

# Tina turner's comeback album: private dancer



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Or “ personal liberation and sonic redemption” ( *Slant Magazine* , March 5, 2012)

Tina Turner was born as Anna Mae Bullock in Nut Bush, Tennessee, US in 1939. She was the youngest daughter of her parents, Zelma Bullock and Floyd Richard Bullock, who had an abusive marriage. Anna Mae and her sister, Alline, grew up with their grandmother after their parents had abandoned them. In the early years of her life she already had an interest in music, she sang in the church choir where her father was a pastor (Turner and Loder, 2010, p. 1-12)

Having a troubled childhood was not the only obstacle to face before she became an international superstar with her comeback album: Private Dancer. As we can read in her autobiography co-written with Kurt Loder (2010), her involvement in the music industry started in East St. Louis in Ike Turner's band. First as a backing singer, later on as the main attraction on stage. She became famous for her raunchy voice and her energetic dance moves. According to Mark Rowland (1984) “ From the moment young Anna Mae Bullock from Nutbush, Tennessee hooked up with a hot East St. Louis band leader named Ike Turner, nobody has sung and danced quite like her.” As Tina recalls in Mark Rowland's article (1984) she had always been surrounded by male singers who sang blues songs, having been influenced mainly by performers like Little Richard or Ray Charles. Buzzy Jackson (2005, p. 123) refers to Susan Fast (2001) while describing her vocal inspirations: “ Tina Turner similarly constructed her vocal style around male performers, such as Little Richard and James Brown, as a strategy of ‘ claiming maleness’ in order for her to gain agency in a male-dominated space”. This could

explain her powerful presence on stage and the way she uses her vocal abilities. According to her “ my voice is so unusual- very strong, very full, very loud. But you can't get a pretty voice to sing Ray Charles. It just won't happen.” (Rowland, September, 1984)

As Lucy O'Brien explains it in her book called “ She Bop II” (2002, p. 123) Tina had what it took to stay in the industry: on the one hand, she had the convincing attitude of a strong and independent woman and her appearance brought this to a higher level. On the other hand, she was in possession of a “ solid background in raunchy R&B.”

The pair had quite a few successful singles and tours, ( *A Fool in Love* , *It's Gonna Work Out Fine*, *Nutbush City Limits* ). Apart from *Proud Mary* which was 4<sup>th</sup> on the Billboard Top 100 and received a Grammy for Best R&B Vocals in 1971, they never stayed on the charts for long, they needed something more. One of the ways Ike tried to achieve more spotlight was changing their band name to Ike and Tina Turner Revue (Turner and Loder, 2010).

According to De Curtis (1998), Phil Spector was very keen on making a record with Tina's vocals, after he had seen one of the revue's performances. Furthermore, De Curtis refers to the song that Phil Spector recorded with Tina Turner as a vocalist in the following manner: “ a summary of everything Phil Spector has sought to achieve in pop music, it's *River Deep Mountain High* ”.

By Tina Turner's own admission in her autobiography (Turner and Loder, 2010, pp. 118-120), working with Phil Spector made her feel like a professional for the first time. She did not work with a producer before.

Making a record with Phil Spector was one of the main steps for Anna Mae Bullock in becoming Tina Turner.

Ike Turner turned out to be a very abusive husband. Their marriage, which had lasted for sixteen years, came to an end in 1978. After her escape from Ike, former Anna Mae Bullock took her life and career into her own hands and with the help of Roger Davies as manager, she started to rebuild both. By that time the Revue was already forgotten, the only thing the record labels and radio stations were interested in was rock'n'roll and/or pop. The outcome of the divorce was that Tina Turner kept her name, while Ike Turner got all their belongings and royalties, which meant that financially she was left bankrupt. This made it even harder to start a music career on her own (Turner and Loder, 2010). Buzzy Jackson in her book entitled *A Bad Woman Feeling Good* (2005, p. 236) wrote: " She knew she could try to rebuild her career as long as her fans knew who she was, and she was right."

The album " Private Dancer" was released in 1983 and it is often mentioned as Tina Turner's comeback. In an AllMusic Review Alex Henderson wrote: " In 1984, a 45-year-old Tina Turner made one of the most amazing comebacks in the history of American popular music. A few years earlier, it was hard to imagine the veteran soul/rock belter reinventing herself and returning to the top of the pop charts, but she did exactly that with the outstanding Private Dancer." Capitol Records offered her a contract in 1983

after a few people, who worked for the label at that time, have seen one of Tina's performances in the Ritz, NYC. The label wanted to record an album straight away, but the manager, Roger Davies has already booked a European Tour for her. This is how she ended up recording most of the album, *Private Dancer*, in London. Roger Davies used all his European contacts to find successful songs for Tina. "All those people came through him. It was his decision on all of these producers" as Tina recalls (Pidgeon, 1991).

The making of the album cost Capitol Records approximately \$150. 000, including airfare, hotels, food and taxis, too (Turner and Loder, 2010, p. 242).

According to Mark Rowland (1984) "Thus *Private Dancer* was constructed hastily and in rather patchquilt fashion, featuring eight different songwriters and four producers who worked in separate studios. Ever the pro, Tina sojourned from one to the next – if this is Tuesday it must be Abbey Road. Yet the album's overall feel is surprisingly coherent; it rarely packs the wallop of Tina's live show, but recoups with more sophisticated vocal phrasings, textures and dynamics."

In the following section I shall summarise the process of making the album, referring to John Pidgeon's interview with Tina. (1991)

Having been asked if she found the amount of producers and songwriters working on the album odd, her reply was that she liked the fact that the songs did not sound the same. She said she preferred her show to be versatile and using more professional musicians than usual helped to achieve that in this album. The writing process took a week for the

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producers, it took another week for Tina to record her vocals. Another two weeks were needed for mixing and correcting a few things and then in just one month's time the final record was released. " This was a rush job here" she said. Even if the album was made in a " rush", it helped her have her first number one song and to become more popular than ever before in her career.

*I Might Have Been Queen* was written by Jeannette and Rupert Hine, based on what Tina told them about her life and spirituality. Rupert Hine also wrote *Better Be Good To Me* , and his unique style on the keyboard was much appreciated by the singer.

*Let's Stay Together* was written by Greg Walsh and Martyn Ware. According to Tina, watching these two musicians working together seemed like a " surgery, and I'm standing there singing, and the sound was incredible". Martyn Ware produced Tina's cover of David Bowie's *1984* too.

*Help* was a Beatles cover recorded in John Farnham's version. The reason for it being in the album was that the public in one of her shows at the Ritz, not long after John Lennon's death, loved the song and the way Tina sang it.

The title song of the album, *Private Dancer* had originally been written for Dire Straits, but their singer, Mark Knopfler thought that it would be more suitable for a female vocalist. They recorded the song with Dire Straits, only with Tina's vocals, and a musician from Capitol Records, John Carter produced it, along with *Steel Claw* . Tina thought *Private Dancer* was ' unusual and arty sounding', so she put the ' old soulful touch' to it. She chose the song as title for the album, because she thought that it would go

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better with the album's cover and *What's Love Got to Do With It* was considered too long as an album title. Terry Britten wrote two songs for the album: *What's Love Got To Do With It*, *Show Some Respect* and he produced Tina's cover of Ann Peebles' *I Can't Stand The Rain* as well. Tina did not like *What's Love Got to Do with It* because "it was too pop" for her. Roger Davies convinced her to sing it, and it was released as a single before the album. (Pidgeon, 1991).

According to Martha Bayles (1994, p. 329) the single helped Tina regain her popularity in Europe and they also made a video clip for it. It was a perfect prelude to the actual album's release in May 1984. The album sold eleven million copies worldwide and stayed in the Top 100 for two years. A year later it won three Grammy Awards for Best Female Pop Vocal Performance, Best Female Rock Vocal Performance, and, finally, Record of The Year (Jackson, 2005, pp. 236-37). In the book "Rock and Pop, Year By Year" (2003) Crampton and Rees refer to the album as the year 1984's "most significant comeback", for it having been a certified platinum by the RIAA and the single *What's Love Got to Do With It* confirmed gold respectively.

The album received a RIAA Gold-Platinum on the 9<sup>th</sup> of September, 1987 ([https://www.riaa.com/gold-platinum/?tab\\_active=default-award&ar=Tina+Turner&ti=Private+Dancer#search\\_section](https://www.riaa.com/gold-platinum/?tab_active=default-award&ar=Tina+Turner&ti=Private+Dancer#search_section), no date).

It peaked at third place on the 29<sup>th</sup> of September 1984, on the Billboard 200 and it has been on the chart for 106 weeks. (Billboard Charts, <https://www.billboard.com/music/Tina-Turner/chart-history/billboard-200/song/312275/no-date>).

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On the Billboard Top R&B/Hip-Hop Albums Chart it had been number one for three weeks from the 1<sup>st</sup> of July, 1984. It had been on the chart for 84 weeks in total. ([https://www. billboard. com/music/Tina-Turner/chart-history/r-b-hip-hop-albums/song/312275](https://www.billboard.com/music/Tina-Turner/chart-history/r-b-hip-hop-albums/song/312275), no date).

On The 40 best-selling and most-streamed albums' list on the official NZ Music Charts at the end of the year 1984 it was number 27([https://nztop40. co. nz/index. php/chart/albums? chart= 3873](https://nztop40.co.nz/index.php/chart/albums?chart=3873), no date). A year later, at the end of 1985 it became number 15 on the same list. ([https://nztop40. co. nz/index. php/chart/albums? chart= 3874m](https://nztop40.co.nz/index.php/chart/albums?chart=3874m), no date).

On the 28<sup>th</sup> of December it was number 28 RPM's Top 100 Albums of 1985 ([https://web. archive. org/web/20121021000517/http://www. collectionscanada. gc. ca/rpm/028020-119. 01-e. php? brws\\_s= 1&file\\_num= nlc008388. 0618&type= 1&erval= 24&PHPSESSID= mhe12pta2k83e08udtq66ot062](https://web.archive.org/web/20121021000517/http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/rpm/028020-119.01-e.php?brws_s=1&file_num=nlc008388.0618&type=1&erval=24&PHPSESSID=mhe12pta2k83e08udtq66ot062), 2004).

Apart from staying on the charts for a long time, *Private Dancer* received great reviews internationally, for example Debbie Miller wrote in the Rolling Stone Magazine (Jul 5, 1984) that “ There isn't a single dud among the songs, and they're given modern rock settings that are neither detached nor very fussy.” And adds: “ Turner covers a lot of ground, musically, but this is firmly a rock & roll record, despite its soulful heart.”

The fact that it still resonates today is indubitable. For example, it became number 63 on The 100 Best Albums of the 1980s list made by the staff of Slant Magazine (5<sup>th</sup> of March, 2012).



*Private Dancer* was everything that Tina Turner's career needed. First, a 'comeback' from the grey years after the divorce with Ike Turner, when she was nowhere to be found on the charts or in the newspapers, while only singing in pubs and restaurants. It suddenly made her a stadium tour performer. Second, it gave her international fame and enough money to continue her legacy in the music industry (Turner and Loder, 2010). Lastly, it gave the audience a classic rock'n'roll album with some pop feel to it, which is still remembered and played on the radio internationally.

No artist or public performer could ever be separated from the age in which he/she lived and created, even less from his/her own life experiences. Perhaps Gleason's summation shows best the importance and impact of the album, especially if one takes into account the troubled years in Tina's life before and around that particular time:

"It was one of the most charismatic comebacks of modern rock: a woman literally singing for her life, and flexing all the experience she'd gained on the chitlin circuit, Rolling Stones tours, in the studio with Phil Spector and her husband the legendarily abusive Ike. Like a phoenix she rose, and she burned proud – and set the entire globe ablaze doing it." (Gleason, May 1, 2008)

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