

Soul, rhythm and blues and jazz singer Roberta Flack, 1937-2025

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Roberta Flack, the gifted rhythm and blues singer and pianist, passed away February 24 from cardiac arrest. She was 88 years old.

Flack developed ALS, otherwise known as Lou Gehrig's disease, in the last decade of her life. The neurodegenerative condition robbed her of the ability to sing in her final years. However, her voice has been immortalized on dozens of albums spanning the period from the late 1960s to the second decade of the 2000s.

At her peak, the singer was capable of genuine depth, sincerity and emotional intimacy, which she seemingly conjured from thin air. She had a universal quality to her singing, which had a way of reaching an individual wherever he or she was in life. Les McCann, the soul-jazz singer, composer and fellow pianist who discovered Flack while the latter performed in a Washington, D.C. club, once said, "[h]er voice touched, tapped, trapped and kicked over every emotion I've ever known."

Flack was a trained classical vocalist and pianist. At age 15, she was awarded a full musical scholarship to Howard University in Washington, where she received training in piano as well as voice. Prior to this, she played classical compositions for her local church in Arlington, Virginia. "I grew up playing piano for the choir: Handel, Bach, Verdi, Mozart and all those great, wonderful, intricately written Negro spirituals," she said in an interview.

The resultant mixture of influences on her artistry was a precise, controlled but melodic vocal style, which Flack dubbed "scientific soul." It lacked some of the vocal embellishments that characterized many of her soul and funk peers, but made up for it with many of the qualities previously noted.

The two ballads for which she is best known, "The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face" (from her debut album *First Take*, 1969) and "Killing Me Softly with His Song" (from *Killing Me Softly*, 1973), were based on folk songs. Both, particularly "The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face," written by left-wing British folk singer Ewan MacColl, are injected with tenderness and intimacy and so transformed by Flack as

to render their originals almost unidentifiable.

Roberta Cleopatra Flack was born in 1937 in Black Mountain, North Carolina, the site of the notable liberal arts college (1933-1957). She was the second oldest child in a working class family. Roberta's mother and father both had musical backgrounds and sought to instill a similar appreciation and foundation in their children. From her early childhood, Roberta revealed herself to be musically exceptional, at age 13 winning second place in a national competition for her classical piano playing.

Despite her undeniable talent and interests, she did not pursue a musical career until her discovery while moonlighting at the still-existing Mr. Henry's Restaurant in Washington, D.C. in the late 1960s. At the time, she was already in her 30s and working as a music teacher at a local middle school.

First Take (1969, Atlantic) was her first studio album. Released to critical acclaim, the album exemplified Flack's gift for understated yet powerful vocal melodies. Julius Lester of *Rolling Stone* wrote at the time that *First Take* was "one of those rare albums that has the power to enlighten the emotional content of one's life. You feel the world differently after listening to it."

The singer's melodies and song styles were a unique melding of different jazz and folk music influences, all emphasizing her most powerful instrument: her voice.

While remaining closely associated with soul music and rhythm and blues, her music drew as well from jazz, folk and classical music. This musical breadth extended to her choice of orchestration as well as songwriting. She frequently "reinterpreted" the work of artists far afield from herself, making their work completely her own. "If I can find that heartbeat, I can live in there," she said of her feeling for music, adding, "I also think that that's what makes a song a hit."

As with many artists in the circles she frequented, Flack became politically radicalized by the social and political upheavals of the late 1960s and early 1970s. *First Take* notably features Flack covering McCann's upbeat

“Compared to What,” a song written by Gene McDaniels which is sharply critical of war and injustice.

While Flack’s version is strong, it also lacks some of the spark and raw energy of the McCann original. In general, Flack was not the sort of singer who was most comfortable belting out punchy phrases atop a funky, fast paced rhythm.

The period characterized by opposition to US imperialism’s war in Vietnam, inequality and injustice throughout the world had a powerful impact on numerous artists.

Flack’s music registered these events in a particularly intimate way. On “Business Goes On as Usual,” the final song on *Chapter Two* (1970, Atlantic), one hears sour chords playing the military funeral song “Taps,” with marching drum beat. Flack’s voice hits the listener like a wave over this bleak and somewhat sinister setting, as she solemnly intones that her brother, “twenty-five, and very much alive,” died fighting in a war “he did not understand.” Her ability to fuse deeply human emotion with more profound causes and concerns—the deeper connections between people—gave her music a lasting quality.

Flack would not gain commercial success until 1971, when the initial album’s iconic single, “The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face,” was featured prominently in actor-director Clint Eastwood’s popular thriller *Play Misty for Me*. The resulting demand caused her label to re-release the song the following year. She would win a Grammy for Record of the Year in 1973 for the song, a feat which she duplicated in 1974 for her remarkable “Killing Me Softly With His Song.”

In 1972, Flack recorded her first of two records with collaborator and fellow Howard University alumnus Donny Hathaway. *Roberta Flack & Donny Hathaway* has a more prominent soul and rhythm and blues element. The inclusion of the hymnal “Come Ye Disconsolate” (by Irish writer Thomas Moore, published 1816) as well as covers of popular records play to the performers’ strengths. “Mood,” the concluding instrumental of the album, is an intimate piano melody performed by Flack. She described the song as “one of my most unique musical moments...I wrote that song—or it wrote me, because it was all extemporaneous.”

In 1975, Flack recorded another groundbreaking record, *Feel Like Makin’ Love*. The album’s title track, written again by McDaniels, is one of first instances of the rhythm and blues subgenre known as “quiet storm,” radio-friendly and polished sound.

“Be Real Black For Me,” from her 1972 album with Hathaway, bears the influence of the “black pride” movement of the day, even as songs throughout her catalog draw from diverse sources and inspirations. She famously lived next door to John Lennon and Yoko Ono in their Manhattan apartment building, where she was regarded by

the Lennon children as “Aunt Roberta.”

Flack’s musical output slowed down considerably in the 1980s as more electronic and slickly produced sounds took over. This followed a trend among many of her contemporaries who had risen to success amid the turbulent radicalization of an earlier period. While Flack still remained active, for the most part her role in music had begun to shift to something of an R&B elder stateswoman, respected without being necessarily prominent.

Why did Flack more or less disappear from public view, or why did her musical style and approach disappear from view? Her ascent was bound up with the mass civil rights movement, with the end of Jim Crow, with expectations that steps toward genuine equality and further progress would follow. Critic Robert Christgau noted in 1971 that Flack was “generally regarded as the most significant new black woman singer since Aretha Franklin,” but also criticized her “gentility.”

In any case, the humanistic character of her music lost its appeal in the 1980s, which witnessed ever increasing social inequality and a sharp growth in the wealth of a privileged African-American social layer. Meanwhile the worsening conditions for broad layers of the population fed disappointment and disillusionment among urban youth. The hopeful, emotional quality of her music fell out of favor.

Interest in Flack’s music rose again in the mid-1990s, with the New Jersey-based hip hop group Fugees’ successful cover of “Killing Me Softly With His Song.” The version, infused with an appealing but understated hip hop backing instrumental, re-introduced Flack to a new generation and also demonstrated the timeless quality of her music.

Though not engaged in music for over a decade, the best music Roberta Flack contributed in a previous era still rings powerfully true today.



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