

Marie Dionne Warwick,
ca. 1963



DIONNE WARWICK

HER GORGEOUS VOICE REMAINS
ONE OF THE MOST DISTINCTIVE AND
AFFECTING IN POPULAR MUSIC.

BY ELYSA GARDNER

In her 2010 autobiography, *My Life As I See It*, New Jersey native Dionne Warwick (b. 1940) fondly recounted a childhood shaped by “good teachers and two wonderful parents.” Describing one of the latter, she wrote, “The word I most associate with my mother is *class*,” adding, “Mommy expressed the importance of being a ‘lady’ at all times in the ways we dressed, walked, spoke, and presented ourselves to the world. I sure hope that I have maintained the legacy she gave us.”

To say that Warwick has done just that, and on a scale her mom likely never thought possible, is in no way to diminish the strength and daring that have also defined her, as both an artist and a public figure, for more than sixty years. For contrary to what some latter-day pundits would have you think, “lady” is no more a term denoting frailty or deference than “muse,” as Warwick has proved time and again by soaring mightily in both capacities.

While her roots lie in gospel – as a teenager, she sang with the Gospelaires, whose other members included her aunt Cissy Houston – Warwick found stardom as the primary interpreter for one of the greatest songwriting duos of the twentieth century: composer Burt Bacharach and lyricist Hal David. It would be insufficient, of course, to reduce her role in their collaboration to that of a source of inspiration, or a conduit. It’s impossible to imagine the string of hit singles the three enjoyed in the

1960s and early 1970s – including such enduring classics as “I Say a Little Prayer,” “Anyone Who Had a Heart,” “Message to Michael,” “Do You Know the Way to San José,” and Grammy Hall of Fame entries “Don’t Make Me Over,” “Walk On By,” and “Alfie” – without Warwick’s voice, which remains among the most distinctive and affecting in popular music.

That voice was never a pristine powerhouse like that of Warwick’s late, great cousin Whitney Houston, Cissy’s daughter. Warwick’s singing is distinguished instead by a piquant, ever-so-slightly jagged beauty – stretching from husky low notes to an ethereal top – and by an emotional transparency and fervency only made more potent by her discretion and, yes, class. At a time when singers of all stripes – in pop and R&B, even on Broadway – are encouraged to belt notes as long and hard as they can, and to embellish them with as much melisma as they can handle, Warwick’s singing reminds them, and us, that serving the melody, the lyric, the feeling is the point.

And Warwick’s service by no means ended when her historic run with Bacharach and David did, with 1971’s Grammy Award-winning “I’ll Never Fall in Love Again.” Following a few less prolific years, during which her biggest single was 1974’s “Then Came You” – with last year’s Hall of Fame inductees the Spinners – she bounded back with her 1979 Arista Records debut, *Dionne*, pro-



FROM LEFT: Warwick around the time of her first Grammy nomination, ca. 1965; recording with Burt Bacharach at Pye Studios, London, 1964. OPPOSITE: In performance at l'Olympia, Paris, 1964.

duced by Barry Manilow. The album featured the hits “I’ll Never Love This Way Again” and “Déjà Vu,” both of which earned additional Grammys.

The eighties brought more success, with the Top Ten pop single and Adult Contemporary chart-topper “Heartbreaker,” written by Bee Gees Barry, Robin, and Maurice Gibb for an album of the same name. It was followed by the 1985 rendition of Bacharach and Carole Bayer Sager’s “That’s What Friends Are For,” which Warwick recorded with Gladys Knight, Elton John, and Stevie Wonder to raise funds for AIDS research and prevention. The latter became the Number One single of the next year and scored Grammys for both Song of the Year and Best Pop Performance by a Duo or Group With Vocals; it remains a beloved anthem, promoting both accountability and hope.

All told, Warwick has collected, among a bevy of other honors, fourteen Grammy nominations and five awards – including the first one given a Black female solo artist of her generation in a pop category, for her performance of “San José.” But the singer had begun breaking boundaries before that. First introduced to French audiences with an album cover featuring a photo of a lissome strawberry blonde, Warwick – who would earn attention for her own regal, high-cheekboned beauty – went on to become one of the first recording artists to tour Europe extensively and took part in a royal command performance for Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother.

Early in Warwick’s career, as she mused in the 2021 documentary *Dionne Warwick: Don’t Make Me Over*, “They didn’t know where I fit – if I was Black, if I was white . . . what I was. The music I was singing was like nothing any of them were singing, Black or white. So they really didn’t know what to do with me.”

Bacharach, of course, had known from the moment

he heard Warwick singing with the Gospelairees during a session at the storied Brill Building in 1961, and asked if she would record demos of songs he was crafting with David. At the time, the young singer was working under her given last name, Warrick; a label misprint on the disc that featured “Don’t Make Me Over,” her first hit (as a B-side, actually) put another w where the second r belonged. A promised correction was never made, but the artist did not hold a grudge. As she wrote years later in *My Life As I See It*, “The Warwick name has served me well.”

Not that Warwick would be a pushover in other arenas. By the singer’s account, the title of her first hit was inspired by a comment she made to Bacharach and David early in their relationship, when a song they had agreed to give her was recorded instead by another singer. As she recalled in her memoir, “I reminded them of the promise they made to me. ‘We have a problem here. You want me to record with you? I am who I am. Don’t make me over, man!’” Later, in the 1970s, when the songwriters stopped collaborating, Warwick would sue them for breach of contract, although the case was eventually settled out of court.

Other big-name artists would be humbled by the grit underlying Warwick’s grace. In the nineties, as gangsta rap rose in popularity, she summoned Snoop Dogg, Suge Knight, and others to her home for an early-morning summit, during which she made a surprising request: Would they call her a “bitch,” using the same term their lyrics had applied to other women, to address one of the most respected figures in music? “Girls don’t have tails; they don’t walk on four legs,” Warwick told them, as she recalled in *Don’t Make Me Over*. “So why are you calling them what you’re calling them?” As Snoop put it, “I believe we got out-gangstered that day.”

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: With cousin Whitney Houston, New York City, 1990; meeting Queen Elizabeth II with Frank Sinatra, Hollywood, 1983; with Cyndi Lauper, Lionel Richie, Bob Dylan (from left), and many others at the Live Aid finale, Philadelphia, 1985; holding one of two Grammys, 1980; with Gladys Knight, Elton John, and Stevie Wonder (from left), at "That's What Friends Are For" recording session, 1985.



Warwick has brought the same fire to her social activism, nowhere more so than in confronting the HIV/AIDS crisis. It was her initiative nearly forty years ago to invite fellow superstars Knight, Wonder, and John – who has credited her as “the first person in the music business to actually speak up about it” – to record “That’s What Friends Are For,” which had been introduced by Rod Stewart in 1982, as a fundraiser for the Foundation for AIDS Research, also known as amfAR. The recording has since generated millions of dollars for the organization. Honoring Warwick with its Award of Courage earlier this

year, amfAR CEO Kevin Robert Frost noted, “Few in the entertainment community have done as much to support the fight against AIDS as Dionne Warwick.”

Warwick has supplemented her continued efforts in this battle with other pursuits as an activist and advocate. She served as a U.S. Ambassador of Health under President Ronald Reagan, who came to express more awareness of AIDS under Warwick’s influence. In 2002, she became a United Nations Global Ambassador for the Food and Agriculture Organization. All the while, she remained active as a musician, eventually ranking



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: With Quincy Jones, Michael Jackson, Stevie Wonder, and Lionel Richie (from left) at the Grammy Awards, 1986; live at Southend, U.K., 2024; being honored by President Biden at the Kennedy Center Honors, 2023.

as one of the forty biggest hitmakers of the rock era (beginning in 1955), according to the *Billboard* Hot 100 Pop Singles Charts; 56 of her singles made that chart between 1962 and 1998 – and that number doesn't account for her many R&B and Adult Contemporary hits.

In 2023, after garnering a cluster of other distinctions for her long string of achievements – inclusion in the Grammy Hall of Fame and the National Rhythm & Blues Hall of Fame, and on the Hollywood Walk of Fame and the Apollo Theater Walk of Fame, to cite just a few – Warwick became a Kennedy Center Honoree. In a

speech, Debbie Allen, who had been granted the honor two years earlier, mused that Warwick's recognition was overdue: "Dionne Warwick was born with a gift from the ancestors, the powers of the universe, and God: the gift of a golden voice – a voice that set her on a destiny to inspire, uplift, and change the world."

Indeed, as Stevie Wonder observed in *Don't Make Me Over*, "You cannot separate the voice from the heart. Dionne's music inspired people to see and look forward to the best part of themselves." Anyone who has a heart would agree.