

# OPINION

## Black Women Make History Too

### Coretta Scott King was MLK's equal partner

BY MARTHA BURK

We celebrated Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday in January, and now the country has moved into Black History Month. MLK left an enduring mark on our hearts and souls. But he was part of a team, and the other half of that team — his wife Coretta Scott King — made her own kind of history, with her husband and without him, both before and after his death.

Coretta Scott King was a peace activist, an advocate for children, and a champion of the poor both before her marriage and long after her husband's tragic death in 1968. But because she was the wife of a great man, her own participation in the civil rights movement is often minimized.

Before her own death in 2006, King met many times with biographer Dr. Barbara



Reynolds, one of the founding editors of USA Today and the only woman and African American on the paper's editorial board.

Of the time right after MLK's assassination, Reynolds says this: "Most of the male civil rights leaders didn't want to talk to me as a journalist, because they were afraid I would write something negative (about their desire to usurp King's legacy). But Mrs. King had nothing to hide — she opened her life to me."

Coretta Scott King put her life on the line every day, endured taunts and threats, and narrowly escaped death when the Kings' house was bombed while she was home alone with their baby daughter.

"What people don't understand is that Mrs. King was in the line of fire," says Reynolds. "She was the one who answered the phone when racist whites would call, and say 'I'm going to kill you.' This aspect of her life is not part of her profile as a leader — but she said she could be trusted with trouble."

After MLK's death, Mrs. King, as she preferred to be called, traveled throughout the world speaking out on behalf of racial and economic equality, women's and

children's rights, gay rights, and the needs of the poor.

Dr. King's posthumous profile is much larger thanks to his wife's tireless work preserving his memory. Through seem-



Coretta Scott King

ingly endless fundraising and advocacy, Coretta Scott King founded the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change in Atlanta. It's a memorial to the work they shared, and it houses the nation's largest archive from the civil rights movement — an archive that exists

in no small part because Coretta Scott King took notes, kept photos, and preserved documents throughout the struggle.

She also spearheaded the 15-year education and lobbying campaign to establish her husband's birthday as a national holiday, now celebrated by millions worldwide in over 100 countries.

Yet for all this, there's no mention of Coretta Scott King at the recently dedicated memorial to Dr. King on the National Mall in Washington.

"It is an outrage that Coretta is nowhere to be found," says Reynolds. "Telling one story without the other creates a flaw and an imbalance — a scar on history."

Coretta Scott King was far more than "the woman behind the man." Never a mere appendage, she was an equal partner with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. throughout their lives. Her life and legacy with — and without — her husband, serve to remind us that black women make history too.

Martha Burk is a political psychologist, women's issues expert, and director of the Corporate Accountability Project for the National Council of Women's Organizations.

## The Incomparable Whitney Houston

### An inspiration to fulfill God-given talents

BY MARC H. MORIAL

Billie Holiday was 44. Judy Garland was 47. Dinah Washington was 39. Michael Jackson was 50. Jimi Hendrix was 28. Janis Joplin was 27. Amy Winehouse was 28. And



Whitney Houston lived only 48 years on this earth.

I was one of millions of people around the world who were stunned to learn of the untimely death of pop-music queen Whitney Houston. Like so many other entertainers who died too young, Whitney was blessed with a divine talent, but also haunted by a heavy load of troubles.

Throughout much of the 80s and 90s, Whitney Houston

reigned as the undisputed queen of pop.

With songs like "The Greatest Love of All," and "I Will Always Love You," she set a standard as an octave-shattering virtuoso who brought both elegance and a gospel-tinged intensity to her work in studio and on stage. That was surely a natural outgrowth of her church choir roots and being the daughter of classy gospel legend Cissy Houston.

Whitney got her start singing in the junior choir of Newark, N.J.'s New Hope Baptist Church, where her mother has served as Minister of Music for decades. Whitney also undoubtedly benefited from the influences of other great musical talents in her family.

Dionne Warwick was her cousin, and Aretha Franklin was her Godmother. But Whitney was a pure original.

In addition to setting the music world on fire and influencing such performers as Mariah Carey, Beyoncé and Jennifer Hudson,

Whitney also excelled as an actress and had starring roles in such movies as "The Bodyguard," "Waiting to Exhale" and "The Preacher's Wife."

Her final film, "Sparkle," a remake of the 1976 movie about three sisters from Harlem who form a singing group, is set to be released in August.



Whitney Houston

It is a sad irony that Whitney Houston died on the eve of this year's Grammy Awards. The winner of six Grammys herself, Whitney was preparing to attend a pre-Grammy party given by her mentor, the legendary music producer Clive Davis.

In her 2009 interview with Oprah Winfrey, Whitney revealed

for the first time, some of the most intimate details about her troubled marriage to Bobby Brown, the deep feelings she had for her mother and her daughter, Bobbie Kristina, and her struggles with drugs.

She candidly admitted to Oprah that at times "It was too much. So much to try to live up to, to try to

be, and I wanted out."

Through it all, Whitney said she was constantly reading her bible and trying to get back to God. While we are all shocked and saddened by her death, I am hopeful that Whitney Houston's life and incomparable musical gifts will inspire

others to let nothing stand in the way of the full and healthy expression of their God-given talents.

Our thoughts and prayers are with Cissy, Bobbie Kristina and the entire Houston family.

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