

CULTURAL ICONS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

The Iconic Impact Initiative by Bridge Philanthropic Consulting, LLC



Introduction by

H. Beecher Hicks III,
*President and CEO,
National Museum of African
American Music*

Robin Terry,
*Chairwoman and CEO,
Motown Museum*

ARETHA FRANKLIN

By Tashion Macon, Ph.D., Sylvia White, Jennifer Jiles, and Dwayne Ashley

INTRODUCTION

It is easy to understand why Aretha Franklin handpicked Jennifer Hudson to play her in the biopic “Respect,” released in August 2021. Hudson gets it. She understands the essence of the “Queen of Soul,” who died in 2018 at the age of 76 without getting to see the fruits of her inspired selection.

“You can’t just wake up one morning and decide, ‘I’m gonna be Aretha Franklin,’” Hudson told the *Los Angeles Times*. “I mean her voice. Her legacy. The songs. Who she is to all of us. It was daunting. There were times when I was like, ‘Jennifer, what have you done?’”

Aretha’s legacy is one that is entwined in social justice. Her father, preacher C.L. Franklin was a friend of The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and set the example for his daughter on how to battle for civil rights. Her song, “Respect,” became an anthem for the movement, and she used the financial power that came from being a concert drawing card to deliver funding for Dr. King when funds were running low.

“She used her platform to respond to the times,” Hudson continued. “She fought so hard to get there, and that could have taken her down, but she did it. She left us an example – for us to keep pushing. That’s what got me through this whole thing – her saying, ‘Jennifer, go on.’ I’m like, ‘I don’t know if I’m as courageous as you, but if you think I can, I’m going to give it a try.’”

In its **Iconic Impact Series**, Bridge Philanthropic Consulting expands the definition of philanthropy beyond financial generosity to include the willingness to risk one’s career and reputation to fight for social justice. Few, however, checked off every box the way Franklin did. Generous to the extreme, she was willing to sacrifice everything to elevate African Americans from oppression and second-class citizenship.

A year after the killing of George Floyd by police and the ensuing social justice protests, with efforts to suppress Black votes at renewed heights, the release this month of the biopic “Respect” could not have come at a better time, reminding us not only what we are fighting for, but how to fight.

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*“Aretha Franklin offered to post bail for me, saying, I have the money; I got it from **Black people** — they’ve **made me financially able** to have it — and **I want to...**”*

- Angela Davis

Younger generations may know the name of Aretha Franklin and that she reigned as the “Queen of Soul.” But awareness has faded that while she was establishing herself as musical royalty, she was also in the thick of the fight for social justice and civil rights.

“Respect,” starring Jennifer Hudson of “American Idol” fame presents an opportunity to recall the story of her vital role. The song for which the film is named was not just a chart topper. It was the anthem of the civil rights movement, and Franklin herself was a friend of its foremost icon.

No time was that clearer than when she came home to Detroit, where the mayor had declared February 16, 1968 “Aretha Franklin Day.” Standing on stage before 12,000 fans, she was taken by surprise when the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. himself strode out on stage to present her with a special award from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Although Dr. King could not speak due to laryngitis, his presence shone a spotlight on her importance to the movement.

Less than two months later, Dr. King was dead from an assassin's bullet. In a soulful gesture of gratitude, Franklin sang "Precious Lord" at a memorial service for him. His daughter, Bernice King, remembered Franklin's devotion to her father when Franklin passed away in 2018 from pancreatic cancer.

"We were blessed to live in a world with #Aretha Franklin," Bernice King wrote on Twitter. "Beyond her tremendous singing voice, she was a powerful voice in the civil rights movement. An instrument..."

Indeed she was. Bridge Philanthropic Consulting can think of no one who more embodies philanthropy than Aretha Franklin, as we remember her in this installment of the **Iconic Impact Series**.

Franklin gave of herself in every way. She risked her career by placing herself at the center of the civil rights movement and the fight to uplift African Americans. She gave her time and money to help support the movement. And she donated generously to a wide range of charities, never forgetting her roots in the city of Detroit and giving for causes ranging from the Special Olympics to AIDS.



"Being the Queen is not all about singing, and being a diva is not all about singing," Franklin said of her fame. ***"It has much to do with your service to people. And your social contributions to your community and your civic contributions as well."***



Aretha Franklin was born into a family where civil rights and giving back were core values. Her father, the Rev. C.L. Franklin, became one of the most influential faith leaders in the country as pastor of New Bethel Baptist Church in Detroit, where he was known as the man with the “million-dollar voice.” He led the church from 1946 to 1979, when he was shot and wounded in an attack that left him in a coma until his death five years later. During his tenure, the church became a hub of the civil rights movement.

In 1963, her father’s activism caught the eye of King. The civil rights leader visited the family’s home in 1963 and spoke at the Detroit Walk to Freedom. Two months later, passages from the Detroit speech — most notably the “I Have a Dream” passages — became inscribed in history when used by Dr. King at the March on Washington.

“She talked about the fact that she was influenced by her father, because he was an activist-pastor and very involved in the civil rights movement,” said Franklin’s longtime friend, journalist and neighbor Greg Dunmore, executive producer of PulseBeat Media in Detroit, in an interview with The Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

Franklin grew up singing gospel at New Bethel. When she was 12, her father began managing her and brought her on the road during his “gospel caravan” tours to perform in various churches. She was mentored by Mahalia Jackson, the “Queen of Gospel” and noted civil rights activist who was also good friends with King.

As Franklin approached adulthood in 1960, she shifted into secular music as a Columbia Records recording artist, and in 1966 she became famous after signing with Atlantic Records. It was her song “Respect” that launched her to the heights of musical success, ultimately, taking her to 18 Grammys and the honor of being the first woman inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland.



Image from spcr.org

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

Find out what it means to me

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

As Elwood Watson, an East Tennessee State University professor of history, African American studies and gender studies, wrote for the *Washington Post*, the song was originally written by Otis Redding with an entirely different meaning. It set out demands of how a woman should treat her man in exchange for the role he plays as a provider.

“By recording the song as a woman, without changing the perspective, Franklin produced a version that became both a feminist and civil rights anthem, placing the spotlight not only on a woman demanding respect, but a woman as the primary provider,” Watson wrote.

“It [reflected] the need of a nation, the need of the average man and woman in the street, the businessman, the mother, the fireman, the teacher – everyone wanted respect,” Franklin wrote in her memoir *Aretha: From These Roots*. “It was also one of the battle cries of the civil rights movement. The song took on monumental significance.”

She not only sang of respect but received it in return across the spectrum. Franklin was careful with her words not to tread too deeply into politics, instead letting her music do the talking. But her actions spoke loudly of her activism. In that, she continued on the path of great Black women like Lena Horne, Billie Holiday and Nina Simone.



“When Dr. King was alive, several times she helped us make payroll,” the Rev. Jesse Jackson told the *Detroit Free Press*. **“On one occasion, we took an 11-city tour with her 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.”**

With her anthem and her persona established, Franklin was among a cadre of Black celebrities – including Harry Belafonte, Sidney Poitier, Nancy Wilson, Mahalia Jackson and Sammy Davis Jr. – who wrote checks and raised money for King and his movement.

“We recognized when we had those brief moments of terror, we called in celebrities and always got a good response,” Xernona Clayton, a close associate of the King family, told the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. “Interestingly, some stars said they were sick even before we gave them the date. But Aretha always answered the call. Her response was always right on time. She was always available.”

In the book *Burial for a King: Martin Luther King Jr.'s Funeral and the Week that Transformed Atlanta and Rocked the Nation*, Rebecca Burns stated Franklin, Belafonte, Poitier and Joan Baez raised more than \$250,000 for King and the SCLC with a concert series.

Franklin not only would sing at King's funeral in 1968 but that of Rosa Parks, who died in 2005.



Civil rights veteran Bernard LaFayette, chairman of the board of the SCLC and head of the Emory University Center for Advancing Nonviolence, said Franklin's music was a key facet of the civil rights movement.

"She brought the message through music," he told the *Journal-Constitution*. "The unique thing about that period is that music was intergenerational. She appealed to younger and older people. The music played a very important role in unifying people and building the kind of coalition that was needed."

Franklin took one of her most controversial stands for civil rights in 1970 when she offered to post bail for Angela Davis, a revolutionary activist and scholar who was a member of the Communist Party. Davis was accused of assisting in a courtroom takeover that ended in four deaths.



Image from USA Today

"Angela Davis must go free," Franklin told *Jet* magazine. "**Black people will be free.** I've been locked up [for disturbing the peace in Detroit] and I know **you got to disturb the peace when you can't get no peace.** Jail is hell to be in. I'm going to see her free if there is any justice in our courts, not because I believe in communism, but because she's a Black woman and she wants freedom for Black people. I have the money; I got it from Black people — they've made me financially able to have it — and I want to use it in ways that will help our people."

Franklin offered to cover whatever the bail amount was, whether \$100,000 or \$200,000, Davis recalled for the *Journal-Constitution*. Although the judge later determined she was ineligible for bail, Davis never forgot the gesture.

"I thanked her publicly for it many times, but can't remember if we actually spoke to each other," said Davis, who was later acquitted. "Aretha's music speaks for itself — 'Respect,' 'Natural Woman,' — all of these are anthems for the movement. She did not have to do anything besides her music to raise people's consciousness. That is her most important contribution."



The power of Franklin’s activism was that her stature crossed over to feminism as well.

“Sisters Are Doin’ It For Themselves” was another feminist anthem, envisioning a world where women achieve their own identity and successes.

“Now this is a song to celebrate,” the lyrics read.

“The conscious liberation of the female state! / Mothers, daughters, and their daughters, too. / Woman to woman / We’re singin’ with you. / The inferior sex got a new exterior / We got doctors, lawyers, politicians, too.”



Franklin also never forgot her roots, raising funds to improve life in the city of Detroit, where her family moved when she was age 3 from Memphis, Tennessee. **It is said that her philanthropy dated back to her days as a student at Northern High School, where she was known to buy lunch for students who couldn't afford to purchase their own.**

The Rev. Robert Smith Jr., who has been New Bethel's pastor since the shooting of Franklin's father, told the *Detroit News* he could always count on \$10,000 checks from her several times a year. She also held an annual fundraising concert at the church, where she brought in famed gospel singers and put out a spread for the entire audience. She sponsored Thanksgiving and Christmas feasts for the community at New Bethel, calling it "an Aretha presentation just for you."

In 2008, when Franklin was honored during Grammys week as MusiCares Person of the Year, she was singled out for supporting the churches and food banks in the Detroit region. The MusiCares dinner raised \$4.5 million. The highlight of the night was the auction of her pink Cadillac CTS, made famous in the lyrics of “Freeway of Love,” for \$51,500.

“It’s her way of giving back,” Smith said. “Everything is wrapped around her father and her love for her father and keeping that tradition alive.”



Her friend Dunmore recalled a time that Franklin shot a commercial for a record store chain and proceeded to donate her fee to a local women’s shelter.

Yet Franklin’s generosity went far beyond the Metro Detroit area. Other charities she supported included the Boys & Girls Clubs of America, the Elton John AIDS Foundation, Feeding America, the NAACP, the Special Olympics, the Rainforest Foundation and the United Negro College Fund.

“Aretha Franklin has had such an impact on the community over the years,” Dunmore said. ***“Countless people have been given hope for life because of her singing, and the way her voice has made every guy and every girl feel like they could make it.”***



Aretha Franklin was bestowed numerous honors in her career, including being awarded the National Medal of Arts and the Freedom Medal from President George W. Bush. She earned a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame in 1979.

But what she considered a pinnacle of her success was in 2008 when she sang at the inauguration of the nation's first Black president, Barack Obama.

“Oh boy, what an honor,” Franklin said. “It's all ... overwhelming.”

It was Obama himself, however, who felt honored, insisting she sing on that historic day.

“American history wells up when Aretha sings,” Obama told the *New Yorker*. “Nobody embodies more fully the connection between the African-American spiritual, the blues, R. & B., rock and roll— the way that hardship and sorrow were transformed into something full of beauty and vitality and hope.”

To not only be a vital part of history but sing the music that makes it resonate inside you is the legacy of the regal Queen of Soul, one that will never be surpassed.

AUTHORS

Tashion Macon, Ph.D *Partner, Culturalist*

With almost twenty years of exceptional achievements in both the for-purpose and for-profit realms, Dr. Tashion Macon is widely known as a leading marcom and traditional/transmedia expert with an unwavering emphasis on results. A true visionary, Tashion sees changes and trends in the market before anyone else, frequently finding extraordinary and lucrative opportunities by innately recognizing what can be different and better. After she predicts the future, she gets in front of it. A gifted and highly respected culturalist and strategist, she regularly originates marketing and communications strategies that dramatically influence new consumer realms. She helms pace-setting marketing initiatives that

generate multi-million-dollar profits and successfully managed and navigated \$400MM media budgets to drive double digit percentage boosts in ROI. With a rare meteoric mind and transformational ability to galvanize like-minded people, she collaborates with corporate and client leaders to mobilize cross-functional teams. She is regularly sought out as a subject matter expert in pop culture, global social enterprise, philanthropy, politics/policies and impact programming and crafts important conversations that become part of the social lexicon.

Tashion holds a Doctor of Philosophy in Psychology and a Master of Business Administration in Strategic Marketing. She has a number of professional affiliations and associations.

Jennifer Jiles *Partner, Professor*

Jennifer Jiles is an award-winning strategic communicator, writer, magazine editor, producer, and college educator. She has held managerial or senior level positions across private industry, nonprofit organizations, higher education, and arts and entertainment. Her areas of expertise include strategic planning, campaigns, editorial, media, crises, and change management. Over the years, Jennifer has also built an appreciable track record in fundraising communications strategies. Most recently, she was a member of the Global

IT vice president's leadership team for Dell SecureWorks, a leading cyber intelligence company. Jennifer led the global corporate communication function for the company. She has worked with more than 25 organizations, including AT&T, UPS, Walmart, BET, and Jazz at Lincoln Center. Jennifer has been faculty at Georgia State University since 1999. She is holds membership in the Technology Association of Georgia and the Public Relations Society of America.

Dwayne Ashley *Founder and Chief Executive Officer*

Dwayne Ashley is renowned for his bold, strategic thinking and wise counsel in philanthropy. He is a successful entrepreneur. In the course of his career, he raised more than \$800 million. A fearless and authentic solicitor, he is committed to social justice and helping organizations of color maximize their fundraising success. He advises non-profit, philanthropists and influencers globally.

A powerhouse of energy and a passion for fundraising, Dwayne has managed capital and annual campaigns and spearheaded development for such notable organizations as the Jazz at Lincoln Center, Success for Kids, 100 Black Men of America, the Thurgood Marshall College Fund, the United

Negro College Fund, and the United Way of Texas Gulf Coast, among many others.

Dwayne is a thought-leader in the field and he has shared valuable concepts in numerous articles and in four books. They include *Eight Steps to Raising Money: Measuring Your Fundraising Impact*, *Word for Word Publishing*; *8 Winning Steps to Creating a Successful Special Event* with Carol Campbell, Director of Events at Prairie View A&M University; *I'll Find A Way or Make One: A Tribute to HBCUs* with noted journalist Juan Williams and *Dream Internships: It's Not Who You Know, But What You Know!* He is an alumnus of Wiley College and the University of Pennsylvania Fels School of Government.

AUTHORS

Sylvia White *Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer*

A seasoned development executive with substantial experience in principal and major gifts, board development, and fund-raising management, Sylvia White has worked directly or managed teams in every area of development,

including major gifts, corporate and foundation relations, annual giving, stewardship, systems, and research, among others. Ms. White is a highly sought after advisor and mentor in the nonprofit and fundraising sector.

H. Beecher Hicks III *President and CEO, National Museum of African American Music*

H. Beecher Hicks III's professional experiences are in the private, public, and nonprofit sectors, joining the National Museum of African American Music in 2009 as a board member, becoming President and CEO in 2013. His banking experience includes roles as an investment banker at Bank of America and as a partner with private equity group Red Clay Capital Holdings. In 1998, Henry was appointed by President William J. Clinton to be a White House fellow, serving as

senior adviser to the CEO of the Corporation for National and Community Service and launched the AmeriCorps Promise Fellows program. He is a member of the boards of directors for Leadership Nashville, the Center for Nonprofit Management, and the Nashville Downtown Partnership. Henry is a graduate of Morehouse College and earned an MBA in finance from UNC Chapel Hill. He is married to Crystal, an elementary educator, and they have two sons.

Robin Terry *Chairwoman and CEO, Motown Museum*

Robin has devoted the past two decades to carrying the torch for one of Detroit's most notable entrepreneurial families and preserving the legacy of an iconic brand, "Motown."

Robin is the Chairwoman and CEO for Motown Museum, a cultural gem founded in 1985 by her grandmother, the late Esther Gordy Edwards. Mrs. Edwards was a senior executive at Motown Record's and sister of Motown founder, Berry Gordy.

Robin's mission is to build on her grandmother's vision to tell the story of Motown by expanding the museum campus into a world class entertainment and education destination that will inspire talent, entrepreneurship and the transformation of a neighborhood community. With her ongoing dedication to the development of Detroit and to the preservation of its rich history, Motown Museum will continue to serve as a global tourist attraction and cultural beacon for generations to come.



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