

The Arts

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THURSDAY, APRIL 16, 1998

The New York Times

POP REVIEW

There Are Divas, and There Are Divas

By JON PARELES

Five singers were on the bill for "Divas Live," a concert at the Beacon Theater that was telecast by VH1 on Tuesday night, and six women performed. Mariah Carey, Celine Dion, Gloria Estefan, Aretha Franklin and Shania Twain were joined by Carole King as an unannounced guest. But there was only one real diva onstage: Ms. Franklin, who presented the true diva's combination of a remarkable voice, a commanding presence and a whimsical, imperious assumption of power. With Ms. Franklin around, the rest were only troupers.

Mariah Carey, left, and Aretha Franklin at the Beacon Theater on Tuesday night.

In a field of singers, Aretha Franklin stands out, boldly.

Like the other women on the bill, Ms. Franklin was there to plug her latest album. Each star sang a current song or two and an older hit, in music segments surrounded by awards show hoopla: video-montage biographies and laudatory introductions from actresses (Susan Sarandon, Jennifer Aniston, Sarah Jessica Parker, Teri Hatcher and Patricia Arquette). The songs illustrated the paradox of the diva repertory; some insisted on female strength, others promised to give up everything for a man. And

much of the concert was routine; with television cameras around, most of the singers concentrated on avoiding mistakes rather than taking chances.

Where the divas of yore lived for the stage, VH1's younger divas were tied to the recording studio. Ms. Carey sang a breathy, submissive ballad, "My All," and suddenly switched to an uptempo dance beat, mimicking a dance-floor remix. Ms. Estefan worked through a medley of her hits like someone scanning across a CD. Ms. Twain swaggered across the stage in stiletto heels, a halter top and skin-tight pants, alternately flirting and asserting herself in standard video gestures. And Ms. Dion, wearing a long coat that made her look like a ringmaster, mugged through her songs, including the inevitable hit from the "Titanic" soundtrack, with self-congratulatory smirks and

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