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When Black Male Singers Were Sex Symbols

Teddy Pendergrass was the R&B singer women wanted and who men wanted to be. And the one whose life-sized cardboard cutout stood in one family's living room.



Philadelphia International Records / Photo illustration by [Katie Kosma](#)

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[Ericka Blount Danois](#) | [Longreads](#) | January 2019 | 23 minutes (4,688 words)

Driving through blinding rain from Baltimore to Philadelphia recently to see the documentary *If You Don't Know Me By Now*, about the life of R&B singer Teddy Pendergrass, I was reminded how one of my first encounters with Teddy was as a life-size cardboard cutout of him my mother kept in our living room. Dressed in an Italian silk suit, he became part of my family as my parents and sister passed him daily on our way out the door to school.

I had already admired Teddy when I would browse my father's extensive record collection as a kid and stare at the covers. Both the Jackson Five's *Third Album* and *The Teenagers Featuring Frankie Lymon* album covers made me wish I had been born just a little bit sooner so I could meet Frankie Lymon or a young Michael Jackson. I thought Marvin Gaye was handsome, but when I saw Teddy Pendergrass's album *Teddy*, I said to myself: *One day I will marry a man that looks just like that.* I don't know what made Teddy future marriage material and not just a childhood crush. Maybe it was the handsome face and the masculine beard that looked like it tasted like Hershey's Kisses. Maybe it was the aloof look and the symphony of gold chains on his chest, surrounded by a silk scarf and shirt. Or that North Philly, rough-and-rugged, raspy, commanding baritone voice. Or the way he talked trash on the album's interludes. Or the half church, half sexual ecstasy shouts and ad-libs, sometimes full-on sermons and conversations mixed with singing. His *weells*, *ooohwaaahs*, and *yesssahs* all got you to the point that, when he said with conviction "close the door!" on the cut of the same name, you nearly jumped up to slam it shut. He was the kind of man whose steak you made sure was hot when he came home as you handed him his pipe and slippers. Somehow I knew he was the whole package, a man's man in a time when this is what it meant to be a man. And I wasn't wrong.

I came of age in Washington, D.C., in the 1970s and '80s, when individuality was king and people were suddenly doing exactly what they wanted to do. Adults were wearing their hair long, dropping acid, picking Afros, and being their true selves. Marvin Gaye had dropped the clean-cut, shaved face, choir boy look that Motown had cultivated for him at the same time he remade his sound into politically conscious music with his concept album *What's Going On*. Stevie Wonder followed suit with *Innervisions*. On the basketball court, Walt "Clyde" Frazier was the arbiter of cool. He dressed with the sartorial spirit of the flamboyant pretty-boy-Floyd of your neighborhood, wearing gold chains, capes, and wide-brim hats, with a beard, bushy

sideburns, and a bop walk that gave him an aura of unflappable bravado. His signature style earned him the first sneaker endorsement, with the Clyde Pumas. When white movie executives started meddling, director Gordon Parks had to fight Hollywood to keep Richard Roundtree's facial hair for the movie *Shaft*, because he knew losing the facial hair meant losing a symbol of Shaft's masculinity.

Most of us didn't pay much attention to whatever White House activity made the city national news. For us, Mayor Marion Barry, a former SNCC organizer elected in 1979, was the official we saw in person, who gave us hugs, and whose leadership program regaled us with slogans like "If it is to be, it's up to me!" Although the crack epidemic ravaged the city in the 1980s, nobody paid attention to Nancy Reagan's weak "Just Say No" campaign. Barry's innovative summer and after-school jobs program kept my pockets lined and my nose clean. During the day I listened to go-go music by local bands, at night to slow jams on the "Quiet Storm" hosted by Melvin Lindsey, and the next morning before school to the playful voice of Donnie Simpson on WKYS. Saturday nights we tried to stay awake to see Eddie Murphy curse on *Saturday Night Live*. Sex was everywhere — from late-night adult films on Super TV to books by Erica Jong and Judy Blume — and we learned as much as we could sneak and learn.

Before Prince and D'Angelo's overtly sexual song titles, lyrics, and stage shows brought a fearless, audacious brand of sexuality to the mainstream, things were different.

Like Roundtree, Isaac Hayes, and Melvin Van Peebles, Teddy represented a new unbridled black masculinity that black men had previously been forced to hide in the white American mainstream. These tall men had commanding voices and a rich, flamboyant fashion sense. They wore facial hair. They didn't hide their sexual presence. They didn't have to wear shirts and ties. They could look and sound like themselves.

As a preteen tomboy who was still two-step slow dragging a foot apart from boys at school discos and watching Dr. J float from the free throw line, Teddy Pendergrass represented both the promise of what was to come and the fallout of being unapologetically black, audacious, and sexy.

* * *

Towering at 6'1", handsome, with a growling baritone, Teddy Pendergrass arrived on the heels of Jackie Wilson, Sam Cooke, and Marvin Gaye, and defined the macho fantasy of women of all races the world over.

Although Teddy started singing solos as a 3-year-old in his family's church in North Philadelphia, watching Jackie Wilson's show in Philadelphia's Uptown Theater as a teen eventually inspired him to become a professional singer. Wilson commanded the audience and caused women to lose their minds. In Wilson's finale, he laid on the floor with a woman from the audience, she wrapped her legs around his hips, and they simulated sex. Teddy couldn't believe Wilson got away with it, and he knew then what he wanted to do for the rest of his life.

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By high school, Teddy regularly came to school late after singing doo-wop and Motown classics with friends in a storefront alcove. He eventually got a gig as a drummer for The Blue Notes. The leader of the group, Harold Melvin, helped the group refine their stage presence, showing them how to present themselves with finesse and class and glide across the stage. When Gamble and Huff saw the group perform at the Apollo in Camden, New Jersey, they offered them a contract on the spot. Harold negotiated the contract without the group knowing it and changed the group's name from the Blue Notes to Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes.

"He lied to us," Gamble said in the BBC documentary about Teddy's life. "Harold said it was all right with the group. He knew Teddy was so dominant."

Harold continued that pattern of deception and jealousy, keeping the group's royalties for himself and staying in luxury hotels while other members stayed in motels. Even with Harold's attempts to overshadow Teddy, when the group released their first two tracks in 1972, "I Miss You" and "If You Don't Know Me By Now," Teddy's growls, shouts, and riffs

helped seal his fate as the star. Women would ask after shows to meet the group's leader, Harold would come out, and they would reject him because they had assumed Teddy was the leader. It was only a matter of time before Teddy went solo and eclipsed the whole group.

His debut self-titled album featured the hits, "I Don't Love You Anymore," "The Whole Town's Laughing at Me," and the gospel single "Somebody Told Me," that spoke of answering his calling at 10 years old to be an ordained minister. All of these singles led the album to be certified platinum. He debuted at New York City's Carnegie Hall and released a follow-up album a year later, *Life is a Song Worth Singing*, featuring cuts like "Close the Door" and "When Somebody Loves You Back." The songs left women swooning, screaming, and throwing panties onstage when he performed them, anointing him a sex symbol. In 1979, he released *Teddy*, featuring the hits "Come Go With Me" and "Turn Off the Lights," further turning up the heat.

Meanwhile, Harold Melvin — the same man who first recognized Teddy's talent and took him off of the drums to sing lead — always felt Teddy was replaceable. It quickly become clear at performances that he wasn't replaceable when audience members would scream "WHERE'S TEDDY?!" at the Blue Notes' new lead singer David Ebo.

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In 1979 Teddy started performing "women-only" concerts where women threw paper notes with their phone numbers, house keys, flowers, bras,

and panties onstage. At these shows women received an embossed chocolate lollipop that they could lick as they watched him perform, and later they could call a phone line to hear a recorded message from Teddy. The record label even launched a clothing line of Teddy Bear jeans designed for black women whose voluptuous rear packages couldn't fit in other brands.

Teddy and his manager created the women-only concept. It helped break him out of the Chitlin' Circuit, where promoters often doubled as radio station owners and were slow to pay, if they paid at all. Artists didn't like to balk about money for fear that promoters wouldn't play their music on the radio and their labels would drop them. One of Teddy's first women-only shows was at the Roxy in Los Angeles, playing to a majority white audience with white promoters. Teddy and the label received death threats, and his manager, Shep Gordon, claimed that they had to call the FBI for protection. "He risked his life to make it easier for Afro-American artists after him," said Gordon. Their gig at the Roxy helped open the door to larger venues for black R&B artists.

Onstage, Teddy was more subtle than Wilson had been, more romantic, but still seductive, swaying his hips and glistening sweat in a silk tank top as he reached out to women in the audience and brought them onstage to sway with him. He'd close his eyes as he sang and open them to look at the audience with his wide, perfect smile. For R&B music, he had brought the black male sensuality, freedom, and rawness of the Chitlin' Circuit to the mainstream.

My parents went to these shows because men weren't restricted from coming to "women-only" shows. In fact, most women brought along their male partners who benefited later from them getting hot and bothered. "It was a ploy to name it 'women-only,'" Philadelphia International employee Harry Coombs told me. "Most men go to concerts to see the women, so we knew the men would come too."

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But it was really the women who went everywhere Teddy went. Some dressed in maid's uniforms to sneak into Teddy's dressing room. One rabid fan tried to stab him while yelling, "If I can't have you no one can!" Pimps glared at him as their prostitutes salivated at Teddy from front-row seats.

Popular tales of both women and men fighting over Teddy's sweaty towels thrown into the audience only heightened his sexual mystique.

Offstage Teddy dressed in silk suits or casually in a Stetson cowboy hat, Sassoon jeans, and boots. He liked the best of everything — cars, furs, even a sable sleeveless, full-length cape on one photo shoot. He had a 10-bedroom brick mansion, and he dated the finest women. He eventually bought a Learjet with the Teddy Bear logo emblazoned on the fuselage and luxury cars like a Rolls Royce Corniche, a Mercedes, and a Corvette that he drove fast with a pistol in the glove compartment for protection. He needed that pistol, because the bigger he got, the more dangerous things became for him.

His first manager, Taaz Lang, was shot execution-style in what some said was a Black Mafia hit. Some even accused Teddy of having her killed. Others said shady promoters shot her, while still others speculated that the Philly police shot her. The Philly police had been harassing Teddy since he was a 15-year-old kid in North Philly, minding his own business. They followed him around. They falsely accused and imprisoned him for a robbery once. When he became a star, they ticketed him for parking in front of his house. "The police gave him such a hard time in Philadelphia that I never knew when something might happen. Whenever they saw his car they were right behind us and they were following him and just looking for an opportunity," recalled a girlfriend in the documentary. "Here's this big black man with a Rolls Royce, millionaire, so the police felt like 'there's a target.'"

And then there was the time Teddy was almost shot right in front of me.

* * *

In Washington, D.C., at the height of the crack epidemic, young black men were a constant target for police harassment. Undercover cops, or "jump-outs" as they were called then, rode in Pontiac Chryslers or Chevrolet

Caprice Classics around the block looking for any reason to pick black boys up. Cops would frisk and harass them daily, then arrest them for no reason, often while they were doing nothing more than sitting in front of their own houses. There were other slights that were less aggressive, but equally emasculating. There was never a time I went out with a boyfriend who could hail a cab without someone's help. Sometimes cabs would stop for me, but there were many times we'd have to ask a white person to hail it for us.

Captured in films like *Birth of a Nation*, part of America's obsession with black men's sexuality was the fear that it would be expressed to white women. This fear of black men and boys' physical presence often made them the targets of violence. Emmett Till, a 14-year-old boy, was murdered in 1955 because of erroneous claims that he whistled at a white woman. Tamir Rice, killed at age 12 for playing with a toy gun in 2014, was perceived as older and threatening. In 1910, there was a search for a white fighter to defeat champion black boxer Jack Johnson, who ran a successful business, flaunted his wealth and his white girlfriends. And when boxer James Jeffries, billed as the "Great White Hope," couldn't defeat Johnson, white riots **left dozens of black people dead in cities across America**. This distortion of the image of black masculinity in the white imagination led to what **author** and scholar Mark Anthony Neal refers to as the strong black man myth, where black men aren't permitted to show vulnerability.

Some black artists with a platform, like Sun Ra; Earth, Wind & Fire; and Sylvester challenged the way society handled that fear and obsession with their lyrics and just by being unapologetically themselves. Singers confronted cultural taboos visually too with outrageous and intergalactic costumes, in the case of Parliament-Funkadelic, and sexually explicit stage shows, in the case of Rick James.

Before Teddy, Marvin Gaye, Washington D.C.'s native son, didn't mince words about his sexuality, with songs like "You Sure Love to Ball," "Distant Lover," and "Let's Get it On." Tall and handsome with sharp features and a laid-back demeanor, he alternated between a plaintive tenor and a raw falsetto on songs like "Till Tomorrow" and lost the subtlety on songs like "Sexual Healing."

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Although they were friendly, and Teddy opened for Marvin's 1977 *Let's Get it On* tour, Marvin considered Teddy his competition, taking his place on the sexy pulpit. In *After the Dance: My Life with Marvin Gaye*, his widow Jan Gaye talks explicitly about the complications and perversions of his sexuality, his jealousies and insecurities, from withholding sex from her, to offering her up to sleep with other men. Jan writes that Marvin told her where his obsessions stemmed from: "To watch purity turn to perversity is a fascinating thing. You were once my angel, but now you have fallen. ... It is exciting to watch the fall."

Teddy was one of those men that Marvin was jealous of and obsessed with. In her book, Jan described how, during their separation, she eventually dated Teddy, who was a gentleman and a romantic, sending her and her kids first-class plane tickets and taking them to Universal Studios. In Teddy's autobiography he says that during he and Jan's brief love affair, Marvin followed them and once sent Teddy a dozen dead roses.

Sexual liberation was as complicated in real life as it was to perform. The day Marvin's father murdered him in 1984 on April 1st, the day before his 45th birthday, my sister collapsed from grief in our dining room. I was devastated too. I loved Marvin's voice, his consciousness, his handsome looks and charm, his sensitivity and laid-back sensuality. Although he opened the door for Teddy's unabashed women-only performances, it really wasn't until the 1980s when Teddy fully embraced his sexuality in an overt way onstage. My father and my sister went to Gaye's 1982 tour for *Midnight Love*, where he performed the finale "Sexual Healing" while grinding in black bikini underwear briefs.

My parents were young, hip, club-hopping, intellectual, revolutionary transplants from New York, living in D.C. My father was a music enthusiast and record collector who accepted all kinds of music. My parents danced and were members at cutting edge clubs like the Paradise Garage in New

York and Tracks and the Clubhouse in D.C. — gay clubs that were cultural laboratories where DJs could try out new music. They saw jazz greats at the Village Vanguard, Slugs, and Blues Alley, danced at the Cheetah and 9:30 Club, and reveled in Sun Ra and Miles Davis's live performances. We got the first hip-hop records from New York record stores like Other Music and the first 12" dance cuts from record stores like Twelve Inch Dance Records in D.C.'s Dupont Circle.

My father worked around music in several capacities, including as a radio DJ, a stagehand, and a record store manager, where record labels tried to persuade him to put their product front and center. When my father worked at Kemp Mill Records in Oxon Hill, Maryland, my mother managed to finagle the life-size cardboard cut-out of Teddy Pendergrass from the store. Because of my parents, part of our daily routine became passing Teddy in all of his gloriousness as we collected our bus tokens and lunch money.

My parents went to see Teddy every time he came to town to perform his women-only shows. We always knew when my parents were going to a Teddy Pendergrass concert, because my mother would play his records from his early days with Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes up to his latest solo album — from up-tempo songs like "Bad Luck" and "I Don't Love You Anymore" to ballads like "I Miss You" and "Love T.K.O."

"It was just warm-up before the game," my mother said.

She insisted that his appeal beyond his music was that he was "tall, dark, and handsome with a beard and something of a bad boy with a dangerous, sexy edge. And when he said 'come on over to my place' — holy mackerel!"

One night when my parents went to a concert, my sister babysat me after having just seen the horror movie *When a Stranger Calls*. In the movie, a man continuously calls the teenage babysitter asking, "Have you checked the children?" By the time he calls for the last time, she realizes he's calling from inside the house on the separate phone line upstairs, and he's standing over both of the children he's killed.

We lived in a seventh-floor apartment with one telephone line. As my sister talked on the phone in our shared bedroom, she thought she heard a

clicking sound. The sound, she thought, was someone picking up the extension in the kitchen. Her friend Stacey thought that it may be her little brother Bobby. But Bobby had asthma, and every time he tried to eavesdrop on their conversations, they heard him breathing heavily. This was something different. Then it clicked again.

“Did you hear that?” she asked Stacey. About a minute later our bedroom lamp went off.

“I think someone is in the house,” she told Stacey frantically. “If anyone is looking for me, we’re gonna run out!”

My sister then turned to me. “I think a killer is in the kitchen. We gotta get out of here!” I grabbed our poodle Magic as we ran out of the bedroom. I had to leave our cats, Bootsy and Starchild, to weather the storm. I didn’t have time to put on shoes or socks. My sister demanded I not look in the direction of the kitchen.

We sat in our building’s lobby with Magic, unsure what to do. After about 10 minutes, police officers appeared at the lobby door. Stacey had told her grandmother what was happening, and her grandmother had called the police.

The police made their way up to our apartment on the elevator. What seemed like a few minutes later our parents came off of the elevator, terrified about what may have happened to us.

Here’s what happened: The police opened the door and pulled out their guns because they saw a shadowy figure. They prepared to shoot. That figure turned out to be the cardboard cutout of Teddy Pendergrass.

After hearing what happened, my terrified mother surveyed the damage in the living room and was relieved that Teddy wasn’t hurt. My parents and the police had a good laugh. They ushered the officers out as quickly as possible. We were reminded how difficult it would be for someone to scale seven flights up the side of a building. And we were reminded we had deadbolt locks on the door, bells that rang when the door opened, and a chain on the door, so unless the killer had a key and a chainsaw, he wouldn’t have been able to get in.

Then they laughed at my sister's imagination and chastised her for letting the "pigs" in the apartment.

My kids now have a puppy named Teddy Pendergrass. At Teddy's first appointment, his vet noted that "all he wants to do is cuddle." When he's outside, women stop to fawn over him. He's doing his best to live up to his name.

* * *

Of course it was Teddy's voice that earned him four platinum albums. A baritone growl — some likened it to raw meat, that could be alternately sensual and vulnerable and rough and authoritative.

It's easy to see how Teddy became every black woman's fantasy — and eventually *every* woman's fantasy to the johnny-come-latelys. Like Idris Elba, brought to popularity on television as the character Stringer Bell on *The Wire*, Teddy Pendergrass was what black women had celebrated in real life for years. "He personified the expression tall, dark, and handsome. He exuded sexuality," said Dyana Williams, who met him while she and Gamble were married. "Teddy was the guy that other men wanted to be like and women wanted."

The musical era where black men were asserting themselves uncompromisingly while being alternately romantic, sensual, and boldly sexual continued with singers like Luther Vandross, whose romantic ballads dominated the '80s. Prince shocked audiences with his erotic stage shows. D'Angelo's orgasmic video for "Untitled (How Does it Feel)" took sexual innuendo to the next level.

Teddy was as much substance as he was sex appeal.

Teddy was as much substance as he was sex appeal. The worst adjective used to describe him was arrogant. At his core, Teddy was a simple man. He never lost his gospel roots, and he stayed committed to the church throughout his life, performing with newcomers like Kirk Franklin and including gospel songs like "Truly Blessed" and "My Father's Child" on his albums in the '90s. His proudest moment was buying his mother a house. After a 1982 car accident rendered him a quadriplegic, his greatest fears

centered on how he would care for his mother and wife and children. Despite struggling to remake his voice with a paralyzed diaphragm, he scored with the album *Love Language* in 1984 and *Joy* in 1988, which both went certified gold. Even in the 1990s, when American society became so hard-edged and fast-paced that lyrics like Method Man's "get all up in your guts" became standard fare, Teddy's romantic approach still earned him two Grammy nominations in 1991 and 1993.

Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff wrote songs suited to their artists' psyches and personalities, and audience's tastes. Most modern R&B label executives are more committed to one-hit wonders than grooming artists to have lasting careers. As a result there hasn't been anyone comparable to Teddy since.

* * *

It was late after we finished watching *If You Don't Know Me By Now* at the Ritz East in City Center, and we had a long drive back to Baltimore in the rain. My family and I were hungry, and we couldn't come to Philly without getting a cheesesteak. We drove to West Philly to Abner's, one of the few cheesesteak haunts left amidst expensive new developments. We hurried to get inside Abner's and out of the rain, and we happily ordered greasy cheesesteaks and fries.

After screening the film, I was left with more questions, particularly around Teddy's accident. In between laughs at the jokes my father made about Harold Melvin's pettiness, I thought about some of the most popular black male sex symbols and their collisions with violence: Sam Cooke, Marvin Gaye, and Teddy Pendergrass. In the documentary, a friend of Teddy's mentioned that before the brakes failed on Teddy's brand-new Rolls Royce Silver Spirit and ran him into a guardrail, the brakes had been cut on both Teddy's Mercedes and his Corvette. Was it just an accident, or did an intentional hit spawned from jealousy cause his injury? And if so, by who? Racist cops? Crooked music industry veterans? Crazy fans? The thought that someone could have killed him, or that anyone could find a reason to hate him, had never occurred to me as a kid. Either way, I choose to remember him as the silky smooth singer who stood still and beautiful in our living room.

By the time we graduated from dress-up school discos to full-out basement parties, like my parents before us, we were dancing and grinding to Teddy Pendergrass's music. In those moments dancing close with a teenage crush, who I would find also liked me, I got closer to figuring out what all of Teddy's magic was.

Ericka Blount Danois writes about music, culture and social justice issues for outlets like The Root, Afropunk, Okayplayer, and Playboy, and has written for The Source, Vibe, ESPN, The New York Times, and The Washington Post. She is the author of *Love, Peace and Soooooouul! The Behind the Scenes Story of America's Favorite Dance Show.*

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