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Sananda Maitreya: Prince and I saw ourselves in each other

The musician tells Sarfraz Manzoor about leaving TTD behind



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TTD in London in 1987. He has since released seven albums as Sananda Maitreya

In March 1988 Radio City Music Hall in New York hosted the 30th annual Grammy awards. The ceremony featured performances by Michael Jackson and TTD, who was being hailed as the successor to the king of pop. Androgynously beautiful, with a lusty soulful rasp of a voice and effortlessly quotable — “I’m a genius, point f***ing blank,” he had told the NME in 1987 — the former soldier seemingly had it all.

His debut album, *Introducing the Hardline According to Terence Trent D’Arby*, sold nine million copies and spawned hits including *Sign Your Name* and *Wishing Well* as well as winning him a Brit and a Grammy. At Radio City that year D’Arby sang *If You Let Me Stay* in front of his musical heroes: Jackson, Prince and Whitney Houston. It was “like having an out-of-body experience”, he says. “It was mind-blowing.”

The future seemed wide open, but D’Arby’s second album, *Neither Fish Nor Flesh*, was a commercial disappointment, as were his subsequent records. Q magazine, which had put him on the cover in 1987, featured him in 2001 in its “Where are they now?” section.



Performing in Milan in 2018

The answer to that is a flat in Milan, where he lives under the name Sananda Maitreya, with his wife, Francesca Francone, an Italian architect and TV presenter, and their two young sons. He has released seven albums as Maitreya, none of which charted in the US or UK. The latest is *Pandora’s PlayHouse*, a 28-track double album of rock, psychedelia, soul and R&B that comes out on his own label, with Maitreya writing, producing and playing every instrument on every track. The new album was the pretext for the interview, but during our nearly three-hour conversation it is barely mentioned. Maitreya, 59, is unshaven and wearing



a burgundy hoodie and blue-green bandana; he looks more like the boxer he trained to be before becoming a doe-eyed, delicate-boned pop idol.

He was born in 1962 in New York. His mother was a black gospel singer and his biological father was a married white man of Scottish-Irish ancestry. His mother married a preacher named James Benjamin Darby — the apostrophe was added by her son — and the family moved from New York to Florida to Chicago. In a song called *In America* on the new record Maitreya sings: “If you’re white they’ll always try and make it right in America/ If you’re black you’ll always have to watch your back in America.”

Maitreya joined the US army aged 18 and was stationed in Germany, where he took up singing before leaving and moving to London to launch his music career. He was an avid reader of the British music press and noticed that journalists would complain that American artists had little to say except thanking God and their record company. He decided “that I was going to try and paint myself as what they wanted rather than what they always get, and so I did my Muhammad Ali shtick”. That involved telling everyone who would listen that he was a genius. It worked for a while and he seemed set to join the ranks of Jackson and Prince.

Jackson, who was also with Sony, did not appreciate the comparison and, Maitreya believes, was instrumental in destroying his career. “I just had the misfortune of being in the shadow of Zeus,” he says. “We didn’t get along and he was a shit to me. I paid the price of being in the shadow.” Was Jackson threatened by him? “Yes, of course, and he didn’t have to be. I’d have pushed him to become even greater.” Did they meet? “Yeah, but he refused to physically acknowledge me,” he says. “We were even wearing the exact same boots.”

Prince was more supportive and there is a track dedicated to him on the new album. “We definitely saw a lot of ourselves in one another,” Maitreya says. “We had a big brother/little brother relationship. It was always respectful, one of those things that you need to anchor yourself. A brotherhood that understands what you’re trying to do.” They recorded a track together but it was never released and remains in the Paisley Park vaults. “I think he thought it was too spirited or too controversial or something,” Maitreya says.

It wasn’t just musical royalty with whom Maitreya was friends. “I was close enough to Princess Diana to know that she was a real goddess,” he says. “She was f***ed up a little bit but she



Maitreya in 1987

also had the heart of a saint. That heart was abused and since a tremendous amount of us in the entertainment profession can understand abuse, we understood her. She was one of us.”

In Maitreya’s narrative, racism plays a large part in explaining the commercial failure of his music career. He cites a surprising example. “Oasis were using the same shtick I was. Liam Gallagher took my act. And I love Liam. I’m a fan but Liam took my attitude hook, line and f***ing sinker. So if you compare the treatment of Meghan versus Kate and the treatment I got versus Oasis, the question answers itself. In an Anglo culture we shouldn’t be surprised if Anglos get away with more than those who aren’t fully anglicised.”

Sony, pressured by Jackson, he claims, withdrew support and he believes that he was punished for not making a second album that sounded like the first. “Even going into the project [*Neither Fish Nor Flesh* — he can’t bring himself to name his D’Arby albums] something felt not the same,” he says. When it flopped it “damaged the psyche that I had created as the vehicle for that



purpose". He changed his name to Sananda Maitreya — it came to him in a dream — in 2001, married Francone and moved to Milan.



With La Toya Jackson in the 1980s

There may be something to Maitreya's explanation for why his career stalled. Blaming others, however, handily overlooks the possibility that the second album was not that great, and demanding the label released no singles from it may not have been the smartest strategy. Maitreya prefers to share his florid conspiracy theories. "There were people in the strata of English society who were uncomfortable with what I represented," he says. "In the Vatican and the House of Lords there were discussions as to whether I was a menace." I don't ask him to tell me more in case he does.

I have been warned not to use the words "Terence Trent D'Arby" in his presence and it's clear how wounding those years were for him. "Fame is trauma," he says. "It doesn't matter if you wanted it. To dream of something is not having to deal with the reality. You're enjoying the meal and the bill hasn't come yet. The price of it is pretty high."

When he was in the army in Germany, "my time overlapped with certain gentlemen who were in Vietnam", he says. "They were jovial men until you mentioned Vietnam. You couldn't bring up the subject. That's how they dealt with it." The 1980s were Maitreya's Vietnam, he says, and he survived by reinventing himself. "Interviews are really challenging because it's the only time I'm

called upon to confront things," he says. "Artistically I more than fulfilled my potential. Whether from a commercial standpoint they got as many nickels out of me as they envisioned, that's a question you'll have to leave for them [his labels].

"Look at the price Michael, Whitney and Prince had to pay," he says. "They were basically chewed up and spat out by an unrelenting machine." Did he fear that he might go the same way? "If I hadn't moved on from identifying with certain traumas it would be difficult to get to another place in a healthy manner. At the same time, I'm not a pussy. I'm a pretty tough f***er." He didn't sound tough; he sounded like a deeply traumatised and endearingly fragile human.

Yet he did what he needed to survive, and that deserves respect. "The eternal question is: did I shake the tree to its roots or did I grab a few apples and run?" he says. "I lived a great story, worthy of cinema or opera, and the moral of the story is that no matter what route you take, you're going to have to pay a price. There are no exits: the only way out is through." ■