughter as “just a stone singer” who, whatever others may think, “has never left to church.” The shots of Aretha beaming with obvious pleasure at her father’s words, staring at him adoringly as he speaks, and of C. L. coming to the piano to mop her brow with a towel while she sings “Never Grow Old” bring some of the dynamics of their father-daughter relationship to life.

One figure who is undetectable on vinyl but who the documentary makes an indispensable focal point is Alexander Hamilton. Though organized by Cleveland, the Southern California Community Choir on these two nights is directed by Hamilton, who demonstrates how a gospel choir conductor operates, mobilizing set pieces worked out in advance in a way that preserves and supports extemporaneous, in-the-moment inspiration. Hamilton is the center of attention for not only the choir, but also for Cleveland at the piano and the band, all the while taking his cues from Franklin. In this respect, *Amazing Grace* unfurls the making of an album, the making of a documentary, and the making of gospel music itself. The film augments the presence of the choir—the shots down rows of singers’ faces in profile are particularly effective—and the audience, which on the second night includes the Rolling Stones’ Mick Jagger, who the camera seems to keep finding, or vice versa. Right after Aretha’s performance of one of her father’s signature songs, “Climbing Higher Mountains,” we are given a glimpse of worship performance practice indebted to the Sanctified church. The musicians launch into a driving groove that signals that it is time for a praise break to the sound of tambourine, wailing organ chords, and double-time walking bass. A visibly eager white photographer scrambling to capture shots of the Holy Ghost dancers is a reminder of the doubleness of the entire film project, which, more than the LP, is both about black gospel music in situ and insatiable white spectatorship of black folk doing church.

During his spoken remarks, Reverend Franklin reminds us, as if any reminder is needed, that his daughter’s voice is inconceivable without black gospel music, that she was “influenced greatly by James, greatly by Mahalia Jackson, greatly by Clara Ward.” Coincidentally, Jackson died just two weeks after the *Amazing Grace* sessions, and Ward, seen prominently in the front row, also passed suddenly one year later, making the film in some ways a paean, perhaps even a eulogy, for a Golden Age of Gospel that for critic West was the standard against which Franklin should be judged. By the conclusion of the film we see Franklin rise again after singing “Never Grow Old” to lead the choir herself, totally absorbed in a spontaneously improvised coda: “I’m so glad I’ve got religion/My soul is satisfied.” Here we recognize that the impact of *Amazing Grace* lies not in matching exemplary performances but in seeing and hearing what is made anew when one of the greatest voices of the twentieth century—a gospel voice—goes home again. And how sweet the sound.