



THE SUNDAY TIMES

D'Arby day again

By JOHN BUNGEY



25 February 2003

Pop: Terence Trent D'Arby was briefly a superstar. Now, at 40, he's trying again

AS CAREER implosions go, his was one of the most spectacular. For ten minutes in the late Eighties Terence Trent D'Arby was the future of rock, R&B, male-modelling, you name it. His debut album, *Introducing the Hardline According to Terence Trent D'Arby*, sold vastly, perhaps 15 million, perhaps 22 million copies (depending on whom you believe). Here were the voice of Al Green and the moves of James Brown in one pin-up package. He wrote the tunes, he played the instruments. "I am a genius, point f***ing blank," declared the young god. Too good to be true? Of course it was.

D'Arby's wildly ambitious follow-up, *Neither Fish Nor Flesh: a Soundtrack of Love, Faith, Hope & Destruction*, baffled many a fan and the critics turned on him. He fell out with his record company; they thought him cocky and rebellious, he thought them venal and parasitic. Two more albums leaked out, the last in 1995, with little fanfare, and that, many supposed, was that, the sad end to another tale of pop crash and burn.

Recent word that D'Arby was changing his name to Sananda Maitreya, after he had heard angels addressing him thus in a dream, only backed those who suspected fruitcake tendencies.

So it's something of a surprise to be shaking hands in 2003 with the eminently sane individual who has bounded through the door of a London hotel room. He's stick thin, looks ten years younger than his age (40), clad in designer casuals, and has none of the hallmarks of a rock'n'roll casualty. He's here on a charm offensive, promoting a new album, *Wildcard!*, on his own label. And another surprise is just how good it is, full of the fierce

passion and sharp hooks of his debut release. The catchy first track, *O Divina*, has already been a minor hit in Italy, his new home after a decade in LA.

So where's he been since 1995? D'Arby, who still answers to that name, takes a long breath and in quiet, intense tones explains: "Basically I have been putting my life back in the direction I wanted — and it took all this time, wresting control from the music industry.

"If you are not careful, when you work for them a transformation occurs. One moment these people are working for you, then all of a sudden you are the horse that's pulling them, and their dreams, and their kid's ambitions. In my naive way all I'd really wanted to do was make the most exciting pop music I could, and just get on with it."

His legal battle with Sony took six or seven years as he fought to get away from a company which he claims wanted endless remakes of his debut. Ultimately D'Arby says he was bought off, but his lawyers would use the groundwork to go on to fight George Michael's famous case.

"I say thank you to the industry for the pain, for the lessons, for the suffering," says D'Arby. "Everything gave me a much clearer idea of who I was, and who I very clearly wasn't."

And one person he wasn't, it turned out, was the LA-living rock star Terence Trent D'Arby. The singer doesn't repeat the angels story but merely says: "I had been given intuitional information that to change my name would not only save my life but rejuvenate it — and I have to say this has been my experience."

Maitreya, I point out, is apparently a Buddhist name for saviour of the universe. The singer shrugs: "I'm sure it means lots of things. I deliberately stayed away from knowing what it meant for the first two years, even though friends had read it up."

Then he adds that he told the name to Muhammad Ali, whom he has met several times. "He punched me on the



shoulder and said, 'I like that.' So if one of your heroes approves, that's OK."

The current album is credited to Sananda/ Terence but he is "90 per cent" Sananda these days. He accepts that the English press might be a tad sceptical of a Prince-like name change, "but people will always be suckers for good music made by people who feel it, whatever their name".

He has a love-hate relationship with the English. It was here that his career took off. After growing up in the States, the rebellious adopted son of an Episcopalian minister, he began singing with a band while serving with the US Army in Germany. After moving to London, D'Arby's early hits, *Sign Your Name*, *Wishing Well*, melted the hard hearts of the music press, and that acclaim jumpstarted his career in America.

D'Arby claims that the debut album sold seven million more copies than Sony gave him credit for. "I know people who had access to the real information," he says darkly. "I was big in territories, like Eastern Europe, that I never knew about."

But after the hype, it was the British press who were the first to lampoon D'Arby's alleged monomaniacal tendencies (notably declaring his debut album better than Sgt Pepper). The singer admits that in the madness of sudden fame the braggadocio spun out of control. I ask what advice Sananda would give the young D'Arby. "Actually, if I loved him, I would immediately kill him — and call it a mercy killing." But musically, he would not have done anything differently. At the time, Rolling Stone was almost the only magazine that agreed with the singer that the grandiose *Neither Fish Nor Flesh* might be blessed with genius. "But ten years on there were people telling me how much they were touched by those songs. It took that time."

He tells of meeting a Tokyo brain doctor whose hospital had been using the tunes to help patients to recover from trauma. "They have found that this record affects brain tissues and can bring them back to a state of equilibrium." He laughs but adds: "It's scientific evidence that the artist knew what he was doing."

Today life in Florence is good. He has an Italian partner and expects to marry. "And in Italy they respect musicians. They accord them the same respect that the English give barristers or doctors." The success of *O Divina* brought out an unlikely admirer — and here D'Arby slips into

wide-eyed fan mode.

"We got a call from the Vatican, 'Would I like to play?' Afterwards I was invited to a private hang-out thing with the Pope and it was cool. I was very moved. A lot of the Church is business but there are still a lot of people who are very, very sincere. He strikes you as one who is. I also noticed his hands — they were as soft and smooth as a baby's."

D'Arby is no Catholic, but he professes a deep spirituality and believes that life needs a foundation in faith. "You can always re-invent it. You can cut it down at the root and put new ideas on top."

And it's faith that has kept D'Arby going through the seesaw years and his campaign now to re-introduce himself to a world that has almost forgotten him. "I'm very grateful for where I am. All the bitterness I had to endure, if you hold it, and try to use it constructively, it just becomes wine. I'm really grateful for the s*** the industry put me through. It basically made a man of me."

***Wildcard! is out on Sananda Records* ■**