



Roberta Flack

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Roberta Cleopatra Flack (born February 10, 1937)^{[2][3]} is an American singer. She is known for her #1 singles "[The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face](#)", "[Killing Me Softly with His Song](#)" and "[Feel Like Makin' Love](#)", and for "[Where Is the Love](#)" and "[The Closer I Get to You](#)", two of her many duets with [Donny Hathaway](#).

Flack was the first, and remains the only, solo artist to win the [Grammy Award for Record of the Year](#) on two consecutive years: "[The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face](#)" won at the [1973 Grammys](#) as did "[Killing Me Softly with His Song](#)" at the [1974 Grammys](#).

Early life

Flack lived with a musical family, born in [Black Mountain](#), North Carolina to parents [Laron LeRoy](#) and [Irene Council](#)^[4] Flack^[5] a church organist,^[6] on February 10, 1937^{[7][2]} and raised in [Arlington](#), [Virginia](#).^[8] Her interests in performing were inspired when she discovered the work of [Mahalia Jackson](#) and [Sam Cooke](#) while singing in a predominantly African-American [Baptist church](#).

When Flack was nine, she started taking an interest in playing the piano,^[5] and during her early teens, Flack so excelled at classical piano that [Howard University](#) awarded her a full music scholarship.^[9] By age 15, she entered Howard University, making her one of the youngest students ever to enroll there. She eventually changed her major from piano to voice, and became an assistant conductor of the university choir. Her direction of a production of *[Aida](#)* received a standing ovation from the Howard University faculty. Flack is a member of [Delta Sigma Theta sorority](#) and was made an honorary member of [Tau Beta Sigma](#) by the Eta Delta Chapter at Howard University for her outstanding work in promoting music education.

Roberta Flack



Roberta Flack in concert in 1992

Background information

Birth name	Roberta Cleopatra Flack
Also known as	Rubina Flake ^[1]
Born	February 10, 1937 <div>Black Mountain, North Carolina, U.S.</div>
Genres	Jazz , folk , soul , R&B
Occupation(s)	Singer-songwriter, musician
Instrument(s)	Vocals, piano, keyboards
Years active	1968–present
Labels	Atlantic (1968–1996) <div>Angel / Capitol (1997)</div> <div>RAS / 429 / Sony/ATV (2011–present)</div>
Website	Robertaflack.com (http://www.robertaflack.com/)

Roberta Flack became a student teacher at a school near Chevy Chase, Maryland. She graduated from Howard University at 19 and began graduate studies in music, but the sudden death of her father forced her to take a job teaching music and English in Farmville, North Carolina.^[10]

Career

Early career

Before becoming a professional singer-songwriter, Flack returned to Washington, D.C. and taught at Browne Junior High and Rabaut Junior High. She also taught private piano lessons out of her home on Euclid St. NW. During this period, her music career began to take shape on evenings and weekends in Washington, D.C. area night spots. At the Tivoli Club, she accompanied opera singers at the piano. During intermissions, she would sing blues, folk, and pop standards in a back room, accompanying herself on the piano. Later, she performed several nights a week at the 1520 Club, again providing her own piano accompaniment. Around this time, her voice teacher, Frederick "Wilkie" Wilkerson, told her that he saw a brighter future for her in pop music than in the classics. She modified her repertoire accordingly and her reputation spread. Flack began singing professionally after being hired to perform regularly at Mr. Henry's Restaurant, on Capitol Hill, Washington, DC in 1968.^{[11][12]}

The atmosphere in Mr. Henry's was welcoming and the club turned into a showcase for the young music teacher. Her voice mesmerized locals and word spread. A-list entertainers who were appearing in town would come in late at night to hear her sing (frequent visitors included Woody Allen, Bill Cosby, Ramsey Lewis and others).

As Yaffe recalled, "She told me if I could give her work there three nights a week, she would quit teaching." He did and she did.

To meet Roberta's exacting standards, Yaffe transformed the apartment above the bar into the Roberta Flack Room. "I got the oak paneling from the old Dodge Hotel near Union Station. I put in heavy upholstered chairs, sort of a conservative style from the 50s and an acoustical system designed especially for Roberta. She was very demanding. She was a perfectionist."

1970s

Les McCann discovered Flack singing and playing jazz in a Washington nightclub.^[5] He later said on the liner notes of what would be her first album *First Take* noted below, "Her voice touched, tapped, trapped, and kicked every emotion I've ever known. I laughed, cried, and screamed for more...she alone had the voice." Very quickly, he arranged an audition for her with Atlantic Records, during which she played 42 songs in 3 hours for producer Joel Dorn. In November 1968, she recorded 39 song demos in less than 10 hours. Three months later, Atlantic reportedly recorded Roberta's debut album, *First Take*, in a mere 10 hours.^[8] Flack later spoke of those studio sessions as a "very naive and beautiful approach... I was comfortable with the music because I had worked on all these songs for all the years I had worked at Mr. Henry's."

In 1971, Flack was a member of the legendary 1971 Soul to Soul concert film by Denis Sanders, which was headlined by soul singer Wilson Pickett along with R&B duo Ike & Tina Turner, the Santana band featuring electric guitarist and Mexican-American Carlos Santana, gospel, soul, and R&B group The Staple Singers, soul

pianist/vocalist Les McCann and saxophonist Eddie Harris, and The Voices of Harlem among others. The U.S. delegation of musical artists was invited to perform for 14th anniversary of African independence in Ghana.^[13] The film was digitally reissued as DVD and CD packet in 2004 but Roberta Flack declined permission for her image and recording to be included for unknown reasons. Her captivating a cappella performance of the traditional spiritual "Oh Freedom" retitled "Freedom Song" on the original Soul to Soul LP soundtrack is only available in the VHS version of the film.^{[14][15]}

Flack's cover version of "Will You Love Me Tomorrow" hit number 76 on the Billboard Hot 100 in 1972. Her Atlantic recordings did not sell particularly well, until actor/director Clint Eastwood chose a song from *First Take*, "The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face" written by Ewan MacColl, for the sound track of his directorial debut *Play Misty for Me*; it became the biggest hit of the year for 1972 – spending six consecutive weeks at #1 and earning Flack a million-selling Gold disc.^[16] The *First Take* album also went to #1 and eventually sold 1.9 million copies in the United States. Eastwood, who paid \$2,000 for the use of the song in the film,^[17] has remained an admirer and friend of Flack's ever since. It was awarded the Grammy Award for Record of the Year in 1973. In 1983, she recorded the end music to the Dirty Harry film *Sudden Impact* at Eastwood's request.^[8]

In 1972, Flack began recording regularly with Donny Hathaway, scoring hits such as the Grammy-winning "Where Is the Love" (1972) and later "The Closer I Get to You" (1978) – both million-selling gold singles.^[16] Flack and Hathaway recorded several duets together, including two LPs, until Hathaway's 1979 death.

On her own, Flack scored her second #1 hit in 1973, "Killing Me Softly with His Song" written by Charles Fox and Norman Gimbel, and originally performed by Lori Lieberman.^[18] It was awarded both Record of the Year and Best Pop Vocal Performance, Female at the 1974 Grammy Awards. Its parent album was Flack's biggest-selling disc, eventually earning double platinum certification. In 1974, Flack released "Feel Like Makin' Love," which became her third and final #1 hit to date on the Hot 100. That same year, Flack sang the lead on a Sherman Brothers song called "Freedom", which featured prominently at the opening and closing of the movie *Huckleberry Finn*.

1980s

Roberta Flack had a 1982 hit single with "Making Love", written by Burt Bacharach (the title track of the 1982 film of the same name), which reached #13. She began working with Peabo Bryson with more limited success, charting as high as #5 on the R&B chart (plus #16 Pop and #4 Adult Contemporary) with "Tonight, I Celebrate My Love" in 1983. Her next two singles with Bryson, "You're Looking Like Love To Me" and "I Just Came Here To Dance," fared better on adult contemporary (AC) radio than on pop or R&B radio.

In 1986, Flack sang the theme song entitled "Together Through the Years" for the NBC television series *Valerie*, later known as *The Hogan Family*. The song was used throughout the show's six seasons. *Oasis* was released in 1988 and failed to make an impact with pop audiences, though the title track reached #1 on the R&B chart and a remix of "Uh-Uh Ooh-Ooh Look Out (Here It Comes)" topped the dance chart in 1989. Flack found herself again in the US Top 10 with the hit song "Set the Night to Music", a 1991 duet with Jamaican vocalist Maxi Priest that peaked at #6 on the Billboard Hot 100 charts and #2 AC. Flack's smooth R&B sound lent itself easily to Easy Listening airplay during the 1970s, and she has had four #1 AC hits.

Later career

In 1999, a star with Flack's name was placed on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.^[9] That same year, she gave a concert tour in South Africa; the final performance was attended by President Nelson Mandela. In 2010, she appeared on the 52nd Annual Grammy Awards, singing a duet of "Where Is The Love" with Maxwell.

In February 2012, Flack released *Let it Be Roberta*, an album of Beatles covers including "Hey Jude" and "Let It Be". It was her first recording in over eight years.^[19] Flack knew John Lennon and Yoko Ono, as both households moved in 1975 into The Dakota apartment building in New York City, and had apartments across the hall from each other. Flack has stated that she has already been asked to do a second album of Beatles covers.^[20] She is currently involved in an interpretative album of the Beatles' classics.^[21]



Flack performing in Boston, Mass., on August 28, 2013

Critical reputation

Flack's minimalist, classically trained approach to her songs was seen by a number of critics as lacking in grit and uncharacteristic of soul music. According to music scholar Eric Weisbard, her work was regularly described with the adjectives "boring", "depressing", "lifeless", "studied", and "calculated";^[22] AllMusic's Steve Huey said it has been called "classy, urbane, reserved, smooth, and sophisticated".^[23] In 1971, *Village Voice* critic Robert Christgau reported that "Flack is generally regarded as the most significant new black woman singer since Aretha Franklin, and at moments she sounds kind, intelligent, and very likable. But she often exhibits the gratuitous gentility you'd expect of someone who says 'between you and I.'"

Reviewing her body of work from the 1970s, he later argued that the singer "has nothing whatsoever to do with rock and roll or rhythm and blues and almost nothing to do with soul", comparing her middle-of-the-road aesthetic to Barry Manilow but with better taste, which he believed does not necessarily guarantee more enduring music: "In the long run, pop lies are improved by vulgarity."^[22]

Personal life

Flack is a member of the Artist Empowerment Coalition, which advocates the right of artists to control their creative properties. She is also a spokeswoman for the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals; her appearance in commercials for the ASPCA featured "The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face". In the Bronx section of New York City, the Hyde Leadership Charter School's after-school music program is called "The Roberta Flack School of Music" and is in partnership with Flack, who founded the school, which provides free music education to underprivileged students.^[24]

Between 1966 and 1972, she was married to Steve Novosel.^[5] Flack is the aunt of professional ice skater Rory Flack. She is mother to rhythm and blues musician Bernard Wright.^{[25][26]}

According to DNA analysis, she is of Cameroonian descent.^[27]

In popular culture

Her collaboration with Donny Hathaway is mentioned in the song "What A Catch, Donnie" on Fall Out Boy's fourth studio album, *Folie à Deux*.

American experimental producer Flying Lotus had a song named after her ("RobertaFlack") on his *Los Angeles* album.^[28]

In 1991, Hong Kong singer Sandy Lam recorded a cover version of "And So It Goes" called "[]" in the album []
[[]][[]][[]]. Although it was not officially promoted by the record company, it was played by many DJs.

In the Red Hot Chili Peppers' song "My Lovely Man", on the album *Blood Sugar Sex Magik*, Anthony Kiedis sang "I listen to Roberta Flack, but I know you won't come back."

She is a favorite singer of Vic Wilcox, manager of an engineering firm in David Lodge's campus/industrial novel *Nice Work*, winner of the Sunday Express Book of the Year award in 1988.

In the 2014 Marvel movie *X-Men: Days of Future Past*, her hit "The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face" is playing on the radio in the room when Hugh Jackman's character, Wolverine's consciousness initially arrives back in 1973.

Accolades

Flack was inducted into the North Carolina Music Hall of Fame in 2009.^[29]

Grammy Awards

The Grammy Awards are awarded annually by the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences. Flack has received four awards from thirteen nominations.^[30]

Year	Nominee / work	Award	Result
1972	"You've Got a Friend" (with Donny Hathaway)	Best R&B Vocal Performance by a Group	Nominated
1973	"The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face"	Record of the Year	Won
	<i>Quiet Fire</i>	Best Pop Vocal Performance, Female	Nominated
	"Where Is the Love" (with Donny Hathaway)	Best Pop Vocal Performance by a Duo, Group or Chorus	Won
1974	<i>Killing Me Softly</i>	Album of the Year	Nominated
	"Killing Me Softly with His Song"	Record of the Year	Won
		Best Pop Vocal Performance, Female	Won
1975	"Feel Like Makin' Love"	Record of the Year	Nominated
		Best Pop Vocal Performance, Female	Nominated
1979	"The Closer I Get to You" (with Donny Hathaway)	Best Pop Vocal Performance by a Duo or Group	Nominated
1981	<i>Roberta Flack Featuring Donny Hathaway</i>	Best R&B Vocal Performance, Female	Nominated
	"Back Together Again" (with Donny Hathaway)	Best R&B Performance by a Duo or Group with Vocal	Nominated
1995	<i>Roberta</i>	Best Traditional Pop Vocal Performance	Nominated

American Music Awards

The American Music Awards is an annual awards ceremony created by Dick Clark in 1973. Flack has received one award from six nominations.

Year	Nominee / work	Award	Result
1974		Favorite Female Artist (Pop/Rock)	Nominated
		Favorite Female Artist (Soul/R&B)	Won
	"Killing Me Softly with His Song"	Favorite Single (Pop/Rock)	Nominated
1975		Favorite Female Artist (Soul/R&B)	Nominated
	"Feel Like Makin' Love"	Favorite Single (Soul/R&B)	Nominated
1979		Favorite Female Artist (Soul/R&B)	Nominated

Discography

- *First Take* (1969)
- *Chapter Two* (1970)
- *Quiet Fire* (1971)
- *Roberta Flack & Donny Hathaway* (1972)
- *Killing Me Softly* (1973)
- *Feel Like Makin' Love* (1975)
- *Blue Lights in the Basement* (1977)

- *Roberta Flack* (1978)
- *Roberta Flack Featuring Donny Hathaway* (1979)
- *I'm the One* (1982)
- *Born to Love* (1983)
- *Oasis* (1988)
- *Set the Night to Music* (1991)
- *Roberta* (1994)
- *The Christmas Album* (1997)
- *Holiday* (2003)
- *Let It Be Roberta* (2012)

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External links

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- Roberta Flack (<https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0280808/>) at IMDb
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