

# How Tina Turner 'broke the silence' on domestic abuse

By Helen Bushby

*This article contains descriptions of domestic violence which some readers may find distressing.*



**IMAGE SOURCE, GETTY IMAGES**

Ike and Tina Turner in 1971, seven years before she left him

**When Tina Turner first spoke out about the violence she endured during her marriage to Ike Turner, it was an act of bravery to expose herself so publicly.**

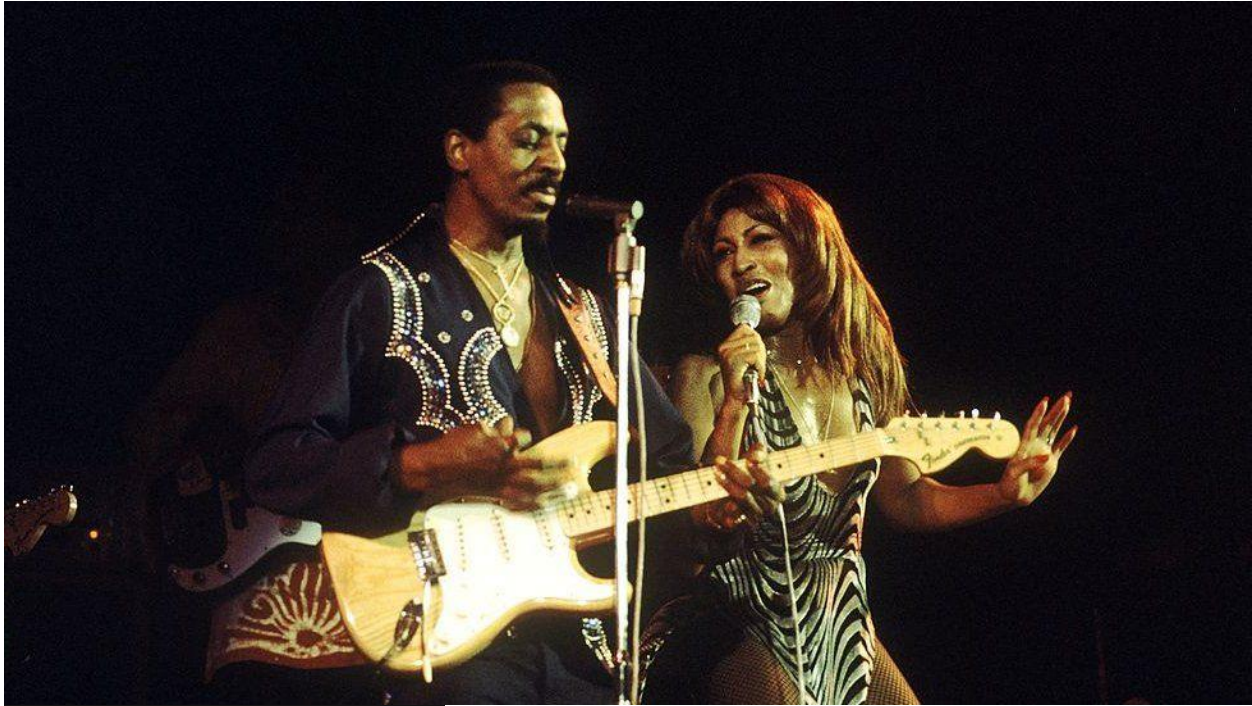
"I was insanely afraid of that man," she told *People* magazine in 1981, revealing the painful reality behind the hugely successful musical duo.

Tina's scorching description of their marriage included being made to watch a live sex show in a brothel on their wedding night, and being beaten with a shoe stretcher while she was pregnant.

She also spoke about Ike throwing scalding coffee at her, and of being brutalised with a coat hanger. In 1968, she tried to take her own life.

"I was afraid to put it out [talk about the abuse] because of what I would get from Ike," she told journalist Carl Arrington.

Ike Turner, who died in 2007, always denied his ex-wife's claims that he abused her, and expressed frustration that he had been demonised in the media.



**IMAGE SOURCE, GETTY IMAGES**

The couple performed in Hammersmith, London, in 1975

The couple met when Tina was just 17, after she saw his group Kings of Rhythm perform, and asked him to hear her sing.

Not surprisingly, he spotted her star quality, making her his lead singer, choosing her stage name and lavishing her with clothes and jewellery.

They married in 1962, and Tina, who had already experienced the pain of being rejected as a child by her mother, promised Ike she "wouldn't leave him" - something she later came to regret.

"I felt obligated to stay there and I was afraid," she told Arrington. "I didn't want to hurt him, and after he beat me up... I was sitting there all bruised and torn, and all of a sudden I'm feeling sorry for him.

"Maybe I was brainwashed."

But by 1978, after a string of hits including River Deep, Mountain High, Tina decided she felt able to leave Ike. She could no longer put up with the "torture" of being married to him, and the impact it had on their four sons.

"I was living a life of death. I didn't exist," she said. "But I survived it. And when I walked out, I walked. And I didn't look back."



**IMAGE SOURCE, GETTY IMAGES**

Tina Turner in 1981, the year she revealed the truth about her relationship with ex-husband Ike Tina moved away, and had to rebuild her career, making money by singing in Las Vegas and appearing on various TV shows. She decided to tell all in the 1981 interview, to expel some of the ghosts from her past.

In Daniel Lindsay and TJ Martin's **2021 documentary Tina**, the singer said she was so nervous about doing the interview that she asked her psychic if it would ruin her career. "She said, 'No, Tina'," the singer recalled. "It's going to do just the opposite. It's going to break everything wide open."





**IMAGE SOURCE, GETTY IMAGES**

By 1985, when this picture was taken, Tina Turner was once again enjoying chart success. Dr Lenore E Walker, director of the US-based Domestic Violence Institute, which provides support for victims of domestic abuse, thinks Tina's decision to speak out was hugely important. "In 1981 we were just learning about the extent of domestic violence in homes," she tells the BBC. "It was often thought to be only poor women without resources who were abused.

"When Tina Turner spoke out about her life, it brought awareness to the fact that domestic violence was everywhere."

She says Tina helped give credence to other women daring to speak out about abuse.

"Women were not believed when they spoke out about domestic violence, so when Tina Turner, a well-respected and famous singer, spoke out, it gave other women the courage to do so, also," she explains.

"We needed 'influencers' such as Tina Turner to speak out about domestic violence, so that **my work on battered woman syndrome** was introduced in the courts, and juries began to believe women acted to protect themselves and their children."

Media caption,

Watch: Tina Turner spoke frankly about domestic abuse with the BBC's Will Gompertz back in 2018

Dr Walker says the weight carried by Tina's words carries through to today.

"It is still important to hear her voice to understand how difficult it is for a woman to be able to terminate a battering relationship without getting hurt worse or killed," she says.

"The real question is: 'Why don't these men let women go?'"

- **[Journey from abuse to music superstardom](#)**
- **[Tina Turner's 10 best songs and the stories behind them](#)**
- **[A life in pictures](#)**

Broadcaster and sexual abuse survivor Oprah Winfrey also talks in the documentary of the importance of women speaking out in the 80s.

"Nobody talked about sexual abuse, physical abuse, domestic abuse - abuse, period. Our generation is the generation that started to break the silence."

What Tina didn't realise, though, was that her explosive revelations would follow her round as her career took off again, with hits including Let's Stay Together, What's Love Got to Do With It and Private Dancer.

By 1986, she published an autobiography, I, Tina, co-written with Kurt Loder, to "get the journalists off my back".

She thought if they had all the answers from her book, they would stop asking her endless questions taking her back to such an unhappy period in her life.

But it didn't work.

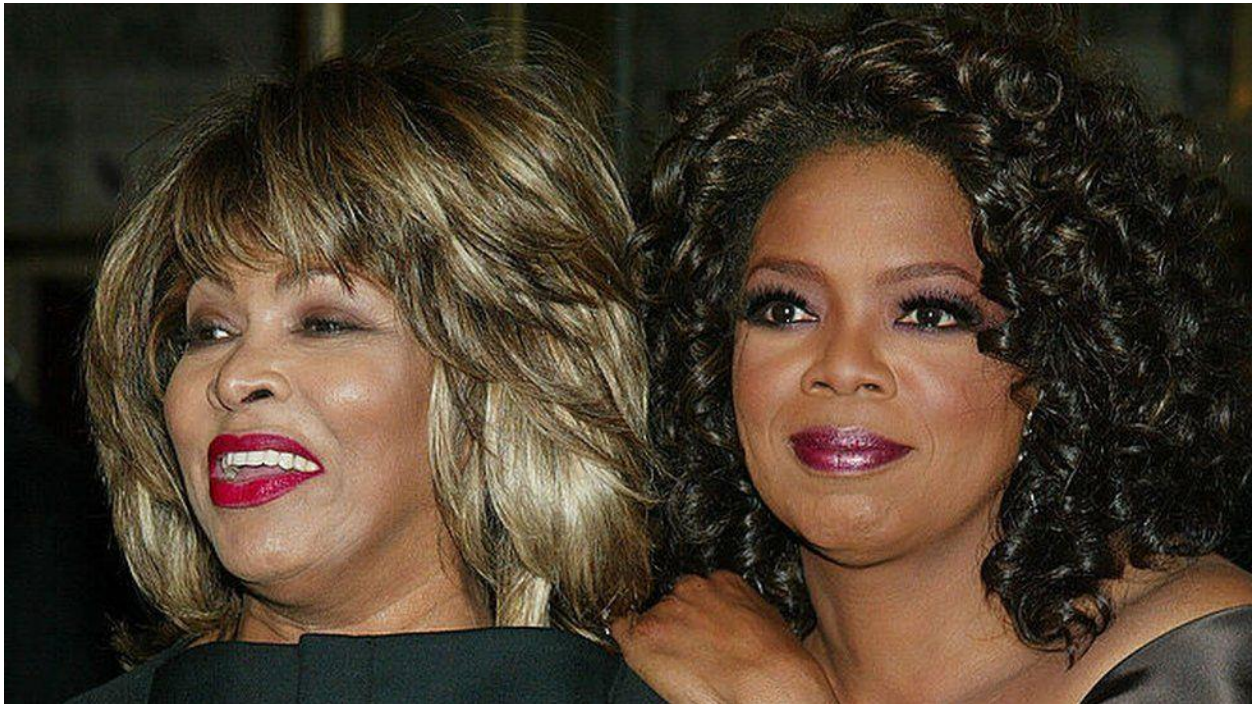


IMAGE SOURCE, GETTY IMAGES

Tina Turner and Oprah Winfrey, at the 2005 opening of *The Color Purple* in Broadway. Interviewers repeatedly asked her to relive her memories, with [Buzzfeed noting in 2021](#): "Tina Turner deserved so much better from the media, and here are 14 moments that prove it."

The article highlighted moments including a 1993 interview with Australia's Nine Network, in which she was played a pre-recorded interview with Ike, who responded to a question about beating her.

Her dignified, calm response said it all: "I don't want to start an argument with Ike Turner via satellite. I have nothing to say."

## **Buddhist faith**

Tina's career continued to grow, and her story carried on being told, and in the 1993 film *What's Love Got to Do With It*, adapted from the book *I, Tina*, she was played by Angela Bassett.



By 2005, Winfrey - a huge Tina Turner fan - recalled meeting a woman who was inspired by the singer to leave an abusive relationship.

**Winfrey wrote:** "When Tina Turner's Wildest Dreams tour stopped in Houston back in 1997, I stood (let me tell ya, you seldom sit at a Tina performance) next to a woman whose story I'll never forget.

"I came because I was looking for the courage to leave the man who beats me,' she said. 'Tonight I found that courage.'"

Winfrey has paid tribute to Tina, saying: "Her life became a clarion call for triumph."

The singer often credited her Buddhist faith, which she found in the 70s, with helping her find the courage to leave Ike Turner. She said chanting helped give her clarity.

"I started seeing my life - I started really seeing that I had to make a change," she said in the documentary.

By 2018, the singer decided to bring out a new autobiography, My Love Story, where she also talked about finding love with actor and producer Erwin Bach and how she coped with the suicide of her son, Craig.



**IMAGE SOURCE, GETTY IMAGES**

Tina Turner and her husband Erwin Bach attended 2018's Paris Fashion Week

A jukebox stage show about her life also opened in London that year, and the singer said at the time: "When I look and see it done so well, I feel proud."

In 2021, Tina was inducted on her own into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, having previously been inducted - with Ike - in 1991. Bassett made the speech to commemorate it, **saying:** "What a life Tina has led. Her story has become a film, a documentary, a blockbuster Broadway show, and a best-selling autobiography.

"What brings us here tonight is Tina's journey to independence. For Tina, hope triumphed over hate. Faith won over fear. And ambition eclipsed adversity."



**IMAGE SOURCE, GETTY IMAGES**

Angela Bassett inducted Tina Turner to the Rock and Roll Hall Of Fame in 2021

In April, the singer's story went full circle, when Tina - The Tina Turner Musical **partnered with Women's Aid for its fifth anniversary**, ahead of Women's Aid's 50th anniversary.

Farah Nazeer, chief executive at Women's Aid said: "It is wonderful to have the story of such a powerful and influential woman supporting our mission.

"Tina is an inspiration, her story shows the strength of survivors and that there is hope for women experiencing abuse currently - there is both freedom and happiness after abuse."

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