

The Unforgettable Teena Marie

Written by Robert ID1004

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Teena Marie

Plenty of blue-eyed soul artists have come and gone since Teena Marie's first album 27 years ago. Yet none have been able to garner the credibility of the late Rick James' former protege and lover girl.

Unlike most of her Motown contemporaries, Marie's first record didn't include her picture. That executive decision was made by legendary label chief Berry Gordy, who wanted the pint-sized Lady T's robust vocals to speak for themselves.

Marie's soulful timbre ended up shouting out hits across two decades, from "Lovergirl" and "I Need Your Lovin'" to "Square Biz," which was sampled most notably on the Fugees' "Fu-Gee-La," introducing her to a new generation of fans.

Most recently, the singer born Mary Christine Brockert, now 49, appeared as a judge on hip-hop rap artist Missy Elliott's the reality series "Road to Superstardom with Missy Elliott." The Associated Press caught up with her by telephone at the home she shares with her 13-year-old daughter, Alia Rose, in Los Angeles. Here she is, in her own words:

Teena Marie: I was maybe only 36 years old when they started calling me (a legend), you know. It was just strange because right after that I didn't have a record deal, so I kind of didn't know what that meant. I left Epic so that I could raise my child and that was a conscious effort to be a part of my daughter's life. It wasn't that my label said they didn't want me anymore, it was just that I was of a certain age and I wanted to have a baby, be at home with the baby, and take a break. And that's what I did, but I always toured, I've been on the all the road all my life with or without a record. So that's been a great lesson in my life.

I was just down the block from my home at the barbecue joint, and they were flipping out in

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there. They were like, "Man, you look just like Teena Marie. I just saw her on ("Road to Superstardom") last night." I guess they just don't expect to see you in the rib joint, and be so accessible to what I feel is my people. I had a ball, so much fun on the show, those kids where great. A couple of them fell out when they saw that I was one of the judges.

I think I'm really the only white artist that has really been completely accepted by a black audience, and looked at as if I'm a black person. I think that is a wonderful thing because I think music is supposed to transcend all colors, you know, any kind of stereotype. You shouldn't have to be any particular color to sing the way that you sing, you know. Minnie Riperton was a black woman that a lot of people thought was white because she didn't have the soul, of say, an Aretha Franklin. She was still very soulful in her own right. But because she didn't sing like she was straight up out of the church, a lot of people thought that she was white. Some of the greatest opera singers in the world have been black women. They shouldn't have to sing R&B just because they're black!

When I started, I was one of the first female rappers. I played a part in it. I went through a whole Public Enemy thing, and I've always loved rap. So I really hate to say this, because I believe so firmly in freedom of speech, but some (hip-hop) I wish was not on the radio. It bothers me if someone takes one of my songs and turns them into something that is disrespectful. The Fugees didn't do that; they were very respectful. I had a No. 1 record with "Ooo La La" and so did they. To come out with that song and have a number one record in 1988 and then come back eight years later and have another number record with them in a whole other generation where some kids didn't know that was my song. I still have 12 and 13 year olds coming up to me like, "Lady T, Lady T, I love that song you did!" And a lot of times I'll be somewhere in the community and someone will make me black. They'll always go, "Teena is not white, she's just light-skinned," or whatever. You know, I've never really tripped on color; I don't look at that at all. But it's just funny how people react to it.

I think God gave me the destiny of somebody like a Dr. King or a Robert Kennedy, that people just loved because they are good people, and they just don't really look at color and just try to benefit all people, not based on their skin color. My mother and father raised me to believe that all people are equal and that is just the way I look at people. And I think my music is very unpretentious, it's not something that I sit around and try to create, and it's just naturally me. I think that anyone who hears me and knows me, knows that I'm not a fake, knows that I didn't sit up and try to emulate black artists. That was just the soul in me.

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