

The long journey of ‘Amazing Grace,’ the film document of Aretha Franklin’s 1972 gospel recording sessions

By Randy Lewis



Aretha Franklin in a scene from the movie "Amazing Grace." (Sundial Pictures)

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He’s remembering the historic gospel sessions Franklin delivered in collaboration with gospel music titan Rev. James Cleveland that were recorded and released in 1972 on her album “Amazing Grace,” a project that was simultaneously filmed by Sydney Pollack, who’d been nominated in 1970 for an Academy Award for his direction of “They Shoot Horses, Don’t They?” Astonishingly, the film sat on the shelf for decades, unfinished.

In November, it screened in one-week theatrical engagements in Los Angeles and New York for Academy Awards consideration, but now having secured a distributor is on track for additional screen time in 2019. That’s thanks to the years-long efforts by producer Alan Elliott, who bought the raw footage in 2007 and ultimately figured out how to overcome the technical and contractual hurdles that kept it out of the public eye for so long.

Additionally, for reasons that were never entirely clear, Franklin herself didn’t want the film released. Even after Elliott and his collaborators solved the synchronization problem several years ago and made attempts to screen it at film festivals, Franklin

objected. She famously sued in 2015 to halt planned exhibitions of the movie at Telluride and Toronto.