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Aretha Franklin and Janis Joplin: Women Take the Lead as the Vietnam War Politicizes Popular Music by Mark Naison

In this short essay class, my major focus will be two extraordinary women singers, Aretha Franklin and Janis Joplin, who found themselves elevated from obscurity to become the greatest women superstars of their generation and the voice of women everywhere claiming authority over their bodies, their minds, their voices and their sexuality. This could only have happened in a time when all traditional forms of authority were being undermined, including those shaping gender relationships and sexual mores, leaving room for women who looked and sounded dramatically different from those women who had been the face of women in Rock and Roll only a few years earlier (Diana Ross, Ronnie Spector, the Shirelles etc) and in Janis Joplin's case, who had been the face of women in folk music (Joan Baez, Mary Travers)

Both Aretha Franklin and Janis Joplin were musical outsiders during most of the 1960's even though they had extraordinary voices. Aretha, whose personal life was profoundly troubled and chaotic, suffered through terrible arrangements and bad advice provided by the men who controlled her musical career, and Janis tried to make it in a folk world that had no room for a chunky young woman with a bad complexion who sounded more like Bessie Smith and Etta James than Joan Baez.

But somehow, by 1967, as described in the brilliant chapter in "Sweet Soul Music" called "Aretha Arrives" and in the great movie about Aretha's life, "Respect" and in "Scars of Sweet Paradise." Alice Echols brilliant biography of Janis Joplin, each of these artists found musicians and promoters who realized that an audience deeply scarred by the tragedy of the Vietnam War and the racial divisions tearing apart the nation wanted passion, authenticity and raw emotional power more than they wanted neatly packed sounds by neatly groomed artists

So Aretha found the right record company and the right backup musicians to let HER take control of her own voice and Janis found a rock band that would make her the focal point of a sonic assault on their audiences

In the process, these two women, with voices that resounded through the ages, carved a path for every woman tired of people telling her what to look like, what to do, how to find love or refuse love to have the courage to say "No More- I am going to be myself, and if you can't handle it, too bad for you,"

There was a price to pay for the freedom they sought, for themselves and others, but the music stands on its own