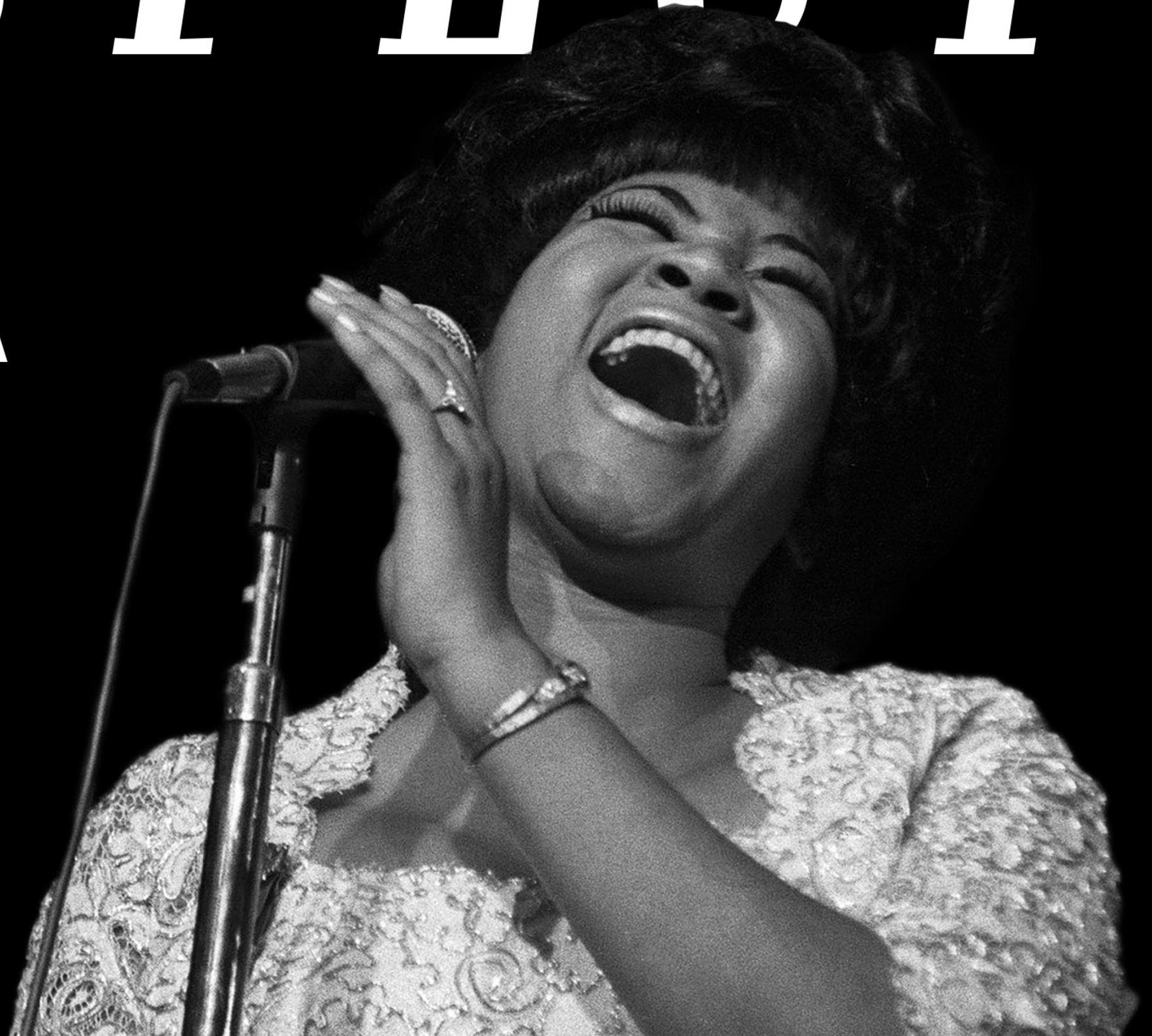


R-E-S-P-E-C-T

**THE ROLE OF STRUGGLE IN ARETHA
FRANKLIN'S PATH TO GREATNESS**
By Julie Miller



Aretha Franklin's voice may be deeply familiar to millions, but her origin story is lesser known—and that was by the Queen of Soul's design. When the singer-songwriter commissioned a memoir, 1999's *From These Roots*, it largely glossed over traumatic milestones in the performer's life, including the death of Aretha's mother, when the singer was only 10; Aretha's pregnancy at 12 years old; her first marriage; and her alleged battles with alcohol.

The book was so sanitized that its ghostwriter, David Ritz, eventually admitted his disappointment, claiming it contained "enormous gaps and oversights." About 15 years later, Ritz convinced Franklin to let him write a more honest biography, 2014's *Respect*—bolstered by interviews with Franklin's family members and contemporaries like Ray Charles, Billy Preston, and Luther Vandross. ("Mr. Ritz managed to persuade Ms. Franklin that if she didn't let him write his own gloves-off story," explained *The New York Times*, "someone more meanspirited would do it." Even so, after *Respect* was published, Aretha called the book "full of lies.")

Franklin's formative coming-of-age traumas are depicted (or referenced in PG-13-appropriate detail) in *Respect*, the biopic directed by Liesl Tommy, written by Tracey Scott Wilson, and starring Jennifer Hudson, in theaters. "Her childhood had so much heartbreak that helps you understand how she was able to sing with such emotional intensity, and how she was able to bring so much pain and power to the renditions of the songs she chose to sing," said Tommy in an interview with *Vanity Fair*. Or as Ritz put it in his 2014 biography, "The most traumatic parts of Aretha's life would produce her most moving music."

Her Parents' Split.

You'd never know from Franklin's account of her childhood, but the singer-songwriter's parents had a complicated marriage. Aretha's father, Reverend C.L. Franklin, was a nationally known Baptist preacher and civil rights activist who, in spite of his religious commitments, impregnated a teenager at his church, according to his biography, *Singing in a Strange Land*. Meanwhile, Aretha's mother, Barbara, became pregnant with another man's son, Aretha's half-brother Vaughn. In 1948, when Aretha was six, Barbara moved—taking Vaughn with her to Buffalo, New York, but leaving C.L. and her children with him behind.

"We were all devastated," Aretha's sister Erma told Ritz. "My parents' relationship was stormy and...my father had a violent temper...I'd also be lying if I didn't admit that we

certainly knew about my father's reputation as a ladies' man. We saw how women in church literally threw themselves at him. After I became older, I saw for myself that he availed himself of many of those women."

Though the family still visited Barbara, the move "broke Aretha's little heart," according to Aretha's brother Cecil in the book version of *Respect*. "I think Mother's move impacted Aretha more than anyone," said her sister Carolyn. "Aretha was a severely shy and withdrawn child who was especially close to her mother... Aretha and I shared a room, and after Mother left I saw her cry her eyes out for days at a time...Days before those trips to see Mother, Aretha would have her little bag packed and be ready to go."

Her Mother's Death

When Aretha was 10, her mother died suddenly from a heart attack. In *From These Roots*, Aretha reflected, "I cannot describe the pain, nor will I try." The Queen of Soul added that she remembered how she "sat in tears...for a long time" after returning from her mother's burial.

Others, like her booking agent Ruth Bowen, offered more insight to Ritz. "She was a traumatized child. It's one thing to have your mama move out of the house for reasons you don't understand. But it's another to have your mama die of a heart attack as a young woman...And it happened just like that—no preparation, no warning. [Her father] told me after that he was afraid Aretha wouldn't ever recover, that she was unable to talk for weeks. She crawled into a shell and didn't come out until many years later... Without the music I'm not sure Aretha would have ever found her way out of the shell."

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Her First Marriage

According to Ritz, Aretha first saw Ted White at a party inside her family's home in 1954 when she was 12. When the singer and single mother was in her late teens, she married White and appointed him as her manager in spite of her father's protestations. Etta James explained to Ritz, "Ted was supposed to be the slickest pimp in Detroit. When I learned that Aretha married him, I wasn't surprised. A lot of the big-time singers who we idolized as girls...had pimps for boyfriends and managers...Part of the lure of pimps was that they got us paid. They protected us. They also beat us up."

In a 1968 cover story, *Time* portrayed Aretha as being a larger-than-life performer who could command any stage, but who skulked behind the scenes. "I've been hurt—hurt bad," the magazine cryptically quoted her as saying. The story continued: "...last year...Aretha's husband, Ted White, roughed her up in public at Atlanta's Regency Hyatt House Hotel. It was not the first such incident. White, 37, a former dabbler in Detroit real estate and a street-corner wheeler-dealer, has come a long way since he married Aretha and took over the management of her career. Sighs Mahalia Jackson: 'I don't think she's happy. Somebody else is making her sing the blues.' But Aretha says nothing, and others can only speculate on the significance of her singing lyrics like these:

As Aretha became more miserable in her marriage, she allegedly looked to alcohol to numb her pain. It surprised her agent Ruth Bowen, who told Ritz, "She had a habit of getting loaded before a performance. In no way did that help her singing...Aretha was big on denial. She didn't want to hear that she had a drinking problem.

It didn't matter how many falls she suffered, how many tickets she got, how many subpar performances she gave due to inebriation. Her talent protected her. Even drunk, she could sing better than ninety-nine out of a hundred singers. Most people couldn't tell anything was wrong."

Aretha never publicly acknowledged her alleged battle with alcohol. While other public figures have garnered sympathy from fans by acknowledging their personal obstacles, that was not Aretha's style.

"She had a tough childhood," Ritz explained to *People* in 2018, shortly after the icon's death. "And early on in her career she was hit by the tabloids...there were stories of her being a victim of domestic violence and she didn't like that. She didn't like the image of her being a beaten woman. She loved the blues but she didn't want to be seen as a tragic blues figure."

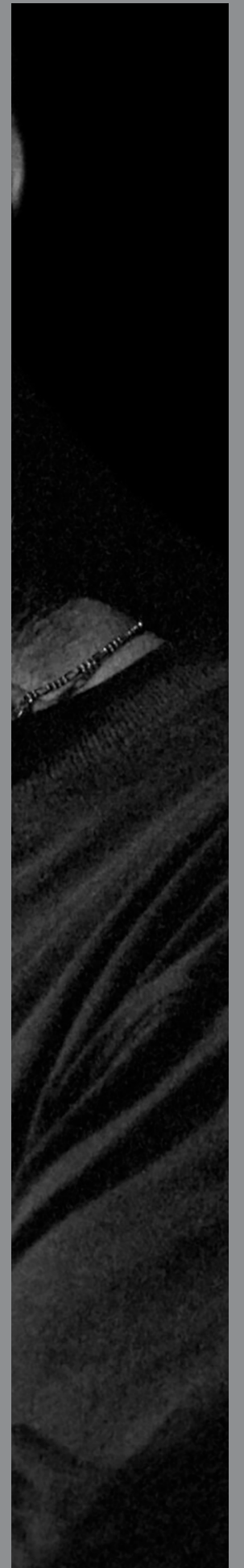


By Keegan Kelly

The

“CARLIN WARNING”

WHY 15 YEARS AFTER HIS DEATH IS
GEORGE CARLIN STILL COMEDY'S
MORAL COMPASS?





In all of comedy history, no artist has left behind a legacy as complicated, as prescient, or as unfading as that of George Carlin. No comic is as constantly (and often incorrectly) quoted on Twitter, on talk shows, in political speeches, or in terrible Facebook memes shared by an uncle whose profile picture is him in his truck wearing sunglasses and not smiling. Comedians and comedy fans across the Internet will continue to argue over what Carlin would think about whichever topic is trending until the doomsday he so gleefully foretold finally arrives.

Whatever you believe to be true about the man's politics, one point is clear — George Carlin is still comedy's conscience fourteen years after his death. George's bravery, his tenacity, and his deep empathy made him the most important figure in the history of modern humor, but it was his complete dedication to the medium itself and the bold actions he took in service of his beliefs that cemented him as the litmus test for every controversial comedian who followed in his footsteps. Not every comic can say they've been arrested seven times for swearing.

In 1962, George Carlin had an early introduction to the world of iconoclastic comedy when he saw trailblazing, trash-talking comic Lenny Bruce get arrested on obscenity charges over the contents of his controversial act. George was in the audience during his hero's infamous performance, and when a police officer asked for George to present his ID, he refused, leading to his own arrest. George and Lenny were taken to the station in the same police car — a fitting first encounter for two legendary troublemakers.

It was a long while before George earned his own charges for naughty language and dangerous ideas. In fact, he spent the majority of the '60s playing a straight-laced, suit-and-tie comedian on variety shows and family-friendly programs. George landed a gig as a house comic at Howard Hughes' Frontier Hotel in Las Vegas, which earned him a massive \$12,500 per week (over \$100,000 in 2022) for delivering clean-cut comedy to Hughes' snooty patrons. But George wasn't a caged bird, and singing wasn't quite as much fun as swearing — in 1967, George was fired for delivering an obscenity-laden monologue to that night's guests.

George's comedy during the '70s skewed sharply political as he sought to assault a stiff white America with rants about Vietnam and Muhammad Ali. George called out bigotry and rooted for underdogs, and through his comedy, he advocated for the disenfranchised, the discriminated against, and those people deemed distasteful by conservative society. George's daughter Kelly said of her father's choice in allies, "He taught me from Day One that the black and brown people have always been oppressed, horribly and systematically, by the owners of wealth. He had a pure disdain and loathing for white men in America."

"Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television."

In 1972, George wrote his Magnum Opus during the peak of counterculture with his legendary routine "Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television." George was a masterful linguist with a deep curiosity for anything deemed inappropriate, which was all exacerbated by his early experience with censorship in a squad car with Lenny Bruce. George chose seven words with the unique power to provoke and joyfully shouted them in theaters, in stadiums, and on the radio, leading to his biggest controversy and one of the definitive court cases in the history of comedy.

In spite of George's efforts to explain the importance of free speech and the arbitrary barring of individual words deemed "dangerous", the FCC won the case and banned bad words from radio broadcasts. Nevertheless, the case proved to George that comedy could be used to start serious political and moral discussions. He would grow even more impassioned as his career progressed, even when that passion led to disappointment.

George reinvented himself multiple times during the '80s and '90s as he moved away from wordplay and focused on the anger and moral indignance he had about a world that refused to address its injustices, though never at the expense of being funny. As Marc Maron said, "There's something about his righteous aggravation — it's a rare point of view, and it's rare that it's a natural point of view. It's not something you can pretend to make happen. Aggravation is not always funny."

That aggravation would only grow as George aged, but his commitment to the craft of comedy and the unending effort to get better, more precise, and more effective with his work only intensified up until the very end of his life. In 2007, just one year before he passed away, George was asked about his dedication to his work when he referenced humanitarian and cellist Pablo Casals, saying, "Pablo Casals was 94 and still practicing three hours a day and someone said to him, 'Why do you still practice three hours a day?' And he said, 'I'm beginning to notice some improvement.'"

George's final few specials are notorious for their sheer nihilism — George cheered for natural disasters, for mass murders, and for devastation and destruction in a society he deemed to be past the point of redemption. Whether the change in tone was an effort to lead people towards hope through irony or a reflection of a genuine misan-

thropy that pervaded his entire career is a question without a definitive answer. But the disappointment George felt about a culture that had only grown more hostile and exploitative since his early years is palpable in these later specials.

Why, then, does this nihilistic, cynical comic set the bar for morality in comedy fourteen years after his passing? It's because he lived an ethos throughout his entire career that defines the role of a comic in an unjust society. As Chris Rock said in George Carlin's *American Dream*, "Man used to love philosophers. We don't really have philosophers anymore. We have comedians."

When George appeared on Chris' show in 1997, he spoke about this spirit of comedy that he sought to embody, saying, "I like to bother people. I like to find out where their line may be and deliberately cross it, then make them glad they came." But George was never one to cross the line just for the sake of crossing it. Too many comedians and comedy fans think that crossing the line is a merit unto itself — George did it to make statements about what he believed to be the rights of every individual in a society that was constantly preying on the vulnerable and disenfranchised. George attacked the powerful and selfish, not the suffering and marginalized. In George's eyes, comedy should only punch up.

George was fired, arrested, banned, and blacklisted for staying true to his point of view. He was fully devoted to both his craft and his morals — he challenged himself to get better, more focused, and more effective as a comedian until the day he died while always fighting for what he believed to be right. For that reason, the moral compass of comedy can be defined by the question. "What would George Carlin do?"

