



HER VOICE BLACK WOMEN FROM THE SPOTLIGHT TO THE SCREEN

What's Love Got to Do with It

In a genre famous for bungles and mediocrities, Brian Gibson's biopic of Tina Turner, *What's Love Got to Do with It*, works on every level. This is partly because it has advantages which counterbalance the problems. Tina Turner's life has coincided with watershed changes: in politics, in race relations, in fashion and the leisure industries. Though the film does not belabour these points, all are invoked – through 'home movies', modes of performance, styles of stage lighting, varied street scenes and eye-popping costumes. (The passage of 30 years means, for Angela Bassett's Tina, 90 pieces of 'wardrobe').

Also, in black American autobiography, 'I' is code for 'we'. ('From Frederick Douglass to Arthur Ashe,' says black author Randall Kenan, 'the record of plight and travail and triumph speaks to "our" lives as a group, as Everyman and Everywoman, singing an infinity of riffs on the sorrow and the Gospel.') Through this alone, the film carries an extra layer of resonance. Ike, we realise, is not just any restless and volatile musician. He is a black man whose paranoia is specifically of its time. With Laurence Fishburne and Bassett aided by sterling work from the rest of the cast, *What's Love* belongs to Ike as much as it does to Tina.

When he is 'discarded' at the movie's end, we see a way of life – both good and bad – being vanquished. The R'n'B performance circuit demanded specific talents: to make it you needed confidence, style, a wide array of hustling skills, supernatural stamina and plenty of one-on-one charm. That power structure was cannibalised in the disco era, which altered radio formats forever, handed control to 'name' producers and finally took apart the pieces which made up the R'n'B universe.

When that world vanished, so did a marketplace and an aesthetic which were exclusively black. As we see in *What's Love*, the universe a 'free' Tina chooses is neither 'black' nor 'white', but one within which her blackness is exotic and other. Mostly it is a corporate world, one which sees song and performance as money-making machinery. As Ike slinks away down the alley of oblivion, Tina begins a collusion with rock as spectacle rather than as 'soul'. Her future is MTV, rock as film trailer, rock as electronic press kits and global satellite link-up.

Therefore change rather than success or charisma centres this biopic. (The fact that both Ike and Tina have talent is simply a given.) *What's Love* is about the way a couple's aims and pasts first unite, then later destroy them. It deals with how the male ego handles envy and anxiety. It even broaches the roles played by terror and healing in making art. All the questions raised by this movie are real, adult questions: *What is loyalty? What is respect? What is family supposed to mean – and whose responsibility is that?*

What's Love achieves this because of a rare chemistry – an instance where all film's variables cohere. What initiates the confluence is Laurence Fishburne, who was won on to the project by the casting of Angela Bassett. Ever since they met at an audition over five years ago, Bassett and Fishburne have been

major fans of each other's acting. Her *Boyz n the Hood* cameo kicked off a working relationship each wanted to pursue. But in the first script, as Bassett confided to writer David DiNicolo, Ike appeared as 'a devil ... an evil black male stereotype'. Far from pleased, Fishburne demanded changes and engineered shifts, bringing the character dignity.

In *What's Love*, Fishburne plays Ike as feral and ruthless. Yet it was the death of Ike's father, we learn, which taught him to bury any twinges of vulnerability. Tina, deserted early on by her mother, thinks she 'understands' this. But her Faustian bargain is not struck with Ike alone. It is with all the things to which he offers access – all the delusions and promises popular music promotes. This is electrically captured in a fast-paced montage of singing and shopping where Tina, as the centrepiece, belts out huge desires ('*I want to be crazy/I want to do some things!... Oh Lord, I want to be/Made over!*'). There is no better filmed scene of summoning up the devils in rock.

Not every star's life, of course, offers such rich material. As punk's most famous victim, Gary Oldman transformed Alex Cox's slight *Sid and Nancy* into a gem. But, says the actor, he had everything and nothing to work with. 'Everyone knew what Sid looked like, everyone had heard him speak. Except for me, of course, 'cause I had no interest in punk.'

Oldman did plenty of research on Sid Vicious. He studied the footage, looked at the pictures, read stacks of cuttings. He sat at home in his bedroom, struggling with a bass guitar. 'But we were not making *Sid and Nancy: What They Were Like*. These were banal, monosyllabic people! How they 'really were' would have been disastrous. What I saw was two people destroying their lives with drugs. How they dressed, what they chose to call themselves, I didn't care.'

Rock biopics claim to offer fans at least the outline of truth. But that outline, like those nuggets of fact around which it is assembled, must be fully subservient to a movie's needs and pace. Says Oldman, 'There's a certain theatricality to all scripts. Something which is, of necessity, going to be bigger than life. You work from a standpoint of reality, that's where actors come from. But you can be "accurate" only in so far as it works on film.'

As Tina Turner, Angela Bassett faced these pressures. Plus she had the real Tina Turner looking over her shoulder. Press hymns to Bassett's performance say she 'crossed from stage to screen' via John Singleton's *Boyz n the Hood* and Spike Lee's *Malcolm X*. But much earlier she was employed by John Sayles in *City of Hope*. (She also appears in the writer-director's current *Passion Fish*.) Sayles re-met Bassett when he acted in *Malcolm X*, and says he found her 'pretty tense' about preparing to play Tina.

'It was funny,' he says now, 'because during my film [*Passion Fish*] the Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill hearings were being televised. Every day that was a very major, ongoing topic. But for anyone who was black, it went a whole lot deeper. It was, "Oh my God, Oh my God, this is awful for us".' Adds Sayles, 'I thought about that during my day shooting on *Malcolm*. About how, when Robert Dole starts laying into Clinton, we don't start running around, going "This is awful for white people!" Right there is some of what Angela found herself up against. Tina Turner's story is just so big, so racially loaded.'

Cynthia Rose, *Sight and Sound*, October 1993

WHAT’S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT

Directed by: Brian Gibson
©: Touchstone Pictures
Production Company: Krost/Chapin Productions
Presented by: Touchstone Pictures
Distributed by: Buena Vista Pictures Distribution Inc.
Executive Producers: Roger Davies, Mario Iscovich
Produced by: Doug Chapin, Barry Krost
Co-producer: Pat Kehoe
Production Accountant: Noel Bermudez
Location Managers: Richard Davis, Jody Hummer
1st Assistant Director: Barry Thomas
Script Supervisor: Dawn Gilliam
Casting by: Reuben Cannon & Associates
Screenplay by: Kate Lanier
Based upon I, Tina by: Tina Turner, Kurt Loder
Director of Photography: Jamie Anderson
Camera Operator: Conrad W. Hall
1st Assistant Camera: William G. Clevenger
Key Grip: Al LaVerde
Special Effects Co-ordinator: James K. Fredburg
Editor: Stuart Pappé
Film Editors: Dave Rawlins, Michael J. Hill, Thomas G. Finnan
Production Designer: Stephen Altman
Art Director: Richard Johnson
Property Master: William Blount
Costumes Designed by: Ruth Carter, Dana R. Woods
Make-up Designed by: Marietta A. Carter
Hair Designed by: Robert L. Stevenson
Title Design: Deborah Ross Film Design
Titles/Opticals: Cinema Research Corporation
Cameras by: Clairmont
Original Score by: Stanley Clarke
Guitar Solos by: Michael Thompson
Drums: Curt Bisquera
Keyboards: CJ Vanston
Trumpet: Lee Thornburg
Guitars: James Ralston, Tim Pierce

Bass: Bob Feit
Sax/Keyboards: Timmy Cappello
Guitar: Gene Bloch
Choreographer: Michael Peters
Production Sound Mixer: Arthur Rochester
Boom Operator: Douglas J. Schulman
Re-recording Mixers: John Reitz, David Campbell, Gregg Rudloff, Buena Vista Sound
Supervising Sound Editor: John Stacy
Stunt Co-ordinator: William Washington
Tina & Ike Vocal Coach: Jessica Drake
Head Wranglers: Angelo Rivers, West Paw Animal Rentals

Cast

Angela Bassett (Tina Turner)
Laurence Fishburne (Ike Turner)
Rae’Ven Kelly (young Anna Mae Bullock)
Virginia Capers (choir mistress)
Dorothy Thornton, Juanita Allen, Natalie Wilson, David McKinney, Maurice O’Niel, Monroe Howard, Wakeen Best, Francis Cheathon, Bell Dawn Best, Billie Barnum, Jeanne Steele, Cassandra Thames, Demetrice Cheathon, Helen Marie Lovelace, Seymour Daniel, Jayd Stanfield, Frank Raspberry, Serist Roberts, Michelle Jackson, Dena Ellerbee, Maggie McGee, Alfie Silas, Oren Waters, Valetta Barber (choir members)
Rev Emery Shaw (organ player)
Cora Lee Day (grandma Georgiana)
Jenifer Lewis (Zelma Bullock)
Phyllis Yvonne Stickney (Alline Bullock)
Sherman Augustus (Reggie)
Chi (Fross)
Terence Riggins (Spider)
Gene ‘Groove’ Allen (club announcer)

USA 1993©
118 mins

HER VOICE
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What’s Love Got to Do with It
Fri 4 Jun 18:00; Sat 26 Jun 20:45
Twenty Feet from Stardom
Fri 4 Jun 20:45; Thu 10 Jun 18:20
Siren of the Tropics (La sirène des tropiques)
Sat 5 Jun 12:20
Stormy Weather
Sat 5 Jun 16:00
The Wiz
Sun 6 Jun 12:20; Fri 18 Jun 17:45
Amazing Grace
Tue 8 Jun 18:10
...But Then, She’s Betty Carter
Mon 7 Jun 18:00
Sparkle
Thu 10 Jun 20:35

Billie
Tue 15 Jun 20:40
Mavis!
Thu 17 Jun 20:40
Ella Fitzgerald: Just One of Those Things
Sat 19 Jun 15:20
Dreamgirls
Wed 23 Jun 20:30
Whitney: Can I Be Me
Sat 26 Jun 18:10

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