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My Life Story

# Tina Turner

with Kurt Loder

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My Life Story  
Tina Turner  
with Kurt Loder

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EVER!  
I, TINA**

Tina Turner's is the most fascinating true story in show business. From Nut Bush, Tennessee, to Hollywood stardom . . . from Ike's Kings of Rhythm to onstage with Mick Jagger and the Stones . . . from the lowest lows to the highest highs, Tina has seen, done, suffered and survived it all. And in her spectacular bestseller *I, TINA*, she tells it like it really is . . .

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**Tina Turner**

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**Kurt Loder**

I, TINA



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## Nut Bush

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It is a sun-dappled late-summer morning in Nut Bush, Tennessee, sometime in the early forties. A meandering breeze ruffles the poplars and pecan trees along State Highway 19, and the air is heavy with honeysuckle perfume. Fields of brown sorghum, soybeans, sweet corn, and blossoming cotton blanket the gently rolling countryside. Strawberries abound, and peach trees thick with fruit. There is about the scene a feeling of deep rural repose: the occasional buzz of a hornet, the halfhearted peck of an odd stray hen scratching amid the clumps of cowitch begonia, perhaps the soft flip-and-splash of a hooked perch in some nearby fern-banked pond, or a supperbound catfish in one of the creeks. And now, out of the backwoods, the unhurried clomp of a family field horse bearing five small brown children down Forked Deer Road toward its oblique juncture with the two-lane highway.

As their horse draws nearer the main thoroughfare, the kids can hear the intermittent clatter of cars and farm pickups motoring up and down Number 19, headed either for the more substantial town of Ripley some six miles to the northwest—up along that part of the Arkansas border

formed by the Mississippi River, wending its way south from St. Louis down through the Delta to New Orleans—or for Brownsville, fifteen miles to the south and east; or, farther southwest, another forty-five miles or so, Memphis. Few outlanders are likely to entertain Nut Bush itself as a destination. It is a sparsely inhabited mile-long burp in the road, its populace—maybe fifty families—tucked away like weevils in the surrounding pastures, groves, and hollows. Just one in a string of such faintly evident settlements scattered along Highway 19. Passing through—en route to Ripley, say—a motorist might notice the Nut Bush cotton gin, where the annual crop is purged of its seed and prepared for baling. Or, across the highway, Gause's general store, gas pump out front, dry goods and diverse provisions within. Farther along: the Edders Grove Elementary School, a two-room wooden building attended by the children of the area's black farm workers. Next, on the right, a kind of candy shack—cum—honkytonk, owned by Miss Alglee Fowler, where by day kids buy crackers and soda and country bologna, and at night their elders crowd into the sixteen-foot-square back room to snuzzle beer and perhaps stomp around to the sounds of Mr. Bootsy Whitelaw, an itinerant trombonist of local note. Finally, backed off a bit from Number 19, there is the Woodlawn Baptist Church, a tidy stack of dignified red bricks adorned by crisp white wooden pillars, where on Sundays the elders stoke their spiritual resolve for another week of strenuous endeavor.

And that, for Nut Bush, is about it. An outhouse here, a pit-dog pen there. Not much.

For the five kids on the horse, however, it is a capacious and comforting world. They are Joe Melvin Currie and his older sister, Margaret; their two first-cousins: Alline Bullock, who, like Margaret, is about age seven, and Alline's sister—younger by nearly three years and tiny by any measure—Anna Mae; and the Bullock girls' older half sister, Evelyn. Well before reaching the highway, they

rein up at the drowsy intersection of Forked Deer and Tibbs Road, just behind the gin house, and slide off their snuffling horse in front of Elvis Stillman's clapboard grocery, where a cold bottle of Coke costs a nickel, and for a bit more there's ice cream to be had as well. They're chattering absently, as small children will, but they politely defer to whatever adults are present, especially white ones. Relations among whites and blacks and the scattered intermarried Indians hereabouts are generally cordial, all things considered; but Tennessee, like the rest of the South, is officially segregated. Some black groups, such as the recently formed Congress of Racial Equality—CORE—up North in Chicago, have begun questioning this social arrangement with considerable animation (and a new political tactic: the "sit-in"). But among rural blacks, an elaborate code of deferential behavior still obtains. In any case, the five kids don't linger long at Stillman's. But as they clamber back on the horse and set a leisurely, laughing course for their homes less than a mile away, they carry with them a happy sense of event, of having done something.

Two of the smaller girls wear their hair in the tight little plaits thought proper for young black daughters, pickaninny twists that poke out like thorns on their gently bobbing heads. But the third, Anna Mae, safely away from parental purview, has undone her mother's patient braidwork and gathered her full reddish hair into a rough ponytail at the back, revealing an already exotic facial geography of elegant broad bones, richly sculpted lips, honey-toned skin, smooth as a breezeless sea, and eyes like tiny brown beacons.

The woman who would one day be Tina Turner was born Anna Mae Bullock at the tail end of another age. By 1939, tensions in the world, long building, were yielding to turmoil. In September, when the Nazis, abetted by the Soviets, sandbagged Poland, England and France finally declared war on the troublesome Huns. In Paris, a physicist named Frédéric Joliot-Curie demonstrated for the first

time the feasibility of a nuclear chain reaction. In the U.S. Albert Einstein pondered the possibility of an atomic bomb.

Such events still seemed safely remote to most Americans, however, and the U.S. remained politically neutral amid the bad news from abroad. There were, after all, more effervescent diversions. This was the year Garbo laughed in *Ninotchka*, the year of *Gone With the Wind* and *Gunga Din*, of Buck Rogers, *The Wizard of Oz*, and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. Pan American Airways inaugurated regular flights to London aboard its Dixie Clipper. In New York, Edwin Armstrong, a Columbia University professor, discovered frequency modulation—a marvelously static-free broadcast medium—and built the first crude FM radio station. On the AM dial, Americans contented themselves with Kate Smith's "God Bless America," and hummed just as happily through "Over the Rainbow" or "In the Mood" (it was Glenn Miller's big year) or perhaps "South of the Border," the latest hit by Gene Autry, the "Yodeling Cowboy" of the silver screen.

But 1939 was also the year of Cab Calloway's "Jumpin' Jive," Coleman Hawkins's luminous "Body and Soul," and Charlie Barnet's "Cherokee." Miles Dewey Davis, Jr., son of an East St. Louis dentist, turned thirteen in May and received a trumpet—his first—from his dad. Charlie Parker, Kansas City sax star, moved to Manhattan in 1939 (following a trial taken three years earlier by Count Basie's band, with Lester Young in tow), and was soon part of an as yet unfocused musical ferment being stirred by such musicians as Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonious Monk, and the very young Bud Powell. And that summer, a young black Oklahoman named Charlie Christian popped up in the Benny Goodman Sextet in New York brandishing an unsettling instrument—an electronically amplified guitar.

Ethel Waters, the star of Duke Ellington's steamy Cotton Club revues, appeared in concert at the New York World's Fair, and also became the first black woman to star in a Broadway drama (*Mamba's Daughters*, it was

called). It was the year that Jane Bolin became the country's first black female judge; that more than a thousand black voters defied Ku Klux Klan cross-burnings to cast ballots in Miami; that Billie Holiday, the doomed jazz singer, recorded "Strange Fruit," a blood-chilling account of a black lynching in the South. And it was the year that Marian Anderson, the noted black contralto, denied the use of the capital's Constitution Hall by its white owners, the Daughters of the American Revolution, sang instead on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, under the aegis of the Roosevelt administration, before a shivering Easter Sunday audience of seventy-five thousand cheering people.

Anna Mae Bullock was born on the morning of November 26, 1939, at Brownsville's Haywood Memorial Hospital, a two-story municipal building whose basement was relegated to the tending of black patients. She was quickly transported back up Highway 19 to Nut Bush, home: a four-room shotgun house ensconced amid the vast and bountiful Poindexter acreage. Her father, Floyd Richard Bullock, was resident overseer on the Poindexter farm, supervising harvests and hands for the property's white owners. A deacon of the Woodlawn Baptist Church, Richard (as everyone called him) was also (as everyone knew) a man in constant conflict with his wife. Zelma Bullock, Anna Mae's mother, was a black Indian of high spirits. Anything but a homebody, she had been smoking cigarettes and shooting .45's since the age of ten, and was not—as Richard had come to be painfully aware—a woman to be trifled with. Richard and Zelma's fights, real wall-rattlers, were the dominant feature of the domestic landscape. There was one other child at home—little Alline, almost three—and she greeted her new sister as an ally.

Down the hill and across Forked Deer Road lived the Indian branch of the clan: Zelma's parents, Josephus and Georgianna Currie. Papa Joe, short and dark, a longtime Poindexter sharecropper, was a warm-hearted, child-loving, church-going Baptist (though not a militant, by any means),

and three-quarters Navajo—a distinction in Tennessee, land of the Cherokee. Mama Georgie, a wizened squaw, had the Cherokee blood, and was, like her husband, one-quarter black. The Curries were happy people, optimists always. Mama Georgie in particular, ambling about in her oversized shoes and tatterdemalion farm duds, the very soul of toleration and acceptance, seemed mystically connected to some higher natural order. It was said that she had been banished from her tribe for marrying below her station, but she loved Josephus and never looked back. Her people, the Flaggs, were distinctively Indian in appearance—the women noted for their high cheekbones, angled eyes, and abundant hair worn long and straight. They still divined much from nature, the procession of the seasons and the starlit sprawl of the heavens, although this had begun to fade even by Zelma's day; but for the young Bullock girls, Mama Georgie, rough and lovable and rooted in the earth, would become a reminder of the other blood that flowed in their veins.

Having raised seven children of her own, Mama Georgie now sheltered three of their semiorphaned spawn. Evelyn Currie, born in 1935, was the issue of an unconsecrated teenage liaison between Zelma and one Jerome Beard; she was thus a half sister to Anna Mae and Alline. The eldest of the children, Evelyn would always seem cool, distracted, emotionally remote. But Mama Georgie's other wards, Margaret and Joe Melvin Currie—the children of Zelma's brother Joe Sam and his recently deceased wife, Odessa—were to become prized pals of their cousins, the Bullock girls.

Farther up Highway 19—hard by the church, and spiritual worlds away—lived the Bible-brandishing branch of the family: Richard's parents, Alex and Roxanna Bullock. Mama Roxanna was a big, fine, church-centered woman of sober demeanor and harsh, starchy virtues. Alex, an unabashed souse, was the cross she bore through life. With them lived Uncle Gill, the only one of Richard's many

brothers to remain at home. Visits to this senior Bullock residence, a bastion of Baptist rigor, were anticipated by the two granddaughters with something decidedly short of delight.

Such was the immediate family, comfortably sunk in the Tennessee hills, working the land and living the life allowed them.

Zelma recalled that one of her aunts—Essy Flagg, a small and sleek-figured woman with strong Indian features—had been a rousing singer, with a big, room-filling voice, good enough to go . . . well, who knew where? But she never had. Zelma thought she could detect traces of Essy's smoky vocal tone in both of her daughters, particularly Anna Mae. But Essy aside, neither branch of the family was particularly musical, apart from participation in the weekly church sings.

Nearby the Bullocks' wooden house, across a brief swatch of grassy pasture, fronting on the road, stood the larger brick home of the Poindexters: Miss Ruby and her younger second husband, Vollye. These were "good white people," in the general estimation, and they treated Anna Mae and Alline like something close to kin, counseling them by example in the ways of white folk and fashion, and having them in for snacks and, much later, when TV arrived, to watch the tube. Despite the strictures of segregation, there was a genuine and unmannered amity between the two families. Richard Bullock was a valued employee, and the Poindexters paid him well by prevailing norms. Mr. Vollye doted on Zelma's egg-custard pies, and was kept generously supplied. And Miss Ruby, who had a daughter of her own, doted nevertheless on little Alline, whose first name, Rubbie, although never used, had been bestowed in approximate honor of the white woman.

At the Poindexters', Anna Mae caught glimpses of something that was missing in her own home—easy affection, solicitous commitment. She felt it too in the tribelike embrace of the Currie household. But in her own home she



felt frozen out, barely there. It was more than just the pall that hung over Richard and Zelma's marriage. They managed to find time for Alline between wrangles, it seemed. But for Anna Mae there was little of the hearthside intimacy of a loving homelife, only a grudging toleration.

For it had been her misfortune to be the last, unwanted child of a foundering union. As Richard and Zelma turned away from each other, their puzzled daughter, stranded in the middle, began to turn away too. In those hours unoccupied by schooling, or later by work stints alongside her family in the cotton and strawberry fields, she took to roaming the pastures and the woodlands, searching for strength in solitude. This, she came to suppose, was simply the way things were.

But despair was never in her nature. If there was pain, it would pass. Another day would come, with a new sun to warm it. Her life was just beginning, and as the forties took form she managed to pry a little girl's pleasures out of her uncomplicated backcountry world. Despite the emotional dislocations, there was a redeeming sweetness to life then too, looking back.

**Tina:** I was raised on pork, and believe me, I'm healthy. That's what I remember clearest about those times, the food. Syrup and biscuits and salt pork for breakfast, winter dinners of beans, rice, and cornbread. And it was good. Daddy's garden must have covered an acre: Cabbages, onions, tomatoes and turnips, sweet potatoes, watermelons—we planted it all, and that garden fed us through the summer. We had fresh eggs from our chickens and fresh milk from our cows. We didn't buy anything but flour and sugar at the country store in Nut Bush, and in the winter we bought beans. There wasn't much red meat—in the winter there wasn't much fresh meat at all. There was chicken, and in the summer we'd fish the ponds for perch. And when Daddy went hunting—sometimes I'd tag along with him, 'cause I was always a tomboy—there were the