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Whatever Happened to Terence Trent D'Arby?



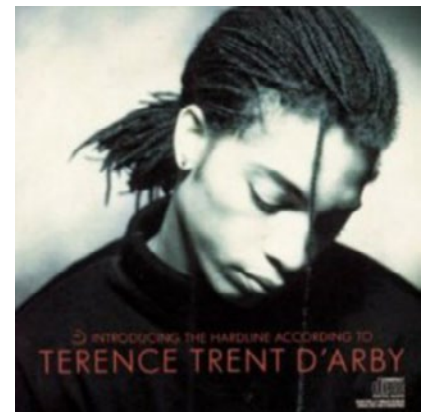
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The day “Introducing the Hardline According to Terence Trent D’Arby” came out, in the fall of 1987, I bought it, on cassette, in a state of fevered anticipation. I had been reading about D’Arby all summer: the record, released in England that July, had become an instant sensation, topping the charts and earning comparisons to everyone from Prince to Michael Jackson to Sam Cooke. It remains an audacious *début* that brought soul music into the eighties, with hits like “If You Let Me Stay,” “Wishing Well,” “Sign Your Name,” and the Smokey- through-Michael-Jackson cover “Who’s Loving You.” The importance of the music was matched by the self-importance of its creator: D’Arby claimed that his album was the most monumental piece of pop music since “Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band,” and used nearly every interview to anoint himself a peerless genius. Because of D’Arby’s evident talent, these assertions were both irritating and exciting. Two years later, there was another record, “Neither Fish Nor Flesh,” a compelling sidestep that frontloaded three long ballads, and, as a result, blunted the force of the balance of the album, which consisted of powerful, soulful, and funky compositions that were every bit the equal of the *début* (“This Side of Love” remains one of his finest moments). The mixed reception to the record also effectively killed D’Arby’s commercial momentum. Then there were two more records, “Symphony or Damn,” in 1993, and “TTD’s Vibrator,” in 1995, uneven releases that seemed, at the time, like object lessons in diminishing returns. D’Arby didn’t want to play the superstar game, at least the way it was supposed to be played; he could be silly one moment and solemn the next, and he had a penchant for releasing singles with B-sides that were little more than wordless piano improvisations. And then he vanished, or so it seemed.

When D’Arby returned, in 2001, he had a new album, an independently released opus called “Wildcard” that included a soaring opener, “O Divina,” and songs co-written with hit-makers like Glen Ballard and Dallas Austin.

But he wasn’t Terence Trent D’Arby anymore. Or, rather, he was and he wasn’t. The album was released under both that name and the name Sananda Maitreya (which he had adopted during his years away from recording, and which he legally took in 2001). “Wildcard” was re-released in 2002, and this time there was no trace of Terence Trent D’Arby: it was a Sananda Maitreya album in full. He was typically maximalist in his explanation of the change: “Terence Trent D’Arby was dead,” he said. “He watched his suffering as he died a noble death. After intense pain I meditated for a new spirit, a new will, a new identity.”

There were other changes, too. After the slow demise of his major-label career, Maitreya moved to Munich and then Milan, where he settled in 2002. The following year, he married the Italian architect and television host Francesca Francone. Many artists of his (former) stature would have stopped making music, or contented themselves with nostalgia tours, belting out lazily played arrangements of “Wishing Well” for decades. But Maitreya was as stubborn and ambitious as D’Arby had been. In Milan, he started to make music again, creating it mostly on his own (he borrowed the “Written, Arranged, Produced, and Performed” credit from Prince). He distributed his songs primarily through his Web site, occasionally packaging them into multi-phase albums and selling CDs. It took him a while to develop a working pace and a release schedule, but once he did, he created



as much as he ever had: “Angels and Vampires, Volume 1” came out in 2005; “Angels and Vampires, Volume 2,” the next year; “Nigor Mortis,” in 2009; and “The Sphinx,”



in 2011.

All of the albums were proudly unclassifiable, veering between straightforward soul ballads, idiosyncratic experiments, personal confessions, and instrumental fragments. “Nigor Mortis,” for example, had a wordy bit of neo-soul (“This Town”), a jazzy dissection of intimacy in relationships (“A Wife Knows”), and a bit of raga-flavored hard rock (“Mrs. Gupta”). Along the way, Maitreya also created a mini genre of similarly titled odes to various women, possibly mythological (not just “O Divina” but, also, “O Lovely Gwenita,” “Ooh Carolina,” and “O Jacaranda,” which he rhymes with “I wanna be your panda,” a reasonable request). They weren’t records that major labels would have released, or could have.

This spring, right on schedule, Maitreya released “Return to Zooathalon,” a sprawling album that’s just as baffling, uneven, and wonderful as his best work. Listing its influences is exhausting: there’s Beatles and Stones and Motown and Sam Cooke and Prince, of course, but there’s also plenty of jazz and prog, not to mention yacht rock and arena rock.

At twenty-two songs, in fact, there’s a little bit of everything. There’s a two-part “Stagger Lee,” which has little to do with the classic Lloyd Price song and everything to do with gritty soul, something he still excels at more than a quarter-century after his debut. There’s a cracked self-portrait (“Mr. Gruberschnickel”), a broken love song based on a preposterous pun (“Tequila Mockinbird”), a scene piece worthy of Jimmy Webb (“Albuquerque”), and a pair of instrumental compositions to wrap the whole thing up, one for kazoo (“D.H.S.”) and the other for piano (“The Last Train To Houston”). What there is, mostly, is a conspicuous commitment to artwork and the messy, miraculous process of creation, which is a strange thing to say about a pop album at this point in time. How does the earnest, open-hearted “Free To Be” sit comfortably next to the surging, bitter “Kangaroo” (“Will I ever learn to jump like you?”)? It doesn’t, and that’s one of the album’s greatest assets. Throughout, pop melodies are wrapped around lyrics so specific and idiosyncratic that they demand (and reward) repeated listenings.

And there’s a song to a woman, of course: “Ornella Or Nothing,” which sings the praises of a girl who “punches poets just to keep it real” and features one of the loveliest choruses of his career. More than a decade after leaving American and British soul stardom behind, Maitreya still has it all, at least artistically. That’s the hardline.