



Queen Of Heart (And Soul)

*The Queen Mothers: Aretha Franklin/Irma Thomas/
Etta James/Dionne Warwick/Tina Turner/Dusty Springfield/
Mavis Staples/Ann Peebles*

TOP: ARETHA
FRANKLIN AT THE
FILLMORE WEST, 1971;
BOTTOM-LEFT:
MAVIS STAPLES;
RIGHT: ETTA JAMES



WHEN ARETHA FRANKLIN SPRANG, FULL-THROATED, out of obscurity at age 14, sitting down at the piano in her father's Detroit church and banging out "Yield Not to Temptation," caught for posterity on a reel-to-reel tape recorder, she was years away from Soul Queen status. She'd still have to run the gauntlet through a stint in New York City on Columbia Records, where she'd record off-the-mark songs like "Rock-a-Bye Your Baby With a Dixie Melody" for Mitch Miller. That deal eventually went south and so, wisely, did Franklin, landing in Muscle Shoals, Alabama in 1967 with producer Jerry Wexler and the cream of the FAME (Florence Alabama Music Enterprises) studio band behind her. This unbeatable combination, although fleeting (she soon returned to New York, bringing with her what Wexler called "that wonderful rhythm section of Alabama white boys who took a left turn at the blues"), was a sign of things to come.

Once Aretha opened the door, a small army of sequin-clad, hip-shakin' queens sashayed through it. Some of the most notorious—Etta James, Mavis Staples, Irma Thomas, Dionne Warwick, Ann Peebles and Tina Turner—are still on the scene; Dusty Springfield, sadly, is gone. Non-songwriters for the most part, these artists interpreted, beautifully—sometimes drawing from the same deep well. Franklin turned down "Son of a Preacher Man" and Wexler scooped it up for Springfield. Warwick recorded "I Say a Little Prayer" and "A House Is Not a Home,"

BY CHRISTINE OHLMAN



and Franklin and Staples followed suit, respectively, taking those same songs to church in the process.

Muscle Shoals soon became a mecca. Etta and Irma recorded at FAME Studios in quick succession, both grabbing Otis Redding's funky anthem, "Security." Memphis was another hub. While Springfield traveled there from London to record her soul tour de force, *Dusty In Memphis*, Ann Peebles never left, reigning as the queen of Willie Mitchell's brilliant stable at Hi Records, where she recorded anthems like "Come to Mama" with the same peerless rhythm section that would anoint Al Green. Only Warwick and Turner picked their studios almost exclusively north of the Mason-Dixon Line. The choice suited Warwick's elegant, poised demeanor (and besides, she was virtually wedded to the songwriting team of Burt Bacharach and Hal David), but what fireworks might have ensued had Tina Turner gone the classic southern route? A rare Memphis outing on the Minit label, "You've Got Too Many Ties That Bind," is just too tantalizing. As the grittiest queen of them all, she might have found her perfect match in the company of the Memphis/Muscle Shoals studio cats.

The Queen Mothers are a fascinating group of strong, savvy, sexy women—artistically diverse, yet joined at the heart. So let's trace the lineage of the soul queens "descended" from these famous royals, talk about what's behind the sound, and focus on some of the Comeback Queens and newly-crowned Princesses-on-the-Block.

What Makes a Queen a Queen?

THE SONGS: What sets the Queen apart is that she *knows*. She sings—in songs (often penned by a male lyricist) that are low-down and sublime, soul-shaking and soul-sanctifying—of pain and joy, of loss and deep love. She rejoices in her man, in the pleasure of his touch, dirty and sweet, but she can turn on a dime and, taking deadly aim with her voice, mark him as a heartbreaker, a wrong-doer, a dog.

THE SOUND: It's the raw cry of souls scrubbed bare-naked. The Queens wail; they moan. Some sport a veneer of refinement (Warwick, Springfield) and some are just plain down-home (Tina, Etta). Their voices cut deep, way down. It's the sound of the South, and of church—redemptive and deeply human. Classically, in the '60s and '70s the sound emerged from backwater recording studios and tiny labels whose names then went down in history—FAME, Hi, Royal, Muscle Shoals Sound, Stax, Sound Stage 7, Volt, Goldwax, Norala—with backing bands largely composed of white musicians. These studio cats are the unsung heroes of this story. As Jimmy Johnson, ace session guitarist, says, "I didn't even think of the music as being black or white. It was several years before I realized that the whole floor was full of white boys and one black singer. I remember turnin' around and goin'... 'wow!'"

THE LOOK: Sequins covering a tight dress, a ton of rhinestones, a fine wig and lots of eye makeup. Etta was the Kabuki-eyed queen—check her out on the cover of her live LP *Etta James Rocks the House*.

THE ATTITUDE: Sass and class mixed, in equal amounts, with a generous helping of unshakable strength. The Queen's touring schedule often added up to years on the grueling Southern loop known as the Chitlin' Circuit. No shrinking violets allowed—ever.

True Grit: Descended From Aretha Franklin, Mavis Staples, Ann Peebles

The sound is bottomless, haunting in its funky majesty and consummate artistry.

DIONNE WARWICK: DAVID VANCE; IRMA THOMAS: ARNIE GOODMAN; BETTYE LAVETTE: STEVE SANDICK; CANDI STATON: ALAN MESSER

CLASSIC CUTS: Aretha's gorgeous "Sweet Bitter Love," from 2007's eye-opening *Rare & Unreleased Recordings From the Golden Reign of the Queen Of Soul*; Staples' "I Have Learned to Do Without You" from *Only For the Lonely*; and Peebles' "I Needed Somebody," with an opening line like a raw wound—"I left home early this morning, against my father's will"—that evokes a world of regret.

Ruby Johnson: The Unsung Queen of them all, Johnson had a working woman's face and an unforgettable voice full of hurt and longing. Her records for Stax, produced by Isaac Hayes and David Porter ("I'll Run Your Hurt Away," "How Strong Is My Love") featured some of Steve Cropper's best unheralded guitar work. Pre-Stax, the monumental "Come Back to Me," recorded in her native Washington, DC on the Nebs label, is a collectors' treasure.

Gladys Knight: I celebrate the side of Ms. Knight that is a little bit gutbucket and all-the-way real. "If I Were Your Woman" and her Motown debut "Just Walk In My Shoes" are as far from the Motor City pop mainstream as Muscle Shoals is from Detroit, and the "I got to go!" at the end of "Midnight Train to Georgia" is pure church.

Erma Franklin: On the original version of "Piece Of My Heart," framed by Paul Griffin's stark piano intro, Aretha's older sister pours out her broken heart. Janis Joplin wisely covered it; Faith Hill and Melissa Etheridge have since been similarly smart. Other fine sides for the Shout! label include "Just Not Ready For Love" and "Gotta Find Me a Lover (24 Hours a Day)." Erma sang with the third Franklin sister, Carolyn, in church choir, and all three famously joined voices on Aretha's version of "Spanish Harlem."

Inez Fox: After recording with her brother Charlie (who *hasn't* heard their original version of "Mockingbird"?), she church-shouted her way onto Stax's Volt subsidiary for "Circuits Overloaded" and "You Hurt Me For the Last Time." Her and Charlie's matching tiger-skin outfits were the tops in raunchy cool.

The Ladies of Sound Stage 7: Deejay John "John R" Richbourg had a way-deep Nashville stable at his Sound Stage 7 label, including Ella Washington ("I Can't Afford to Lose Him"), Ann Sexton ("Have a Little Mercy") and Margie Hendrix (post-Raelettes, the fabulously righteous "Do Right Baby") that couldn't have been more down-home, or more right.

COMEBACK QUEEN, Candi Staton: The former Mrs. Clarence Carter had sweet, woman-wise '60s hits like "Stand By Your Man," "I'd Rather Be an Old Man's Sweetheart," and the completely wonderful "To Hear You Say You're Mine," then skirted the disco era with "Young Hearts Run Free." Her 2006 comeback disc *His Hands* is a country-soul tour de force produced by Mark Nevers of Lambchop and recorded in Nashville with soul veteran Barry Beckett on keys. The Will Oldham-penned title cut will give you chills.

The Cream of the Crop: Descended From Irma Thomas, Dionne Warwick, Dusty Springfield

The sound is poised, soulful-smooth, even elegant at times, but with a core of heart-break and bittersweet longing.

CLASSIC CUTS: Irma's "I Wish Someone Would Care"—check out, too, the new creative high of her evocative post-Katrina recordings for the Rounder label—Warwick's monumental "Walk On By" and Springfield's Memphis-waxed "Breakfast in Bed" and "I Don't Want to Hear It Anymore."

Mabel John: "Shouldn't I Love Him," "I'm a Big Girl Now" and "Don't Hit Me No More" are but the tip of the soulful iceberg waxed by Little Willie John's sister at Stax, once again aided by the Hayes-Porter songwriting/production team (with Isaac Hayes playing some of his best piano). Hers are grown-up records in the best sense, fueled by a voice that's sweet, worldly and weighty with experience.

Bettye Swann: "Be Strong Enough To Hold On" and "I'm Just Living A Lie" (Atlantic and FAME, respectively) feature



LEFT PAGE - DIONNE WARWICK; RIGHT PAGE - TOP: IRMA THOMAS; MIDDLE: BETTYE LAVETTE; BOTTOM: CANDI STATON

The Crown Princesses a.k.a. New Queens on the Block

THE ROYAL LINE CONTINUES



Sharon Jones: Sprung forth from the same hometown as Godfather of Soul James Brown, this Augusta, Georgia native began singing, like many soul singers do, in church. Though obviously a diva and unquestionably a queen, this "True Grit" impassioned soul-shouter initially made a living doing sporadic, sometimes anonymous, session work, singing in wedding bands and even working as a prison guard at Riker's Island in New York. In 1996, a short-lived indie label asked the soulstress to come in for work as a back-up singer. When the two other girls didn't show, Jones recorded each part herself. That impressive session earned her a fruitful partnership with the fledgling label's co-owner Bosco "Bass" Mann, and although Jones was at first hesitant about working with the 21-year-old Jewish kid, their common love for soul music eventually led to the creative force that spurred the incredible Sharon Jones & the Dap-Kings. This one-of-a-kind live act, dubbed "the Daptone Super Soul Revue," led by Jones' powerful pipes, is now in high demand the world over.

Jill Scott: After being "discovered" at a poetry reading in her native Philadelphia, Jill Scott slinked and grooved into the pop consciousness with the 2000 release of her

debut album, *Who Is Jill Scott? Words and Sounds Vol. 1*. Going double platinum, garnering Grammy nominations and winning NAACP Image Awards, the album put a spotlight on Scott's thoughtful, empowered, sexy soul sound, vaulting her into the hallowed line of soul queens, highlighted when she shared the stage with Aretha Franklin at the VHI Divas concert in 2001. Since those not-so-humble beginnings, Scott's creative drive never wavered as she continued to release gold-selling albums and garner Grammy nominations, including a win for Best Urban/Alternative Vocal Performance for "Cross My Mind." Following her portrayal of another great R&B singer, Big Mama Thornton, in the film *Hounddog*, Scott released *Collaborations* and *The Real Thing: Words and Sounds Vol. 3* in 2007. Scott describes her music as "sexy, harsh, simple...and growing," but her voice is blissfully soulful.



Amy Winehouse: Born in 1983 in north London, Amy Winehouse began her professional career at 16. She grew up surrounded by jazz, but, foreshadowing the rebellious streak that would make her a tabloid legend, later found herself inspired by American R&B, hip hop and rap. Winehouse cultivated her own unique, soulful fusion sound, captivating UK audiences with her critically acclaimed 2003 debut, *Frank*. Powered by Winehouse's brutal, deeply personal songwriting, her sophomore release *Back to Black* catapulted her to international stardom, selling over five million copies. Propelled by the catchy hit single "Rehab," *Back to Black* hit Number Seven on the Billboard Hot 100 upon release in the US. At the Grammys, Winehouse made history as the first British female artist to take home five trophies in one night. Her controversial lifestyle is almost as arresting as her astoundingly soulful voice.



SHARON JONES: SCOTT NEWTON FOR KIRU; AMY WINEHOUSE: MISCHA RICHTER/JMG; CORINNE BAILEY RAE: TOSHIYA SUZUKI; DUFFY: MAX DODSON; ERYKAH BADU: MARC BAPTISTE



Corinne Bailey Rae: This Leeds-born songstress began her musical life as a classical violinist, but upon picking up the electric guitar in her early teens, Rae morphed into an alt-rock and formed Helen, an all-female group in the mold of key influences L7 and Vercsa Salt. Despite local popularity, Helen ended early and Rae entered university intending to study English literature. A job at a jazz club, however, brought her back onto the scene, this time as a soul singer. Her 2006 eponymous debut proved a stunning success on both sides of the pond, and in 2007 she followed up with the CD/DVD set *Live in London and NY*. Rae recently appeared on the Reverend Al Green's *Lay It Down* (see July 2008 *On the Record*). Her elegantly smooth and soulfully seductive vocals are chill-inducing.

Duffy: Raised in the remote north Wales coastal community of Nefyn, miles from any record store, with only her parents' records to listen to (and without, as her producer Bernard



Butler says, "any concept of what was cool or current,") it's not surprising that Duffy, only 24, lists '60s' staples Stax and Motown as her chief influences. Evoking those sounds with bright organs, subtle string swells and spare, Steve Cropper-like guitar, Duffy places herself in the tradition of the great soul queens. Like fellow Brit Winehouse, whose throaty crawl Duffy

LEFT PAGE - TOP: SHARON JONES ON THE AUSTIN CITY LIMITS; BOTTOM: AMY WINEHOUSE; RIGHT PAGE - TOP: CORINNE BAILEY RAE; BOTTOM: DUFFY; SIDE: ERYKAH BADU

often recalls, she gives that soul queen persona a modern, more assertive update. The massive, and still growing, success of Duffy's 2008 debut, *Rockferry*, is certainly pushing the modern soul queen into the pop lexicon, peaking at Number Four on the Billboard charts, fueled by its big single, "Mercy" (fittingly similar to Aretha's "Chain of Fools"). Her punctuated, soul-infused vocals are youthful and fresh.



Erykah Badu: Born Erica Wright in Dallas in 1971, Badu grew up with the sounds of '70s soul all around her. In 1994, she was a part-time singer and full-time teacher when she opened for D'Angelo in her hometown and awed Kedar Massenburg, D'Angelo's manager, who quickly signed Badu. Her 1997 debut *Baduizm*, with an R&B bass-driven feel, showcased Badu's dreamy, at times tormented vocals. This soulful artist writes her own tunes, lyrically challenging urban-based poetry with a personally philosophical bent. Her musical influences are broad, yet all neatly weave together in her compositions. Often compared with Billie Holiday in her vocal delivery, many consider her a pioneer in the "NuSoul" trend, helping to revive interest in a genre once relegated to the past. With over a decade in the biz, Erykah Badu is now a household name.

a shimmering vibrato so deep you could drown in it. And seek out her rockin' sides on the Money label, like "The Heartache Is Gone"—she wrote this track, as she did "Make Me Yours," her biggest radio hit.

Lorraine Ellison: Ellison's "Stay With Me" is one of the most thrilling records ever made, and Janis Joplin covered her "Try (Just a Little Bit Harder)." A true soprano, Ellison's flights into the upper register presage the modern stylings of singers like Mariah Carey.

Carla Thomas: The teen queen of Stax Records first dueted with her father Rufus at age 17 on the rockin' "Because I Love You," graduating to hits like "B-A-B-Y" and "Tramp," her sassy toe-to-toe outing with Otis Redding. She could go deep, too, on the wonderful "Let Me Be Good to You" and "How Do You Quit (Someone You Love)."

Jackie Moore: Her radio smash "Precious, Precious" joins "Make Me Feel Like a Woman," "Darling Baby" and "Wonderful, Marvelous" in showcasing one of soul music's warmest, most seductive voices. She often worked with the Dixie Flyers, Jim Dickinson's band of southern redneck geniuses.

Barbara Lynn: This Texas guitar-totin' queen (star of one of the best clips you'll ever see on YouTube from the classic TV show *The!!! BEAT*) hit it big on Atlantic with "'Til Then I'll Suffer" and "You'll Lose a Good Thing." She continues to burn up the blues festival circuit today.

Betty Harris speaks out about her career:

THE BEGINNING, MIDDLE AND WHAT WAS SUPPOSED TO BE THE END

Big Maybelle is the one I went to. I became a protégé of hers. She taught me stage presence and helped me to maintain who I was as a singer because I was all over the place.

Musically I came out of a gospel field. My influences were Rosetta Tharpe, the Caravans, and after I had been in show-business, Aretha Franklin, Gladys Knight, all the girls were really laying it down thick including Tina Turner, so those influences helped to kind of fate me for R&B.

Knowing a lot of gospel artists, I knew that these were great singers but they weren't making the money. I went with where I thought the money was and that was R&B and that was against my family traditionally. They did not like the idea.

The hardest lesson I learned...when to get out and who to trust, and basically, there just wasn't anybody to trust. I came straight from high school into major league show business with no experience and found out that a million-seller was not a million-seller: It yielded no money and I had to say goodbye. So that, I think, was one of the hardest things

I ever did in my life, to give it up.

The choices that I made were for my children so I don't regret any of that. I got out because I wanted to earn a living, I didn't want to spend my time on the road 24/7 with a child. The 35 years that I was out of the business were happy, I was doing what I really wanted to do. The first couple of years were excruciating, though. I got to where I wouldn't even listen to the radio, but I finally got past that. Show business sends you flying high and then incredibly suddenly it can drop you and you're just hanging there in the air. I sent my baby to college and she came back and said, "Mommy, everybody's making money off your music but you. I'm grown, it's time for you to do something."

I never lost what I had because mine was strictly a gift and it still is. I thank God everyday for it. Being back out here now, I really enjoy it. I wanted to explore how far I could go so that's how *Intuition* came along. But right now I'm back to being a little more soul-oriented and when I record again it will be Betty Harris, period!

Judy Clay: Haunting, lovely tracks with stellar backup harmonies were her specialty, and no surprise—she was briefly part of the Sweet Inspirations, soul music's studio session queens. "The Greatest Love" is flawless, and "It Takes a Lotta Good Love" is a hip-shakin' delight. She recorded swingin' duets, too, with William Bell ("Love-Eye-Tis") and Billy Vera (the radio hit "Country Girl-City Man").

COMEBACK QUEEN, Betty Harris: "Trouble With My Lover" (just one of a group of great New Orleans productions by Allen Toussaint), "I'm a Fool For You" (an un-credited duet with soul king James Carr) and a transcendent (many would say definitive) version of "Cry to Me" that's sexy and sad all at once are included on two import compilation CDs, *Lost Soul Queen* and *Soul Perfection Plus*. Harris' powerful 2007 comeback release, *Intuition*, produced by Nashville's Jon Tiven, highlights her gorgeously well-worn low register as she moans and shouts with a soulful elegance all her own.

Truth Tellers: Descended From Etta James, Tina Turner

The sound is arrow-true, brutally honest, sometimes raunchy, with a swagger that only barely masks the hurt and tears.

CLASSIC CUTS: Tina's "A Fool in Love" and "River Deep, Mountain High." Etta's "Tell Mama" and "I'd Rather Go Blind."

Laura Lee: Al Green called her "the deepest singer I've ever heard." A gospel star first, her soul career spanned two labels and artistic thrusts—Chess ("Love More Than Pride") and Hot Wax ("Women's Love Rights," "Wanted: Lover, No Experience Necessary").

Joshie Jo Armstead: This former Ikettes (she sings on "I'm Blue") is a true soul renaissance woman. She co-wrote with Ashford & Simpson ("Let's Go Get Stoned"), founded and ran her own labels, and had solo hits like "I Feel an Urge Coming On," "Stepping Stone," "I Been Turned On" and "A Stone Good Lover."

Denise LaSalle: LaSalle was a pioneer in the sense that she wrote many of her own songs for a variety of labels and then sang them with equal helpings of beauty and blue grit. "A Love Reputation" (Chess), "My Brand on You" and "Hung Up, Strung Out" (Westbound) and "A Man-Sized Job" (Malaco) all feature her strutting, truth-telling style.

Millie Jackson: No one could strut like Jackson, whose X-rated stage persona was barely toned down on mostly self-penned sides like "Young Man, Older Woman" and the achingly fine "It Hurts So Good" (featured on the *Cleopatra Jones* soundtrack). On LPs with titles like *Live and Outrageous*, Jackson raised the truth-telling bar, paving the way for the most outspoken of today's female rap artists.

Jean Knight: "Mr. Big Stuff," produced by super-fine New Orleans



LEFT PAGE: BETTY HARRIS; RIGHT PAGE: GLADYS KNIGHT

BETTY HARRIS: COURTESY OF BETTY HARRIS; GLADYS KNIGHT: KWAKU ALSTON



TOP: JEAN KNIGHT;
MIDDLE: BARBARA
LYNN; BOTTOM:
DENISE LASALLE

arranger Wardell Quezergue, was huge, as was the follow-up, "You Think You're Hot Stuff," but the more obscure non-stop groove of "Carry On" (Stax) should have been a radio anthem.

Betty Wright: This Florida-based queen (Hialeah's TK Studio was her home turf) popularized the often-sampled "Clean-Up Woman" along with "Tonight Is the Night," "He's Bad, Bad, Bad," and perhaps the best version of Allen Toussaint's "Shoorah Shoorah." Wright was Gloria Estefan's demo singer for years, and, most recently, she's tutored soul princess Joss Stone as part of Stone's demo production team.

COMEBACK QUEEN, Bettye LaVette: Just 15 when she came on the scene in 1962, she bounced around from label to label for years, making fabulous but little-heard records like "Let Me Down Easy," "He Made a Woman Out of Me" and "Right in the Middle of Falling in Love." More recently, her appearances on *The Late Show With David Letterman* and at SXSW have brought her back to the spotlight. A collectors' Holy Grail LP shelved by Atlantic in 1972 finally saw release in 2006, and both 2005's *I've Got My Own Hell to Raise* and 2007's *The Scene of the Crime* (the latter recorded with second-generation Muscle Shoals vets the Drive-By Truckers) are certified classics of soulful realism.

What a groove that so many of the classic queens continue on the scene, just as the new princesses stoke the soul fires and carry the torch forward. Besides LaVette, Staton, and Harris, Mavis Staples has a brand-new live CD, *Hope At The Hideout*. Irma Thomas continues to live up to her title as "The Soul Queen Of New Orleans" and Etta James, newly svelte, churns out one heart-wrenchingly good record after another. *Rolling Stone* recently named Aretha the greatest vocalist of all time. The music—and the talent—are, truly, timeless....and regal. ●

The Beehive Queen of Blue-Eyed Soul

Christine Ohlman

Re-Hive ● (HMG Records)

The blue-eyed soul of the beehived soul queen Christine Ohlman astounds any live audience lucky enough to be in her presence. As a veteran and featured vocalist of the SNL band, her finely tuned pipes are often heard, not seen; a huge misfortune for the late night viewer as her charisma onstage is one of a kind. Few singers today are truly versed, like Ohlman, in all things soul. But her encyclopedic knowledge of the genre has only helped refine her powerful voice and enrich her catalog of staple covers.

Though she sings Ann Peebles' "I Can't Stand the Rain," as if the song burst forth from her inner-being, few know that Ohlman is a seasoned songwriter herself. *Re-Hive* retrospectively showcases some of her best original tunes from four previous releases along with some alternate takes, live cuts and unreleased tracks. If the "True Grit" and "Truth Telling" soul queens have a common descendant, it is Christine Ohlman. Tough and raw around the edges, Ohlman belts with a voice steeped in the heritage of this musical tradition. Even when not singing soul songs, she embodies the power and masked vulnerability essential to the genre.

Christine Ohlman & Rebel Montez suffered the loss of long-time friend and producer Doc Cavalier in 2005. *Re-Hive* is appropriately dedicated to Cavalier. As Christine says, "The four CDs we cut together were Doc's babies as surely as they were mine." This collection is a great primer for new Ohlman fans curious about this in-demand lady whose guest spots and collaborations form a daunting list that's the stuff of musical legend. Look for her first release of original material in five years, *The Deep End*, due out in early 2009. —Ali Green

