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“I was killed when I was 27”: the curious afterlife of Terence Trent D’Arby



Terence Trent D’Arby’s 1987 debut album sold a million copies in three days. The music press went mad for him. Where was there to go but down?



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BY KATE MOSSMAN

Imagine this. You’re 25 years old and [your debut album](#) of perfectly polished soul-rock-pop-funk sells one million copies in the first three days of release. It delivers three Top Ten hits, winning you numerous

platinum gongs and a Grammy Award, and parachutes you right into the arena of the 1980s megastars you idolise. You drive the music press into a frenzy: they say you combine the voice of Sam Cooke and the moves of James Brown with the louche beauty of Jimi Hendrix. You are mentored by Springsteen, Leonard Cohen and Pete Townshend; you spend hours on the phone with Prince and sing on Brian Wilson albums. You even meet your hero Muhammad Ali, whose attitude you’ve ingested, saying: “Tell people long enough and loud enough you’re the greatest and eventually they’ll believe you.” In case anyone is in any doubt about just how important you are, you draw a parallel between your destiny and that of Martin Luther King.

Early one morning, at the end of one of your six-hour, joss-stick-infused overnight interviews, a journalist asks you what happens if your follow-up album isn’t as successful as your first. For once, you are lost for words. “That’s like asking me what I would do if my dick fell off . . .”

The man who slips into the hotel lobby in Milan looks like

a fashion district local – one scarf over his dreadlocks, another curled round his neck – but there’s an inward energy about him, like one of those fragile celebrities who doesn’t want to be noticed but cannot help it: it’s all there in the cut of the trousers and size of the blue-bottle shades.

I’ve been given instructions for my meeting with Sananda Maitreya. 1. Please don’t mention the name “Terence Trent D’Arby”, as it is painful for him. 2. Please don’t make any comparisons with Prince regarding his name change, which occurred in 1995 after a series of dreams. 3. Please don’t ask him things like, “What songs do you think would make a good single from your new album, *Rise of the Zugebrian Time Lords?*”

The hotel is next to Milan’s cathedral, the Duomo, where Maitreya (formerly Darby) proposed to his Italian wife, the architect and former television presenter Francesca Francone, some years ago during a Catholic Mass. We go to the sixth floor and find that nothing is quite right up there: the room is too hot; he orders a whiskey and Coke and can’t find a bottle opener; we find one and it doesn’t work. Finally, he takes a long, reassuring slug and declares, “I feel like I’m going on a date when I’ve been married 25 years. I don’t know how to do this any more.”

He says softly: “One thing about Italians is you can’t let them in your head. They’re inquisitive. The English and Germans are a dog tribe; the Italians are cats. They’re very helpful, but it’s in their own rhythm, their own way, and it can drive you crazy.”

It’s an odd start to an interview, but even as a young



man Terence Trent D'Arby liked to discourse on a broad range of subjects. An American who rejected his homeland, D'Arby was living in Britain through what he refers to today as "the Thatcher Revolution"; he was a strange, exotic bird, dropped down in the streets of London, cruising around on a motorbike in the video for his hit song "Sign Your Name" and appearing frequently on the Channel 4 show *The Tube* (he had a year-long affair with its host, Paula Yates). Today, his accent is New York, but back then it was English; the apostrophe he adopted was a mark of his rapid self-elevation. He was all things to all people, and once began a *Q Magazine* interview deconstructing the defeat of Neil Kinnock in the 1987 election.

"Oh my God, I can't believe you thought I was a socialist," he says now. "I was nothing more than an opportunist. Any socialist tendencies I may have had were cured when I got my first tax bill. All artists are socialists until they see another artist with a bigger house than theirs."

D'Arby had cut his teeth in a German funk band while stationed in Frankfurt with Elvis Presley's old regiment; and like that other army boy, Hendrix, he came to fame in a London that wanted his music more than the country he came from. The producer Martyn Ware – a founder member of Heaven 17 and the Human League – worked with him on his debut LP, *Introducing the Hardline According to Terence Trent D'Arby*, which also included the hit songs "Wishing Well" and "If You Let Me Stay". He describes D'Arby as "a box of fireworks going off in every direction. I have never met anyone so driven." Ware would arrive at the studio in the morning and find D'Arby already sitting there in the dark, analysing live recordings of Sam Cooke: "It was like he was studying at university to be a classic soul singer."

Out in the world, his preternatural confidence was magnetic. "He was the world's most beautiful man," Ware says. "I used to walk around Soho with him and women would literally stop and stare – he looked like a god because he's got that boxer's body, and he was a bit androgynous, too. Even the men fancied him." (D'Arby once said he had sex more often than he washed his hair.)

To the music press, he posed a dilemma. As a pop star he was so perfect, Charles Shaar Murray wrote in 1988, he was "like something invented by three rock critics on the 'phone". They called him two things: a genius, and a wanker. To make things more confusing, the very same people calling him a genius were the people calling him

a wanker. Worse still, D'Arby worshipped these people. While living in Germany he had devoured the *NME* and *Melody Maker*. "I had an intellectual crush on Nick Kent, Charles Shaar Murray and Julie," he says today – "Julie Burchill. But she is so reactionary now." He knew that British rock hacks thought American artists were boring to interview so he set out to be different.

Terence Trent D'Arby's follow-up album, 1989's [Neither Fish Nor Flesh](#), was not the triumph he had predicted. It was an experimental psych-soul project featuring tribal drums, surf rock guitar and cosmic libretto: "To an outside world I will not be defined!" Early in its inception, D'Arby's old team received a Dear John letter saying that he felt like this was his moment: he wanted to produce, master and engineer the project himself. He is credited as playing, among other things, kazoo, saxophone, sitar and timpani on the record. He invited Martyn Ware to hear the album when it was finished (in another darkened studio session, which D'Arby himself did not attend). "And although I thought it was very brave," Ware tells me, "I just couldn't hear the singles." The album stiffed – spectacularly, for its time – selling just 300,000 copies (the debut sold over nine million). It brought about a downfall straight out of a Greek tragedy. In music lore, its creator disappeared from the face of the earth on 23 October 1989, the moment the record was released. The truth is slightly different: he soldiered on valiantly for a few years, did a naked cover shoot for *Q* in 1993 and his third album, [Symphony Or Damn](#), produced four top 20 singles in the UK, among them "Delicate" and "Let Her Down Easy". But all this is irrelevant, because no one believes that Terence Trent D'Arby died in 1989 more than Terence Trent D'Arby himself.

"It felt like I was going to join the 27 Club," he says quietly, referring to the rock'n'roll heaven inhabited by Jim Morrison, Janis Joplin, Kurt Cobain and all the others who died at that unfortunate age. "And psychologically I did, because that is exactly the age I was when I was killed."

His speech has an automatic quality and there is very little eye contact. You don't interact with him, you lob questions over the top of what he's saying and hope that he might catch them.

"The bottom line is, we're all pretty much sleepwalking," he says. "The most difficult thing artists have to deal with is the crushing difference between what they know they



can do with their dream being supported, and the reality they have to navigate with the business.”

Over the years he has blamed his former record company, Sony, for the failure of his career, saying it refused to promote *Neither Fish Nor Flesh*. He drew parallels with George Michael, who fought a long battle with Sony in the same era, claiming it wished to keep him in a situation of “creative slavery” when he wanted to branch out with his sound. But George Michael is still with us. I’m curious to know whether, with hindsight and a change of identity, Sananda Maitreya finds that his feelings about the causes of his career failure have changed. “The good news is, most record company people are motivated by the same reason most of us are: greed,” he says. “So, no, when you look back at it, it didn’t make much sense for management not to want my second record to succeed.”

The alternative reasons he gives are a surprise. “I came around at a time when myself, Michael Jackson, Prince, Madonna and George Michael, we were considered kind of dangerous,” he says. “To the system, to the establishment, you become a rival politician.”

The establishment’s urge to end his career was so great, he says, that there were debates about him in the House of Lords. His real nemesis was not the Thatcher administration, but “the 800lb gorilla in the room, Michael, Master Jackson”, who saw him as a threat and, having bought up the Beatles catalogue in 1985, held “more power than the Pope” within the industry.

Every few minutes in our long conversation, Maitreya cuts away from dark realms of government plots and talks more candidly about the business. “It’s only a matter of time before a cheaper model of you comes along,” he explains. “Record companies say, ‘Hey, if you like this asshole, you’re going to like *this* asshole – plus we’re making a higher margin on this asshole.’ They don’t tell you that while you’re getting smarter, commanding more for yourself, you’re putting an egg-timer on your career.”

As a young man he once observed, “This industry doesn’t like too many black faces around at one time. If someone puts me on the cover of a magazine, they ain’t going to be putting another black face on the cover for a while because it wouldn’t make commercial sense and that’s the way of the world.” Already selling millions to a white yuppie audience, D’Arby could afford to be philosophical about genre pigeonholing but the digs at his rivals abounded. He claimed that black artists before him – Lionel Richie, Luther Vandross, Michael Jackson

– had emasculated themselves to get into the charts. He would be Jerry Lee Lewis, he once declared, rather wonderfully: “the embodiment of the white man gone bad”.

Today he does not name the new, cheaper-to-run assholes who came up when the industry had “successfully killed my primary image”, so I draw his attention to a poem on his website, from 2002.

For Lenny K

Fear not, Your girls are safe!

I’ve got an italian girlfriend now

And my leash is pretty short

Ps Also let me say to you now how proud I am of you.

You took care of the tribes necessary business and moved it forward

And kept the light on.

I know it wasn’t easy. Bless you!

I ask him whether this poem was dedicated to Lenny Kravitz, who achieved success the year Terence died and was also, like him, a sexy black rock star who’d grown up listening to the Stones.

He says he can’t remember writing the poem, but then concedes: “At one point I thought they would give Lenny my social security number as well. I think my greatest envy of him was that he actually did have a tremendous amount of support from his record company while I was always fucking arguing with mine.

“Much of what I wanted to do was moved over to him while I was going through my mortification period.”

In August, at a festival in Sweden, Kravitz’s leather trousers split on stage and the unfortunate incident went viral. He was revealed to be wearing no underpants, and a cock ring. I ask Maitreya whether he saw the internet clip.

“No,” he says, and for the first time a spark dances in



his eye. “Choreographed for sure. The only thing I could think to do with a cock ring now is keep my house keys on it.”

In hindsight, it's impossible to imagine a *Game of Thrones* playing out in the late 1980s and early 1990s between a handful of black male rock stars – D'Arby, Kravitz, Seal, Michael Jackson and Prince. Yet Jackson, paranoid about everyone, indeed felt threatened by D'Arby; he was upset when his lawyer, John Branca, took D'Arby on as a client, and urged him to drop him.

“The hero factory is there to produce pop idols,” Maitreya says. “We're fools, we wear the fools' hats. Our job is to be publicly flogged and beaten when it's time to do that. The price of fame is: when we need to crucify you, you need to be available to us. We'll give you a good burial, make some nice T-shirts. Each of them pays their own price. You don't just come through unscathed.”

Did he hold on to his publishing rights? Does he still get royalties?

“Yeah. I wasn't a total idiot.”

In January 2009 Lady Gaga told the world, “. . . I've always been famous, you just didn't know it.” The press enjoyed her nuclear sense of self-belief and the postmodern, almost academic way she talked about her music, borrowing a limb from all her heroes and setting herself alongside them. Five years later, Gaga was declared dead by various publications – but not before she had rendered Madonna irrelevant. In 1988, Terence Trent D'Arby declared he'd be as big as Madge, too. “The worst thing she could possibly do is not to have died young like Marilyn,” he says. “How considerate of Marilyn to have died, so we didn't have to deal with the reality of the fact that even our goddesses get older.”

In the afterglow of his first album's success, he declared he would finally break America – and shortly afterwards he turned up on the cover of *Rolling Stone*. But every long profile of him began with enthusiastic speculation about his inevitable fall. “He created this monster,” Ware says. “It started off as a giggle, an ironic thing. He understood the business of star-building, and he became his own experiment. Then he fell out with journalists who were extremely eager to pull him down.”

Before he joined the army, D'Arby studied journalism for a year at the University of Florida. He records our interview and emails me afterwards. I'm half expecting him to retract some of the things he has said, but he's just improving a few of his quotes. The old self-belief is still there but these days it is shot through with pain. Where does it come from? Can he explain, now Terence is dead and buried?

He has never told anyone this, he says, but on the night of 8 December 1980 he dreamed that he met John Lennon on the street in New York and extended his hand, and felt Lennon “basically walk into” him. When he awoke he heard that Lennon had been killed. “From the age of 18 onwards, I had a different confidence about what was meant to happen to my life. I can only say this with all relative humility: I saw myself as a Beatle.”

A few years ago, Sananda Maitreya's wife told him his attitude was that of a typical New Yorker. “I thought about it, and I said, ‘Actually, that's right, you know,’ because New Yorkers have a chip on their shoulder, too.”

He was born in Manhattan in 1962 to a gospel singer and counsellor, Frances Howard, and raised by her and the man he now refers to as his stepfather, Bishop James Benjamin Darby. Pop music was banned from the household: hearing Michael Jackson's voice floating from a neighbour's yard was “like my first kiss”. The family moved from New York to DeLand in northern Florida, where his stepfather became pastor of the city's Church of Our Lord Jesus Christ and chairman of the Pentecostal international board of evangelists. Terry Darby, as he was known, was a successful pupil – he became managing editor of the school paper and sang in a student chorus called the Sound of the Seventies – but he got into fights. He had problems with black kids and with white kids (“Fuck the both of you – I'm green,” is how he once put it) and suffered his first fall from grace when, during one scuffle, he stabbed someone with his afro hair pick. Boxing was an outlet for his anger – he won the prestigious Golden Gloves prize in Orlando at 17 and caught the attention of army coaches. His parents persuaded him to go to university instead but he was frustrated there, particularly by his lack of success with women. He dropped out and joined the army but soon got fed up of taking instructions from people he considered less intelligent. After amassing a number of reprimands he was discharged at 21.



Maitreya tells me today that he was an illegitimate child, raised with five legitimate children. “The circumstances of my birth were very embarrassing to my mother,” he says. “My biological father was a married man, so basically, in any event, it was already a messy situation.”

I ask him if this biological father was white (he has often drawn attention to his light skin). “. . . or an alien, or both. Point is, I came into the world in a very compromising situation, and because of my mother’s religious upbringing abortion was out of the question.”

He tells me that his mother “made it very, very clear that Jesus was the most important thing in her life, and she did what she could not to project the fact that I was an embarrassment to her. I spent most of my life unconsciously competing with Jesus for my mother’s attention. Which is kind of tough, because first of all, I couldn’t see him, except for pictures, and second of all he wasn’t really there, and it’s tough to compete with somebody who’s invisible.”

Does he still talk to her? She can be seen on YouTube, singing gospel under the name Mother Frances Darby.

“I’m not sure she’s even the same woman,” he says, vaguely. And then, as he has been given to doing throughout his career, he pulls his experience – and probably that of many other pop stars – into focus for a moment. “If you have a chip on your shoulder, use it,” he says. “In Latin, fame means hunger, and I’m hungry. Not a hundred people in my generation could have done what I did, and the difference between us is that they got from their environment what they needed. There was no need for them to mount some huge, fucking life-destroying campaign to show the world, ‘Look, I am worthy of my mother’s attention.’”

Did he have a nervous breakdown?

“Of course I had a breakdown,” he says. “It was clearly a breakdown, and all you can do is surrender and try to not put too many pills into your body. You could say, clearly this guy had some sort of bipolar crisis.”

And where was he when this breakdown happened?

“I was living in great fabulous fucking mansions in Sunset Boulevard on my own,” he says, sounding suddenly weary, and tapping my tape recorder. “Are you sure this thing is on?”

Maitreya says he has inherited “a degree of family

madness, some male schizophrenia issues”, from his Scots-Irish bloodline. He talks about the connection between madness and creativity, comparing the management of demons to the delicate power balance involved in a man having successful dominance over a wolf. Yet the cast of characters in attendance during his breakdown – which occurred after he moved Los Angeles in the mid-1990s, feeling alienated by the British press – appears to have been more mundane.

“I can remember getting up in the middle of the night and sleepwalking to the bathroom, taking a piss, and having a quiet inner voice saying, ‘Don’t worry. Some day, you’re going to change both the music and the business,’” he says. “I do believe that Master Lennon, being an angel of the Lord, is available to a lot of people in inspiring circumstances. I believe the same about Elvis, the same with Master Michael, even though he was a huge nemesis in that lifetime. Since his death, he definitely knows he owes me some karma.”

It was angels who named him Sananda, he says, in dreams during his depression. “Then, later, I realised I think I need a second name, because I didn’t want to piss Madonna off, you know!”

The singular ambition that burned *Neither Fish Nor Flesh* to cinders has only intensified over time. Sananda Maitreya puts out a new album every two years on his independent label, Treehouse. They usually feature two dozen compositions; his puntastic titles include *Nigor Mortis* and “Neutered and Spade”. Each project is the fruit of finally having the space to “completely regurgitate all the stuff that went into my becoming an artist in the first place”. For several years there has been talk of a film about his life, he says, but he is struggling to get involved because he can see three or four different ways of telling the story.

The new project, *Rise of the Zugebrian Time Lords*, is a retro-futuristic concept album spread over two discs of “bipolar” excess. Maitreya’s decision to start with a Beatles song, “You’re Going To Lose That Girl”, should come as no surprise. The energy of the project is almost exhausting. Instruments – he plays them all – form a noisy zoo of woodwind, blues guitar and a loose, jangly piano spooked by the spirit of Carole King. What is this record? A Broadway musical for one? A fantastic exercise in rock’n’roll hubris? An aural exploration of



mental health issues?

Surprisingly, he doesn't want to talk about it. I press him about the lyrics to "Giraffe", a likeable, child-friendly melody that contains the lines: "Giraffe/can I have your autograph?/Please sign it to Sananda". When I suggest that it sounds like a song from *Sesame Street* he brightens. For the past five years he has been listening almost exclusively to children's music with his two sons, aged three and five. Joe Raposo, who wrote many of the programme's best-loved songs, including "It's Not Easy Being Green", is one of his favourite composers. His husky voice swells into a perfect, sparkly croon: *Can you tell me how to get – how to get to Sesame Street!* "You know," he says, "I think Elvis Costello was also influenced by some of Raposo's stuff. You're not supposed to say that, as an angry young writer, 'Oh yeah, I listen to Sesame Street,' but I can hear certain devices of his that sound like that whole Electric Company style of songwriting."

His boys love "Giraffe", but he can't be around while they are listening to it; his wife later tells me she has to wait until he's out of the house to play it to them. He talks touchingly about love being "something you have to work on – it doesn't just come to you". As a young man, he scythed his way through women, partly because of his mother issues, he thinks: then one day he decided to stop, "because you're only going to wind up looking for the same thing anyway".

He can't listen to anyone else's pop music these days. His only comfortable relationship is with "Master Beethoven", who presumably is dead enough not to offer any painful competition. But clearly the man who makes a double album and then can't play it again is living daily with bigger enemies than "Lenny Cockring Kravitz" (as he calls him in his follow-up email) or the ghost of Master Jackson. Across the record there are hints of the cinnamon-voiced psychedelic wonders that could emerge from the pen of Sananda Maitreya, were he to allow a producer or A&R team to get their hands on his work. "His voice is even better than it was at the time," says Martyn Ware, who still receives each new project in the post from his old charge. "But he has no sub-editor."

"Tell me about your new album" is usually the most boring prompt in the rock'n'roll interview. The second – "How has being a father changed you?" (Maitreya also has a grown daughter from a previous relationship) – yields similarly surprising results. "Anything else at this point in life is a bonus, because I've already done the

most important thing, simply to have passed my genes on to some other bitches," Maitreya says, showing me a picture of two small boys who look just like him, only with blond, curly hair and blue eyes.

"I'm very confident that my first son is my biological father and it gives me the chance to have finally a relationship with him. My first son is also a continuation of the life that I left behind."

His first son might be Terence Trent D'Arby? Does that not worry him?

"Preferably they'll both want to follow their mother and be architects," he says.

As the afternoon draws to a close he talks again of bloodlines. Originally all the world was black, he tells me: "Bitches looked like me! Didn't look like you!" His own white, "land-owning, slave-owning blood" is another reason Providence gave him his assignment, he says.

And once we're back on to that, something clicks down in him again. We're on to Jonah and the Whale, "being spat out unceremoniously after three days", and thence, without pause, to vampires. For a moment, he becomes agitated when he realises that the brown cotton scarf that was covering his dreads has disappeared. It's true enough: one minute I was looking at it and the next it wasn't there. So much magic has been talked in this room today that I think, for a moment, that Sananda Maitreya's headscarf might have vanished into thin air and I'll have to tell someone about it afterwards. We search and find it down the back of his seat.

"What was I saying?"

I want to tell him not to re-join his mystical thread. He was so much happier talking about Elvis Costello. But we're back to the industry, and death. The irony is, the industry he was raised in is dead and buried, too.

"And in killing the messengers they killed a whole generation," Maitreya says. "Like Maestro Thom Yorke: they alienated him, and he was providing the answers they needed."

Surely the point is that you're free now?

"Yeah, well, free is relative," he says. "The moment we're met with too much freedom, we shit our pants." ■