

## coverstory

BY GEORGE DICKIE



Cynthia Erivo stars in "Genius: Aretha," premiering Sunday on National Geographic.

# Erivo channels the Queen of Soul in NatGeo's 'Genius: Aretha'

Anyone who has heard Cynthia Erivo sing on stage or in film knows she has the pipes to play Aretha Franklin.

And she's a fan. Growing up in London, the Tony-, Grammy- and Emmy-winning singer and actress ("Harriet," "Bad Times at the El Royale") listened to her records, sang her songs and paid attention to the subtleties in her voice. In the end, it turned out to be perfect training for "Genius: Aretha."

Premiering Sunday, March 21, on National Geographic with double-stacked episodes across four consecutive nights (and also available for streaming the next day on Hulu), the eight-episode third installment of the "Genius" anthology franchise explores the career and musical brilliance of the artist otherwise known as the "Queen of Soul," who sold more than 75 million records worldwide and won 18 Grammy Awards among myriad accolades before her death in 2018.

Also starring Courtney B. Vance ("American Crime Story: The People v. O.J. Simpson"), Malcolm Barrett ("Timeless") and David Cross ("Mr. Show"), the series tells the story of a musical prodigy raised in Detroit in the 1940s and '50s, who taught herself to play the piano despite not being able to read music. At age 12, she began to record gospel music and go on tour with her father and at 18 she had her first record deal. By 24, she was at Atlantic Records, where she recorded many of her most iconic songs, compositions that young singers like Erivo cherished.

"I love Aretha," Erivo says. "... I learned to sing and tell stories... by listening to her. So you approach (the role) by paying attention to the music, listening to her voice, listening to how she communicates with her music. Reading."

The actress also gained much insight on her character from the 2018 documentary "Amazing Grace," which she says is "a really wonderful look into the relationship she has with people and the way she communicates, the way she is with others. I've been poring over lots of her interviews to find out her cadence and just different things really. I get to be a geek of something I really love, but that's how I've been getting into her."

And she also did a lot of singing, regardless of whether the cameras were rolling. On the series' set, director/executive producer Anthony Hemingway ("Underground") encouraged Erivo to vocalize as Franklin as she saw fit in an effort to help her connect with her character.

"Music is a real way to open up and to be vulnerable and to share the way one feels (and) to express the things that you can't say," Erivo explains. "And so, to be able to actually sing live means that I can be in the moment and I don't have to manufacture it. And it's there in the words, in the lyrics, in the music, in the way I have to sing it. So, for me, it's a gift, a true gift to be able to sing live on set, truly."

## Guide to the TV grids

PA: Parental advisory  
DVS: Descriptive video service  
EI: Educational/instructional  
D: Dialogue  
L: Language  
S: Sexual situations  
V: Violence

### HD scheduling, please note:

Schedules are based on standard-definition (SD) channels. High-definition (HD) channels may vary by three hours when a West Coast

programming feed is not available to your TV provider. Please refer to your provider's interactive TV guide for detailed HD channel schedules.

For a list of cable and over-the-air channels by zip code, as well up-to-the-minute TV programming, please visit [www.bendbulletin.com/tv](http://www.bendbulletin.com/tv). For questions or feedback please call The Bulletin Circulation Department at **541-385-5800**.

### TV Ratings:

'G': General audience  
'Y': Young children  
'7': Children over 7  
'14': Children over 14  
'PG': Parental guidance  
'M': Mature audience only

### Common symbols:

🔊: In stereo  
📺: Closed captioning  
iTV: Interactive TV program  
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