

## FILM REVIEW: 'Amazing Grace' Follows Live Recording of the Best-selling Gospel Album of All Time



In *Amazing Grace*, Aretha is a conduit who channels a spirit from above into the hearts of those who listen. With the premiere and distribution of this film, she can do that for eternity.

By **Dwight Brown**  
 NNPA News Wire Film Critic

Back in the day, if you couldn't get to church on Sunday to hear the pastor's sermon, you'd put on Aretha Franklin's "Amazing Grace" album, the best-selling gospel record of all time, and she would give you your spiritual fix. After a long delay, and its share of controversy, this uplifting documentary that preserved her live recording of that album is finding distribution. It's as if Franklin is sending a message to us from the great beyond. Thank heaven.

With the best of intentions, director Sydney Pollack and his crew filmed the Queen of Soul

as she performed over two days, January 2nd and 3rd, at the New Temple Missionary Baptist Church in Watts, Los Angeles in 1972. The smooth transition from her live recording to the now historic double album culminated with a Grammy Award for Best Soul Gospel Performance. The making of the documentary traveled a much rougher road. Apparently, Pollack and his crew had problems syncing the sound. It was a challenge that didn't get resolved until producer Alan Elliott bought the rights from Pollack in 2007.

Elliott then had two problems to solve. 1.) Fix the technical hitches and make a cohesive documentary. 2.) Overcome Franklin's resistance;

she successfully sued to stop the distribution of the film in 2011 and 2015. After she passed away, her estate gave permission for the film to be released, and it premiered at the DOC NYC Film Festival in New York on Monday November 12, 2018. So, was it worth the wait?

The master of ceremonies at the recording session is the legendary Reverend James Cleveland, whose rich baritone is somewhere between the soulful tones of Barry White and Teddy Pendergrass. Cleveland introduces the lady of soul with such reverence that you'd think a queen was walking into his church. And she is. Says the reverend with great pride: "She can sing anything. 'Three Blind Mice.' Any-

"magizoologist," meaning he has an army of supernatural animals at his disposal. Trouble is, Newt has been grounded by the British Ministry of Magic since inadvertently making such an embarrassing mess in the Big Apple during FBI.

Following a successful appeal of the harsh sentence, the unassuming hero's wand and travel rights are restored, setting in motion a series of events leading to an inevitable showdown with the megalomaniacal Grindelwald. Still, the deliberately-paced tale takes a number of nostalgic detours prior to the monumental clash of good vs. evil, thanks to Newt's fervent desire to remain neutral.

So, we're first treated

to a string of extraneous subplots, like distracting sidebars revolving around reunions with Professor Dumbledore (Jude Law) and Newt's old flame, Leta Lestrange (Zoe Kravitz). Diehard fans of the franchise are apt to appreciate such time-filling folderol while average audience members might grow increasingly impatient for the visually-captivating action sequences.

Overall, FB2 proves to be an entertaining episode ending on an engaging enough note to keep you curious about the next offering in J.K. Rowling's incomparable Wizarding World series.

Very Good ★★★

Rated PG-13 for action

Running time: 134 min.

thing."

Behind his pulpit is The Southern California Community Choir, directed by Alexander Hamilton. The singers have more enthusiasm than fans at a Beyoncé concert. On the side of the pulpit, Franklin's band warms up: Guitar: Cornell Dupree. Organ: Kenny Luper. Percussion: Pancho Morales.

written and formerly sung by Marvin Gaye "Wholy Holy." Then "How I Got Over" rocks the church to its core. The gospel standard "Precious Memories" is so solemn it could bring tears to anyone's eyes. Playfully she blends the Carol King song "You've Got A Friend" with the very traditional "Precious Lord (Take My

yeah. (Choir) Drown in the Red Sea." Franklin caresses the melody and draws extra meaning out of every word of a song that became popular again during the '60s civil rights movement.

There's more on view than just a memorable performance by one of America's most famous vocalists. Also on exhibit is a musical form that has been an integral part of the black community since Africans first arrived in America. What audiences witness, through song and on display, is a rich resilient culture that has an undeniable affinity with music. Also, the love on view in this house of worship in Watts is not unique. It plays out on Sundays in black churches all over the country. It's a continuous affirmation of customs. A spiritual calling. A communion with neighbors. And a front row seat to the evolution of black gospel music that started in fields and has grown into a very sophisticated art form with choirs, instruments and amplification. Spirituals have come a long way.

Kudos to Alan Elliott for managing and bringing to fruition a creative process that has stymied others for years. He does his best, considering some of the original footage is out of focus. Editor Jeff Buchanan magically weaves together the performances, anec-

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Drums: Bernard Purdie Bass: Chuck Rainey. The audience is a mix of parishioners, music fans and some well-known guests: Clara Ward, Aretha's father Reverend C.L. Franklin, along with Mick Jagger and Charlie Watts from the Rolling Stones.

Franklin floats into the room with an aura befitting Cleopatra. At the piano or standing in front of a mic on the podium, she launches into classic and contemporary gospel songs that show her versatility and musicianship. Her voice is at the peak of its powers. Clear. Piercing. Emotional. Divine. She settles into a modern gospel song

Hand),” displaying an equal feel for pop and gospel stylings.

Easily the most dramatic performance from the two days of singing has got to be her intense rendition of "Mary Don't You Weep." It's a classic spiritual that dates back to the Civil War when it was sung by slaves as a coded message that said that times will get better, oppressors will get their due, persevere and resist. In lyrics that the overseers could not fully understand, the chorus goes: "(Soloist) Pharaoh's army. (Choir) Pharaoh's army. (Soloist) I know you know that story of how they got drowned in the sea one day, oh

## Review

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the apprehension and imprisonment in New York City of the evil Gellert Grindelwald (Johnny Depp). However, while being transported across the proverbial pond to Europe, the dark wizard escapes his captors with the help of his minions.

Next thing you know, he's hatching a diabolical plot to establish a new world order by breeding a race of pure-blood witches and wizards to rule over all "muggles," aka ordinary people. Ultimately, the hope for saving humanity will rest on the shoulders of the picture's protagonist, Newt Salamander (Eddie Redmayne).

This good wizard is a

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