

# “Private Dancer”—Tina Turner (1984)

Added to the National Registry: 2019

Essay by Evelyn McDonnell (guest post)\*



*Tina Turner*

There are three definitions of comeback, according to Webster’s:

1. *“A return to formerly enjoyed status or prosperity” a.k.a. “a return to popularity.”*

For Tina Turner’s comeback--she had not had a record in the American charts since 1975--it was not for lack of trying: she had recorded two albums and toured frequently. But she was mostly seen as an oldies act, someone whose fame was a thing of the past.

“Private Dancer” made the artist born Anna Mae Bullock more popular and prosperous than ever.

2. *“The act of making up a deficit, as in a contest or game.”*

The first two decades of Turner’s career were defined by her relationship to her husband and bandleader, Ike Turner. When she left him in 1976, with 36 cents in her pocket, she had to reinvent her work, her identity, her life. Meanwhile, Ike was hailed as one of the pioneers of rock ’n’ roll, his 1951 song “Rocket 88” widely credited as the first hit of that genre. With “Private Dancer,” Turner just didn’t reassert her success: she blew her past fame out of the water, topping charts, going multiplatinum in multiple countries, and winning four Grammys.

3. *“A reply, especially a quick witty one; a retort.”*

LL Cool J’s famous lyric “*Don’t call it a comeback, I’ve been here for years*” was the ultimate comeback about a comeback. While the entire Turner album could be heard as an abuse survivor’s reply to patriarchal oppression, “Private Dancer” can be thematically summarized by one iconic line: “What’s love got to do with it?”

“Private Dancer” is a culturally significant work of art not just because its eclectic pop, soul, and rock tracks are threaded together by one of the most iconic voices of late 20<sup>th</sup> century music, nor

because it reasserted and redefined the queen of rock 'n' roll's career. Turner's album advanced the breakthrough of a larger, more radical notion: that in the youth-driven world of popular music, reinvention is possible--even for African-American women from Nutbush city limits in the third decades of their careers.

Turner had indeed been here for years when she began recording "Private Dancer" in 1983. Fortunately, there were overseas fans of American music who understood her importance and talent. English pop music of the early '80s was infatuated with R&B, and rather than simply appropriate the genre, acts hired black music legends to record classic soul cuts with them. Turner performed the Temptations' "Ball of Confusion" with BEF and Al Green's "Let's Stay Together" with Heaven 17. The latter's success in the US and UK ignited the fuse for Turner's explosive comeback.

Suddenly, there was a call for a new Tina Turner album. It helped that the singer had a new, young manager, an Australian named Roger Davies, and a new American label, Capitol, thanks to A&R man John Carter. The pressure to strike while the iron was hot was intense: "Private Dancer" was recorded in an astonishing two weeks. Setting what would become a precedent for hit albums, Davies hired a mix of contemporary producers to bring out various sides of Turner's prodigious talents. After all, by that point, she was a veteran artist who had cut rock, disco, and R&B tracks. Turner recalls driving to multiple studios every night for a fortnight, each time stepping up to the plate to take on different pitchers--and always hitting every ball out of the park.

There are different versions of "Private Dancer": English, American, the 2015 remastering. They all begin with "I Might Have Been Queen," the only song that was specifically written for the album. After conversing with Turner about the Buddhist beliefs that kept her going through the years of psychic and physical violence with Ike and her subsequent rebirth, writer Jeanette Obstoj and producer Rupert Hine penned this metaphysical tale of a "soul survivor." Its reference to a river recalls two of Turner's most famous songs: rolling on the river in her Grammy-winning "Proud Mary" and "River Deep, Mountain High," her epic track with Phil Spector. The river is also of course a spiritual metaphor for the journey of life. By the end of the album, Turner has reclaimed her crown.

The rest of the songs may not have been written for Turner, but she claims them. An astonishing seven tracks were released as singles. The sources range from Ann Peebles to David Bowie to the Beatles, but it's the songs by lesser-known writers that Turner makes into testaments of her own. "Better Be Good to Me," originally recorded by the band Spider and also produced by Hine, became a top-ten womanist anthem with Tina's emphatic drawl of the rhyming diss lines: "*Cause I don't have no use/ For what you loosely call the truth.*" "Steel Claw," by the Irish songwriter Paul Brady, is a hard-rocking protest song complete with searing Jeff Beck solo, its story of life "*in the gutter*"--"*a long hot battle with the cold law*"--as timely in 2020 as it was in 1984. The title track takes the opposite tack from "Claw's" ferocious assault; "Private Dancer" is a slow jam told from the perspective of a call girl. Mark Knopfler wrote it and his band, Dire Straits, back Turner on it, again assisted by Beck. Tina has said that she can relate to its story of a woman selling her body, or her soul, for survival.

But it was a song written and produced by Terry Britten that topped the charts in the US, Canada and Australia and so thoroughly defined Turner's second act that it became the name of the 1993 biopic about her. The singer has said that she hated "What's Love Got to Do With It" when her manager first brought it to her. But when she saw Britten play it on his acoustic guitar, she realized its potential. With changes in pitch and a few chords, they turned the pop ballad into a *cri de coeur*. The song speaks from the heart of a woman who has been wounded and is afraid to feel again--but feel she does. The title seems hardened but it's actually a song of rebirth, as only a woman who has risen from the ashes can sing it. Because of course, as a Buddhist knows, love has everything to do with it.

The nine tracks (ten in England) are produced by five different producers and production teams. Synthesizers and computers were new recording toys; Turner has recalled stepping into the studio with Martyn Ware and Greg Walsh and marveling at what she called the "X-ray" machine that produced the tracks. What was once cutting edge can sound dated 27 years later, which makes Turner's vocal performance in a handful of studios, offering object lessons in consistency and how to age well, all the more remarkable.

Also remarkable is how adeptly the rock legend adapted to the video age. She strode onto MTV with her big hair, tiny skirts, and long legs and became a hero to another generation. The small screen beamed the throbbing gristle of her great voice, her been-there-done-that stare, her transcendent wigs, and her ability to do it all backward in heels into millions of living rooms, and everyone from housewives to their preteen children loved her like she had never been loved before.

"Private Dancer" relaunched Turner's career. She had subsequent hits with "We Don't Need Another Hero" and "One of the Living" and became one of the greatest touring acts of all time--after all, Mick Jagger learned everything he knows from watching Ike and Tina open for the Rolling Stones early in their career. She has received the Kennedy Center honors, is the subject of a London and Broadway musical, and has written two biographies. But "Private Dancer" remains her best-selling album and ultimate statement, of a soul survivor on the river, still rolling.

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\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect the views of the Library of Congress.