How did Aretha Franklin represent a new female voice in 1960s popular music?

When Aretha Franklin belted out, “What you want, baby I've got it,” in her 1967 recording of Otis Redding’s song “Respect,” millions of listeners could not help but agree. She had it. With a voice unadorned yet undeniably powerful, she quickly rose up the Pop charts. For many listeners, it may have been the first time they had heard of Aretha Franklin. However, when the album on which “Respect” was included, I Never Loved A Man The Way I Love You, was released on Atlantic Records, it was certainly not her first recording project. She was a veteran artist who had released more than ten studio albums prior to that point. Aretha had been a Gospel ingénue as a young child, recording her first album at the age of fourteen. When “Respect” was released in 1967, she was coming out of a five-year recording contract with Columbia Records where she had released a string albums that revolved around a jazz-pop style. But there was a new energy to her Atlantic debut, backed by the famous Muscle Shoals rhythm section, “The Swampers.” The recordings made more of her Gospel heritage, blending those roots with an R&B feel that resulted in the 1960s Soul sound that we have come to know. When “Respect” reached Number 1 on both the R&B and Pop charts, and Aretha garnered her first two Grammy Awards, it was clear the “Queen of Soul” had arrived.

Like many vocalists, Aretha's first foray into music was through her church. She was raised in Detroit, where her father, Reverend C.L. Franklin, was the preacher for the thousand-member New Bethel Baptist Church. Black churches were not only centers of religious experience, they were also centers of social activity, giving a sense of community to a population affected by the upheaval of the Great Migration. The Great Migration changed the fabric of the nation, with millions of African-Americans moving to the North, seeking jobs and freedom. Vibrant black churches, like the New Bethel Baptist Church, flourished during the 1940s and 1950s in northern industrial cities. Aretha's musical style had roots in this history. Her father was nicknamed “the man with the million-dollar voice.” He was a close friend with other pivotal,
itinerant preachers, such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and famous Gospel performers, including Mahalia Jackson and Clara Ward. Growing up, Aretha would often sing in church with her siblings, (her sisters, Erma and Carolyn, would eventually sing background vocals on albums throughout her career, including the famous “sock it to me” phrase on “Respect”). At eighteen years old, however, Aretha made a break from Gospel music. With the blessing of her father, and following the footsteps of Sam Cooke who had made a similar transition before her, she signed a record contract with Columbia to record secular popular music.

By 1967, the Civil Rights movement had cast a light on human rights issues, opening up a dialogue on women’s rights as well. Just a few years prior, in 1964, Congress had passed Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, banning discrimination not only on the basis of race, but also on the basis of religion, ethnicity, and/or gender. Women, and in particular minority women, had long been excluded from certain institutions of higher learning, from job opportunities, from equal pay, and even from fair and equal government representation. In 1966, the National Organization for Women (NOW), a grassroots group for women’s rights, was founded. There was a need for strong, feminine voices in a male-dominated society, voices that could redress the largely unspoken sexism of the time. Gospel, which as a musical genre had always elevated the female voice with singers like Mahalia Jackson and Sister Rosetta Tharpe, provided a natural answer to the call. And Aretha, despite her move into the Pop arena, was in possession of a raw, riveting style. Her soulful blend of Gospel and R&B would prove to be just what some Americans needed to hear.

In this lesson, students will watch a 25-minute video, Aretha Franklin – ABC News Close Up (1968), as a pre-lesson activity. In class, students examine a timeline of landmark events that occurred during the women’s movement from 1961 to 1971. While watching multiple live performances of Aretha Franklin, including “Dr. Feelgood,” “Do Right Woman,” “Respect,” “(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman,” and “Chain of Fools,” students will seek to identify Gospel influences and investigate whether issues related to women’s rights are reflected in the songs as well. The extension activity includes an insightful personal narrative that provides an account of sexism that existed during the Civil Rights era.
Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. **KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):**
   - The way in which Aretha Franklin’s unique blends of Gospel, Soul, and R&B brought forth a new voice for women in the 1960s, examining songs such as “(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman,” “Respect,” and “Chain of Fools”
   - Legislation and key events concerning women’s rights between 1961 and 1971
   - A brief history of Gospel music and how it plays a role in American popular music

2. **BE ABLE TO (SKILLS):**
   - Analyze a musical performance
   - Evaluate the connections between popular music and the society in which it is created, specifically with regards to Aretha Franklin and women’s rights in the 1960s.
   - Common Core: Students will read a personal history and analysis of the song “Respect” and write their own reactions about how it pertains to the events of the 1960s (CCSS Reading 9; CCSS Speaking and Listening 3; CCSS Language 5)

**PRE-LESSON ACTIVITY:**

Watch the 1968 film Aretha Franklin - ABC News Closeup (25 minutes) as a pre-lesson activity. Students will complete Handout 1: Aretha Franklin Entry Ticket Prompt while they view the video on their own time.

**MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY:**

Discuss the completed Entry Ticket Prompt with the students. Ask student volunteers to either read aloud the quotes they selected, or to share something they learned while watching the film. Have a class discussion:

- Did students select similar quotes? Are there any common themes that these quotes reveal?
- What was the most interesting thing you learned while watching the profile on Aretha Franklin?
- What questions do you still have after watching the film?
PROCEDURE:

   • Describe the tone of the vocalist. What do you think she is feeling?
   • Who is she singing to? How has that person treated her?

To contrast, play a video of Aretha Franklin performing “Chain of Fools” live in 1968. The single was initially released on Atlantic Records in 1967.
   • Describe the tone of the vocalist. What do you think she is feeling?
   • Who is she singing to? How has that person treated her?
   • How do these two songs compare musically?

Note to the teacher: Both Aretha Franklin and the Supremes were successful recording artists, both from Detroit. “Where Did Our Love Go” was the first single recorded by the Supremes to reach Number 1 on the Billboard chart, in August 1964. The Supremes would come to be associated with the polished, orchestrated sounds of Motown that swept the nation during the 1960s. In this song, Diana Ross’ soft and sweet voice calls out to the man who has left her behind. By contrast, Aretha Franklin, who recorded “Chain of Fools” in 1967, would achieve prominence with her powerful, earthy vocals. “Chain of Fools” would reach Number 2 on the Billboard chart. The commanding strength of her voice seemed different from the female Pop sounds, like the Supremes, who had come before. Concurrently, the role of women within society was beginning to shift during the 1960s, just as Aretha’s voice was coming to the forefront.

2. Distribute Handout 3: Women’s Movement of the 1960s which includes key dates and events concerning women’s rights from 1961 to 1971. This time mirrored the rise of Aretha Franklin’s career. Have the students review the timeline individually, marking any events they have heard referenced before. Ask the class what surprises them most about the events in the 1960s with regards to women’s rights?

3. As a class, students will listen to an audio clip of “Respect” as recorded by Otis Redding. Redding wrote the song and released it in 1965. Students can reference Redding’s lyrics in Handout 2: Aretha Franklin Lyric Sheet.
   Then, watch a live performance of Aretha Franklin’s version of “Respect” from 1968. Note the lyrical changes between the two versions of the song.

Discuss as a class:
   • How are these two versions of “Respect” similar in terms of musicality (instrumentation, tempo, feel etc.)? How are they different?
   • How does the meaning of a song shift, when the voice, perspective, or gender of the singer changes? Does the word “respect” mean the same thing in both versions? Why or why not?
   • Does Aretha’s version of the song remind you of anything from Handout 3: Women’s Movement of the 1960s? If so, what? (Possible answers include the 1963 Equal Pay Act or Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act).

4. Divide students up into small groups. Distribute Handout 4: Gospel Music and Glossary and have them review the information together, alternating reading
paragraphs aloud. Can students identify Gospel influences in Aretha Franklin’s version of “Respect”? (Possible answers include evidence of call-and-response between Aretha Franklin and the backup singers and different rhythmic patterns occurring between the horns and the drums).

5. Each group will be responsible for viewing one of the live recordings of following songs performed by Aretha Franklin between 1967 and 1968:

- “Do Right Woman” (1967)
- “(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman” (1968)
- “Dr. Feelgood” (1968)

Multiple groups can investigate the same song. Groups can reference Handout 2: Aretha Franklin Lyric Sheet as needed. Each group will answer the following:

- What is this song about? What message is the singer trying to convey?
- Do the lyrics remind you of anything you have learned about concerning the women’s movement in the 1960s? (Possible answers for separate songs could include sexual liberation, equality between genders, and more).
- Do you see evidence of Gospel influences in this song? (Possible answers include call-and-response, complex rhythms between different instruments, and/or a Gospel performance style).

SUMMARY ACTIVITY:

The teacher will show each of Aretha Franklin’s three live performances above to the entire class. The group(s) responsible for analyzing the performances will present their findings. Ask the class, how do these performances relate to each other, if at all? At the end of class, students will each select their favorite Aretha Franklin song that they heard during the lesson, or while watching the television special. Why is this song their favorite? Encourage students to use some of the comparative listening vocabulary and Gospel terms they learned during class.

EXTENSIONS:

1. Distribute Handout 5: “Respect” Personal History. Have the students read the handout on their own. It is a first-hand account given by Evelyn C. White, who was a 13-year-old black girl when Aretha Franklin’s recording of “Respect” was released in 1967. (Note to teacher: the author briefly refers to sex in the piece; you can determine if it is appropriate for your classroom).

In a written response, students should address the following:

- What appealed to the author about Aretha Franklin? Were you surprised to read the author’s account of sexism during the Civil Rights movement? Why or why not?
- What made the song “Respect,” as performed by Aretha Franklin important to this author? Why do you think Aretha was poised to make an impact on listeners during the late 1960s in America?
• The author mentions Rosa Parks, Ella Baker, and Fanny Lou Hamer, who are all pivotal women in the Civil Rights movement. Invite students to research these women if they are not familiar with them. What does Aretha have in common with them? How is she unique?

2. In 2009, Aretha Franklin performed “My Country Tis Of Thee,” at the inauguration of the 44th President of the United States Barak Obama, in Washington D.C. Write a fictionalized letter from President Obama, who is a well-documented music-lover of all genres, inviting Aretha Franklin to perform. Why might it be important for the President to have Aretha Franklin sing at his inauguration? The inauguration took place near the site where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his “I Have A Dream Speech” during the March on Washington in 1963. In your letter, assume the voice of President Obama and reference what you’ve learned during this lesson in order to invite Aretha Franklin to sing at your inauguration.

STANDARDS

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

College and Career Readiness Reading Anchor Standards for Grades 6-12 for Literature and Informational Text

Reading 7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

Reading 9: Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

College and Career Readiness Writing Anchor Standards for Grades 6-12 in English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects

Writing 1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening for Grades 6-12

Speaking and Listening 3: Evaluate a speaker’s point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Language for Grades 6-12

Language 5: Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.
SOCIAL STUDIES – NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)

Theme 1: Culture
Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions
Theme 6: Power, Authority, and Governance
Theme 10: Civic Ideals and Practices

NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION

Core Music Standard: Responding

Select: Choose music appropriate for a specific purpose or context.

Analyze: Analyze how the structure and context of varied musical works inform the response.

Interpret: Support interpretations of musical works that reflect creators’ and/or performers’ expressive intent.

Evaluate: Support evaluations of musical works and performances based on analysis, interpretation, and established criteria.

Core Music Standard: Connecting

Connecting 11: Relate musical ideas and works to varied contexts and daily life to deepen understanding.

RESOURCES

VIDEO RESOURCES
• Aretha Franklin – Chain of Fools (1968)
• Aretha Franklin – Dr. Feelgood (1968)
• Aretha Franklin – ABC News Closeup (1968)
• Otis Redding – Respect (1965)
• Aretha Franklin – Do Right Woman - Merv Griffin Show (1967)
• Aretha Franklin – Respect (1968)
• Aretha Franklin – Natural Woman - ABC News Closeup (1968)
• The Supremes – Where Did Our Love Go? (1964)

FEATURED PEOPLE
• Aretha Franklin
• Otis Redding
• The Supremes
• Jerry Wexler

HANDOUTS
• Handout 1: Aretha Franklin Entry Ticket Prompt
• Handout 2: Aretha Franklin Lyric Sheet
• Handout 3: The Women’s Movement in the 1960s
• Handout 4: Gospel Music History and Glossary
• Handout 5: “Respect” Personal History