

FAMILY ALBUM



The first time ever we saw her face.
Roberta Flack photographed in 1971

Take It To Heart

The story behind ROBERTA FLACK's remarkable debut, catapulted to the top of the charts by a fluke movie appearance. ANDY MORTEN gets starstruck

When Roberta Flack's 'The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face' hit the US #1 spot in April 1972, few of the millions who bought it could've cared less that it, and its parent album, *First Take*, which simultaneously topped the album charts, were in fact three years old. Flack had released her third album, *Quiet Fire*, in November '71 and it had barely dented the Top 20. The same month, Clint Eastwood's directorial debut, *Play Misty For Me*, opened and featured 'The First Time...' in a prominent love scene.

"The pivotal issue that made that first album

come to national attention," Roberta tells *Shindig!*, "was Clint Eastwood insisting that 'The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face' be kept at the slow pace that I'd performed it at. Atlantic [Records] wanted the song sped up a bit to be more 'radio friendly.'" Indeed, it takes Flack almost five minutes to negotiate the three verses of Ewan MacColl's '57 love letter to his future wife Peggy Seeger, so languid and sensual is her approach. "That movie and its success got my song the attention and me right along with it. It hit the charts as a result and off I went." 'The First Time' won the Record Of The Year Grammy for '72, kick-starting a hugely

successful career, which shows little sign of slowing down 40-odd years later.

Raised in Arlington, Virginia, Flack was turned on to music by her parents at any early age. She excelled at piano, being awarded a scholarship by Howard University in Washington, DC before switching her major from piano to voice after having fallen under the spell of gospel singers Mahalia Jackson and Sam Cooke in the Baptist church. The sudden death of her father when she was 19 necessitated a move into teaching music, which she did in Junior High schools and from her home in Washington. But



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the performance bug stayed with her and she began accompanying opera singers at The Tivoli Club in the evenings, eventually playing sets of blues, folk and pop standards alone during the intervals. “I sang songs about the times,” she explains, “what was going on. I sang show tunes, songs by Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen. Ones that told stories that moved me; anything that spoke to my heart.”

Word soon spread and Flack took her first professional gig at Mr Henry’s, a Capitol Hill restaurant, in ‘68, where she was “discovered” by jazz pianist and vocalist, Les McCann. “Her voice touched, tapped, trapped, and kicked every emotion I’ve ever known,” McCann later wrote in the sleeve notes for *First Take*. “I laughed, cried, and screamed for more... she alone had the voice.”

Roberta is keen to clarify. “[Les] didn’t discover me so much as open a door that resulted in my first major record deal with Atlantic. Many talent agents and producers saw me before he did. People make lots of promises, but he followed through.”

McCann took Flack to Atlantic Records producer Joel Dorn, for whom she reportedly played 42 songs in three hours before he snapped her up. In November ‘68, 39 songs were demoed, leaving the team with something of a dilemma about what to present to the world on her first album. So who chose the eventual contents of *First Take*? “I did!” states Roberta triumphantly. She plumped for a wildly eclectic selection: songs of many styles and from disparate sources, all connected by their emotional heft and spiritual heart. The whole thing was cut in 10 hours over two days in late February ‘69. “I had performed many of those

songs over and over at Mr Henry’s,” she recalls. “They came pouring out of me and my heart. What you hear is as close to a live performance as I would have done at that time.”

Gene McDaniels’ radically-charged ‘Compared To What’ proves an uncharacteristically funky opener. Flack’s version being the first to be recorded, before McCann’s rendition was captured live in Montreux that June for his *Swiss Movement* album. Andrés Blanco Guzman and Manuel Álvarez Maciste’s ‘Angelitos Negros’ had been released by Toña la Negra way back in 1942; the traditional spiritual, ‘I Told Jesus’, was probably learnt from Nina Simone’s ‘62 live recording; Fran Landesman and Thomas Wolf’s ‘Ballad Of The Young Men’ originated from the ‘59 stage musical, *The Nervous Set*; Flack’s good friend and future musical partner Donny Hathaway contributed two co-writes in ‘Our Ages Or Our Hearts’ and ‘Tryin’ Times’, a biting slice of social commentary.

But it’s the devastatingly fragile and emotional readings of the aforementioned ‘The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face’ and Leonard Cohen’s ‘Hey, That’s No Way To Say Goodbye’ that keep many listeners coming back to Roberta’s debut. Flack imbues both songs with a humanity and humility that might be inaccessible to many in their original incarnations. In her hands, these poetic odes to all-consuming love take on universal depth and intensity.

The “less is more” approach employed in the sparse, often feather-light instrumentation (Flack’s vocal and piano supported by John Pizzarelli’s guitar, Ron Carter’s bass and Ray Lucas’ drums) and spacious arrangements (courtesy of Atlantic’s William Fischer) helped ensure that *First Take* inhabited a radically

different place to contemporary outings by Nina Simone, Aretha Franklin, Odette, Judy Collins or any of the other artists routinely named as being Flack’s peers.

First Take was released on June 20th, ‘69, housed in a sleeve depicting Flack in a nightclub gazing intently at her piano, while her bass player and drummer look on from the smoky stage. It received mixed reviews – a belated October ‘70 notice in *Rolling Stone* was favourable – and sales were modest, resulting in its follow-up, the similarly intoxicating *Chapter Two*, taking over a year to appear. But Flack’s talent could not be denied – her place in popular music was assured.

With the benefit of hindsight, most of us would find it hard to believe that ‘The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face’, and the album on which it appeared, wouldn’t have become massive hits eventually – with or without Clint Eastwood’s help. So was it strange to experience one’s first major chart success with three-year old recordings on the back of a mainstream movie? “It blew my mind,” she says. “I’m not sure that the song would have charted if it had had a different arrangement or was sped up. Sometimes the meaning of a song is lost in the arrangement and the production.”

And as long as Flack continued to base her choice of material on *meaning*, she’d be sure of creating the kind of timeless, inspiring artistry that years of over-exposure on movie soundtracks and TV ads, and a hundred pale cover versions, could do nothing to erode. [SI](#)

Roberta Flack performs on the Legends Live tour with Dionne Warwick, Mary Wilson and The Drifters, nationwide from 2nd October.

