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For a long time it was thought that a fire at a tape storage building in the late-'70s had destroyed any remaining unreleased Atlantic recordings by Aretha Franklin. That was certainly the reason cited for the conspicuous dearth of previously unissued songs on the 4-CD box set, 'Queen Of Soul,' back in 1992. Thankfully, though, a recent rummage in the Atlantic vaults by dedicated soul detective, Patrick Milligan, proved that this accepted wisdom was built on conjecture rather than fact - it turns out that there was a plethora of forgotten and long lost studio outtakes waiting to be discovered in the Atlantic tape archives. This fantastic 2-CD compilation masterminded by veteran producer, Jerry Wexler, features 35 rare Aretha tracks, 32 of which have never seen the light of day before. For Aretha aficionados and avid fans of classic soul music, it really is an amazing treasure trove of lost soul gems that will send shivers down the spine. The music spans the fertile period 1966-1973, when Aretha was arguably at her peak and enjoying what Wexler describes in his absorbing liner note commentary as her 'golden reign.' The collection kicks off with three demos from 1966 including versions of 'I Never Loved A Man (The Way I Love You)' and 'Dr. Feelgood,' which would later become big hits and help catapult Aretha to superstar status. These are followed by a clutch of high quality studio outtakes from her late '60s LPs. The most ear-catching of these is 'Mr. Big' (co-penned by Re's sister, Carolyn), a tremendously earthy version of Holland-Dozier-Holland's 'You Keep Me Hangin' On,' and the plaintive organ-drenched ballad, 'I'm Trying To Overcome,' featuring the Sweet Inspirations. There's also a rare 45 flipside: a lovely version of the Van McCoy tune, 'Lean On Me.' Disc 2 opens with an alternate, horn-less, mix of the funky 'Rock Steady' from 1970, followed by eight left over cuts from the Quincy Jones-helmed 1973 LP, 'Hey Now Hey (The Other Side Of The Sky).' They're all strong tunes but Aretha's mid-tempo rendition of the Gene McDaniels' song, 'Tree Of Life,' is absolutely sensational (and very reminiscent of her version of 'Bridge Over Troubled Water'). Also noteworthy is 'Ain't But The One,' a rousing, high-octane duet with Ray Charles recorded for a Duke Ellington TV special in 1973 that climaxes with a stomping, gospel-soaked finale. In fact, there's so much scintillating stuff on this collection, that it's difficult to do justice to it here. This is undoubtedly one of the year's best archival soul packages and re-affirms why Aretha was crowned the Queen of Soul. Stunningly magisterial.

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