

Aretha Franklin and the Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO)

By [Abayomi Azikiwe](#)

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“Queen of Soul” cited in 270 pages of documents declassified by the FBI as they pursued Black revolutionary and communist influences in political and cultural life during the 1960s and 1970s

On August 16, 2018, Aretha Franklin, popularly known as the “Queen of Soul”, passed away at her home in Detroit, Michigan at the age of 76.

Born in Memphis, Tennessee on March 25, 1942, Aretha came to Detroit in 1946 with her parents, vocalist Mrs. Barbara Siggers Franklin and Rev. Clarence L. Franklin, a well-known minister who originated in the Delta region of Mississippi. Franklin became a minister while he was a teenager in Mississippi.

Rev. Franklin was recruited to come to Detroit from Buffalo, New York in late 1945 and in subsequent years built the New Bethel Baptist Church into an internationally recognized religious institution located on Hasting Street on the eastside of Detroit. The community surrounding the church was later targeted in the late 1950s and early 1960s for demolition in a so-called “urban renewal” project fostered by the then City of Detroit government and the Federal Highway Administration based in Washington, D.C.

By the early 1960s, Detroit was seething with discontent over the massive displacement of more than 100,000 people from the lower east side communities known as Paradise Valley and Black Bottom. Many small businesses, social clubs, churches and as well as thousands of homes were destroyed by the racist white city administration.

New Bethel relocated on Linwood Avenue in the Virginia Park District on the west side in the Spring of 1963. This was the same year of the massive “Walk to Freedom” down Woodward Avenue on June 23. The demonstration was the largest civil rights manifestation in the United States and would set the stage for the “March on Washington” just two months later. The Detroit Walk to Freedom was led by Rev. C. L. Franklin, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. of the

Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Rev. Albert Cleage of the Central Congregational Church, also located in the Virginia Park District on Linwood Avenue, among other community and labor leaders.

Rev. Franklin was heavily involved with the SCLC as a board member and fundraiser. Dr. King and his organization, in which he served as president, were subjected to intense spying and disruption efforts by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) along with segregationist southern state governments bolstered by law-enforcement agencies and business interests.

Aretha Franklin often traveled with her father during the 1950s in his highly popular gospel tours throughout the South and other regions of the U.S. By 1960, Aretha had signed a recording contract with Columbia Records in New York City. Later in 1967, she switched to Atlantic Records where her first album catapulted the soul artist to the top of the charts.

FBI Sought to Document “Communist Infiltration of the SCLC”

Of the 270 pages of FBI files which were the topic of several newspaper articles in early September, a substantial portion of the documents focus on the SCLC and its activities during 1967-1969. Dr. King in early 1967, had come out solidly in opposition to the U.S. occupation of Vietnam and described the war as an “enemy of the poor.”

King’s position on Vietnam coincided with a radicalization of the SCLC and other organizations such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the emergence of the Black Panther Party (BPP) and the Republic of New Africa (RNA), to name some of the most well-known groupings. In late July 1967, the city of Detroit erupted in a Black rebellion, the largest of such occurrences among all other municipalities during the period. New Bethel Church was located in the heart of the hardest hit areas of the rebellion, yet the building was unscathed by the violence.

A declassified FBI document from Atlanta, Georgia, dated August 1, 1967, noted that the SCLC was holding its annual convention in the city between the 14-17th of that month. This document reported that a weekly African American newspaper announced that “Carol Hoover (Special Fund-raising Officer, SCLC) is serving as coordinator of the convention. Sidney Poitier, popular actor, will be the featured speaker at the opening banquet August 14, 1967, and Aretha Franklin, popular entertainer, will also appear at the banquet.”

Dr. King was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee on April 4, 1968 after intervening in a citywide sanitation workers strike which had gone on for two months. Although the FBI and then Attorney General Ramsey Clark immediately claimed that King’s murder was not the result of a conspiracy, there is ample documented evidence that the SCLC co-founder and president was the subject an incessant surveillance and destabilization campaign by the federal government.

The SCLC convention was held in Memphis just four months after the assassination of King. On August 16, FBI sources in a document from the Special Agent-in-Charge to the Director of the FBI, under the topic “Communist Infiltration of the SCLC”, cited Rev. James Bevel, a SCLC staff member stating that:

“The United States Government is involved in acts of genocide against the Vietnamese people in a systematic murder of non-whites.’ He stated that the United States is in Vietnam for the reason that it wants to gain physical control of Vietnam because the

United States wants Vietnam's rice and Tungsten. He described Vietnam as 'the rice bowl of Asia' and stated that the United States wanted to use Vietnam as a military base from which to dominate all Asia."

In the first and second paragraphs of the confidential document dated August 21 on the 1968 SCLC convention in Memphis, it states:

"Enclosed herewith for the Bureau are 11 copies, Atlanta 4 copies, and for all listed offices 2 copies, an LHM (letterhead memorandum) and captioned as above. Copies are being furnished to the United States Attorney and United States Secret Service, Memphis, and to regional offices of Military Intelligence."

This same report from an FBI source noted a performance by Aretha Franklin at the convention along with comments made by her father, Rev. C.L. Franklin. The document quoted Rev. Franklin as saying:

"England has degenerated from a first to a third-rate power. He stated that Communist China has evolved from a second-rate to a first-rate power and now has atomic energy."

The Angela Davis Defense Campaign

On August 7, 1970, Jonathan Jackson, 17, the younger brother of Black Panther Party Field Marshal and prison writer, George L. Jackson, died in an ambush by Marin County Sheriff Deputies. Jackson had attempted to take a judge and several jurors hostage in an effort to free George from San Quentin prison. George Jackson was killed one year later on August 21, 1971 in another effort to win freedom.

Arms utilized in the operation on August 7, 1970 in California were connected to Angela Davis, a then-member of the Communist Party (CPUSA) who had been fired in 1969 from her teaching position at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) at the aegis of Governor Ronald Reagan due to her political affiliations. Davis had been a leader in the Soledad Brothers defense campaign and was immediately put on the FBI's most wanted list. She was later captured in October 1970 spawning an international campaign demanding her release.



A. Franklin



A. Davis

Aretha Says She'll Go Angela's Bond If Permitted

Soul Queen Aretha Franklin says she stands ready to go Angela Davis' bond, "whether it's \$100,000 or \$250,000," if the courts will let her. Miss Davis, 26-year-old former UCLA philosophy instructor and an admitted Communist, is being held in New York without bond pending extradition to San Rafael, Calif., where a Marin County grand jury returned murder, kidnaping and conspiracy indictments against her in connection with a courtroom escape attempt that took four lives. Miss Davis was accused of buying the guns that were used in the abortive attempt to free three prisoners.

Miss Franklin said, "My daddy (Detroit's Rev. C.L. Franklin) says I don't know what I'm doing. Well, I respect him, of course, but I'm going to stick by my beliefs. Angela Davis must go free. Black people will be free. I've been locked up (for disturbing the peace in Detroit) and I know you got to disturb the peace when you can't get no peace. Jail is hell to be in. I'm going to see her free if there is any justice in our courts, not

because I believe in communism, but because she's a Black woman and she wants freedom for Black people. I have the money; I got it from Black people—they've made me financially able to have it—and I want to use it in ways that will help our people."

Aretha Franklin in 1970 offered to post bond for Angela Davis (Source: Abayomi Azikiwe)

In a December 1970 [article](#) in Jet magazine Aretha offered to post bail for Angela Davis. She was quoted as saying:

"Angela Davis must go free. I've been locked up... and I know you got to disturb the peace when you can't get no peace. Jail is hell to be in. I'm going to see her free if there is any justice in our courts, not because I believe in communism, but because she's a Black woman and she wants freedom for Black people. I have the money; I got it from Black people."

Other documents released by the FBI point to Aretha being mentioned in meetings hosted by the Young Workers Liberation League (YWLL), a youth group connected to the CPUSA during the early 1970s. The meeting merely suggested her as a performer for fundraising activities aimed at building the Angela Davis defense campaign.

An August 26, 1971 document from the FBI office in Los Angeles suggests that Aretha Franklin was being solicited to perform at a function hosted by the Black Panther Party. Bobby Seale, the then Chairman of the BPP, was scheduled to oversee a free food distribution event where 5,000 needy families would be served. There is no evidence that Aretha appeared at the program.

An FBI memorandum dated May 29, 1973 from the Special Agent-in-Charge of New York to the Acting Director of the FBI said:

“Document C-173 is a letter from Harold R. Washington, requesting that she donate funds to the Women’s Bail Fund. This fund was used for bail of inmates at the Women’s House of Detention in NYC.”

However, the memorandum went on to say that:

“On 5/2/73 (redacted name) advised that to the best of his knowledge, Aretha Franklin has never been associated with the Black radical movement. In view of the fact there is no evidence of involvement by Miss Franklin in BLA (probably Black Liberation Army) activities and in view of her fame as a singer, it is felt that it would not be in the best interests of the Bureau to attempt to interview her.”

In the final document related to the counterintelligence program of the FBI which are present in the declassified files on Aretha Franklin, dated September 22, 1976, it reports:

“Captioned individual, not further identified may be identical with one female entertainer by the same name, who has not been the subject of an investigation conducted by this Bureau. Our files, however, reveal that ‘The Daily People’s World’, a West Coast communist newspaper, carried a story under March 6, 1972, dateline, citing star performers raised \$38,000 at Los Angeles for the Committee to Free Angela Davis... In September 1972, a confidential source abroad advised that Coordinating Council for the Liberation of Dominica (CCLD) was a Black extremist group bent on disturbing the tranquility of the island of Dominica and the CCLD may have established a base of operation in the New York City area. The same source identified persons associated or known to Roosevelt Bernard Douglas, a Black extremist of international note, and the CCLD. One of the persons named was ‘Aretha Franklin, publicly known entertainer.’”

This same document from 1976 also reports: “In April 1973, during a review of documents obtained concerning the Black Liberation Army (BLA), one document bore the address of ‘Mrs. Aretha Franklin’ in care of Queens Booking Agency, 1650 Broadway, Room 1410, New York, New York. The BLA was a quasi-military group composed of small guerrilla units employing the tactics of urban guerrilla warfare against the established order with a view toward achieving revolutionary change in America. The significance of association of Franklin into the BLA is not known to this Bureau.”

In reviewing these documents one comes away with the feeling that there are additional entries which may have remained classified by the FBI. Other documents deal with suspicious letters sent to Aretha Franklin between 1968 and 1979 which came to the attention of the FBI through her managers and attorneys.

The last section of the declassified documents dwelled extensively on a copyright infringement investigation which led to an FBI raid on a private individual in Ohio. This investigation was initiated by a Detroit-based law firm which was handling Aretha Franklin’s affairs between 2005-2007. However, the FBI did not pursue the prosecution of the individual who admitted to unlawfully reproducing Franklin’s music and videos.

These documents do shed light on the extensive level of surveillance and destabilization launched by the U.S. government against the Civil Rights, Black Power and Left movements of the 1960s and 1970s. With the FBI being the chief law-enforcement agency in the country, this reveals that the state has never fully accepted the right of African American

people to full emancipation and self-determination.

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Abayomi Azikiwe is the editor of the Pan-African News Wire. He is a regular contributor to Global Research.

Featured image: Aretha Franklin, Rev. C.L. Franklin and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in Detroit, Feb. 16, 1968 (Source: Abayomi Azikiwe)

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