



Portrait with Jerry Wexler. (David Gahr)

"I Would Leave You" from the musical *Camelot*. In little of this could Aretha's private voice be heard, though in retrospect songwriter Jerry Leiber's assessment of her cultural aspirations ("Upward mobility," Leiber suggested at a later point. "Aretha's suffering from upward mobility. . . . We all does it.") could well be taken for one aspect of the truth. Aretha's personality has never yielded to easy analysis in any case, and perhaps it would be just as well simply to concede that her taste, like Ray Charles's, could encompass both kitsch and naked emotion, her talent could suggest the explosive brilliance of intuitive genius and the embarrassing excesses of the squeamishly middlebrow.

Her personal life was equally confused. "She had lived," John Hammond said, "more than most people live in a lifetime. Aretha was lost. . . ." Around 1962 she married thirty-one-year-old Ted White, self-described as a "small-time promoter" but characterized cautiously by *Time* magazine as "a former dabbler in Detroit real estate and a Detroit wheeler-dealer." In 1967, *Time* reported, he roughed her up in the lobby of Atlanta's Hyatt Regency Hotel, evidently not for the first time, and her relationship with White over the years was the subject of much talk and speculation. "I don't think she's happy," Mahalia Jackson told the *Time* reporter cryptically. "Somebody else is making her sing the blues." "His motivation was not sincere," the Reverend Franklin declared of White after the fact, and very likely at the time as well.

Regardless of speculation, White soon replaced Jo King as his wife's manager ("I felt at the time that Aretha should be handled by a man, because

maybe this whole thing with her father could be handled"). In 1964 she had her third child, Theodore III, and in fact at this point her career seemed irremediably stalled, with a reluctance on Aretha's part even to go into the recording studio. At the end of 1965 Columbia exercised its one-year option, but by late summer 1966 word was out that Aretha was available. She had made nine albums and was something like \$80,000 in Columbia's debt. It was at this juncture that Jerry Wexler leapt into the fray, whether to prove a point or sensing a commercial possibility is difficult to say. Louise Williams, the reigning gospel DJ of Philadelphia (and once married to Solomon Burke's champion, Jimmy Bishop), initially approached Wexler on Aretha's behalf; Wexler tried Jim Stewart, then cut a deal with Ted White. Once he had a contract in hand, there was little question of where he was going to take her. With Memphis closed off after the Wilson Pickett debacle, and with the success that Atlantic had enjoyed at the Fame studio in Muscle Shoals for the last nine months, he headed straight for Alabama. In January 1967 Wexler, Tommy Dowd, Aretha, and Ted White arrived in Muscle Shoals, registered at the Down-towner in Florence, and rode out East Avalon to Rick Hall's little studio to begin a projected week's worth of recording on an album that was to prove not only Aretha's genius but his own.

#### SHOW TIME

Rick Hall had little idea who Aretha Franklin was, but he knew from Wexler's enthusiasm and from the excitement in his voice that this was going to be "the ultimate trip." Wexler had arranged for Chips Moman and Tommy Cogbill to come in from Memphis and join Rick's standard rhythm section of Jimmy Johnson (rhythm guitar), Spooner Oldham (keyboards), and Roger Hawkins (drums), but he had left it to Hall to put together a horn section—whether the Memphis Horns or a Bowlegs Miller group or Willie Mitchell's unit it didn't much matter. Dan Penn, already over at American in Memphis with Chips, wouldn't have missed this session for the world. It was not just that he and Chips had already sketched out a song that they hoped would be used; "I knew about Aretha way before she got there. Rick contacted me about the session, but he didn't know who in hell was coming in. I said, 'Who you got?' He said, 'Aretha Franklin.' I said, 'Boy, you better get your damn shoes on. You getting someone who can sing.' Even the Memphis guys didn't really know who in the hell she was. I said, 'Man, this woman gonna knock you out.' They're all going, 'Big deal!' When she come in there and sit down at the piano and hit that first chord, everybody was just like little bees just buzzing around the queen. You could tell by the way she hit the piano the gig was up. It was, 'Let's get down to serious business.' That first chord she hit was nothing we'd been demoing, and nothing none of them cats in Memphis had been, either. We'd just been dumb-dumb

playing, but this was the real thing. That's the prettiest session picture I can ever remember. If I'd had a camera, I'd have a great film of that session, because I can still see it in my mind's eye, just how it was—Spooner on the organ, Moman playing guitar, Aretha at the piano—it was beautiful, better than any session I've ever seen, and I seen a bunch of 'em."

Spooner Oldham, the weedy keyboard player who is known for never playing the same licks twice and who is ordinarily the most reticent of men, speaks in similar superlatives. "I was hired to play keyboards. She was gonna stand up in front of the microphone and sing. She was showing us this song she had brought down there with her, she hit that magic chord when Wexler was going up the little steps to the control room, and I just stopped. I said, 'Now, look, I'm not trying to cop out or nothing. I know I was hired to play piano, but I wish you'd let her play that thing, and I could get on organ and electric.' And that's the way it was. It was a good, honest move, and one of the best things I ever done—and I didn't do nothing."

That, according to Dan Penn, was when Spooner invented "the three-fingered dumb hum" on his Hammond spinet. The song that they were working on was a song that Aretha had come in with, "I Never Loved a Man (The Way I Love You)," by an eccentric Detroit songwriter named Ronnie Shannon. All that she had was a demo of Shannon singing and playing piano, without any discernible meter or melody. Aretha apparently was the only one in the room who could find what she was looking for in the song, because, according to Spooner, "there wasn't anybody around, including myself, that could play it. It took some real thought. Eventually I came up with a little electric piano riff. Chips recognized that was it. He said, 'He's got it, he's got it!' And from there it sort of cohered in a couple of takes."

While the rhythm section struggled with the melody the horn section, led by Charlie Chalmers on tenor, with Ed Logan on bari, Ken Laxton on trumpet, and David Hood on trombone ("It was the most fucked-up horn section you ever heard," says Jimmy Johnson. "They didn't even use Hood's part, but the horns Rick was supposed to get were booked.") was putting together its own off-the-cuff arrangement in Rick's office across the hall. Chalmers wrote out the chords, they played their little riffs and came back in the studio to lay down their track. By midafternoon the song was complete, one of the most momentous takes in the history of rhythm and blues, in fact in the history of American vernacular music.

From Spooner's delicate opening on electric piano and the sharp crack of the drums to the thudding, ominous counterpoint of the bass, and, eventually, Aretha's swelling, hammering gospel entrance on piano, the song was a masterpiece of construction and feel, employing the most subtle dynamics to suggest sheer unrestrained enthusiasm, pitting a vocal of uncompromising purity and transcendence against a lyric that declared, "You're no good, heartbreaker./

You're a liar and you're a cheat/I don't know why I let you do these things to me." "I took her to church," Jerry Wexler later declared, "sat her down at the piano, and let her be herself." This is probably as good an explanation as any for a moment that defies explanation (Aretha hit the "magic chord," remember), for it was as if here Aretha had at last cast off the confining stays of her long apprenticeship and was once and for all ready to give herself over to the unbridled secular ecstasy of her music; she had absorbed all the lessons that soul music had to teach her and now prepared to transcend them. "There's only a few geniuses around," Jerry Wexler continued, "you know, like Ray Charles—who can just come in the studio and lay down the song and everything's implicit; the musicians just color it in." Aretha was one of the few, and in that one unequalled moment at Muscle Shoals she took soul music to a place that no one else could go.

Everyone must have felt giddy. There was no question in anyone's mind that they had done it. Jerry Wexler knew that Aretha was going to deliver on his promise, and even Aretha must have sensed that she had at last achieved a high point that was hers, and hers alone, if only for a moment. Aretha's husband, Ted White, finally loosened up. All the players and onlookers—Dan and Chips and Spooner and Donnie Fritts—knew that they were in the presence of something of surpassing worth. Even Rick Hall, rarely willing, or able, to surrender his skepticism or suspiciousness that fate must have it in for him in some yet-to-be-revealed way, never doubted for a moment that he was standing on the edge of history. A break was called, during which Chips and Dan got back to work on the song they had brought with them from Memphis ("We 'me, you, and itted' it all out"). While they did, a bottle was produced in the control booth, and Rick and Ted White passed it back and forth congratulatorily while the session players came up with one of their own. Jerry Wexler worried over a couple of lines with the cowriters, while out in the studio there was a momentary uproar as the trumpet player made a smart remark to the artist which the artist's husband vociferously objected to.

As soon as the song was finished, Aretha attempted to sing it off the lead sheet. She couldn't seem to get it, but she kept trying, and the more she tried, the further she got from the song. "Well, now it's getting awkward," recalls Dan Penn, "because here's this very talented woman out there sounding like a crackerbox. So they did the same thing they always did in these situations: they put me out there singing. They'd always send me out there to tempt the niggers, you know, 'Go on out there and stir 'em up, Penn.' 'Cause I would just go out there and squeal, and they'd say, 'Aw, shit, I can beat that.' But this time all they wanted to do was to get a track. So I sung, and we put down the awfulest thing you ever heard in God's world: it had one little organ hum and maybe a little ticky ticking of bass or something and me squealing, and it sounded awful."