

Roberta Flack

Saturday, November 8, 2014
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ABOUT ROBERTA FLACK

Internationally hailed as one of the greatest songstresses of our time, Grammy Award winner Roberta Flack remains unparalleled in her ability to tell a story through her music. Her songs bring insight into our lives, loves, culture, and politics, while effortlessly traversing a broad musical landscape from pop to soul to folk to jazz.

Born in Asheville, North Carolina, and raised in Arlington, Virginia, Flack's earliest musical influences came from the church. The local AME Zion Church gave everyone the opportunity to get out of the house, but, as Flack recalls, the music "didn't have the raunchy, wide-open, free, spontaneous, full-of-life thing that you could hear at the Baptist Church down the street." Whenever she could, she'd sneak over there to hear such gospel luminaries as Mahalia Jackson and Sam Cooke with the Soul Stirrers.

At home, Flack's father repaired an old upright piano, and she began to pick out tunes while sitting on her mother's lap. When she turned 9, she began taking piano lessons and also started to listen to a wide range of popular music, including R&B, jazz, blues, and pop.

As she moved into her teens, Flack's listening gravitated toward classical music, and her piano playing developed rapidly. At 13, she won second place honors with her performance of a Scarlatti sonata in a statewide contest for black students.

At the same time, her scholastic excellence enabled her to regularly skip grades, to the point that she had to be "left back" for a year to allow her physical and emotional development to catch up with her stellar academic advancement. Remarkably, by the age of 15, she enrolled at Howard University on a full music scholarship, making her one of the youngest students to ever enroll there. Within a year, she was conducting her sorority's vocal quartet, accompanying pop, jazz, and opera singers, and changing her major from piano to voice as she was assisting the school's choir conductor. To earn extra money, she also taught piano privately and played the organ at her parents' church—a job previously held by her mother.

Flack next changed her major to music education, becoming the first black student teacher at an all-white school near Chevy Chase, Maryland. By the time she graduated, at 19, she'd already directed a production of *Aida*, earning her a standing ovation from the faculty after her final exam recital. She began graduate studies in music, but the sudden death of her father forced her to leave both school and home to take a teaching job to support herself.

Teaching in Farmville, North Carolina, was an immense change from Chevy Chase, Maryland. In this "very segregated, very backwards" town, Flack was hired for \$2,800 a year to teach English and music. The frustration of teaching basic grammar to high school students, some of whom were older than she, was barely outweighed by the small triumphs of exposing the school's 1,300 students to music.

When the year was over, Flack returned to Washington where she held teaching posts at several junior high schools over the next four years. At one school in particular, Banneker Junior High, she taught seventh graders termed "basic a-typical" (at the lowest educational level in the school). Flack remembers,

"I found myself unable to teach music...How was I supposed to teach them to sing the National Anthem when they couldn't read it?"

It was during this period that her professional music career really began to take shape. At D.C.'s posh Tivoli Club, she served as accompanist to the opera singers who strolled the room. During intermissions, Flack would sing and play blues, folk songs, and pop standards on an old upright piano in the back. One thing led to another, and she started working two to three nights a week at the 1520 Club, playing solo piano and singing.

When her voice teacher told her he saw a brighter future for her in pop music than the classics, she started reshaping her repertoire, and her reputation spread. At one famous nightclub on Capitol Hill, Mr. Henry's, the owners constructed an upstairs performance area especially for her with unique church pew seating. People like Burt Bacharach, Al Hibbler, Carmen McRae, Kim Stanley, Eddie Harris, Woody Allen, Bill Cosby, Ramsey Lewis, and Johnny Mathis were in regular attendance, to name but a few. She would often share her stage and her piano stool with them, and even found herself playing with Liberace one night.

By the summer of 1968, the word was out, and that word was "Roberta." While the nation's capital was hosting Resurrection City, Roberta was doing a benefit for the Inner City Ghetto Children's Library Fund. In the packed crowd was famed musician Les McCann, who was stunned by what he heard: "Her voice touched, tapped, trapped, and kicked every emotion I've ever known. I laughed, cried, and screamed for more...She alone had the voice!" Within days, he had arranged an audition for Flack with Atlantic Records.

With a repertoire of more than 600 songs, Flack played 42 of them for Atlantic producer Joel Dorn in three hours. In November of 1968, she went into the studio and laid down some 39 song demos over nine hours. Three months later, she recorded *First Take*, her debut album, in a mere ten hours at Atlantic Studios. Among the songs she cut was "The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face."

Flack recalls those studio sessions and remembers taking a "very naive and beautiful approach...I was comfortable with the music because I had worked on all these songs for all the years I had worked at Mr. Henry's."

First Take was released in June 1969, followed by her first single, the Eugene McDaniels' composition, "Compared To What." A year later, she released her second album, *Chapter Two*, produced by Joel Dorn and King Curtis, arranged by future-collaborator Donny Hathaway, and with laudatory liner notes by Jerry Butler. Another McDaniels' composition, "Reverend Lee," and Jimmy Webb's "Do What You Gotta' Do" both became singles from the album, which included material as diverse as Bob Dylan's "Just Like A Woman," a Buffy St. Marie composition, and the then-contemporary Broadway hit, "The Impossible Dream."

Flack confesses, "I didn't know how well my first album had done; it was enough to get me to do the second album, which was a continuation of the music I'd worked on and perfected."

In 1971, encouraged by Jerry Wexler, Flack and Donny Hathaway collaborated on "You've Got A Friend." Again, her peerless interpretation of the contemporary pop hits won her critical acclaim.

Later that year, she performed in Ghana as part of the star-laden Soul To Soul

Festival. Her friend Les McCann was there with Eddie Harris, as were Ike & Tina Turner, Wilson Pickett, The Staple Singers, Carlos Santana, and The Voices of East Harlem. For this once-in-a-lifetime event, Roberta performed “Freedom Song,” “Tryin’ Times,” and “Gone Away.” The album of the event was released on Atlantic (as was the videotape of the concert, 15 years later).

Capping off this busy year, her third album, *Quiet Fire*, was released, arranged by Flack herself. It yielded the single “Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow.”

By 1972, Flack’s dogged perseverance began to really pay off. Clint Eastwood personally decided to include “The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face” in his thriller *Play Misty for Me*. Atlantic rushed the song from her first album out as a single, and in seven weeks it went to #1 on the charts.

At the same time, the singer’s fourth album, *Roberta Flack & Donny Hathaway*, was released. Two days after it hit the stores, April 22 was declared Roberta Flack Day in Washington, DC, kicking off a weekend celebration including receptions at the Kennedy Center and the Congressional Caucus Room. At an evening banquet attended by more than 500 friends, admirers, and luminaries, Flack was presented with the official proclamation, Down Beat’s award as Top Female Vocalist, a D.C. youth award, and gold records from Atlantic for the “First Time Ever I Saw Your Face” single and the *First Take* and *Quiet Fire* albums. Flack capped off the night with a 45-minute concert in front of the Lincoln Memorial. Her place in history was secured.

Only a few weeks later, Atlantic released a new Hathaway/Flack single, “Where Is the Love.” The album quickly went gold, as did the single, which remained in the Top 10 for two months straight.

At the subsequent Grammy Awards ceremony, in March 1973, “First Time Ever I Saw Your Face” won Record of the Year and Song of the Year, while “Where Is the Love” won for Best Pop Vocal by a Duo.

Simultaneously, Flack’s then-current single, “Killing Me Softly with His Song,” achieved certified gold sales status, having been both the #1 pop and R&B song in the country. *Killing Me Softly*, the album, was released in August, certified gold within two weeks, and remained the bestseller in every musical category except country for months thereafter. At the 1974 Grammys, “Killing Me Softly with His Song” won Record of the Year, Song of the Year, and Best Pop Vocal by a Female.

The follow-up single, “Feel Like Makin’ Love,” went to #1 on the pop, R&B, and easy listening charts. An out-of-the-box gold single, it became Flack’s eighth million-seller in less than two-and-a-half years. *The Feel Like Makin’ Love* album was released in 1975, the first produced by Flack herself.

The following year, Flack continued to work, tour, and record—with special emphasis on the craft of producing. “No matter how many records I’d heard,” she says, “I knew what I sounded like in my head, and in my heart I knew what I wanted it to sound like...My voice is the record for me, and I don’t ever want to lose that.”

After taking the time and care to produce an album that would satisfy both her own conscience and her vast public, in December 1977 she released *Blue Lights in the Basement*, her first album in nearly three years, and the one she still calls her personal favorite. It was preceded by the timely single “25th of Last December,” penned by Eugene McDaniels. At the beginning of 1978, a

second single was released, a new collaboration with Donny Hathaway titled, "The Closer I Get To You." The chart-topping single was certified gold, as was the album, which had reached #1 on both the pop and R&B charts.

She spent almost all of 1979 and the early part of 1980 recording *Roberta Flack Featuring Donny Hathaway*, co-produced by Flack and Eric Mercury. Before the album was released in March, a Stevie Wonder/Eric Mercury composition, "You Are My Heaven," had already become a national R&B/pop crossover hit. For the second time, Washington, DC declared "Roberta Flack Day," and in 1980, Atlantic released "Live and More, a collaboration and co-production with talented crooner Peabo Bryson.

The following year, Flack worked on her first project outside of Atlantic Records, when she composed and produced the soundtrack album for the Richard Pryor/Cicely Tyson film, *Bustin' Loose*. Singles from the album included "You Stopped Loving Me" and "Just When I Needed You."

In 1982, Atlantic released *The Best of Roberta Flack*, a collection of eleven songs that had redefined popular music in the preceding decade. At the same time, Flack returned to the studio to record the *I'm the One* album with producers Ralph MacDonald, William Salter (who together had penned "Where Is The Love"), and William Eaton. Singles culled from the record were "Makin' Love," a Bacharach/Sager tune, and the title track.

Her second collaboration with Peabo Bryson, *Born to Love*, debuted in 1983 and produced another huge smash, "Tonight I Celebrate My Love." The following year, she appeared as a guest artist on Japanese saxophone legend Sadao Watanabe's album, *Rendezvous* (released on Warner-Pioneer in Japan). Flack sang on the tracks "If I'm Still Around Tomorrow" and "Here's To Love."

Later in 1984, she was asked to contribute to *Every Man Has a Woman Who Loves Him*, Yoko Ono's tribute to her late husband, John Lennon. Flack's vocal on "Goodbye Sadness" was praised by the critics as one of the most moving on the album. The year also saw Roberta undertake a successful tour of England.

She returned to Atlantic in 1985 with the single "People On A String" from the *White Nights* soundtrack. In 1986, she released a single version of "We Shall Overcome" on the label to commemorate Martin Luther King's birthday. She performed a number of live dates with symphony orchestras and toured Japan twice between 1986 and 1988: once with Miles Davis and the Crusaders; the second time with Tokyo's Japanese Symphony in performances during which she played piano and sang as the ensemble performed songs from a Portuguese Suite with Chinese drums. She performed with Davis again at the Toronto Jazz Festival in June 1987, and on the Capitol grounds with the National Symphony and Marvin Hamlisch in July before 225,000 enthusiastic fans.

In 1988, *Oasis* was released, featuring the work of Marcus Miller, Andy Goldmark, The System's David Frank, Henry Gaffney, Ashford & Simpson, Greg Phillinganes, Michael Omartian, Jerry Hey, David Sanborn, George Duke, Marvin Hamlisch and Siedah Garrett, Quincy Jones, and others. The title track became a #1 R&B single.

Between the release of *Oasis* and the recording of her new album, *Set the Night to Music*, Flack toured California, Japan, and Hong Kong in 1989, headlining a series of dates with Patrice Rushen and the Duke Ellington Orchestra. In 1994, Flack released *Roberta*, an album of popular jazz and blues standards. *Roberta* contains Flack's own arrangements of such classics as B.B. King's "The Thrill

Is Gone,” “Sweet Georgia Brown,” and “Let’s Stay Together.” *Roberta* earned a Grammy nomination in a category including such company as Frank Sinatra, Willie Nelson, Barbra Streisand, and Tony Bennett.

From 1995 to 1998, Flack hosted *Brunch with Roberta Flack*, a weekly radio show. The show presented Flack as a host with unique insights into the world of music in which she herself has been such an integral part. *Brunch with Roberta Flack* aired nationwide in over 30 major metropolitan radio markets.

In 1997, Flack released her first holiday record, *The Christmas Album*, as well as a new collaboration with Peabo Bryson for Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast*, *Enchanted Christmas* movie soundtrack. Highlights of 1998 included performing with Madonna, Elton John, and Sting at Carnegie Hall for the annual Rainforest Foundation Benefit Concert; a tour of Japan; and a musical appearance with the Muppets on *Sesame Street*.

1999 proved to be a stellar year for Flack. On June 10, she was selected to receive a coveted star on Hollywood’s legendary Walk of Fame. In July, she traveled to South Africa for a sold-out concert tour. Even President Nelson Mandela, a fan of Flack’s, turned out to enjoy the culminating concert.

While she was thrilling audiences in South Africa, Flack’s accomplishments were being celebrated in America, during the five-hour VH-1 program *The 100 Greatest Women of Rock & Roll*. She ranked highly and was in the company of Tina Turner, Aretha Franklin, Madonna, Alanis Morissette, and many other trailblazing female artists.

The turn of the millennium showed that Flack had no intention of slowing down. With international tour dates including stops in Turkey, Argentina, Australia, and Japan, she was constantly inspired when she saw firsthand that her music continues to be loved and enjoyed around the world.

In 2002, *Roberta Flack In Concert* was released on DVD. It was that year that she took a leadership role in response to the aftermath of September 11, 2001. She, along with other celebrities, participated in Nile Rogers’ *We Are Family* movie and single, directed by Spike Lee, which set an example of unity for all Americans. She also participated in the nationwide “Come Back to D.C.” television campaign, a collaboration between the Federal Government and the DC Tourism Board.

Today, Flack remains a shining inspiration to her fans, peers, and younger musicians in the music industry. She has appeared with soul artists like Alicia Keys, India.Arie, and Angie Stone, all younger artists who have been heavily influenced by Flack’s achievements.

Flack is also an outspoken participant in the Artist Empowerment Coalition, an organization that’s primary goal is advocacy for artists’ rights and control of their creative properties.

Through it all, she always comes back to the music, which is why it is not surprising that Flack was asked by VH-1 to participate in its *100 Greatest Love Songs* and *100 Greatest Women of Rock & Roll* television events.

In 2003, Flack released the Christmas album *Holiday*, a timeless collection of seasonal favorites, a Flack classic or two, and a few goodies thrown in for good cheer. In 2012, she released *Let It Be Roberta: Roberta Flack Sings the Beatles*.

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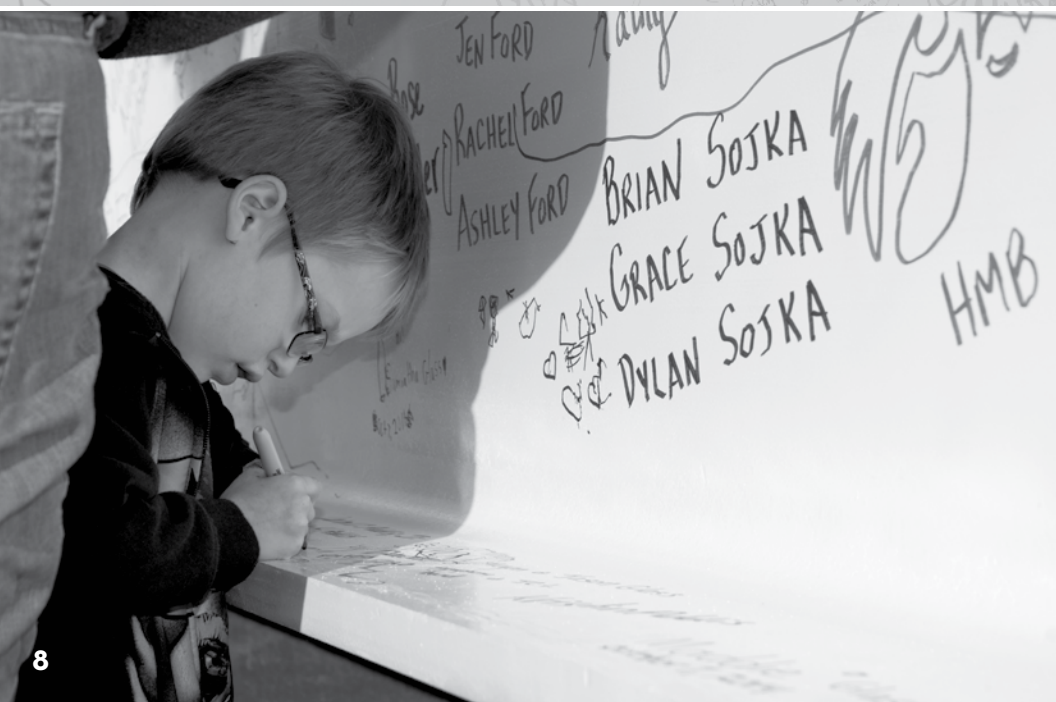
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On October 7 and 8, Hancher and Mortenson Construction invited the public to sign a beam that is now part of the new Hancher facility. More than 1,000 people signed the beam that was hoisted into place during a special ceremony featuring singer/songwriter, Iowa native, and UI alum Susan Werner. Following the ceremony, Werner became the first artist to perform on the new Hancher stage during a lunch for construction workers and others associated with the project, including architect César Pelli.

Photos by Miriam Alarcón Avila





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Victoria Jaiani and Temur Suluashvili of The Joffrey Ballet. Photo by Christopher Duggan.

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Terell Stafford Quintet

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Roseneath Theatre, *La Maleta*

February 27 | Englert Theatre

Pacifica Quartet

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The Joffrey Ballet

March 7-8 | Space Place Theater

The Nile Project

March 11 | Englert Theatre

Howard Fishman

The Basement Tapes Project

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