

Queen of Soul reigns at Radio City Music Hall

By **DEMETRIA IRWIN**

Special to the AmNews

Aretha Franklin wowed New York for two nights at Radio City Music Hall. The living legend belted out hits old and new on March 22 and 23, to sold-out audiences. Her Friday night performance began as she regally stepped on to the stage escorted by Willie Wilkerson Jr., long rumored to be her beau, and whom she refers to as her friend. Graciously acknowledging her standing ovation in a white spaghetti strap gown with powder blue embellishments, a sparkling sheer white wrap and a flower above her right ear, Ms. Franklin looked refreshed and graceful.

Backed by conductor H.B. Barnum and his band, Franklin began her set with the Jackie Wilson classic, "Higher and Higher" before going into a slow, smoky rendition of "My Funny Valentine." The 66-year-old Queen of Soul knew her audience wasn't there just to hear her sing other people's songs, though. The beginning notes of "Don't Play That Song," a



Aretha Franklin, "the Queen of Soul," receiving much-deserved applause during her concert Friday night at Radio City Music Hall.

(Risasi Dais photos)

1960's hit, sent the mostly middle aged audience into a frenzy. Many sang along and kept singing along for her next classic, "Ain't No Way." During the song, Franklin acknowledged the vocal abilities of two of her back-up singers, Cissy Houston (mother of Whitney Houston) and New York's own, Tawatha Agee.

Franklin performed her seminal classic, "Respect" and

shared a bit of wisdom with the audience. "If you have the capacity to love, then you've been truly blessed," said the Queen before bringing out former Temptation Ali Ollie Woodson for a few duets, including songs from her Grammy-winning 1972 gospel album, "Amazing Grace." Woodson and Franklin treated the audience to soulful harmonies and heart-felt ad libs. Franklin,

daughter of the legendary Reverend C.L. Franklin, looked right at home singing the physical, toe-tapping gospel music that fills so many Black churches every Sunday.

The biggest surprise of the



Franklin electrified the crowd during her incredible performance.

evening was Franklin's youngest son Kecalff Cunningham. The self-proclaimed Christian rapper who is nearing 40, performed for about 15 minutes while his mother

rested backstage. Clad in jeans and a black and gray zippered sweatshirt, Kecalff performed to a mostly unenthused audience. Hip hop fans did not appreciate his amateur level lyrical ability and the mostly middle-aged audience did not go to the show to hear a rapper. Kecalff received the most applause upon his exit from the stage.

Upon Franklin's return to the stage, the audience positively responded to material from her new album, "A Woman Falling Out of Love." The album features contemporary sounding ballads as well as mid-tempo songs with more of an old-school feel.

Aretha ended her entirely too short performance (a little over an hour, not including her son) with some feel-good gospel, even doing a little holy dance on her way off the stage as the audience did a soul clap. Those wanting to hear "Natural Woman," "Dr. Feelgood," "Say A Little Prayer For You" and other beloved hits, left disappointed, but the Queen looked truly at peace as she left the stage with a smile on her lips.