

Respect to Aretha

Start time: 8pm

Running time: 90 minutes, no interval

Please note all timings are approximate and subject to change

Arwa Haider speaks to Antibalas's Martín Perna about putting together a celebration of such a towering musical figure.

'Aretha is on a different musical plane,' says Antibalas founding musician, composer and educator Martín Perna. 'Doing a show like this is a humbling experience; how do we show our appreciation, our gratitude? It's really important to keep celebrating her, to say her name, to get together to grieve her loss. Aretha is part of the great American canon of music – if that wasn't clear when she was alive, it's definitely clear now that she's passed on.'

It feels right to refer to Aretha Franklin on first-name terms, and in the present tense. The US Queen of Soul sadly passed away in August 2018, aged 76, but her music connected deeply with generations all over the world, and she left a phenomenal legacy (spanning nearly six decades, achieving tens of millions of sales and countless awards) that always sounds fantastically, vitally in the moment. *Respect to Aretha* obviously namechecks one of her many electrifying classic tracks, but it also extends much further, with Antibalas bringing their rousing rhythmic twelve-piece big band energy to a guest-packed night that highlights the richness of her catalogue.

Antibalas mark the 20th anniversary of their Harlem formation this year, and Perna (who plays baritone sax and flute tonight, and whose own broad-ranging projects include co-founding the celebrated soul/funk revival outfit Sharon Jones & The Dap-Kings) points out that *Respect to Aretha* also taps into their collective roots:

'When I started Antibalas, it was never strictly an Afrobeat ensemble,' he explains. 'We're a group with a New York identity, and we play with everyone; soul music is an artistic language that we're fluent in, and it's part of our legacy. So this is a real team effort; it's a blessing to have so many great people who can really step up in the band.'

Perna was previously musical director for an homage to Aretha's music at New York's Carnegie Hall in 2017, with Antibalas performing as the powerhouse band. In *Respect to Aretha*, their musical passion and proficiency fuels a focused programme, featuring a transatlantic range of suitably strong voices; as Perna says, this is a production with 'many moving parts'. These talents include the wonderfully vivacious and versatile star Bettye LaVette, who grew up alongside Aretha in the '50s and '60s Detroit music scene, and who continues her thrilling contemporary rapport with Antibalas following several previous collaborations. There is the commanding cool of disco rock heroine Nona Hendryx, and the tender R&B/hip hop-inflected sound of José James. British vocalists include the funk-driven Alice Russell, and Zara McFarlane, who has earned widespread plaudits for her modern jazz melodies on independent Brownswood.

'With five singers, we'll be able to build and find a groove in each vocalist's performance, with more time and intimacy. Each performer has brought something different to the mix.'

Backing vocalists from the acclaimed London-based House Gospel Choir add further power to the spirit-soaring set-list – and Perna admits that he took on a 'fascinating challenge' in curating a concert selection from the sheer wealth of Aretha's repertoire, which yields timeless treasures but also unexpected twists for even the most dedicated fan.

barbican

Aretha was just fourteen years old when she recorded her debut album, the hauntingly beautiful spirituals of *Songs Of Faith* (1956), her smash hit canon on the Atlantic label is just one section of her success, and her vocal powers would continue to inspire rapturous responses, right up to recent years, with performances including President Obama's inauguration in 2009, and the Kennedy Center Honours.

'Aretha really kept reinventing herself, and working with the best producers,' says Perna. 'So her catalogue has the gospel vibe, the roadhouse blues vibe, disco, house tracks – hits in all of these different lanes. And how much hip hop is based on Aretha samples?

'Listening through her work, it also strikes you that Aretha does these really compelling covers, all throughout her career. Every song that she takes, she just gobbles it up.'

Aretha certainly proved herself as an astounding songwriter on countless genuinely iconic numbers, including '(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman' (1967), 'Think' (1968, later also unforgettably performed by Aretha in *The Blues Brothers* movie) and the stupendously funky 'Rock Steady' (1971) but her delivery feels so exceptional and unquestionable that it's even often forgotten that even 'Respect', arguably her signature track, was a cover: originally written and recorded by another soul great, Otis Redding. When Redding heard Aretha's 1967 version, he would reportedly admit: 'She done took my song'.

Respect to Aretha is whole-hearted in its celebration of the Queen of Soul's ongoing reign, from exquisitely bittersweet numbers, to riotous dance stormers.

'While there's no way that we can cover everything in a concert like this, we will try to be creative with the song selection,' promises Perna. 'This is really about honouring Aretha's memory, and making it rock.'

Performers

Amayo Duke vocals
Martin Perna baritone Sax, musical director
Timothy Allen guitar
Marcos Garcia guitar
Marcus Winfield shekere
Reinaldo DeJesus congas
Morgan Price tenor sax
Jordan McLean trumpet
Raymond Mason trombone, musical director
Justin Kimmel bass
Christopher Doyle keys
Kevin Raczka drums
Naomi Scarlett backing vocals
Raffaele Crolla backing vocals
Antoinette Thelwell backing vocals

Guest singers

Nona Hendryx
José James
Bettye LaVette
Zara McFarlane
Alice Russell

Produced by the Barbican in association with Jazz à la Villette Festival, Paris.



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