

# ARETHA FRANKLIN DRINKING HERSELF INTO THE GRAVE



Gladys is especially devastated - she's at her wits' end'

**A** STRING of canceled concerts has Aretha Franklin's friends worried that the Queen of Soul's drinking is threatening her career - and her life!

Insiders say family and friends, including Gladys Knight, are doing everything they can to get the music legend some help - but, they add, so far Franklin won't admit she has a problem.

"Gladys and all Aretha's friends are very concerned about her," an insider tells *STAR*. "Gladys is especially devastated by the extent of Aretha's drinking and she's at her wits' end trying to get her to stop."

"Aretha's drinking has been ongoing for years, but now it's becoming a real issue because people think it's causing her to miss concerts."

Friends say they had to step in earlier this month when Franklin canceled a show at the Potawatomi Bingo Casino in Milwaukee less than 48 hours before showtime, claiming she was ill. Good pal Gladys Knight had to fill in for her.

"The word was that Aretha was drinking heavily and Gladys knew she couldn't get it together in time for the show," says the insider.

Franklin, 59, has been one of pop music's most respected voices, thanks to a slew of hits dating from the '60s including *Respect*, *Natural Woman*, *Chain of Fools* and *Freeway of Love*.

She also holds the prestigious distinction of being the first woman inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, in 1987.

But over time her drinking has gotten out of control, say pals.

In 1998 she had a tantrum on a tour bus headed to a concert in Tampa, Fla. Insiders say

she got roaring drunk and demanded that the driver turn the bus around.

The concert had to be canceled.

Last April, she backed out of a booking at the House of Blues in Orlando, only to cancel the rescheduled June 9 show as well.

And Franklin's spectacular weekend-long parties at her mansion in Detroit are legendary.

"At one, she was really drunk," says the insider. "One of Aretha's family members told me she had been drinking since the early afternoon."

"She got into a loud argument with her then-boyfriend, who told her she was drunk and acting up, then slapped her."

"Aretha fell to the floor while holding her glass. Not a drop spilled."

"She picked herself up, finished her drink and asked for another."

Pals say part of the problem is Franklin's turbulent personal life, which includes two ex-husbands, failed romances and court cases over her finances.

Although she's earned millions over her four-decade career, since 1988 Franklin has had more than 30 lawsuits filed against her for unpaid bills. The suits seek a total of

more than a million dollars.

On top of that, her failed romance with Temptations' singer Dennis Edwards, which lasted from the late 1970s to the early 1990s, was devastating.

"I couldn't take living with the queen any longer," Edwards told friends. "I couldn't take all that goes with her - her ego, her entourage and her drinking were all too much for me."

While Franklin's agent Dick Alen says she doesn't drink and never missed a show due to drinking, sources close to the singer insist they are afraid her boozing is putting everything she's worked for in jeopardy.

Friends have even tried to suggest counseling and Alcoholics Anonymous, but claim Franklin is in denial about the problem.

"You can't say anything to her," says a pal. "She's a diva and you don't confront a diva. But Aretha is also a survivor. We're hoping she'll find a way to get through this."

- ROBIN MIZRAHI ★



GLADYS KNIGHT filled in for her pal