

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**EMMY® CHARTS THE RISE OF CYNTHIA ERIVO AS SHE TAKES ON ROLE OF LEGENDARY ARETHA FRANKLIN IN NAT GEO'S *GENIUS***

(**NOHO ARTS DISTRICT, Calif.** — Oct. 19, 2020) — Since making her Broadway debut only five years ago, Cynthia Erivo has taken the entertainment industry by storm with Daytime Emmy, Tony and Grammy wins. *Emmy*, the award-winning official publication of the Television Academy, hit newsstands Oct. 16 with a cover story featuring Erivo's journey from a small theater production in London to playing the queen of soul, Aretha Franklin, in National Geographic's *Genius: Aretha*.

When Erivo left London to play Celie Harris in a revival of *The Color Purple* on Broadway, her sister knew her star was on the rise. As Erivo recalls, "The day I left, she said, 'Why are you leaving some of your stuff behind?' and I said, 'Because I'm coming back.' And she said, 'No, you aren't. You're not coming back.' She just *knew*."

In the wake of her success on Broadway, Erivo was cast as abolitionist Harriet Tubman in the feature film *Harriet*, which brought her critical acclaim, including a Breakthrough Performance Award from the Palm Springs International Film Festival and nominations from the Screen Actors Guild, Golden Globes and Oscars. The film's director and co-writer, Kasi Lemmons, says, "I knew from the moment I saw her run across a field. The way she ran was as important as the accent ... know what I mean? A good actor can do an accent, but she *ran* in character. It was amazing." Her ability to convey the emotion of a character is likely due to her heavy preparation, which she has now brought to her role as Aretha Franklin.

In the cover story, "**The Power of One**," showrunner of Nat Geo's *Genius: Aretha* Suzan-Lori Parks admits that Erivo was the first and only actress she envisioned for the role of Aretha Franklin. "When I found out she was available, I was like, 'Oh my God. We have to have her play our Aretha Franklin,'" says Parks. But it was not until their first meeting that she knew it was destiny. Parks was waiting at a restaurant for their first meeting, and as Erivo arrived and walked toward their table, Franklin's rapturous love song "Daydreaming" could be heard through the restaurant's speaker system. The two women looked into each other's eyes; and, Parks recalls, "I told her, 'Sister, you've just been called.'"

Erivo sings more than 20 songs in the limited series, including "I Never Loved a Man The Way I Love You," "Baby, I Love You" and the gospel cornerstone "Amazing Grace." "I personally think that when a person sings, it's like a little window into their soul, how they truly feel," Erivo says. "It's the ultimate state of vulnerability." As a classically trained Broadway actress, Erivo tells *emmy* that singing in the series helped her tap deeper into her character. "The best singers, and not

necessarily the best technically, are the most honest ones. Aretha was brilliant because she was an honest performer. So to sing a song live on set allowed me to [do more than] just sing it but also access where it came from. To me, it's not just a song, it's 'This is how I am feeling right now.'"

At this year's Oscars, Erivo performed a rendition of "Stand Up," a song she co-wrote and performed for *Harriet*, on the same night she was the only Black person nominated in an acting category. "After I came off the stage, I knew something had gone right that evening," Erivo says. "It was like [it was] an introduction of me—the actress, the singer and the performer."

The premiere date of the eight-part series that covers Franklin's life from age 12 to age 55 remains in flux due to COVID-19 production delays. During the pandemic, Erivo has been finding ways to keep busy, which includes collaborating on a children's book and recording an album remotely. "Part of my duty during this time is to use my voice to help people feel happy, feel sane," she says. "I've always known that music is a way to bring people together, heal their hearts and make them smile. So I just figured I'd lean into it more."

Additional feature highlights from the new issue include:

- In "**The Zoom Room**," *emmy* recaps the biggest night on television with a behind-the-scenes crew that made the 72nd Emmy Awards possible with social distancing.
- This year more than ever, cable's Christmas movie makers are focused on creating content that is diverse and inclusive. In "**A Place at the Table**," *emmy* speaks with some of the rising stars of Lifetime and Hallmark about their historic roles in the 2020 holiday films that begin airing Oct. 23.
- In true 2020 fashion, *emmy* invited participants in this year's Emmys to step into a virtual photo booth to capture safe-at-home portraits. "**Right This Way ...**" features photos from Anthony Anderson, Angela Bassett, D'Arcy Carden, Regina King, Damon Lindelof, Leah Remini and many others.

About *emmy*

Emmy, the official publication of the Television Academy, goes behind the scenes of the industry for a unique insider's view. It showcases the scope of television and profiles the people who make TV happen, from the stars of top shows to the pros behind the cameras, covering programming trends and advances in technology. Honored consistently for excellence, *emmy* is a six-time Maggie Award winner as Best Trade Publication in Communications or the Arts and has collected 52 Maggies from the Western Publishing Association. *Emmy* is available on selected newsstands and at [TelevisionAcademy.com](https://www.televisionacademy.com) for single print and digital copies as well as subscriptions.

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