

## LADY T TALKS

Written by Charles Waring  
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In the summer of 1979, a Santa Monica-born singer/songwriter born Mary Christine Brockert changed her name to Teena Marie and smashed her way into the American R&B charts with her funk-infused debut 45 'I'm A Sucker For Your Love.' Produced by punk-funk bad boy, Rick James, the record was released on Motown's Gordy imprint and broke into the Stateside R&B Top 10. It kicked off a continuous twelve-year run of US chart hits that also included the chart-topping 'Ooo La La' in 1988. A decade-long hiatus followed her 1994 indie album, 'Passion Play,' but in 2004 the songstress made a triumphant comeback with the acclaimed album, 'La Dona,' released on the hip-hop label, Cash-Money. Sales-wise, the album went gold and prompted a Cash-Money follow-up, 'Sapphire,' in 2006. At the end of last year, Teena Marie - now 53 years old - signed with the reactivated Stax label and recently released her thirteenth long player, 'Congo Square.' The singer dubbed the 'Ivory Queen Of Soul' took time out from her busy US tour schedule to talk to [www.soulandjazzandfunk.com](http://www.soulandjazzandfunk.com)'s Charles Waring about her career, life and, of course, that all important new album.

**'The Rose N' Thorn' is one of many fine cuts on your new album. What's the story behind it?**

You know actually I wrote that with Terri Lyne Carrington, the jazz drummer. She brought me the music and she had a little bit of a melody. I said this is gorgeous and she said "write some words to it." So I put words to her music. She had one part of a melody that she wanted to use and then I just went in my own direction with the rest of it and it just really came out beautiful. It's just amazing. I like it because it's so stripped down and raw - it's just me, the bass, piano and drums. And then we put the string chart on afterwards - Paul Riser did the strings.

**You've worked with former Motown arranger Paul Riser before. What was he like to work with?**

On that song and 'Marry Me' I said "I gotta bring Paul Riser here from Detroit to do these." He's

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anointed. There's a difference and you can hear it. Some people are touched by the hand of God and I believe he's one of those people.

### **Did you come from a musical family?**

Not really although my mother sang - although I'm probably the only one who's ever heard her sing - but she taught me about 200 songs by the time I was nine years old. So I would have to say that she was very musical but she was very shy or she probably would have sung herself.

### **Who influenced you when you were younger?**

All the Motown acts and there was a lot of incredible jazz around my house; there was great music like Sinatra, Tony Bennett and Billie Holiday and a lot of Ella Fitzgerald and Ray Charles - just all the classics, all the greats. My mother and father had great musical taste and Friday nights we would all come together and get to play whatever we loved and of course, I was really, really influenced by Motown. Then later on I loved the male vocal groups, like the Miracles - Smokey Robinson influenced my writing most - and the Dells, the Delfonics and The Dramatics. I got a lot from them.

### **How did it feel when you signed to Motown?**

It was an incredible dream come true - to meet Berry Gordy and have him sign me.

### **How did that come about in the first place?**

I met the Jackson Five's producer, Hal Davis, and he got me an audition with Mr Gordy. Hal Davis produced a few tracks that are still in the can on me - some Smokey Robinson songs.

### **How did you hook up with Rick James at Motown?**

My manager at that time and Iris Gordy wanted me to meet him because they thought it would be an awesome pairing. I was playing Stevie Wonder's piano and Rick was just walking down the hall one day and I met him. He leaned in and we started talking. Motown had asked him to produce Diana Ross. 'I'm A Sucker For Your Love' was supposed to be for her but he wanted to do the whole album and they only wanted him to do one track so he didn't want to do it. He said "you know I'd really rather work with Teena." So that's how I got that song.

### **You had an amazing musical chemistry together, didn't you?**

Yes, we did: he was my musical soul mate.

### **What did you learn from working with Rick?**

I watched him in the studio and learned about working with musicians and getting the best out of them and arranging music and holding back until the climax of the song and not giving everything as soon as you start singing; making it build. He was brilliant to be around and I learned how to have fun - it was so much fun.

### **What was it like going on tour with Rick?**

Fun sometimes but we fought most of the time.

### **What did you fight over?**

Well, we were a couple at one point. When we were best friends it was great - we should never have become a couple. In 1981 we went on tour together and the first night of the tour I broke

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up with him. He thought I was joking. So we fought about that. So there were these crazy, crazy nights on the tour - he broke my door down in the hotel room one night and we'd fight on stage. People thought it was just a part of the show and they just were going crazy.

**You left Motown under a cloud in 1982 because you had a legal battle with them, didn't you?**

Yes, I wanted to move on and they didn't want me to go and when I left they sued me. And I countersued and I won.

**Isn't there some kind of law that refers to your case?**

Yes, it's called the Brockert Initiative. Brockert is my last name. The Brockert Initiative says that you can no longer bind an artist for more than five years - back then, it was usual to hold an artist for seven years and now the contracts are only legal for five years. It actually raised the amount of money that artists were paid because the contract that I was under was set in 1911 and in 1976 when I signed it to Motown the money was unbelievably minimal. Even with hit records like 'Square Biz' and 'I Need Your Loving' and 'Portuguese Love' I was still making less than \$6,000 a year.

**You did a good thing for every other musician coming into the business.**

I didn't try. It just fell in my lap. It wasn't something that I set out to do. I really just wanted to move on. I loved my Motown family and I still do. We're still very, very close and over the years we've put the past behind us.

**Do you think you had more freedom when you went to Epic Records in 1983?**

I always had freedom. The reason that I still love Mr Gordy so much is because I really feel that of everyone he was the one that really understood me as an artist. I went to Epic and made a lot

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of money but I never felt that kind of family feeling again. You know at Motown Records you'd walk down the halls and around the corner Stevie Wonder's right there and you'd turn another corner and there's Smokey Robinson. And Bobby Debarge was one of my best friends. I remember the Commodores were in this office and the Jacksons were still there too. It was just amazing.

**It must have been mind-boggling really.**

It was - especially for a young girl that grew up in the beach area of Venice, California, and was very naïve.

**So what's your favourite moment of your Motown years when you look back?**

Oh, I have so many but when Rick and I were on tour in '81 we broke Elvis Presley's record of concert attendance in two cities and we were out-grossing the Rolling Stones that year. I mean there are so many beautiful moments. To sit in Stevie Wonder's office and write 'Casanova Brown' when no one else is around - just me playing his piano. That comes to mind. It was just an unbelievable moment.

**Many of your contemporaries have fallen by the wayside but you still continue to have hits. What's the secret of your enduring success and appeal?**

Probably because I'm just still really passionate about the music and I've always been very honest and truthful in my music. I always tell stories of my life and I think people appreciate that because it's honest and it's not contrived. It's a gift from God and I've always known that. So when you know that - and when you know it's not just you, that it's been given to you - you embrace that and are thankful for it.

**'Congo Square' is out now on Stax/Concord (read the review at [www.soulandjazzandfunk.com](http://www.soulandjazzandfunk.com))**