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(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman
A Song by Carole King and Gerry Goffin –
Unbroken Through More Than 50 Years in Popular Music

Term Paper
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1) Introduction

Carol King was born as Carol Joan Klein in 1942 in New York. Her grandparents were Jewish emigrants from Poland. Her mother Euginia gave piano lessons to the children from their neighbourhood; Carol got perfect pitch. Her father Sidney was a fire fighter. As Carol was very excited by the Alan Freed Show, she talked to him and wanted him to listen to her songs. He told her to go and play her songs for record companies. Jerry Wexler, the man who some years later produced (*You Make Me Feel Like*) *A Natural Woman*, was the first one to whom she introduced her songs with age 15.¹ He and Ahmet Ertegun run Atlantic Records at this time, the label that produced The Drifters, Ray Charles, Ruth Brown, Joe Turner etc.. Jerry Wexler, also with Jewish Polish roots, was the man who changed the term „race music“ to „Rhythm’n’Blues“. But the first one who gave a contract to Carol Klein in 1957 was Don Costa, head of A&R at ABC-Paramount Records at this time. Later on he would produce, arrange, and conduct for Sammy Davis jr., Frank Sinatra, Trini Lopez etc.. Carol’s first releases were quite unknown to the public. In 1958 she changed her name to Carole King. At Queens College she got friends with Paul Simon, and there she also came to know her later partner in songwriting and life, Gerry Goffin. When they met first, they wrote a song together and then continued their collaboration. In 1959 they got married, she with age 17, he with age 20. They lived in a one room apartment, both had daytime jobs, and in the evenings they were writing songs until they got a three-year publishing contract from Don Kirshner and Al Nevins for Aldon Music. They would continue their collaborations for years. Aldon Music was based at 1650 Broadway/West 51st Street. It was a bootcamp for songwriters, and it was usual that they worked as duos, e.g. Cynthia Weill and Barry Mann, the „other married songwriter team“, Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, Neil Sedaka and Howard Greenfield, etc.. The so-called Brill Building was very close, at 1619 Broadway/West 49th Street.

„The structure of Brill Building is an example of ‚vertical integration‘; that is to say that publishers, songwriters, arrangers, producers and performers were located in such proximity, that the entire process of writing a song, arranging it, transcribing it,

¹ cf: Carole King, *A Natural Woman. A Memoir*, New York, 2013, p. 66.

² Simon Barber, *The Brill Building and the creative labour of the professional songwriter*, in: *The*

recording a demo, pitching the song to a label or artist, and contracting a ‚plugger‘ to take the song to radio, could all be done in-house.“²

Aldon Music functioned very similar, they also offered pianos to the songwriters and the possibility to record their songs there. Very often the houses got mixed up with each other, but we can finally say that this „Brill Building Sound“³ was THE sound of popular music in the U.S. before the British invasion through the Beatles. Most writers, producers, and publishers were white Jewish people with a political progressive and non-racist mindset, working for male and female Afroamerican musicians, also for so called girl groups as The Cookies. The Shirelles for example delivered one big hit, written by Carole King and Gerry Goffin in 1960, *Will You Love Me Tomorrow*. So did The Cookies in 1961 with *Chains*, later also sung by The Beatles. The white singer Bobby Vee interpreted hits as *It Might As Well Rain Until September*, and *Take Good Care Of My Baby*. The black singer Little Eva landed another hit of King/Goffin with *The Loco-Motion*. Carole King writes in her memoirs: (At age 22 and 25) „Gerry and I never considered the possibility that our success might not last forever.“⁴

When it came to writing *(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman* for Aretha Franklin in 1967, Carole King and Gerry Goffin were already very successful songwriters, had two children, they had moved to the west coast, to Los Angeles, and were traveling back and forth for their work. They got divorced the same year. Carole King was not a performer herself at this time. She started off her career as musician as sideman on piano for James Taylor, who also sang her songs. He was the one who made her sing lead with her song *Up On The Roof*. She herself released *(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman* in 1971 on her album *Tapestry* for which she got 4 Grammys.

I absolutely appreciate Carole King’s singing and performing – from *Tapestry* to her concert at the Hyde Park in 2016. She is pure and direct in expression, never using any unnecessary embellishments, without glamour or star behaviour. In every moment listening to her or watching her I got the impression that she is just doing what she has to do – writing, playing and singing her songs. She is incredibly successful, and her songs already seem to be unforgettable. She is one of the very

² Simon Barber, *The Brill Building and the creative labour of the professional songwriter*, in: *The Cambridge Companion to the Singer-Songwriter*, Katherine Williams und Justin A. Williams (Hg.), p. 68.

³ cf: Barber, *The Brill Building*, p. 67-77.

⁴ Carole King, *A Natural Woman. A Memoir*, New York, 2013, p.109.

few women of her time making her way, and also making her business in a world of „brotherhood“, as singer and producer Linda Perry calls it in her song „What’s Up“ in 1992. Carole King made all this already in the 60ies. And – I have to mention it – within this music business she stayed healthy, never got drug addicted, and also is a mother of four children. As composer she became very important for many others as Elton John⁵ or even John Lennon.

(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman was sung and interpreted countless times since then. I don’t analyze Carole King’s performances within this work, because I’m tracing this question why nobody ever changed its style, as we know it from other famous songs like *Sound Of Silence* of Paul Simon, for example. It is fascinating that *(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman* survived unbroken through more than 50 years. In spite of the incredible development of technical production in pop music, and in spite of the fact that parts of the lyrics wouldn’t be the words of a self confident woman of today. Why did nobody ever change these lyrics? Why did nobody ever give a „new“ or broken interpretation of this song? Is this „you“ in the lyrics necessary to feel „like a natural woman“? Does it matter that these lyrics were written by a man? I will give you a deeper insight of the production background of this song, based on Carole King’s memoirs out of her biography with the same title: *Carole King. A Natural Woman*. I will further have a look at Alicia Keys’ and Adele’s versions, performed in 2015 and 2017, analyzing their different ways of singing and arranging it, trying to figure out the very essence of *A Natural Woman*.

2) The genesis of *(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman*

Carole King and her then-husband Gerry Goffin walked down Broadway

„when a long black limousine with dark windows pulled up alongside us. The rear window rolled down and revealed Jerry Wexler. He got right to the point. ‚I’m looking for a really big hit for Aretha.‘ [...] ‚How about writing a song called ‚Natural Woman‘?“⁶

Carole King writes in her memoirs about their excitement and discussing the theme on their way back home. After having had dinner with their kids they sat down to work out the song. Carole played the chords, and Gerry came in with the lyrics. They

⁵ Carole King, *Tapestry: Live In Hyde Park*, CD/DVD, recorded and filmed at British Summer Time on July 3rd, 2016, Rockingale Records 88985404812.

⁶ Carole King, *A Natural Woman. A Memoir*, New York, 2013, p. 122.

made a demo recording the same evening and gave it to Jerry Wexler the next day. He said he'd like the song and that he would call them when he knows more. Actually, when he called them, the song was already arranged and recorded.⁷ It was first released as a single, and on Aretha Franklin's album *Lady Soul* in 1967 on Atlantic Records. It got number 8 in the Billboard Top 100, and number 2 in the Billboard R&B Charts.

3) Analyzing the song

3.1 Form and harmony

Looking at the original score the song is written in A major and structured in four parts: Part A, the verse, has 16 bars. Part B, the pre-chorus, then follows with 7 bars. The „missing“ 8th bar is then included in part C, the chorus, in a 9 bar form. Part A, B, and C, are then repeated. The second chorus is followed from part D, the bridge, with 16 bars, leading back to the chorus with some repetitions and extensions in the ending.

It got a $\frac{3}{4}$ rhythm and is intended to give kind of a gospel feel. Following the structure and analyzing the chords, we have to say that this song is almost composed in a modal way. Whenever it moves to step V, the dominant has either a different bass note (c#, step III), or we have the dominant e in the bass under a B minor chord (step II). So the whole song is much more moving between tonic and subdominant, sometimes also using the double subdominant. Only the pre-chorus is gently moving between step II and III, then also getting to the IV, the Dmaj7 chord, and starting off the chorus with a Bm7/E chord (II over V) leading to the tonic, pendeling between I and IV, partly using the c# (III) in the bass and then coming back to this Bm7/E chord. The bridge is first wamping between I and VII (double subdominant), then coming back to the IV, Dmaj7. Here the Dmaj7 chord gets the function of a second dominant. For two bars we find an Am7/D chord, what means, that the temporary tonic would be in the key of G, what is also the double subdominat of the basic key. But then, for the last and extended chorus, we are safely lead back to the key of A. It

⁷ cf. King, *A Natural Woman*. p. 122-126.

is evident that the song is very subtle and clever organized, although it always seems to stay within its main harmony.

3.2 Arrangement

Arif Mardin wrote the arrangement for the very first recording with Aretha Franklin in 1967. He was born in Turkey in 1932 (died 2006 in NY), studied music at the Berklee College, and was the main arranger for Atlantic Records and responsible for the typical sound of the label and their Soul productions.

(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman is musically based on a Rhythm'n'Blues track with piano, bass and drums, backed and bedded through strings and brass. The call and response between lead and backing vocals definitely evokes a gospel feeling, the home and background of soul music.

The piano, played by Spooner Oldham (songwriter and studio musician), definitely is the dominant instrument, underlining the expression of the song in the very best way. Whenever the songline gets a little break – as if the singer would be thinking for a moment before coming along with the next words – the piano plays four very characteristic chords (D – A/C# – Bm7 – A; IV – I/III – II – I) to lead over to the continuing story.

The string orchestra, conducted by Ralph Burns (also arranger and pianist), is gently backing and bedding the song; the brass section only appears during the chorus to give it more strength. The backing vocals, sung by Aretha Franklin's sisters Erma and Carolyn, certainly belong to the most famous „a-oo“s in the world. Gene Chrisman on drums is very decent and unspectacular, most times going hand in hand with the bass line.

Tommy Cogbill (a highly sought-after studio musician, working for many Atlantic recordings) plays this bass line on the very first recording only on the 1 (except the overleading bars) through part A and B. In the chorus then it accentuates the main melody „You make me feel, you make me feel“, and then moves together with the songline through the whole passage of „You make me feel like a natural woman“. This is repeated through the whole song; in the second A- and B-part the bass plays some more accentuations, during the bridge it stays consequently on the fundamental tone of the chords, playing every $\frac{1}{4}$ note, to give the change in harmony hold and strength.

Not to forget about the sound: Tom Dowd was the sound engineer working on this song and for Jerry Wexler at this time, giving the recordings of Aretha Franklin (and generally of Atlantic Records) their very specific sound.

3.3 Melody and lyrics

The song starts off with almost spoken lyrics, thoughtful, a little bit depressed or sad, and narrative in part A:

„Looking out in the morning rain, I used to feel uninspired.

And when I knew I had to face another day, Lord, it made me feel so tired.“

In part B we realize a slow change in mood:

„Before the day I met you, life was so unkind.

Your love was the key to my peace of mind.“

And these words perfectly lead to part C, the chorus:

„’cause you make me feel, you make me feel, you make me feel like a natural woman.“

The emphasis is always put on the „you“, which is also the highest note. The phrase „you make me feel“ is repeated three times before it comes to the downwards falling line „a natural woman“.

Already at this point of analyzing we can see, that the „you“ is of importance for the whole song and its meaning and understanding.

The second verse starts with amazing lyrics:

„When my soul was in the lost and found, you came along to claim it.

I didn’t know just what was wrong with me, ’til your kiss helped me name it.“

But then comes a sentence that no self confident woman nowadays would ever say:

„Now I’m no longer doubtful of what I’m living for,

’cause if I make you happy I don’t need to do more.“

It’s kind of interesting that nobody until today ever changed these words. And we can be sure that none of all these great singers who interpreted this song are (or were) living just to make their lover, boyfriend, or husband happy.

Are words less important than the music? Or has this „you“ got a much deeper and transcendent meaning?

I will come back to this question at a later point. Let’s first get through the whole lyrics. The text is continuing with the following words in the bridge:

„Oh, baby, what you’ve done to me! You make me feel so good inside.

And I just want to be close to you. You make me feel so alive!“

The accent here is definitely put on the word „alive“. The whole phrase is musically leading there. Whatever or whoever this „you“ is, certainly we all are longing for someone who gives us the feeling of being meaningful and alive. Both makes sense and feels good.

And how does Aretha Franklin sing the song?

4) Aretha Franklin's voice and interpretation

4.1 The first recording in 1967

Aretha Franklin's voice is rough and clear at the same time. Every word and every single note is meaningful. We feel her power in every moment, even when she sings in a narrative way, even when she doesn't force anything at all. But when she comes to the chorus and sings it with all her power it sounds like a jubilation. And, together with the backing vocals and the thoughtful arrangement of all instruments, it IS a jubilation.⁸ The backing vocals repeat and underline the words and phrases, and yes, this is the sound of the black church. Her father, Reverend C. L. Franklin, was a Baptist star preacher, touring with gospel musicians. Her mother was a gospel singer. She left the family when Aretha was a kid. Aretha Franklin herself had four children, the first ones she got with age 12 and 14. She knew Mahalia Jackson, the big „mother“ of gospel, who sometimes came over to fix a soup for the kids.⁹ She won 18 Grammys and got many more awards, she was said to be the „Queen of Soul“. What do we hear in Aretha's voice? Christian Staas points it out this way:

„Aretha Franklin hat die Fähigkeit, einen devoten Lovesong wie (*You Make Me Feel Like*) *A Natural Woman* wie ein Dokument weiblichen Selbstbewusstseins klingen zu lassen. [...] Egal, was sie singt: Die Wahrheit liegt nicht in den Worten, sondern in ihrer Stimme. Diese Stimme sagt: Ich lasse mich nicht unterkriegen. Allein darin, in dieser Gewissheit, liegt immer auch eine politische Botschaft,...“¹⁰

Is this already the answer to the questions above?

⁸ Aretha Franklin on *Respect, The Very Best Of Aretha Franklin*, Compilation, Warner 09270542, 2003.

⁹ Christian Staas, *Sie war Soul*, Zeit online, 17. 8. 2018, [url: <https://www.zeit.de/kultur/musik/2018-08/aretha-franklin-soul-saengerin-gestorben-nachruf/seite-3>, lastly recalled June 2, 2019]

¹⁰ Christian Staas, *Sie war Soul*, Zeit online, 17. 8. 2018, [url: <https://www.zeit.de/kultur/musik/2018-08/aretha-franklin-soul-saengerin-gestorben-nachruf/seite-3>, zuletzt abgerufen am 2. 6. 2019]

Carol King writes in her memoirs: „But in the end it was Aretha’s performance that sent our song not only to the top of the charts but all the way to heaven.“¹¹

Is the primary recording and interpretation of Aretha Franklin so strong that we all feel the power of Soul when we listen to the song? Has it become a female statement saying that no matter what else we do, how famous and strong in our careers we may be, that a part of us (women) stays this „natural woman“, happy to be close to the beloved „you“, unbroken?

4.2 Aretha Franklin’s live performance at the Kennedy Center Honors in 2015

To follow the question what we HEAR when we listen to Aretha Franklin I want to consider a much later performance of her. With age 73 she sings the song at the Kennedy Center Honors, where Carole King is one of the award winners (next to George Lucas, e.g.) under president Barack Obama.¹² When getting on stage she is sending kisses to Carole King who is sending kisses back to her. We see two women, both over 70 in age, a white Jewish and a black one, expressing their appreciation and love for each other.

Aretha Franklin’s phrasing is a bit different to her first recording, and still she is telling us a story, seemingly out of this very moment. The orchestral arrangement is broader, and so are the backing vocals. Aretha Franklin first sits on the grand piano, with big jewels and a long mink coat, and sings and plays herself. During the bridge she stands up and continues, now directly singing to the audience. (Another piano player fluently takes in the position on the instrument.) And here she stands. With full power in her voice. With full strength in personality. Taking the audience with her. People follow her with enthusiasm, they sing with her, smile, or have tears in their eyes (even the president), and her extraordinary energy fills the opera room and the hearts of seemingly everybody. Aretha Franklin takes some freedom now in her interpretation, with a first accentuation on the word „alive“ („you make me feel so alive“), almost screaming, highly spirited, in this so typical manner of Soul and the black Baptist church. The next emphasis in her improvising she puts on the word „woman“, repeating it again and again, „A woman“. And what do we hear? A big, wide, female voice. Definitely. Roughness and strength, highly spirited. Do we hear

¹¹ Carole King, *A Natural Woman. A Memoir*, New York, 2013, p. 125.

¹² Aretha Franklin at the Kennedy Center Honors in 2015, (*You Make Me Feel Like*) *A Natural Woman*, [url: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XHsnZT7Z2yQ>, zuletzt abgerufen am 25. 6. 2019]

her age, in comparison to her first recording? The answer is definitely: No. Her voice, of course, has changed a bit, but we don't hear an „old“ voice at all, which would mean a smaller range, partly breaking, less elasticity and power, etc.. Maybe her voice sounds ageless. Definitely she got more power than in her first recording. And all this seems to be much more important than the analysis of single notes. „A woman, a natural woman“ – Aretha Franklin's interpretation has taken this song, composed by a white woman, with lyrics written by a white man, to a different level. What seems to be a simple love song, has indeed become a female statement. Being a black woman in the States, born in 1942, she has experienced all kinds of racism and repression, we can be sure about this. With the tiny view I gave on her life, we know, she has experienced all kinds of female tragic and responsibility, too. But still she stands there like a priest, or a Goddess, pure expression of female power – strong, wild, big, self confident, almost unbreakable – maybe being the true expression of what it means to be a „natural woman“.

5) Alicia Keys' and Adele's interpretation

5.1 Alicia Keys: The Gospel Style

Alicia Keys, one of the most famous singers, pianists and songwriters in today's pop culture, calls Carole King „the most magnificent songwriter, composer on earth..“¹³ when introducing *(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman* at the Carole King Tribute. She seems to be nervous when she sits down at the piano. She starts off the tune with the same chords, but plays them a little bit reduced in comparison to the original recording. Her voice is full and expressive, she absolutely gives you the story. After the second chorus she gets up and takes a free passage. She now acts similar to Aretha Franklin, and at this point she seems not only to sing, but to BE gospel, soul and funk at the same time. As we know it from black preachers, her voice gets intense with full excitement, she sings phrases and repeats them herself, also, the audience and her background vocalists repeat what she says, the typical call and response, coming from the African spiritual tradition. She is improvising, conducting the band, giving instructions with her arms to the hammond organist who is

¹³ Alicia Keys, performing *A Natural Woman* at the Carole King Tribute, [url: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FslDwBaVO0>], lastly recalled June 25th, 2019]

then conducting the whole band and orchestra. This is not only a highly professional performance of a fantastic singer and band leader, this is also the way gospel is sung: The singer or preacher is the leading part, the organist is always following and underlining his or her instructions, mood, and expression. There she stands and sings, with full body expression, with full risk, giving it all to the audience, being it all at the same time: a famous, successful, highly professional, beautiful woman, singing *(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman*. And wherever she stands in her career, we can feel her nature, her strong female nature, her strenght and power. There's no moment where anybody would think she needs a „you“ to be what and who she is, or to know what to do in her life. It is also clear that she is not a pop puppet, created by a label, no, with all her achievements she is and stayed a „natural woman“.

And now there comes an important point: The „you“ in gospel is meant to be God. In a spiritual meaning this is the place of your home, your relief, your strenght, your tears, your trust, and your joy. And when we go further, and think this „you“ in a transcendent way, we find this „you“ everywhere. This may be God, in its very essence, but it may also be a loving partner, or the divine in every human being. In Indian culture we know the word „Namasté“ meaning: I greet and see the divine in you. In other words: Without the other one we wouldn't be recognized.

When Alicia Keys, or Aretha Franklin, or Carole King, would be standing there alone – who would hear them, recognize them, who would hear this song, who would accompany them?

Alicia Keys is not „needy“ at all, but she needs a band, an audience, a company, a label, publishers, sound engineers, distributers etc. to get recognition for what she does and is.

Carole King points it out this way: „But a recording that moves people is never just about the artist and the songwriters. It's about people like Jerry (Wexler) and Ahmet (Ertegun), who matched the songwriters with a great title and a gifted artist.“¹⁴ In her memoires she then names all people being envolved in the first recording, and finally she says:

„It takes a lot more people to deliver a song than most people are aware of, but you, the listener, are the most important person in the process. You complete the circle. You inspire us to write, sing, arrange, record, and promote songs that move us because we

¹⁴ Carole King, *A Natural Woman. A Memoir*, New York, 2013, p. 125.

hope they will move you, too. There might still be an ‚us‘ without you, but you make us matter, and you make us better.“¹⁵

So here we have the „you“ again. And this „you“ is the listener. The reader. The follower. The audience. And the whole producing and publishing machinery.

5.2 Adele: The intimate version

In Adele’s live version¹⁶ she is only accompanied by her e-guitarist. He plays many of the characteristic overleading chords just with their fundamental note and takes over the original e-bass function, underlining the phrase „you make me feel like a natural woman“. This reduced and pure arrangement, the dialogue between the vocalist and the guitar, between a woman and a man gives the song a special intimacy. Actually it was composed and written as a dialogue between a woman and a man. The guitar sounds subtle and gentle, but very present, Adele’s voice is one of these extraordinary white voices with this big and rough timbre and strong in expression as we usually know it from black singers. In her interpretation the focus is put on the love song. So there the „you“ is definitely meant to be the loving and beloved man.

6) Conclusion

We can finally say that the „you“ in the song may be interpreted as a loving partner, God, every human being, the audience, and in best case all people involved in the whole production process. It is not of relevance that a man has written these lyrics. The „you“ is not mirroring the person, but seems to be necessary to achieve recognition. This natural woman is a woman of full power and strength, not having lost the ability to be a lover who sometimes just wants to make the other one happy. The singer maybe also wants to make her audience happy. It doesn’t matter at all whether the song is written out of a very personal experience or not. The songwriters did what makes a great song: They wrote a song that everybody, or, in this case, at

¹⁵ Carole King, *A Natural Woman*, p. 125-126.

¹⁶ Adele Atkins, performing *A Natural Woman*, [url: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pb6Qj9IUygw>, lastly recalled June 25, 2019]

least every woman is able to feel and experience. The listener can identify with the song. Donald Brackett says about songwriters:

„Basically, they all work inside coal mines, but in the coal mines of their own personalities and identities, real or imagined, into which they must first descend to scrape away at the dim walls of their own emotional mine shafts. The raw material they chip away out of the deep darkness, a coal blacker than belief, eventually becomes refined, baked under extreme pressure until it somehow is transformed into that other substance that originates as humble carbon but which we all treasure so greatly: the glittering diamond of a great song.“¹⁷

Aretha Franklin's interpretation makes the song a special female statement. This is probably one of the reasons why this song is still sung unbroken. The pop production style of today has no impact of importance to the song as we can see and hear in the recent live recordings discussed above. This means that the song itself is so strong, that different arrangements, performers, or sound adaptations don't change its original expression. We can indeed call it a diamond.

¹⁷ Donald Brackett, *Dark Mirror. The Pathology of the Singer-Songwriter*, Westport 2008, p. xiii.

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