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WEB EXCLUSIVE: TERENCE TRENT D'ARBY INTERVIEW

By Jonathan Lesser

Photographs by ILPO MUSTO/LONDON FEATURES



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In the December issue START domepiece features Terence Trent D'arby as told to Jonathan Lesser. Interview with Sananda Maitreya (aka Terence Trent D'Arby), 6-11-02

I was born Terence Trent Howard and I became D'arby at age two because a man adopted me.

My new name came from a series of dreams that I had where I was being called "Sananda" by a group of angels. They were always trying to help me locate something in the dream, and the first couple of times I heard the name I was really taken aback by how familiar it sounded. And I would keep looking around excitedly because I was curious to see who "Sananda" was. By the third time it occurred to me they were calling me.

And it just made sense because two or three years proceeding that I had felt more and more of an estrangement from the identity of Terence Trent D'arby. What I mean by that is if you take the first 31 years of someone's life and tell them this is who you are and this is who we expect you to be. And of course if you veer from that there are going to be repercussions behind it. You kind of adopt an identity that sometimes just doesn't hold after the threat of ass whippin's and other things. You grow up with the rules and expectations, and sometimes the role that you play fits the truth of your nature and sometimes it doesn't. I found a schism—a split developing between who I was led to believe I was supposed to be and the truth about how I was beginning to feel myself. So the series of dreams came during that period of time when I was not feeling myself to be who I was told I was. Told by the society at large, your peer group, your parents, your friends, whatever your religion is, whatever the series of associations that we make

growing up that serve to reinforce the idea of self.

Maybe I came out of the womb wrong. I was living with a sense of dissatisfaction regarding what I was expected to do. Something much deeper was pulling at me to take a more truthful look at the role I was playing, because it really wasn't leading to fulfillment or happiness.

I had the dreams when I was between the ages of 32 and 33. Around 33 I basically remembered "Sananda" as something I'd always been connected to. It's hard to explain. It's like waking up from amnesia and all of the sudden pieces fall into place and you start to remember who you are. [Does it mean anything?] Not really, but it sounded immediately familiar. It was one of those kinds of things. It sounded like something you knew but you had forgotten you knew, and when you were reminded—you were like, "wow." And after adopting it as a name it just felt truer to who I was, and things began to fall into place. It's like changing the name changes the vibration which attracts a whole new set of things, and those things were just falling into place with me more than the previous stuff. The previous stuff was beginning to suffocate me.

[Been making music the whole time since 95?] Yeah, I was just in an unfortunate situation with Sony. In order to keep another artist happy, it was decided that in order to retain his services, not as much attention would be put into my situation. I don't really have a problem with that. The decision comes down to: our main artist who has been making us a fortune the last few years is unhappy with this kid. [Was it personal?] It was nothing like that. I guess I was a threat to his situation. In the political move between CBS and Sony there were some people



ousted, and in order to win favor of certain marquee artists promises are made. So it was a matter of saying if you guys want to keep my business you're just gonna have to squash it on this kid. I didn't have enough savvy or whatever to overcome that. That's the price of an education. The thing that was really hard for me was that after it was decided that not a lot of attention be put into my music, they still held on to me for eight years and wouldn't let me out of the contract. I still made records, because I didn't want the situation to take from the opportunity that I was given to hone my craft. I kept recording, but it wasn't going to be promoted. The attitude was we'll just put it out. I've done tours in America where people didn't know that the record was even out until after the gig. So it was kind of a long stretch.

CBS became Sony between my first two projects. I happened in America because a guy named Walter Yetnikoff, who really was the capo, was running the American company and he came over to England and saw me and said, "I'm gonna make this kid happen in America." So he basically sponsored the project. American companies don't tend to like to be told what to do by a smaller territory outside of itself because they're the bigger dog at the table. But he came in and said look, we're gonna make this happen and that's the end of it. But after he left, and pretty much everyone who was in his regime that I had developed sort of a rapport with, everything shifted, it was a big sea change. One of my issues with the industry is that when something like that happens I think it's only fair that artists should be able to review the situation and decide if they want to remain. It was an education. As hard as it was for me to accept, I'm now at the point where I'm in complete acceptance and grace of what opportunities God has given me, and I'm grateful that now I can see past it.

I now own the copyrights to my music. It's such an easier thing to do. Sometimes to keep a big record company's morale up you have to sell so many records in the first quarter. There's all these political things to take into consideration that as a young artist you don't really know exists. You have to sell many more records just to keep the fire alive because you've got like 1,200 people to feed. I'm in a situation where I can do a tenth of that and actually make some money.

I can go out and tour and sell records at the tour. This gives me the possibility to do things that used to be done back in the day, when cats just wanted to sell records. I don't have to hand over 85 percent of it for the privilege of it, just to reach the public, that's the beauty of the

situation. I see a guy across the street, I know that guy feels what I do. This allows us direct access to people who you can directly communicate with.

The Joker's Edition of Wild Card (newest album, his fifth) has four new songs that weren't on previous versions. I'm printing up the first batch now, and it will be available sometime in July on the Internet. Then when we come through town they can buy it at the gig, too.

For a lot of people it isn't about what's your last hit or what they've heard, it's about someone they've kind of given some of their heart to, someone they connect with. Next thing you know you're turning them onto something. People really do miss something that the industry has lost sight of. At the end of the day I don't want to see the end of the industry; whether I like it or not, it's my industry.

I last played the U.S. in 1996. I've been surprised. Sometimes you think you're starting at a grassroots level and you go play someplace and there's all these people waiting for you. I just did a warm up acoustic tour and there were over 1,000 people who showed up for each one, and they were all in what would be called secondary markets. So I was very touched. People are ready to experience something more direct again, and I'm grateful to be in that position. For all of the bitterness that I had to absorb with regard to the industry, it's like with anything -- once you come out on the other side you're really grateful that you got the education and the opportunity. At the end of the day I'm not mad at them. I just believe that by listening to the artists again, and considering our voices more, they could be opening their businesses back up instead of complaining each year that sales are dwindling and blaming other industries for their problems.

I'm living in Italy. I came to Italy in January of this year. I've always felt we have a tradition of people from our culture who just find that they're just much more accepted in other cultures. Italy, for example, is a culture where the people feel themselves very much. They just feel themselves, and anything they feel they feel more and they're able to express it more. It's a culture that's always appreciated artists and creative people. Artists here get treated with the same type of respect that is reserved for doctors in America. Even really older people here will stop me on the street and give me compliments. They take their pleasures and their sensuality seriously. Any artist has it in his or her best interest to keep themselves close to that, because that's the tapestry you're trying to weave from and back into. It's much easier to alchemize love than it is the other shit, but you know you make your



best effort at it anyway.

I was in L.A. for awhile and found that a very uninspiring experience. It's like the capital of the music world. It's really an industry. I didn't find any people to vibe with. I was working too hard to keep my own vibe up. Whether you're an artist or not, if you're a person who has some compassion, just keep yourself as close to where the honey flows as possible, because you owe it to yourself.

I miss playing for American audiences, but the industry just made it what it is — very difficult to express yourself unless you let a committee of motherfuckers tell you who you're supposed to be. With all due respect to people who feed their families that way, I'm just not feelin' that.

[Did you say your first album was better than Sgt. Peppers?] That was something I said that caused a lot of controversy, especially in America. I remember these two girls from a Boston radio station wouldn't even talk to me. I'm a huge Beatles fan too, but the reality of the situation is that the English press, especially the music press, operates in a different way. They have a tradition of what you would call taking a piss, of just saying stuff. Yeah, I did actually say that, but it was something that had to be seen in context. Every time a different journalist asked me that question — and it was a question that was going around for a while — I would just name a different record. I was going through my Muhammad Ali imitation. I was having fun, and they seemed to be enjoying it, and I was just very naïve.

My best is yet to come. I'm very confident and I'm very excited and I'm very grateful for the people who seem to have a tremendous amount of patience with regard to the situation. I look forward to seeing them (fans in the U.S.), because I have something to share with them now that I didn't have before and they'll just have to experience it for themselves.

Tune into the website, sanandamaitreya.com, to find out when the new album will be available. We're finalizing that right now. I post messages on that site, and there's newsletters going around, and the dates will start appearing. ■