Tina Turner (1939-2023): A performer of great power and universal appeal

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For decades, American singer Tina Turner was one of the most universally beloved performers of popular music. Her career lasted from the late 1950s, when she was still in high school, into the 2020s, more than 60 years.

Turner died at 83 in her home in Zurich, Switzerland on May 24. The cause of death was unspecified, but she had been battling several afflictions for years, including kidney and intestinal disease. US fans may be surprised to learn that Turner lived in Europe for the last 30 years of her life, where she felt she had a stronger base of support, both among fans and fellow musicians.

She was born Anna Mae Bullock in the tiny western Tennessee community of Nutbush, about 60 miles northeast of Memphis. Her 1973 tune "Nutbush City Limits" tells of the rural environment of her early childhood. Because her father was abusive, her family broke up and moved around, ending up in St. Louis, where she attended high school. With her older sister she frequented local blues clubs and encountered a band called the Kings of Rhythm at the Manhattan Club in East St. Louis, Illinois.

This was Ike Turner's group, and Anna Mae was immediately struck by its musical skills. She had some talent as well. As a young girl, she had sung in the choir at Nutbush's Spring Hill Baptist Church and very much wanted to show what she could do. The Kings of Rhythm drummer handed her a microphone, and her commanding and passionate singing style managed to impress Ike. She later said that she was influenced by Ray Charles, Sam Cooke and others and never wanted to sing like a typical female vocalist of the time.

Ike took her under his wing as a protégé, instructing her in some of the finer points of the band's music. Ike had been writing and recording music since the beginning of the 1950s. His first notable tune was "Rocket 88" in 1951, recorded by Jackie Brenston and his Delta Cats. Some argue that this was the first rock and roll song ever recorded. Ike wrote "Box Top" in 1958, recording it with his new discovery Anna Mae. He gave her the moniker "Little Ann" for the label.

In 1960, Ike wrote a tune intended for a male vocalist, Art Lassiter. When he didn't show up for the recording session, Anna Mae stepped in. "A Fool In Love" became her first recording as Tina Turner. (A video of her performance of the song 40 years later before a massive crowd at London's Wembley Stadium illustrates the appreciation her fans had of that tune as part of her musical history.) With that first recording in 1960, Ike gave her the stage name of Tina Turner and had it copyrighted with the intention that she would never be able to perform as that persona without him. Anna Mae Bullock became Tina of Ike & Tina Turner for the first 16 years of her career.

Their professional relationship became a personal one, and he began to abuse her physically and emotionally. Yet she stayed with him because she said she "cared for him." She bore his child in October 1960. They collaborated on several albums, then the two eventually entered into a marriage in 1962 that ended in notorious fashion in 1976.

Phil Spector, the record producer famous for his "Wall of Sound" production technique, became interested in making a record with Tina after seeing her performance in the 1966 concert film, "The Big T.N.T. Show." He paid $20,000 for the rights to artistic control and Ike's agreement to keep away from the studio. Using background singers and 42 studio musicians, "River Deep—Mountain High" was the result. While it was a huge success in Europe, sales in the US tanked. In an interview years later, Tina described it as the "first song I got to sing" because Spector insisted that she not embellish her vocals but do it straight.

Ike and Tina earned worldwide acclaim for their powerful and passionate renditions of hits by popular artists. It was her uninhibited presence that gave the group its identity. She is remembered for giving her entire self to her stage performances. Her ebullient vocals were accompanied by spirited rhythmic gyrations carried on in sexy, glamorous costumes. The late '60s and early '70s were replete with great material by artists like Sam Cooke, James Brown, Otis Redding, Aretha Franklin, Sly Stone, Wilson Pickett and Arthur Conley, as well as groups such as the Rolling Stones.

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Ike & Tina covered hits by all those and more.

Now the headliner of the Ike & Tina Turner Revue, Turner made "Proud Mary" her hallmark. Written by John Fogerty of Credence Clearwater Revival and released in early 1969, the duo performed it in November of the same year at Madison Square Garden, where they opened for the Rolling Stones. That performance was notable for, among other things, the spontaneous appearance on stage by Janis Joplin, who was so moved by Tina's rendition of Wilson Pickett's "Land of 1000 Dances" that she jumped onstage to do a duet with her. "Proud Mary" was released on their album *Workin' Together* in February 1971.

The 1970s brought enormous success to the group. By the time of their breakup in 1976, Ike & Tina Turner had produced 19 studio albums and eight live performance albums, along with innumerable television and film appearances. Tempting as it may be for this writer, this is not the place for anywhere near a comprehensive inventory of their hits. The reader will be well rewarded in doing his or her own research. A few examples from that era will give a taste of the vitality of their performances. Sly Stone's "I Want To Take You Higher" was released on their studio album, "Come Together" in May 1970. Otis Redding's "I've Been Loving You Too Long" was released in January 1969 on their "Outta Season" album. "Honky Tonk Woman ," from the Rolling Stones, was released in May 1970 on "Come Together," the album on which they also covered the Beatles song of the same name.

Ike and Tina's partnership was an uneven one. While Tina gave the group its character, Ike's contribution shouldn't be underestimated, as it often is. During the 16 years of their collaboration, he wrote some 200 songs, many of which were recorded by other artists. He brought the expertise in production and the business acumen which brought them to success. He had learned through bitter experience. Ike had been cheated out of royalties for what he estimated as 78 songs that he wrote between 1951 and 1955 when he worked for Sun Records and publishers the Bihari Brothers.

The infamous breakup of the marriage and the act has been told many times. Tina has written several autobiographies, which have informed documentaries, a dramatic film starring Angela Basset, even a Broadway play. Her divorce was surely the culmination of an escape from a brutally abusive relationship. As part of the ensuing legal proceedings, she even had to sue for the use of her stage name. It should be noted, in contrast to the promoted folklore, that the tragic character of the affair stems, not simply from Ike's actions, unsavory as he was, but from societal pressures bearing down on artists in general, particularly those who are contending to maintain commercial success.

With the support of several musical friends, notably Mick Jagger and the late David Bowie, Tina restored and advanced her musical fortunes. She had become bigger than life, selling more concert tickets than any other performer. After her Ike & Tina days, she had a dozen tours and featured as the opener for several other prominent acts. Her last tour—Tina: 50th Anniversary Tour—delivered 47 sold-out performances in the US and Europe ending in Sheffield, England in May 2009.

She has done soundtracks for several dramatic movies, such as "Goldeneye" and acted in others. She played the Acid Queen in the film "Tommy," produced by the Who (1975, before her divorce) and portrayed Aunty Entity in 1985's "Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome." Her tune "We Don't Need Another Hero" from that film earned her an MTV Video Music Award nomination for Best Female Video."

Dire Straits guitarist Mark Knopfler wrote the title tune for what would be known as her 1984 "comeback" album, "Private Dancer." She was backed in the studio by guitarist Jeff Beck and the rest of Dire Straits without Knopfler. "What's Love Got To Do With It" was released the same year.

Despite the collaboration of many well-known artists in her studio work, her later songs had a melancholic air that in this writer's opinion lost much of the exuberance of her early recordings. The same cannot be said of her stage performances. Tina brought the same enthusiasm and love of her audience that she had always been known for, along with additional technical bombastic staging that came with her success.

Tina evokes and personifies an era in music and politics in which boundaries were broken—cultural, political and musical. Though not personally involved in political activity in the civil rights movement, her music is very much a product of the crossing over of the racial lines previously imposed. The optimism of that generation was something she consciously strived to bring to the stage—and that's one of the reasons why millions loved her.

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