



FRIDAY, DECEMBER 07, 2018

MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

MOVIES: "Amazing" Aretha

AMAZING GRACE **** out of ****

FILM FORUM

Ok, in general I want audiences to behave themselves. We're here to watch the movie, not you! No cell phones, no texting, no chatting. But that's not really true. Movie-watching is a communal experience and when the movie's a comedy, an audience laughing along makes it that much funnier. At a tense moment in a thriller, we hold our breath. And sometimes, at a concert film, we...react. We clap or we let loose some sound of appreciation; we are present. The very first film I ever saw at a screening for critics was *Stop Making Sense*. I was in an empty theater in Gainesville, Florida and it was so damn good I practically clapped along even though I was alone and had never (yet) listened to a single Talking Heads album. When I saw a restored print of *The Last Waltz* at the late, lamented Ziegfeld Theatre (w Martin Scorsese in attendance), the audience cheered each number as if they were at an actual live concert. Who could blame them, with performances that good? When I saw *Jazz On A Summer's Day* at Lincoln Center, the hep cats snapped their fingers and burst into cheers at the end of Anita O'Day's legendary "Tea For Two."

So while I was thoroughly transported, agog and beside myself when (finally!) watching *Amazing Grace* -- the documentary film capturing Aretha Franklin's live recording of her legendary gospel album -- it was not exactly an ideal audience. A dozen sleepy critics on a weekday morning and not an "Amen" from one of them. No thank you. I want to see *Amazing Grace* again with a paying audience that is ready to take part, to applaud, to uh-huh, to laugh and be swept up in one of the best concert films in history. Quiet contemplation is not on the agenda.

I've waited decades to see this film, which was filmed way back in 1972



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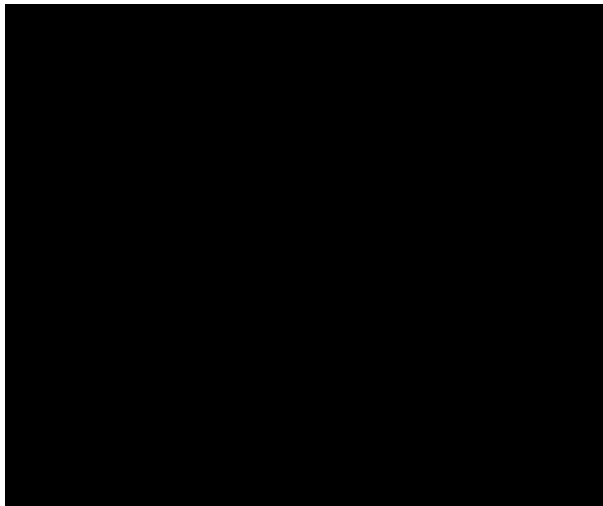
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and then bedeviled by technical issues and then rights issues for 46 years. I bought Franklin's legendary gospel album when it came out on compact disc and the liner notes from that original 1972 release were maddeningly enigmatic. Apparently, a young Sydney Pollack had captured the two nights of recording on film -- the liner notes said so! Just as clearly, the film had never surfaced. What the heck happened? Years of mystery followed until details leaked out: Pollack had failed to sync image and sound with clapboards and it was literally impossible to match them. When technology finally caught up, Pollack handed the whole mess over to Alan Elliott who struggled and labored over the project for ages until he and editor Jeff Buchanan finally delivered a finished film. Now finally, it is making an Oscar qualifying run at Film Forum. The movie will have stiff, stiff competition but it is unquestionably worthy of winning Documentary and if Buchanan isn't at least nominated for Best Editing, Pollack should roll over in his grave.



How could it possibly match decades of anticipation? Heck, Orson Welles couldn't do it when his long-lost film *The Other Side of The Wind* finally surfaced. Well it does. *Amazing Grace* is exactly what I was hoping for, even if I didn't know it. It captures two nights of performance, showing a somewhat nervous and tense Franklin who nonetheless delivers from the first note of the first song on the first night and never looks back. (On night two she is notably more relaxed, if still wholly focused on singing and ignoring the countless distractions whirling around her.

Pollack is everywhere, as are a seeming army of people wielding 16mm cameras. He urges one to capture a wide shot, points others to good angles, discusses segueing from a rehearsal of a song into the actual performance (which is exactly what the film does) and so on. It's gorgeously shot but not in the strikingly beautiful way of say a performance piece like *Stop Making Sense*. It's more like cinema verité, raw and beautiful, with the cameras finding the right point of

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view and sticking with it and the lighting capturing Franklin and the mostly black choir, musicians and audience in every glorious shade under the sun. (No easy trick, especially without the lighting ever seeming harsh.) And what a talented bunch to film. Gospel great Rev. James Cleveland is a treat, whether introducing Franklin, schooling the audience on how to behave around the cameras, playing the piano or singing along. Just as magnetic is the Southern California Community Choir, led by a young man named Alexander Hamilton (!), who has so much personality as he leads them and interacts with Aretha that it's a joy to watch. Individual choir singers stick in your memory like friends, along with audience members (who dance in the aisles when the spirit moves them) or the celebrities in attendance like Aretha's father (who makes his presence known) or gospel great Clara Ward (who whoops in appreciation at various points on night two).

Every detail feels right, even the bizarre fact that the New Temple Missionary Baptist Church in Watts, California wasn't filled to the rafters with people. (Apparently, they failed to get the word out? Though you'd think even a whisper that Aretha was singing would be enough to line folk up around the block.) So it's frustrating to think my six year old self might have wandered in, slipped into a seat in a back pew (near Mick Jagger) and been taken to a higher ground. But it's also kind of beautiful that the church *isn't* full, that this isn't an "event" choreographed down to its every detail, but a gathering of people creating a beautiful noise and above all worshipping.

The clothes, the attitude, the raw human feel of the 16mm film stock -- it all just works. And of course there's Aretha. I can imagine singers studying certain moments of this film just to see how she's doing what she does, the way her mouth and tongue and breathing are so beautifully controlled in building up a moment and then bringing it back down and then building it back up again.

It's a thrill from start to finish but a climax comes at the end of night one when Aretha tackles that old warhorse "Amazing Grace." Yes, there's a reason the album is titled after it. Aretha dives in and her performance is so moving, so meaningful, so completely the opposite of a diva showing off and instead the sound of someone moved to rapture while exploring with her artistry exactly what she can do with this melody at this moment in time with this choir and this audience and it just...flies. The choir has been seated throughout the evening. But you know why a choir is seated, don't you? They're seated so that when they STAND UP, you will feel it as a momentous event. They don't actually stand up as a group, on cue. Here, they simply begin to rise up out of their seats one by one in appreciation, roaring their approval as Aretha soars above them. They leap and laugh and raise their hands and sit back down again to wipe away tears. Rev. Cleveland himself steps away from the piano and takes a seat on the side, covering his head with a handkerchief, seemingly overwhelmed with emotion. The choir director Hamilton takes over on piano and after composing himself Cleveland takes over directing the choir as

Aretha's masterful, transcendent performance comes to a close. I've heard this classic performance many times on disc but seeing the high drama, the intense joy, the sheer spectacle of it all as it was happening all those many years ago was breathtaking.

Don't get me wrong. Cleveland is a performer. Maybe he gets so moved during *every* service he must step aside and compose himself. I've never seen him in concert -- or in church -- before. But if that's a performance, he's a method actor because he was feeling it. And with Aretha singing her heart -- or should I say her soul -- out, who can doubt it? Can I get an amen?

NOTE: An introductory text sets up the film for us and how it came about. However, it unintentionally also misleads. It describes Franklin's remarkable popular success but then claims -- wrongly -- that she had enjoyed 11 consecutive #1 hits on the pop and r and b charts, from "I Never Loved A Man (The Way I Love You)" to "Spanish Harlem." *She had indeed scored 11 #1 hits on one or both of those charts, but they weren't consecutive.* After three #1 hits in a row on the r and b charts (with "Respect" also hitting #1 on the pop charts), Franklin's fourth single for Atlantic was "(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman," which peaked at #8 on the pop charts and #2 on the r and b charts. Later, "The House That Jack Built" also peaked at #2, "See Saw" peaked at #9 and so on. Franklin released twenty singles from her Atlantic debut through January of 1972 when she recording the gospel album *Amazing Grace*. And yes, eleven of them hit #1 on the r and b charts. (She would enjoy ten more #1 hits in the US, including a duet with George Michael that was her only song to hit #1 on the pop charts but not do the same in r and b.) In the 1990s, she also had three #1 hits on the US dance charts. That's an amazing record and needs no exaggerating.

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