

CAROLE KING AND JENNIFER HUDSON:

CAPTURING THE ESSENCE OF ARETHA THROUGH SONG

INTERVIEWED BY RAY COSTA

INTRODUCTION BY RAJASRI MALLIKARJUNA

Respect, the 2021 biopic of famed singer Aretha Franklin, chronicles the legend's life, extraordinary talent, and rise to fame, and stars the Queen of Soul's top choice to play herself, the phenomenal Jennifer Hudson. A legend in her own right, Hudson—who has won an Oscar and a Golden Globe for her breakthrough performance in 2008's *Dreamgirls*, Grammy Awards as an R&B singer, and most recently, an Emmy for her work as a producer on the animated short *Baba Yaga* (2020)—had a deep personal connection with Franklin. So when yet another musical legend and a significant person in Franklin's career, the four-time Grammy winner and two-time Rock & Roll Hall of Famer Carole King, who co-wrote Franklin's 1968 hit "(You Make Me Feel Like) a Natural Woman," was called upon to write an original song for the *Respect* soundtrack, King insisted that Hudson be involved in the writing process. The result: "Here I Am (Singing My Way Home)," a powerful gospel-infused ballad co-written by King, Hudson, and longtime Hudson collaborator Jamie Hartman. Read on to learn about their songwriting process from the two inimitable powerhouses, Jennifer Hudson and Carole King themselves.

SCORE: *Jennifer, when you were cast to star as Aretha Franklin in Respect, was it always the intention that you would contribute an original song to the film?*

Jennifer: I mean, I can't say that it was initially, but in my mind, we're paying tribute to her. And I think that's what inspired it, to want to continue to pay homage to her in every way in an artistic film.

SCORE: *Carole and Jennifer, how did you first get involved in writing an original song, "Here I Am (Singing My Way Home)," for the film Respect?*



CAROLE KING Photo by Elissa Kline

Carole: Jennifer's A&R executive contacted me. I love a challenge and I do have some experience writing on assignment! When I heard the idea for the song and about the film and of course, Jennifer's involvement, I said yes.

Jennifer: I remember speaking with Ms. Carole King about the song and we did it via Zoom (due to the COVID-19 pandemic) and just the concept, the narrative of it. And Ms. King hadn't even seen the film

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—Carole King

yet. I remember explaining to her the nature, the subject of the song and my connection to Ms. Franklin personally and in playing the role and Carole saying, "Jennifer, you should write and be a part of it as well."

SCORE: *What was the writing process between the two of you, along with Jamie Hartman (Jennifer Hudson's longtime collaborator), in writing the song?*



JENNIFER HUDSON Photo by Matt Sayles

Carole: We all met, remotely of course, last year. We really clicked on our first meeting and talked about where we wanted the song to go, its musical and lyrical themes, and then continued the collaboration. Jennifer knew so much about Aretha, and they had a relationship, while I had the experience of being around working during the height of her career, so I brought that knowledge to the song. Each of us brought something unique to the process.

Jennifer: It was a very organic process. It started off with conversations about Ms. Franklin. I remember explaining some of the narrative of the film to Ms. King, and then Jamie being a part of it was very musical in a way. I always like to hear the music, and Ms. King sang the lyrics, or she explained the lyrics she had. will.i.am was also a part of it. We would try things out via Zoom. I remember Ms. King singing the song to me in parts and then me being inspired by that and her saying, “Jennifer, you need your inspiration in there musically.” And then me saying, “Okay, this is what I’m feeling. And I want it to feel this way in particular.” And we did it always from the inspiration of the research from the film, and seeing how Ms. Franklin recorded her music, I said, “I want to approach it that same way that she did,” especially when you’re paying



CAROLE KING Photo by Kirsten Shultz

“...that’s the strength that this song has given me. That’s what it’s talking about, speaking up and using your own voice, telling your own story, dictating that story, having your own narrative.” –Jennifer Hudson

homage to somebody. So it was all of those elements involved, with different approaches and processes.

SCORE: *The original song is reminiscent of a gospel song; was that the original intention all along, or did it evolve?*

Carole: We all talked and traded ideas, but the pure gospel introduction comes from Jennifer, from her background in the church. With Jennifer’s influences and of course, Aretha’s grounding in gospel, the feel of the song evolved naturally. We knew that was the tone that would fit the film and Aretha’s life.

Jennifer: It was important to me to tie in my gospel roots through the introduction leading into the song, which are also Ms. Franklin’s roots as well. So it was like a blend of our worlds; that’s where we meet.

SCORE: *In addition to the gospel aspect, how did your knowledge of Aretha both personally and professionally inspire you all to co-write the original song?*

Carole: I didn’t know Aretha personally, but at the time in the ‘60s everyone knew how incredible an artist she was, especially those of us in music. When Gerry and I wrote “A Natural Woman,” we already had in mind Aretha’s public persona and the range and depth of her singing. That knowledge has never left me. It certainly informed what I brought to the collaboration with Jennifer and Jamie.

Jennifer: Well, first of all, I was just blessed to be able to have that in both forms. I feel like it was well rounded in that way. She’s always influenced me musically, first, which is actually how I was introduced to her. But then, eventually, who gets to meet someone that they look up to like that in that way? Especially to the magnitude of Aretha Franklin. So I think that’s what started the connection. I was blessed to be able to tribute her several times throughout my career. And from there, we kind of formed a rapport, a relationship, and stayed in communication.

SCORE: *Jennifer, didn’t Aretha say she wanted you to play her if there was a movie of her life?*

Jennifer: Yes, that’s what helped form the connection as well. I was having conversations about that. Whereas we met over 15 years ago, that was our initial meeting about me playing her. I guess maybe it had been in the back of both of our minds from that moment, and even in the tributes a lot of times she was like, “I want Jennifer to do the tribute.” I remember near my 30th birthday, someone approached me about doing a tribute to her. And I said, “Of course, when is it?” And they said, “September 12.”



JENNIFER HUDSON as Aretha Franklin in Respect. Photo by Quantrell D. Colbert

And I said, “That’s my 30th birthday. What better way to mark my 30th birthday than to say I sang for the queen.” And it was Aretha’s request as well.

SCORE: *How does the song reflect Aretha’s story, and what do you want audiences to take away from the song after seeing her story depicted onscreen?*

Carole: I’ve said this before, but Aretha stands at the top as a singer. We wanted this original song to reflect her life both musically and in its lyrical themes. We knew we were writing sort of a coda to the film and to Aretha’s life story and tried to have that come through in “Here I Am.” We wanted audiences to know the whole Aretha, what they had just seen onscreen—her strength and her life’s journey.

Jennifer: First, I think it embodies her roots of her religion, her faith, and also just the path of her life. That’s what the narrative of the film is about, not just a girl having a voice but how she finds it and owns it. And when she did, that’s when we got our Queen of Soul. And that was something she was always big on with

me; she would say, “Jennifer, trust your voice. Own your voice.” And so for me being the actress in the film portraying someone who’s deciding to step up to take ownership of her own voice, and then for the song to say the same, it gives me chills just thinking about it.

And I always say I’m singing my way home. And no one can say Ms. Franklin didn’t sing her way all the way into God’s heavenly choir, singing her way home. Within the narrative of the film, she trusted other people’s ways and words all of the time. It’s now time for her to trust her own, and the nature of that is what I took away.

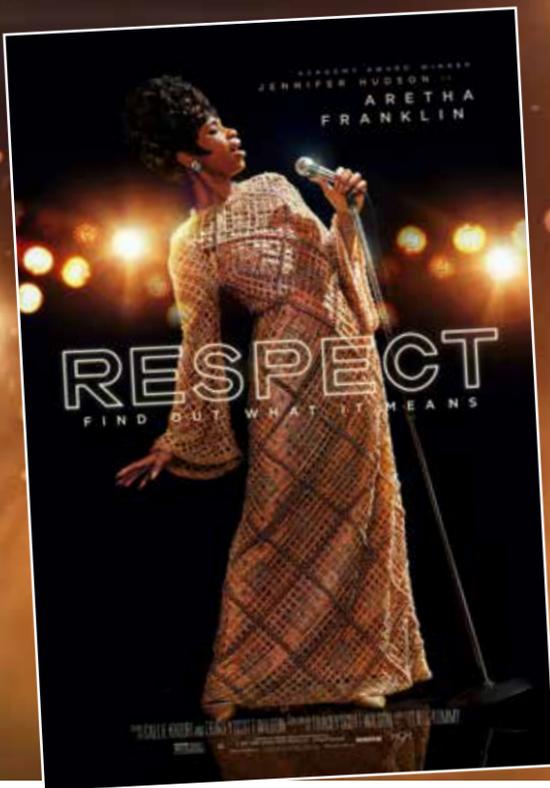
SCORE: *Jennifer, the song is the perfect epilogue for the film. It sums up her story. So you’ve built a stellar career as a singer. Was songwriting always in your blood, or has it evolved since you have worked closely with so many legendary songwriters?*

Jennifer: It’s always kind of been there, but I think it’s with the encouragement of being around so many great songwriters, and it inspires me to want to do it even more. And then to have Carole King say,

“Jennifer,” right on the phone, okay. Oh my God. Okay. She’s one of the greatest of all time, so to get that encouragement gave me the inspiration and even more the confidence to do it. Like, I write, but that’s the strength that this song has given me. That’s what it’s talking about, speaking up and using your own voice, telling your own story, dictating that story, having your own narrative. And so that’s my true testimony or testament and how I feel. Every time I’m singing the song, it just inspires me all over again to continue to want to do it.

SCORE: *Carole, you have numerous hit songs as a singer/songwriter, as well as a songwriter. Was it always your desire to be both a performer of your own works and have others perform your songs? For example, “A Natural Woman” was a hit performed by Aretha Franklin before you released it on your Tapestry album.*

Carole: I started my career as a singer and songwriter, but I was most comfortable behind the scenes. With the encouragement of friends like James Taylor, I became more comfortable on



the stage, and with writing songs that I intended to perform myself. “A Natural Woman” of course, Gerry and I wrote specifically for Aretha—no one can top Aretha’s performance of it—but I enjoyed re-arranging it, along with many other songs Gerry and I wrote, in my own style for my own albums.

SCORE: *Carole, your career has spanned decades; what do you feel was the most influential song to your career, or what song was it you released that made you feel you had “made it”?*

Carole: That’s easy! Gerry and I made a pact to keep our day jobs until we had a number one record, and we got that with “Will You Love Me Tomorrow” in 1961. We had made it!

SCORE: *How did you feel about seeing your career turned into the stage musical Beautiful?*

Carole: I was very hesitant at first, imagining some of the difficult parts of my life broadcast to the world. I had lived it, and some of it was still painful. Then after its debut on Broadway, my friends kept telling me it was worth seeing. They were right. The book and the cast were so good that when I finally saw *Beautiful*, several months after its debut, I couldn’t help but applaud.

SCORE: *It has been a huge success and audiences love it, but there must have been some trepidation at the outset. What made you ultimately give it your blessing to go ahead?*

Carole: My daughter Sherry had just taken over as my manager, and I have to thank her. It gave me a sense of safety that I was represented by a member of my family who could help develop *Beautiful* without me having to relive the less pleasant episodes. Sherry turned a no into a maybe into a yes.

SCORE: *Jennifer, your career has also spanned decades. What do you feel was the most influential song to your career that made you know that you had made it as a singer, a songwriter, or as a performer?*

Jennifer: I mean, first of all, music is everything to me, so to pick one song... I don’t know if I can answer that. “And I’m Telling You” from *Dreamgirls* had a huge part; I always say, “I feel like that song changed my life,” or “I Love You I Do,” which was the original song for me in *Dreamgirls*. And then the music of Ms. Franklin. I don’t know how I would have been able to get through the process of filming without that familiarity and understanding. So again, music is my structured guide of my everyday life. I don’t know if I could pick one song.

SCORE: *The Society of Composers and Lyricists is made up of many iconic songwriters and composers, including Burt Bacharach, Quincy Jones, John Williams, Carole Bayer Sager, Siedah Garrett, Kristen Anderson-Lopez, and Marilyn Bergman, but the organization is also made up of many aspiring composers and songwriters. What advice can you give to an aspiring songwriter?*

Carole: Keep at it. Keep trying. When you get stuck, take a walk, get distracted—clear your head and let the ideas come out. It may be an hour later or a week or a month, but the inspiration will come.

Jennifer: All of those people you named just blew me away by the way! If we speak from and sing from our realities, our emotions, those are real things, so people can’t help but to relate. And simply do what you love to do. I feel like it’s the passion that will drive you into those dreams, into those goals when we do it for the love of it. We are all here because we love what we do. And I think that passion will make room for whatever your gift is. And there’s no right or wrong to artistry. Let me say that. It’s art, you know; it’s an expression. There is no specific guide to go by. And I’m saying that for myself, even right now. I’m so excited to keep writing.