



SONG DOSSIER

Try a Little Tenderness

Aretha Franklin · 1962

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Metadata

Title	Try a Little Tenderness
Artist	Aretha Franklin
First released	1962-08-13
Written by	Harry M. Woods, James Campbell, Reginald Connelly
Length	3:16
Work	Try a Little Tenderness
MusicBrainz recording	a280c623-add8-4b38-925a-88f78918d3a5

Lyrical themes

"Try a Little Tenderness" is a plea addressed to men about how to treat the women in their lives — specifically women who carry the quiet weight of wearing the same clothes, facing the same routines, and suppressing their own longing without complaint. The song asks for gentleness as the antidote to that invisible suffering.

The narrator speaks from a position of knowing observation, almost like a wise counselor stepping in to explain something men habitually miss. The woman at the center of the lyric is not dramatic or demanding; she is tired and wistful, nursing a grief she would never name aloud. This restraint is itself the emotional core — her suffering is understated, which makes the appeal for tenderness feel all the more urgent.

The imagery is deliberately domestic and small-scale: worn clothing, unspoken longing, the daily grind of life. There are no grand romantic gestures in the picture being painted. Instead the song insists that ordinary compassion — patience, soft words, attentiveness — is what love actually requires.

The narrative arc moves from identification of the woman's hidden pain, to explanation of its cause, to the climactic exhortation that builds in emotional intensity as it repeats its central appeal. That arc gave the song its dramatic shape long before Otis Redding's celebrated 1966 recording turned the ending into a full-throated gospel-soul crescendo.

Aretha Franklin's 1962 version — recorded when she was just twenty — inhabits the lyric with a maturity that critics noted even then. Her reading is more conversational and intimate than Redding's later explosion, emphasizing the tenderness the title requests rather than the urgency beneath it. She makes the song feel like private counsel rather than performance, which suits the lyric's quiet, almost motherly wisdom exactly.

Song structure

Aretha Franklin's 1962 recording of this standard — a song that had been around since the 1930s and recorded widely before she touched it — follows the classic Tin Pan Alley verse-and-refrain architecture, but her arrangement shapes it into something that feels like an emotional arc rather

than a simple repeat structure.

The recording opens quietly, with a spare piano-led introduction that sets an intimate, almost conversational tone. Aretha enters at low intensity, working through the verse material in a restrained, almost confessional manner. The melody is stated clearly and cleanly, with the full weight of her voice held in reserve.

As the song progresses through its repeated sections, the arrangement gradually thickens. Strings and orchestral backing become more prominent, adding warmth without overwhelming the vocal. The dynamic build is deliberate — each pass through the material feels a degree warmer and more insistent than the last, a technique well suited to the song's central argument about patience and compassion.

The most memorable moment lands near the end of the performance, where the accumulated emotional pressure finally releases. Aretha's phrasing opens up, her ornaments multiply, and the restraint of the opening gives way to full-throated gospel-inflected delivery. This late surge is the structural payoff the whole arrangement has been steering toward.

There is no dramatic coda or extended outro — the song resolves relatively cleanly after its climactic passage. The brevity of the recording keeps the arc tight.

Worth noting: Otis Redding's 1966 version became the more celebrated recording and redefined how listeners hear the song's structure — louder, rawer, with a more emphatic rhythmic escalation. Aretha's earlier take is cooler and more orchestrated, but the same instinct to build toward release is already present.

Musical composition

Aretha Franklin recorded "Try a Little Tenderness" in 1962 for Columbia Records, produced by Robert Mersey. The song itself dates back to 1932, composed by Harry M. Woods, James Campbell, and Reginald Connelly, and had been a standard long before Aretha touched it.

The recording sits in a slow, stately tempo — a ballad feel that gives her enormous room to shape phrases. The harmonic language is classic Tin Pan Alley: functional major-key progressions built on familiar I-IV-V relationships, with the kind of gentle chromatic movement and passing chords that give the song its aching, bittersweet quality. There are no dramatic key changes; the song moves through its arc within a single tonal center, relying on arrangement rather than modulation for emotional variation.

Melodically the piece is built for a singer. The vocal line has a wide, arching range, with phrases that climb to expose the upper register before settling back, inviting expression through dynamics and rubato. Aretha at twenty uses the space carefully — restrained compared to her later Atlantic work, but already revealing a maturity in phrasing and breath control that sets her apart.

The Mersey production reflects early-Sixties pop sophistication: lush string and brass orchestration, a polished studio sheen typical of Columbia's mainstream pop output at the time. It is elegant rather than raw. This stands in deliberate contrast to Otis Redding's celebrated 1966

recording, which transformed the song into a slow-building gospel-funk explosion. Aretha's version honors the standard's original tenderness, keeping the sentiment intact within a smooth, tasteful arrangement that was commercially conventional for its era but showcases her voice with clarity and warmth.

Historical context

By 1962, Aretha Franklin was still in the early chapter of her recording career, signed to Columbia and struggling to find the commercial breakthrough that her extraordinary voice clearly deserved. Columbia and its veteran producer John Hammond had brought her to the label in 1960 with high hopes, but a string of releases had yet to produce the pop or R&B hit that would make her a household name. Her albums from this period cast her in polished, jazz-inflected settings that often felt at odds with the raw gospel power she had absorbed growing up in her father C.L. Franklin's Detroit church.

"Try a Little Tenderness" came to her with a long pedigree already attached. The song had been written in 1932 and most famously recorded by Bing Crosby, making it a standard well before Aretha touched it. Her 1962 version appeared on the album "The Tender, the Moving, the Swinging Aretha Franklin," a title that itself signals Columbia's effort to position her across multiple market segments simultaneously.

The early 1960s were a transitional moment in American popular music — the era between classic pop and the coming explosion of soul and Motown — and Aretha's Columbia recordings sit uneasily in that gap. Her version of the song did not produce a significant chart impact, and it remained relatively obscure commercially.

What matters historically is the contrast it sets up. When Otis Redding recorded his incendiary version in 1966 and it became a defining soul classic, Aretha's earlier, more restrained reading took on retroactive interest as a document of what she could do even before Atlantic Records and producer Jerry Wexler finally unlocked her full potential starting in 1967.

On screen

Aretha Franklin's 1962 recording of "Try a Little Tenderness" is not the version that earned the song its most prominent screen appearances. That distinction belongs overwhelmingly to Otis Redding's 1966 reading, which became one of the most recognisable film cues in cinema history through its use in "Pretty in Pink" (1986), where it scores Duckie's lip-synced performance in the record store — a scene so beloved it arguably overshadows the film itself. Redding's version also appears in "The Commitments" (1991) and has been used in advertising campaigns over the years.

Franklin's own 1962 recording, by contrast, does not appear to have accumulated a well-documented trail of notable film, television, or advertising placements in the way that Redding's has. The two recordings are closely linked in public consciousness, but screen producers and music supervisors have consistently reached for the Redding cut when the song is called for.

It is worth noting that the song has a longer lineage still — Bing Crosby recorded it in 1933, and it has been covered dozens of times — but Franklin's Columbia-era version sits in a middle period of the song's history, recorded before Redding transformed it into the urgent, gospel-charged arrangement that made it a screen staple.

In short: no confidently documented, significant screen placements for the Franklin 1962 recording specifically are well established in the public record. To claim otherwise would be to conflate her version with Redding's or to invent credits, neither of which serves accuracy.

Covers & hits

Written in 1932, 'Try a Little Tenderness' has proven one of the most durable standards of the 20th century, moving fluidly between pop, soul, and R&B across decades. While Aretha Franklin brought it early heat in the early 1960s, Otis Redding's explosive 1966 reinvention redefined the song entirely, turning a gentle ballad into a crescendoing soul workout that became his signature. Film and television placements have kept it continuously fresh for new generations of listeners.

- Aretha Franklin (1962) — the original — A stately, gospel-inflected reading that showcases her early Columbia Records period, delivered with controlled power and vocal maturity beyond her years.
- Bing Crosby (1933) — One of the earliest and most popular recordings of the song, a smooth crooner's rendition that helped establish it as a beloved standard.
- Ted Lewis (1932) — Among the very first recordings of the song, capturing its original era as a gentle, sentimental pop number.
- Otis Redding (1966) — A transformative soul classic that builds from a slow ballad into an electrifying, frenzied climax, becoming one of the most celebrated recordings of the 1960s.
- Three Dog Night (1969) — A rock-oriented cover that brought the song to a new arena-rock audience and performed well on the pop charts.
- Rod Stewart (1990) — A polished, mainstream pop-soul reading recorded for his 'Downtown Train' singles collection, reaching a wide adult-contemporary audience.

Influence & legacy

Aretha Franklin's 1962 recording of "Try a Little Tenderness" arrived before her commercial breakthrough, but it helped establish the emotional template she would perfect across her career: a slow build toward overwhelming release, rooted in gospel feeling but delivered through pop structure. The performance demonstrated, early on, that she could inhabit a standard and make it feel autobiographical.

The song itself had a long lineage before Aretha touched it — Bing Crosby had recorded it in the 1930s, and it remained a sentimental ballad in the popular imagination. Her version tilted it toward soul, anticipating the direction the song would take when Otis Redding recorded his landmark interpretation in 1966. Redding's version, which transformed the tender ballad into an ecstatic, almost frenzied plea, is now the recording most listeners encounter first — but Aretha's

earlier treatment shows the bridge between the pre-rock era and the soul revolution Redding would complete.

Both recordings have become touchstones. Redding's version in particular generated a durable cultural life through film placements, most notably in John Hughes's "Pretty in Pink" (1986), introducing the song to successive generations. The standard has attracted covers from artists across jazz, R&B, and country, underlining its structural flexibility.

Aretha's standing as an interpreter of standards was confirmed later by her induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1987, where her ability to reshape existing material was cited alongside her original work. "Try a Little Tenderness" sits within a body of early Columbia recordings that critics now reassess as undervalued — evidence of a fully formed artist waiting for the production environment that Atlantic Records would eventually provide.