



Teena Marie Congo Square

When a lady has thrived at the epicenter of a musical movement that some initially claimed was not her birthright, and that lady has steadfastly held that legacy down *strong* for 30 phenomenal years, acknowledgment, respect and celebration are in order. Today, that artist is “Lady Tee,” **Teena Marie**.

2009 marks the 30th (pearl) anniversary of Teena Marie’s recording career with the June release of her thirteenth CD, *Congo Square* – and there’s a milestone for every decade that has led to it. First is the 16-song CD itself, boasting all of the panoramic musicality a fan could desire. Second is her fresh alignment with Stax Records that –after her storied Motown debut in 1979 – marks the second time Teena has been proudly affiliated with a bedrock black music institution. Finally, there’s a more personal revelation regarding her family lineage that once and for all proves why she has been bursting with indisputable soul all these years. Teena has New Orleans roots!

Congo Square is a passionate, accessible and, as always, autobiographical adventure that cruises smoothly from southern soul and smoky jazz to dance floor funk. Along for the party are special guests **Faith Evans** (on the first single “Can’t Last a Day”), **Howard Hewett** (on the steamy duet “Lovers Lane”), **MC Lyte** (on the sexy opener “The Pressure”), the jazz trio of pianist **George Duke** (on the title track “Congo Square”), drummer/co-composer **Terri Lyne Carrington** and bassist **Brian Bromberg** (on the cinematic ballad “The Rose n’ Thorn,” orchestrated by the legendary **Paul Riser**), and Teena’s daughter **Rose LeBeau** (on the soul salute “Milk n’ Honey”).

“I’ve been through quite a few trials and tribulations over the last two years,” Teena shares regarding the time between her last acclaimed release, *Sapphire*, and now. “I spent many of those hours in prayer and felt like God was putting his arms around me. I started thinking about the music I grew up on - how *inspired* it was. Each song I wrote began to sound like the style of some favorite artist of mine from the past... ‘What U Got 4 Me’ is a combination of Curtis Mayfield and Marvin Gaye, ‘You Baby’ is inspired by the old Chicago soul of The Emotions (originally Stax artists in the `70s) and the new Chicago vibe of Kanye West... ‘Baby I Love

You' is my cruising down Crenshaw with Ice Cube bumpin' in the trunk vibe, while 'The Pressure' reminds me of the kinds of things I used to do with Rick." That would be Rick James, the undisputed king of Punk Funk and epic balladry who produced Teena's debut record, *Wild & Peaceful*, consummating a relationship that would take many shapes until his passing in 2004. Recalling that intense, emotional relationship allowed Teena to tap into the deeply personal ballad, "Marry Me," Congo Square's centerpiece. With its soulful, straightforward, southern eloquence and emotive strings that the late great Isaac Hayes would have adored, "Marry Me" is also the composition that is most like a classic slice of Stax. "That's my ode to Aretha," Teena says, "...all the bluesy stuff she did in her young-young years like 'Ain't No Way.' I have fond memories of ridin' around Buffalo with Rick listening to all her early music and singing to it on days off from the road. Without being preachy, I've observed several couples that have been together for years – with their kids all around them – but they still haven't walked down the aisle. It's probably the most bluesy soul song I've ever done. I had to have an anointed genius on this music so I flew Paul Riser in from Detroit to arrange and conduct the strings. During the session, I saw grown men and women cry...I'm talking heavyweight philharmonic players who've heard everything. The harpist had just done Streisand the night before."

Teena songs morph in styles from sassy (the flirtatious "Ear Candy 101") and sexy (the Bourbon Street jazz fantasy "Harlem Blue") to sublime ("Ms. Coretta," about the woman who stood by her man, Martin). "I have so much respect for that woman," Teena says softly. "It's documented that Martin said he wanted a woman with character, intelligence, personality and beauty – so we went deep on this one. I found a spoken passage of Coretta's on the Internet from a speech she gave when Martin's birthday became a national holiday. And the bell you hear is a sample of the Normandy Bell – the French replica of the Liberty Bell." *Congo Square's* first single "Can't Last a Day" is a modern spin on Kenny Gamble & Leon Huff's Philadelphia International sound and pairs Teena with the sensational Faith Evans. "If you really listen to the lyrics," Teena shares, "it transcends a typical love song:

If the sun in the sky disappear from view / And the love in my heart baby wasn't true / If the rivers and seas all just up and dry / And the moon pass away from the deep blue sky / If I lost all my faith in a higher power / Tell me where would I be in the final hour / I'd be losing my way baby I'd be through / Cuz I can't last a day honey without you

It's about that mystical, joined-through-God kind of love...I'm talking about people being together until the end of time! I think we're really missing that level of love today." Reflecting on her hook-up with Faith, Teena continues, "It was AFTER I recorded the song that I got the idea to put Faith on. I've always loved her vocal style. She reminds me of me. Her correlation with Biggie – having a career with him and without him – reminds me of me and Rick. We know each other through mutual friends. I called her up and she was really excited to do it. When I play the song for younger people especially, they seem really thrilled to hear us together...just the idea of it."

As a singer, songwriter, producer and multi-instrumentalist, Teena Marie obliterated the barrier of race when it comes to soul music, opening the door for later superstars from Madonna to Justin Timberlake. That this white woman can purposefully create an album with a title inspired by an historical American locale where Black slaves gathered on Sundays to recharge their spiritual batteries after six days under the lash – *and no one would bat an eye* – speaks volumes of her singular stature within the black community that has embraced her as its own. There's a reason for this which she recently learned.

“I have always had a deep affinity for New Orleans,” Teena begins, “the culture, the people...the actual *air!* From the moment I stepped off the plane, I felt like, ‘I’ve been here before.’ The people embraced me and my music from the very first time I went there in the early `80s. A few months ago, my first cousin was here visiting and I happened to tell her about my deep affinity for New Orleans. She looked at me and said, ‘Well, you know that’s where our people are from, right? Our great, great grandmother **Sarah Howell Colin** was married in the St. Louis Cathedral in the French Quarter.’ I said, ‘What are you talking about? We’re from Texas.’ She said, ‘Yes, but before Texas our folks were in Louisiana.’ I could have learned this at any time in my life, but for me to find this out as I was finishing *Congo Square*... Now it all makes sense.”

This revelation informs much of the atmosphere on the more introspective second half of *Congo Square*, such as the Sarah Vaughan-inspired “The Rose n’ Thorn” and the shout of support to the American men and women serving our country overseas titled “Soldier.” “*Milk n’ Honey* is the title of the album John Lennon was working on when he was killed,” Teena states. “I was thinking about physical things I could give my daughter – diamonds and pearls – but it was far more important to pass down the stuff that sustains us on this earth like milk and honey – the good spirit a mother gives you. Music is part of that, so I had Rose LeBeau write and sing on the track “Milk n’ Honey”. It’s only the second time we’ve recorded together, my way of passing the torch. She makes me so proud.”

That Teena would be making these artistic statements for a resurrected Stax Records makes the cross-cultural connectedness complete. When **Jim Stewart** and his sister **Estelle Axton** laid the foundation for Stax in Memphis during the late `50s, it was as a place where black and white musicians could make incredible music together – evidenced most famously by racially integrated house band Booker T. & The M.G.s.

“Congo Square was the place where slaves were allowed to dance and sing on Sundays,” Ms. Marie concludes. “Can you imagine all the amazing musicians – jazz and otherwise – that have been through since? I thought it would be awesome to consider *Congo Square* as our address – an inspirational place where artists all live in spirit.”

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