

# Talk to Me (2007)

Rated R.. Our ratings: V- 3; L- 7; S/N – 5. Running time: 1 hour 58 min. Note that the last part of the review and the questions contain some spoilers.

*My lips will not speak falsehood,  
and my tongue will not utter deceit.*

*Job 27:4*

*Truthful lips endure for ever,  
but a lying tongue is but for a moment.*

*Proverbs 12:19*

*For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.*

*Romans 12:3*

Ralph Waldo Emerson ‘Petey’ Talk to Me

Greene Jr. might have become as well known as Richard Pryor, the man he most resembles with his mustache and Afro hairdo, had he triumphed when he appeared on the Johnny Carson Show. Thus his story would have followed the arc, as they say in Hollywood, depicted in most biopics: man comes from bad background; overcomes all odds at becoming a local success; obtains following and loyal friends; finally makes it to the big time and becomes loved by millions. It doesn't happen this way in this true

story of a trash talking ex-con whose very gift that makes him a hit with ghetto dwellers of Washington DC almost insures that he will not connect with the sophisticated white audience of the Tonight Show.

Don Cheadle turns in an incredible performance as Petey Greene, as does Chiwetel Ejiofor as Dewey Hughes, the well groomed staff member at WOL, a DC R&B radio station that has been losing its audience of late. While in prison serving a ten year sentence for armed robbery, he spins records and talks for his fellow inmates over the prison p.a. system, Petey meets Dewey in the hallway, the latter returning from an uncomfortable visit with his brother. Learning that Dewey works in radio, Petey calls out that he will come looking for a job when he is released.

Petey is let out early, partly due to a funny scam he pulls on the warden, and sure enough, shows up at WOL offices with his girlfriend Vernell Watson (Taraji P. Henson) on his arm. The two are gaudily dressed like a pimp and his favorite micro-skirted call girl, so the receptionist becomes alarmed. So does station manager E.G. Sonderling (Martin Sheen) as he rushes out of a staff meeting to discover the source of all the noise. Dewey is surprised that Petey expects him to offer him a position. Petey is lucky that Dewey ushers him out of the building without invoking police assistance.

Only later, when the two men meet in a pool hall where Petey challenges him to a game, the stake being a job offer if he wins, do we learn that Dewey is not the "Oreo" that Petey had thought him to be. Dewey easily wins, revealing that he also grew up in the projects where he learned to play such a mean game of pool and to hustle. Despite losing, Petey is offered a position. The other DJs are not happy about this, nor is Sonderling, especially when within five minutes of taking over

the microphone Petey is calling Washington's Mayor Barry a pimp. Petey is quickly ejected from the station.

How he is brought back, and almost loses his job on the second program adds up to a moving tale that definitely is not Good Morning, Vietnam in the Ghetto. Petey prides himself on "telling it like it is," his views on every day life in the slums ringing true to his growing audience, glad to listen to someone who will not sweet talk or smooth over things for them. His style is the then new "rap," a good example being "I'll tell it to the hot, I'll tell it to the cold, I'll tell it to the young, I'll tell it to the old, I don't want no laughin', I don't want no cryin', and most of all, no signifyin'. Achtt! This is Petey Greene's Washington."

The sequence when he takes to the air to try to calm things down during the riots following the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. makes us realize how much the peace-preaching clergyman meant to this tough ex-con. Abandoning for the moment his fast paced trash talk, Petey speaks slowly and sorrowfully, urging his listeners to stay home and not indulge in the suicidal burning. A huge crowd turns out for the concert that he arranges with James Brown, and the force of the people's anger is diffused, the newspaper's crediting Petey and the singer with helping to bring an end to the riot. Even the other DJs who had resented Petey now admire him.

Dewey, more the businessman, offers to manage what he sees as a great career in show business, and so Petey forms a partnership with him, the two becoming fast friends. Petey is a success as a stand-up comedian, turning his acerbic wit on the problems of being black in a white world. He travels outside the DC area with his act, and yet, however much he is praised, he always insists that he is just an ex-con who tries to tell the truth. And then comes the fateful appearance on The Tonight Show, and the arc of success becomes a downward spiral. We are left to ponder the whys of Petey's decision when he came out on the stage and looked at the well dressed

white audience, and then turned away. The film shows us a gifted but flawed man: he is promiscuous, addicted to alcohol and drugs—there being little attempt to anoint him with sainthood. And yet his life counted for something, the city being a far better place for his having spoken to it through his radio and television. Petey's language will be off-putting to some (his white manager was always worried about the FCC cracking down on the station, despite Petey's two Emmy Awards), but for those who can see beyond this, the film offers

## **For Reflection/Discussion**

1) What do you think of Petey's style? How has his growing up in the ghetto influenced him? How does the film refuse to white wash his character? How might he remind one of the hustler in Genesis—the patriarch Jacob?

2) What do you think of Petey's insistence in "telling it like it is" ? How is he like Job in this respect? What effect does this have upon his radio/TV audience?

3) How does Petey regard himself as he becomes successful? Do you think the apostle Paul would have approved? (See Romans 12:3)

4) At what points do you see grace operating in the film? Dewey winning the pool game yet giving Petey a job? Vernell accepting him back after he betrayed her with another woman? The reconciliation between the estranged friends?

5) Were you surprised at how the death of Dr. King affected Petey? How was Petey the right man at the right place during the aftermath of King's murder?

6) What do you make of Petey's turning away from the audience on the Tonight Show? Do you think that he was right, that such a white audience would never understand him and his message? Or was it a failure of nerve? How aware of ghetto life and

problems do you think white Americans were in the 1960s and 1970s? Any better today?

7) One big difference in a documentary film and an entertainment feature is their use of facts. "The Father of Soul" James Brown did give an important concert the day after Dr. King's death, but it was in Boston, not in Washington, DC. What do you think of this distortion of the facts: is this justified for the sake of drama?

8) Where do you God at work in Petey Green's life?

9) To see a couple of video clips by the real Petey Green and to find out more about his life, type into Google Petey Green. The one in which he instructs us on how to eat water melon is priceless!