

BY JON LANDAU

The record business is a well known drag. Even if it isn't a drag for everybody, up until recently it has certainly been a drag for Aretha Franklin. Six years ago she made the mistake of signing a long term contract with a label that didn't know what to do with her — Columbia — and for five years she struggled with material like "Rock-A-Bye Your Baby" and "Try A Little Tenderness." She did the best she could with it, and some of her recordings were extremely good, but it obviously wasn't her scene.

It was only when the Columbia contract expired that Aretha's luck began to change. In 1966 she had the good fortune to encounter an aspect of the music scene which is definitely not a drag, namely Jerry Wexler, the Vice-President of a non-drag label, Atlantic Records.

Wexler has been largely responsible for the soul revival, and while he is certainly not averse to commercial success, he seems to have a high regard for the integrity of his artists. Under his leadership Atlantic and its subsidiaries have been coming up with thoroughly inspired and revitalized soul music, in the form of Joe Tex, Otis Wilson, i.e., the whole Stax-Volt thing. It was under Wexler that the old Ray Charles records were done which set a standard for modern blues artists. The importance of Wexler in allowing Charles artistic freedom can be seen when we compare the Atlantic Ray Charles to the ABC Ray Charles. ABC simply did not know what to do with the genius and as a result he never produced a satisfying album during his entire tenure on that label.

When Aretha finally got away from Columbia Jerry moved in and set her up with Atlantic's regular soul sidemen and songwriters, and in a very short time she emerged as a super-star. Now she books for incredible sums of money and her recent records sell in incredible numbers.

The new Aretha is obviously her own girl with an easily identifiable sound. While Wexler himself produces her, it is obvious that, as with Charles, his commercial and artistic sense tells him that Aretha will do better left alone. Let her do her things, after all, she's the one with the talent. That's the way to treat an artist. Motown wouldn't have been good for Aretha because just like Columbia they would have tried to stick her with a sound that wasn't her own, and for Aretha it never would have worked.

[IN THE SHADOWS]

Musically, Aretha is obviously into gospel. She is the daughter of a well known gospel singer and she has listened to Alex Bradford and Marion Williams, although Aretha's style is more lowdown than either of theirs. She has also listened to B. B. King and other urban, gospel-oriented, blues vocalists. But above all, standing behind her like a shadow, is Ray Charles.

Aretha's own synthesis of all these basically frenetic styles first appeared on *I Never Loved A Man The Way That I Love You*, (the album). On it, Aretha got into some very fine things. She did a very nice job with the rhythm on "Respect" and she laid down a very fine vocal on King Curtis' old instrumental,

"Soul Serenade." Also, "Don't Let Me Lose This Dream" showed her off as a fine songwriter, and again her very subtle rhythmic sense predominates. The verses are almost Latin. The main hang-up with the album as a whole was the lack of versatility on the part of the sidemen. The drums weren't hard enough, the guitar was weak, and the production lacked polish.

On the new album, *Aretha Arrives*, these problems are completely removed. Most of the

slow ballads begin to drag after a while, especially because there is so little attempt at doing anything distinctive with some of them. On the first album this problem was particularly evident on Aretha's thin attempt at recreating Ray Charles' gorgeous "Drown in My Own Tears." On the new album there is too much of stuff like "Never Let Me Go," which fits into this category of uninspired slow stuff.

A cut like "Prove It," or "Change's Gonna Come," on the

who doesn't listen to a lot of soul music this reliance on shouts and screams can be very exciting, but to people more accustomed to the idiom, it is likely to wear very thin. The only soul star who knows how to handle the technique consistently is Ray Charles. Even James Brown can get to be a drag when he overdoes that kind of thing, which lately he hasn't.

So much for the hang-ups. The rest of what is happening here is first rate all the way. On side one Aretha turns in a knockout "Satisfaction," (dig the drums) and a solid remake of Charles' "You Are My Sunshine." She is a hundred per cent successful with her vaguely comical "96 Tears," and "Prove It" is the best ballad on the album, making the most successful use of strings on any of the bands. Side two has most of the real winners though.

Leading off is a version of "That's Life" which convinces you that not only Aretha, but the song as well, is great. "Going Down Slow" is the best blues on the album and is very tough, especially the ending, and the riff that the band backs her with. "Ain't Nobody," written by sister Carolyn, is a gospel thing that shows how well Aretha works with those minor gospel chord progressions. The gospel shouting in the background is breathtaking. And finally there is the opus, by far the best cut on the record, "Baby, I Love You." This cut smoulders eroticism, has beautiful piano, fine rhythm guitar, great lyrics, great vocal backup by Aretha and her sisters, double tracked, and a perfect lowdown dirty lead vocal. I think I got it all.

Basically, *Aretha Arrives* is a high impact album in which neither the sophistication nor the subtlety of the musicians involved gets in the way of the basic primitivism of Aretha's music. The best cuts on the record hit with tremendous immediacy and force, and do so in a totally artistic way. The only hang-ups are the occasional reliance on unnecessary gimmicks, and the weakness of some of the material.

[A NATURAL WOMAN]

It will be interesting to see where Aretha goes from here. The only single that she has released since this album is quite distinct from anything else she has done for Atlantic. "A Natural Woman" was written for Aretha by the team of Goffin and King who do so much writing for big white groups like the Righteous Brothers, the old Animals, and the Monkees. They are songwriters who can write a song to fit anyone's style, and "A Natural Woman," while it is an extremely commercial record, is also a significant improvement over some of the material Aretha's been recording. The production is more within the mainstream of big pop production and makes far better use of strings and horns than was done on either of the two albums.

It is a good sign for the future of Aretha's career because, even while taking her away from some of the more lowdown stuff she has already done, it gives her a chance to work with the really big sound her voice is capable of without sacrificing her identity. It shows that she can go beyond what she has already done. And when one has done as much as Aretha already has, that is no mean accomplishment.

ARETHA



people who do Wilson Pickett's sessions were brought in for the new job, and particularly crucial here was the use of drummer Roger Hawkins. He turns the whole thing into rock and roll which was what the first album lacked. On four of the slow cuts Wexler tries out some strings and I think they work quite well.

Aretha performance on *Aretha Arrives* is not faultless. On the contrary, she herself has two distinct hang-ups, both of which were present on the first album, and both of which really begin to grate on the new one. The first of these has to do with her choice of material. All these

first album, are both very inspired ballad performances, and show fully Aretha's capacity in this direction. Nonetheless, dull stuff takes up too much space on *Aretha Arrives* and helps to destroy the continuity of the album as a whole.

[THE GOSPEL SHOUT]

Aretha's other problem takes the form of a gimmick. It seems whenever she gets into a weak spot in one of the arrangements she runs for the gospel shouts. She overuses two or three phrases to the point of distraction from whatever else is going on during the cut. To someone