Amazing Grace: Aretha Franklin and Anne Shirley

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This blog on "*Amazing Grace*: Aretha Franklin and Anne Shirley" was written in anticipation of an event scheduled for the "L.M. Montgomery and Vision" conference—a screening of the 2019 film *Amazing Grace*, introduced by Halifax writer Evelyn White. Due to the conference cancellation, this blog was not published. We hope that Evelyn's insights inspire you to view this film, which is available to rent or purchase on various platforms.

It took nearly fifty years before *Amazing Grace*—the documentary about Aretha Franklin's 1972 live recording of a gospel album of the same title—made its way from a vault to theatre screens around the world. But film critics, music scholars, Black church historians, and everyday moviegoers have rightly hailed the 2019 release as well worth the wait.

In a five-star review, a critic for *The Guardian* recounts a moment in the film involving the musical director for the recording, the Reverend James Cleveland: "At the halfway mark comes an astounding rendition of 'Amazing Grace' that is stretched out to nearly eleven minutes. The camera moves across the faces of the choir, who are first to leap to their feet in support. Then the audience, then Cleveland, who moves from teary to full-on sobbing. By the end of the song the entire church is a mess, but somehow Aretha keeps it together and hits each note perfectly."

Written in 1772 by British cleric John Newton, "Amazing Grace" has a complex history that includes its reputed links to Newton's regret over his role, as a young

sailor, in the Atlantic slave trade. Black American gospel legend Mahalia Jackson popularized the hymn in the US, in the 1950s and 1960s. Gifted with a powerful contralto, Jackson performed the song as a civil rights anthem “to give magical protection—a charm to ward off danger, an incantation to the angels of heaven to descend,” she later said.

A youthful Aretha Franklin sang the sacred composition as the star soloist at her father’s church in Detroit. The documentary shows the Reverend C.L. Franklin mopping the brow of his daughter (then age twenty-nine) during the recording of the concert, over a period of two nights, at the New Temple Missionary Baptist Church in Los Angeles. The film also includes footage of Rolling Stones frontman Mick Jagger swaying to the music while standing near the back of the sanctuary, sans paparazzi. Indeed, unlike the social media blitz that has become commonplace with today’s marquee cultural events, the *Amazing Grace* project was mainly a community affair that drew little press coverage. Guests entering the parish were reminded that they were attending a worship service and thus to comport themselves accordingly.

Of course, there is ***church*** (a noun) and ***church*** (a verb), the latter of which, in the Black Baptist tradition, routinely gives rise to the euphoria depicted in the documentary. However, aside from the electrifying vocal performance Franklin delivers in *Amazing Grace*, the famously reserved artist barely speaks in the two-hour film. In light of her lifelong public silence on personal matters, her expressed desire to visit Prince Edward Island holds even more significance.

“I love Anne of Green Gables,” Franklin told a Toronto reporter, in 2014. “I have for years. That’s one of my favourite things. She’s such a can-do kind of girl, that’s why I’m crazy about her. And that Gilbert Blythe? He’s a charmer. And Marilla, a lady who knows just how she wants things to go. Oh yes, I think I can appreciate that as well. I just think I’d like to see the place they all came from.”

Sadly, Aretha Franklin (1942–2018) never made it to PEI. But her admiration for the free-spirited Anne Shirley will forever stand as an intriguing part of her legacy.



Evelyn White. Photo by Colleen Fraser, 2019.

Halifax-based American journalist Evelyn C. White presented a paper on “Anne and Aretha: A Harmonious Bond” at the LMMI conference in June 2018, and, in a CBC interview several months later, she talked about the social media flurry that her paper initiated. Now an independent journalist with a scholarly interest in Aretha Franklin, White is a former reporter for *The San Francisco Chronicle*. Her publications include *Every Goodbye Ain't Gone: A Photo Narrative of Black Heritage on Salt Spring Island* (2009) and *Alice Walker: A Life* (2004). She is a graduate of the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism where she was honoured for her Master's thesis on “The Racial Development of Blind Black Children.”

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