



SANANDA MAITREYA

[THE ARTIST FORMERLY KNOWN AS TERENCE TRENT D'ARBY]

“ME AND BONO WERE GONNA COLLABORATE ON SOMETHING ONCE, AND AGAIN, IT’S LIKE, ‘WE DON’T WANT NONE OF THESE MOTHERFUCKERS TOGETHER AND SHAKING THINGS UP’ BECAUSE THAT ALERTS BABYLON TO THE FACT THAT CONSCIOUSNESS IS ALIVE AND IS CAPABLE OF MOVING THINGS.”

Choices for black men with long hair:

Afro

Dreds

Perm

That’s it!

Digital downloads are great, but I for one miss CD liner notes. Combing the booklet of Terence Trent D’Arby’s *Symphony or Damn* (1993) opened me up to the readings of Greek spiritualist G. I. Gurdjieff, even as the singer endorsed Pink Floyd and Henryk Górecki symphonies in print interviews. More than a neo-soul forefather, D’Arby was a tastemaker for die-hard fans paying rapt enough attention. How ironic that MP3s (implicitly eliminating those beloved liner notes) are the preferred method of exchange for the artist currently known as Sananda Maitreya.

Introducing the Hardline According to Terence Trent D’Arby sold multimillions around the world back in 1987, supported by hits most might need to be reminded of nowadays: “If You Let Me Stay,” “Sign Your Name,” “Wishing Well.” At the time even Prince passed a symbolic baton by

performing TTD’s music in concerts. The twenty-five-year-old, Harlem-born London expatriate famously committed the blasphemy of judging his own debut better than Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band, ushering in a black Britpop invasion that soon included Neneh Cherry and Soul II Soul. More so than his superconfident mouth that roared, his eclectic next record, *Neither Fish Nor Flesh* (1989), put a quick cap on his commercial success. In retrospect the album sounds tame compared to modern soul excursions from Meshell Ndegeocello or even Kelis. Yet D’Arby’s career would never recover, despite producing more balanced follow-ups like 1995’s *Vibrator*.

Enter Sananda Maitreya. Legally changing his name six years ago, marrying Italian architect Francesca Francone, and settling in Milan, Maitreya is one example of what rock stardom can mean in the iPod era. Communicating with fans through MySpace, uploading music videos onto YouTube, and

updating his own site (sanandamaitreya.com) regularly with spiritual aphorisms and new music, Maitreya spreads the gospel of his latest work, *Angels & Vampires* (2006).

I met with Sananda Maitreya at the Chococult café in western Milan. After an hour flew by, we took a brisk winter walk and continued our conversation in a nearby park.

—Miles Marshall Lewis

I. “THAT WAS A RECORD A BLACK MAN SHOULD NOT HAVE MADE.”

THE BELIEVER: I saw you perform in downtown Manhattan’s Alphabet City in 1989, at the World. Nona Hendryx was in the audience with Lenny Kravitz, and you gave him a shoutout. His first album had just come out.

SANANDA MAITREYA: I’ve wondered if I hadn’t done that if he would have taken off. I did reach out to Lenny, and I did try to make sure he was stable at the beginning of his journey. Because whether or not I liked what happened to me, I still approved and was a fan of what happened to him. ’Cause it was important, it was necessary. How come you never ever see a black man with a guitar?

I saw a picture of John Legend the other day. No offense to him, but a nigga’s gotta be behind a piano. A piano is big, it represents a barrier, you’re sitting down, so you’re in a tamed position, you’re playing something that can’t move so you have to stay where it is. Now a piano is still an amazing instrument. But there’s a psychological reason why we have to sit behind that motherfucker, as opposed to picking up a guitar and being right in your face playing it. A guitar is another cultural symbol highjacked by the Anglos as a part of their cultural imagery, as a part of their power.

BLVR: Plus it’s phallic. I was the music editor of *Vibe* years ago, and in their fourteen-year history, there’s only been one person on the cover with a guitar: Wyclef Jean. And the cover was split with Lauryn Hill that month.

SM: Right.

BLVR: Would you discuss the trajectory of your career after your debut album hit so big?

SM: I became Sananda Maitreya to receive a new life, fuck a new name. I’m trying to receive new spirit. TTD was taken out of the situation. They had killed that boy. When [Sony] buried *Neither Fish Nor Flesh*, it killed that boy’s spirit. I was thirty-three when I took Sananda, and I remember a good solid two years where the whole focus of my meditation was “Get me out of this motherfucker.” And just being angry.

The bottom line is, that was a record a black man should not have made. We don’t do shit like that. We stick close to the formula. “What are you, the Beatles? Who do you think you are, Dylan?” The irony being, I never heard anything about any record that I turned in that the record company didn’t say about the first. Every criticism I’ve heard on every record I’ve made was the same shit said about the first.

I never saw myself as an R&B singer. I always saw myself as a rock star. A rock star, to my mind, didn’t necessarily mean the limited brand of music that you were marketed under. No matter how they sold Wilson Pickett, Wilson Pickett was a rock star. ’Cause it was his whole thing.

I had the advantage of coming from England and made it clear to the Americans before I even came, I’m not playing that race bullshit. I came all the way to this motherfucker to have my life like Jimi [Hendrix] had to have his so we could do what we were put here to do. All this shuckin’ and jivin’, I’m not interested in that. So basically, they just wasn’t having that. Next thing you know, I’m being replaced by guys who don’t even sing on the record. No offense to them.

One of the things that most moved me was that right before he killed himself, Rob [Pilatus of Milli Vanilli] tried to reach out to me. At the time, man, I was just so fucked up in my own mind. They just fuck with you so hard in so many ways that by the time this kid called looking for energy that I might’ve been able to give him to sustain his life, at least for one more day, I didn’t have it.

BLVR: During promotion for your sophomore album, I remember reading about a book of poetry you'd either just written or were about to publish. What was the title?

SM: *Sex and Insanity Sells*. The story is that after the first printing, it raised a furor with certain people, which was basically, "Wait, this shit is more intelligent than it's supposed to be for one of these R&B singers."

BLVR: So your poetry book was too intelligent and therefore they didn't want to promote it?

SM: I think also because it was prescient. I actually re-discovered it about five or six years ago, and it was pretty prescient, what was happening in South Africa and what was going to happen. I remember around the same time giving an interview and predicting that the [Berlin] Wall was going to come down.

Basically, once I had revealed that prophecy was a part of what the Lord gave me to do, they was not feeling that shit. Now the truth is that most prophets don't even know what the hell they're talking about when they're saying it. You open your mouth and the shit comes out. Next thing you know, all this is coming true. Prophets learned the hard way what to say and what not to say. It's a process for all of us, whether you're KRS-One or Dylan or Prince. All the prophets learn the art of communication. Have to if you want to survive the next day or the last speech.

BLVR: Have you ever read Dylan's *Tarantula*, or John Lennon's *In His Own Write*?

SM: I read Dylan's as a part of the larger compendium that I got. I think the whole book is published in *Lyrics: 1962–1985*. I actually still have the hardback to that. If Dylan writes some shit, I'm gonna read it if it's available. *In His Own Write*? Lennon's one of our chief angels, so I don't really have to read him. He's always pretty much omnipresent, Sir John.

BLVR: Kanye West is very outspoken as part of his image, like you were. Would you caution him?

SM: No, I wouldn't caution him. Outspoken is the way of the man who is that. You can't really fake outspoken when that kind of money's involved. At the same time, since I was making money pretty much right away, what was to stop me from speaking my mind? I didn't know that the money would last me for the rest of my life and that it would *have* to. But what good are you if you got a couple of dollars and you can't say some shit?

Kanye's safe because he has the support of the black community. I didn't. So he ain't have to deal with one of them Spanish *olé*-type situations. There's a joke about the Spanish firefighters who told a guy, if he would just jump from the building they would catch him. But the closer he got to the thing, them being Spanish, they couldn't help but *olé!* and pull the thing from him. If the white man says *olé* on his ass, at least he's still got the brothers to catch him. I didn't have that.

BLVR: Did you manage wealth and fame well in the wake of your first album?

SM: [*Laughter*] As well as you can expect, man. I've been very fortunate to have had enough success that even having not been fully remunerated for the work, in conjunction with continuing to work, I'm able by the grace of God to not have to worry about work. I feel I'm blessed I have to work to get paid because I've seen young people get so much money that they don't even have to work, and an idle mind is the devil's workshop. I'm grateful for the cushion I have to work at what I love, but still grateful that the cushion's not so big that I don't have to work.

II. "LOOKING AT THE PRESIDENCY FROM OUTSIDE THE WHITE HOUSE IS A WHOLE DIFFERENT PROPOSITION FROM SEEING IT FROM INSIDE."

BLVR: You lived in Berlin after a brief stint in the Army—Elvis Presley's old regiment—and started your singing career from London. Now you live in Milan. Why the love of Europe?

SM: My desire was to remain in Europe after I came to Europe because even as a child I knew that the white man was not as bad as this. I just knew it. I've always loved the white man. I've always taken his shit, but I can't help that. I was created to provoke his ass, and he was created to move me to agree that I cannot just walk away from him and wash my hands and say, "Fuck it." Though at this point I have enough of a financial life to not have him all up in my shit. I'm not nearly as rich as I would be if the motherfucker had paid me what I earned, but that's every motherfucker's story.

BLVR: Moving to Paris three years ago, I miss my family sometimes. I imagine it's the same for you. I don't know what your relationship is like with your daughter, Seraphina; she's at Marlborough College now...

SM: I don't know really, either. If I'm honest, I don't really know if she's my daughter. Whether I'll get in trouble for saying that... If she read that, she might be moved by it. But it's not as if she doesn't know already. I was asked to be responsible for someone else's life for the time in which I was asked to be responsible. The question isn't whether she's my blood, it's only if I accept the responsibility. If I accepted the responsibility of what Spirit has asked me to, and He's asked me to hold the bag, then I do. And I make my peace with it the way I do. But I'm not sure that she's my blood. I'm not.

People say, "Well, you should think of your daughter more before you say these things." I do. And I do not wish for her to have the confusion that I grew up with and was asked to grow up with. If she is going to hurt, hurt now so that the truth can get to you and you can see that the willingness to face our truth is what strengthens us and gives us more. Only your truth exists. In fact it's given me more compassion for her, because we're caught up in the same not-knowing.

The law and the papers say this, but the law and the papers were not about to let me get away with not paying taxes. Bill Gates is not even obliged to put his daughter through whatever school she wants to go through. It's assumed that the father has the right to say yes or no. I don't have the right to say yes or no. I would rather have come to the conclusion that I wanted to do

this as opposed to being made by a court to finance any whim her mother decides to take her through. It's as much for that reason as any why I do not patronize the English anymore with my existence. But it's a tradeoff that I'm willing to make.

BLVR: How's your relationship with your brother, Darren, who's got his own band, DoggyBag?

SM: My brother's a half brother, and he may be a half cousin. There's a lot of confusion in my family over my origins and a refusal to completely be honest. It's always been some big family mystery secret, and it has certainly turned me through a lot of bitterness, especially as you get to an age where you can't not have these questions answered.

I am estranged from my family. I'm not very close to them and we do have our problems. Mainly we don't communicate. Because of the environment they were raised in and encouraged to adopt, they kind of see me through a filter that's not entirely their own. I am also working with prejudice considering their way of life and the damage it has done to any forthcoming and honest relationship based on its own terms. But again, that's me working with my judgments and that's them working with theirs.

I'm not very close to my half brother or -cousin. But there is a point in all of our evolution where we have to challenge our view of family and redefine what family is for us. Within family, a lot of pathologies can hide that keep us from evolving to our truest, fullest point. The point I've come to realize is that nothing can be allowed to stand in the way of me and complete self-realization.

BLVR: Have you traveled to African countries? What reflections do you have on African countries you've been to?

SM: I have only traveled at this point in this physical body to the north of Africa. I've always had a really strong interest from places in Kenya and Nigeria, South Africa. I realize now why the [record] company didn't want me to go to those places. People like ourselves

who are diasporans who've done some things in the world always excite them when they come back. It's a way of giving them a different view of themselves. We're just models for the different ways the exodus has taken route and what it's given birth to. But I've been in North African cultures.

BLVR: Where, exactly?

SM: The last place I think was Tunisia.

BLVR: Do you think America will elect a black man president?

SM: I want to say this to Senator Obama: If you're ever gonna be taken seriously for president, you have to know these two things: America is not now nor will it be ready to have a black president. But it will elect a president who is black. He has to see the difference in that. Trying to go through black people now to win their approval, something he has not had to gain in the first place? He will lose and take two giant steps backwards.

I don't care who this offends. Basically, no one is more racist against blacks than black people themselves who recognize that another person has gotten at least beyond the pathology of our toxic thinking we are encouraged to have by Babylon—hello?—so that we do not make it as far with the consciousness that this man has. The fact that he's half white, he's expected subliminally to apologize for it. Of course, only in America is he a black man. Anywhere else he'd be respected as a whatever-the-fuck-he-says-he-is. And of course, we mustn't ever show how equally proud we are to be the other race as well. That's self-defeating bullshit, it's toxic, and that's why if he panders to them, he will not win them. You can only win them by ignoring them. Of course they'll be angry and upset. But we've got to stop catering to the weakest links in the chain. That's why we all stay weak.

I would like to see this man president at some point. I would like to see a woman president. Of course, life being life, we would see the choice come down to the same thing. I think the smartest thing to do is for him

to tuck in under Hillary, be on the same ticket. It'll be one of the most exciting tickets. Even Europeans are excited about that ticket, which means more. You can never underestimate the value of European interest in coverage in American affairs. And, quite frankly, the worst time to be a first black president is right after Bush has gotten through with it. They're colonialist by their spirit and their nature, which means they gonna leave that shit so full of holes that he couldn't do nothing but spend time trying to empty out a boat of water that they put in it in the first place. And the same people will turn around and say, "We told you that blacks weren't ready to be president."

Any person who follows up this administration has to have the kind of contacts that Hillary has to make it work. It ain't gonna be McCain. There's gotta be a Democrat in the White House. There's gonna be a Democrat who understands as much as possible the power structure they're sharing power with. So that'll be Hillary. In the meantime, Obama should tuck his tail, take that seat, learn, do some shit—that's still huge, vice president—and put himself in a position to see whether he really wants that shit or not. Looking at the presidency from outside the White House is a whole different proposition from seeing it from inside.

III. ALERTING BABYLON

BLVR: At the beginning of your career, you told *Q* magazine you didn't want to produce other artists. That's something that Smokey Robinson, Prince, Stevie Wonder, and others have done. Do you still feel that way?

SM: I've not been against it, it's just I grew up with my first love being rock, and I wanted to produce rock bands. Of course Americans never offered. True to the relatively more progressive spirit of the European Anglos, I was offered two or three bands by the Brits, but it always happened in an inconvenient moment. Generally, writing and producing means what? Giving you to other people. The irony is that I'm capable of writing for other people for their own particular voices, but then people want *you*. If you're successful, people want

what they see as the shortcut to *them* getting on the radio. I'm not just gonna cut my organs out and give you my organs. But I will work with you to develop who you are.

I have helped other artists without being in the studio just from trying to mentor them in ways confidentially and psychologically. My ideal producer was always George Martin, and I always felt he was the type of producer I wanted to be: a fill-in-the-blanks guy. "Hey, you could use a string arrangement here, so let me do the string arrangement. You could use nothing here, but more confidence." I always wanted to be that guy, but the industry is very circumspect about how it uses its black talent.

But guys like Nile [Rodgers] and Prince, they don't mind. What gets Prince over is, this is who he is. He always wins big when he's who he is. He's that kind of motherfucker. I'm not. I can assure you that the American industry did not wish to see me and Prince become more closely aligned.

BLVR: Why?

SM: For the same reason the FBI does everything possible to keep two or three niggas from "gathering together in my name. Because there will I be also." If you have two influential and cross-raced people who influence more than one tribe putting their consciousness together, it just means more mass. Me and Bono were gonna collaborate on something once, and again, it's like, "We don't want none of these motherfuckers together and shaking things up" because that alerts Babylon to the fact that consciousness is alive and is capable of moving things. So they usually have us isolated, usually it's a girl or something, or some rumor that is deliberately used to just, "Oh, what? That nigga said what?" It's like this. Jimi and Sly wanted to work together and that was kept from happening. Jimi and Miles wanted to. How come these things never happened?

IV. "THE EASIEST THING IS JUST TO HAVE SOME DREDS."

BLVR: Kanye West is hip-hop's Muhammad Ali big-

mouth, and it's working well for him. How did it occur to you to use the same technique back in 1987?

SM: I moved to London in '86, and I saw LL Cool J at Brixton Academy. Besides my Muhammad Ali shtick, which I leaned on when I first came through, actually a lot of what I was doing was LL. I took some of LL's persona because I was so moved by the lovable arrogance of his image. I deliberately cultivated this "I'm arrogant, so fuckin' what? If you were young and magnificent and gifted like me, you would be too. And still I'm a lovable rogue." 'Cause there was that about LL. Between having grown up with Ali as a huge influence and some other rock stars, it was when I finally saw LL that the other piece fell into place and I felt, I gotta go with this. Even the way he walked out onstage. I think it was around *Walking with a Panther*, and he walks in like a panther!

Of course you realize later—this is not to say LL—but, you know, imagery is most of anything. Half those [tough-guy MCs] are gay, half those guys went to Harvard or, like, Wharton Business School or something. But still, I really appreciated the way that he took the mentality of being under siege that many people like him would've grown up with and just turned it into an asset, turned it into a selling point.

'Cause that's the point. Even you are a young black man growing up in Anglo cultures which are endlessly fascinated with you. It's what you do with it. You can take the same anger and turn it against yourself as well as the people you're angry with. You can take the same anger and use it as an internal asset, because the bottom line is, what fuels almost any man's ambition, much less a black man's ambition, is anger. People say to me all the time, "This guy grew up without a father." It's like, you know, I wish I could say that I grew up without a father. I grew up with a stepfather. Many times I wish he hadn't been there.

BLVR: Your stepfather was a preacher?

SM: Is a preacher. There are few things as antithetical as being a rock musician and being a Pentecostal. You pretty much can't get more of a nemesis-type relationship than that, because just that we exist is an abomination to their belief system. And that they exist is an

abomination to mine. But you peacefully coexist.

I will never judge any black man growing up in America in any time. What it took for a man of his time and place, growing up in the South, to convince The Man that he wasn't a threat and that he was a law-abiding Negro... I can't say I don't understand. You adopt the mask and the persona necessary to survive. In this manner, all of us were the Stepin Fetchits we had to be to survive. Ultimately, he's the man that he is and I'm the man that I am and that's OK.

BLVR: Do you have any interesting stories about meeting Lenny Kravitz or Prince?

SM: With all due respect, Lenny was the American industry's answer to me, and from that point onwards, I was never going to be allowed to get anywhere near what he was then created to commandeer. And that's nothing against him. I mean, a brother's in the right place at the right time using the talents and abilities he has earned and honed. But even he experienced frustration at one point once he wanted to expand and realized that he was really given the position to block another nigga as much as not to expand the position. I woke up one day and there was Lenny on my right flank, Milli Vanilli on the left. And that was just the black ones.

What was never given credit is, like, for example, Oasis were also growing up on my second album. The two of the guys in Oasis used to be in another band that used to do a cover of one of my songs from the second project, "This Side of Love." And they were actually called the Rain, which I'm told was taken out of homage to ["Rain" from *Introducing the Hardline According to Terence Trent D'Arby*] and John Lennon's song "Rain." And also, I was told by two or three of the bands from Seattle that my second album was a huge influence on a part of what became the Seattle thing. So they were all sides affected by it.

BLVR: Speaking of influence, I remember Prince performing "If You Let Me Stay" at concerts when your album first dropped. How did that info get to you, or how did you feel about it?

SM: It's a very small world. Obviously, Anglos always use

the next nigga to get on the last nigga's nerves. [Laughter] Luckily those of us who can perceive it, we get to each other early and say, "OK, this is gonna happen, don't be tripping behind that." I said that to Lenny at some point.

I remember once him saying to me, "How come all the white boys from Seattle can have the same hair, the same T-shirt, the same shirt, and even the same sneakers, and we got dreds and they're hounding us? How come they are *expected* to look like each other and we can't even look like each other coincidentally?" "Oh, you both got dreds, you should change." For years! I finally went blond; I was ready. But for years I had to hear, "Because of Lenny, you should change your shit." He was here because of me.

BLVR: Lenny caught Prince comparisons when he finally permed his hair for a while.

SM: Truly, the nature of our shit is, there's only about two or three choices. If you've got long hair: Afro, dreds, perm. That's it! Or you's a short-haired nigga or you's a bald nigga. The easiest thing is just to have some dreds. You ain't gotta do nothing but keep 'em clean! I know after a few years of maintaining that perm and knowing some girls' pillows you can't even lay on... We gotta get beyond that. God forbid there's two niggas in the Western Hemisphere both with guitars and dreds, when for the white boys, it's a uniform!

BLVR: And the Converse and Levi's.

SM: Exactly. And I love them motherfuckers too. But that's the reality of the situation.

V. "THE RECORD INDUSTRY, LIKE MANY PEOPLE, ALWAYS HAS TO BE DRAGGED KICKING AND SCREAMING INTO ITS BLISS."

BLVR: To the degree that the record industry is falling or fallen, what do you think caused its downfall?

SM: When it turned its back on the other side of the law. One side of the law is, make money. The other side of the law is, [artists are] giving you something to make

money with that is also a public service. It is vital to the international mental interest. They completely turned their back on that and forgot who they're working with and who they're working for. They fell that deeply asleep.

BLVR: What do you think will be the final result of the mass internet collaboration of YouTube, MySpace, peer-to-peer MP3 download sites, etc.?

SM: The dinosaurs that couldn't mutate died. The ones that said, "We might have to get smaller and become lizards" or "We might have to mutate into crocodiles" or "We might have to go Loch Ness on fools," those are the ones that are still with us.

In the meantime, I have helped in what will be seen as the biggest communication revolution in the history of humanity. There has never been a time in humanity where this much has moved so fast. Likewise, there has never been a time in any of the postindustrial era, ever, where the means of production has been placed back directly into the hands of the creators themselves. And that is why now Sony can't give away most of their records, and why I'm not only still standing, I'm winning. I'm making money with my downloads.

The choice is theirs. The record industry, like many people, always has to be dragged kicking and screaming into its bliss. If they can mutate and reinvent themselves, basically as holding companies for artists and their interests, they will succeed. If they continue to see themselves in the old manner, the new form just won't take the old vision. Just reinvent yourself, cut that overhead down, and let's have people involved in the music business again who really give a shit about it.

The problem is, once it became a billion-dollar industry, it attracted the wrong people for the wrong reasons, and they were clogging up the industry. Middle-aged executives who cared way more about their 401K program were all of a sudden deciding what artists could and couldn't release while looking up from their applications on some new loan information they were trying to figure out. Fuck that. Get these motherfuckers out.

BLVR: Prince started dealing with labels as a free agent in the 1990s, and he's been getting Grammy nominations

and the cover of *Rolling Stone* lately. Maybe it would take more major artists like Prince or Madonna going independent like you to make a tipping-point shift.

SM: What we're doing supports those who are still under slavery contracts. I know Madonna. As competitive as she is, she's not gonna look at me doing this shit and not think, "I'm Madonna. What the fuck am I paying some other motherfucker for when I could be doing just what this motherfucker's doing and be creating from scratch a whole new identity? This is me for days, and I ain't gotta split my money with none of these fools who then tell me what the market is looking for."

American Idol is the culmination of what the record industry wanted to be, and it's a perfect summation of who they are. In fact, all of them should get together and do the *Finding Talent* show. It'll be more honest. And then let the next part of the competition be, whoever bids the highest gets it.

But I'm introducing another law. I'm saying, the future is, once I finish mastering my record, does it matter to me whether Coca-Cola buys it and uses it how the fuck they want? Or Sony? No. The Microsoft advertising budget is more than record companies spend promoting their shit anyway. What's to stop me from talking to Steve Jobs—if you're listening—and saying, "Steve, why are you dealing with these guys you're way smarter than anyway? Why don't you just step to cats like me who are free and independent, who have the credibility to talk to other people, like, 'Madonna, as soon as you get outta this shit, yo, we gonna put together the coolest label that's ever been put together.'"

If you're listening, Steven Jobs or Bill Gates, since even your personal fortunes can buy the whole record industry outright, why don't you? Why are you haggling with these motherfuckers for pennies when I personally could step to you, if I were interested, and start something for you that's Apple Digital Recordings or whatever? Don't you think that George Michael would rather give you the master and you say whether you want to use it first to advertise some other shit?

What do I care? I just want the people to have the music and make my money. ★