



the
triumphant

life
of

Tyler Perry

HOW HE SURVIVED A PAINFUL
CHILDHOOD TO BECOME AN ENTERTAINMENT
SUPERSTAR—AND DISCOVER
THE LOVE THAT WOULD HEAL HIM

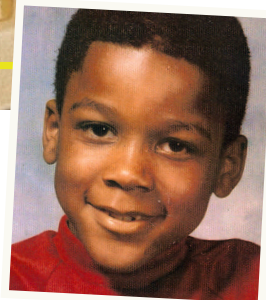
By **MARY GREEN**

Photographs by **SHAYAN ASGHARNIA**

Grateful Dad
“I have this beautiful son
and this amazing life,” says
Perry (at his studio
on Aug. 27, 2019). “It’s
more than I could have
ever dreamed.”



Difficult Childhood
Siblings (from left) Melva, Emmbre, Yulanda and Tyler leaned on each other in trying times. Below: Perry around age 8.



When Tyler Perry was a boy, whenever things got really bad for him, he'd crawl under the front porch of his house and let his imagination transport him to another world—a world without a violent father, predators and pain. “No matter what was happening to me, be it sexual abuse, whatever, I could escape and be somewhere else,” says Perry. “I could create these worlds and be there for hours. I didn’t realize it at the time, but that’s where my gift to write came from—the heartache and the hell.” He used that gift to create his most famous character, Madea—a sharp-tongued southern matriarch who, Perry says, is a mix of his late mother, Maxine, and his aunt Mayola. Since 2005’s *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*, Madea films have earned more than \$500 million, and producing TV shows such as TBS’s *House of Payne* and OWN’s *The Have and Have Nots* has made Perry one of the entertainment world’s most successful moguls. As he fulfills his dream of opening the 330-acre Tyler Perry Studios in Atlanta, the star, 50, reflects on his rise to success, how fatherhood has helped him heal and how he honors the woman

‘I don’t think I ever felt safe or protected as a child’

Madea & More
As an actor, in addition to playing his famous character Madea (along with her brothers Joe and Heathrow and nephew Brian), Perry also played a wealthy businessman in *Good Deeds*, a police detective in *Gone Girl* and Colin Powell in *Vice*.



who made everything possible, his mother. “She’d be very, very proud,” he says. “She’d say, ‘Who’d have thunk it?’ That was her thing. ‘Who’d have thunk you could have made all of this?’”

Surviving a Traumatic Childhood

One of four children raised in New Orleans by Maxine, a preschool teacher, and her husband, Emmitt, a construction contractor, Perry says, “I don’t think I ever felt safe or protected as a child.” Perry says his father was an abusive alcoholic who once beat him so severely with a vacuum cord it ripped the skin off of his back. “The weekends were when the hell would start,” Perry recalls. “I never felt that I was loved by him. I don’t know if he knows what love is. Never felt respected by him. Never felt like a person to him.” His mother once tried to take the kids and leave, but Emmitt told police she stole his car and tracked them down. Most of her family “said, ‘Stay with that man,’” Perry says. “He had a job and was a provider. I knew she wanted to protect me, but there was always hostility.” (Perry, who found out when he was 41 that Emmitt is not his biological father, now supports him financially but has no other relationship with him. He says he eventually forgave Emmitt: “Holding on was hurting me more than him.”)

Perry also says he was sexually abused by three different men and a woman—all family acquaintances—by the time he was 10 years old. “It was rape,” he says. “I didn’t know what was going on or the far-reaching effects of it. I just moved through it. ‘Boys don’t cry, shut up and move on.’ Holding on to all of that, not knowing what to do with it, there was a lot of anger in my teenage years, in my 20s.”

To help her son face the brutality in his life, Maxine shared her deep religious faith with him. “My mother would wake me up and take me to church from the time I was a little boy,” he says. “I’m so grateful for that. If I wouldn’t have had that, I don’t know where I’d be. That was our North Star, the Bible, faith, church.”

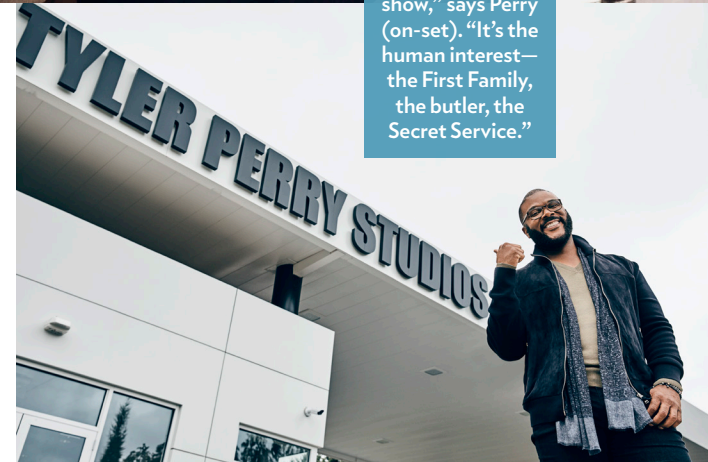
Still, there were times when Perry sunk into deep despair. He even attempted suicide in his teens. “If any of it had worked, my attempts to kill myself. . . I wouldn’t have gotten to the other side of all the horror. I believe that to everything there’s an opposite. So for all of that pain and hell I was going through as a child, there had to be beauty. I tell anyone who is in pain, ‘Just keep going. One little step is a step.’”

Making a Breakthrough

After high school Perry moved to Atlanta, where he struggled for a time working as a bill collector. “I ended up being homeless,”



Next Up: the White House
Not politics but the show *Oval* for BET+. “This isn’t a political show,” says Perry (on-set). “It’s the human interest—the First Family, the butler, the Secret Service.”



Scan this QR code with your phone’s camera to watch *People Cover Story: Tyler Perry on PeopleTV.*

Tyler’s Dream Fulfilled

In 2015 Perry purchased 330 acres of Atlanta’s former Army base Fort McPherson—including the commander’s home, which once housed leaders like Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Colin Powell. Perry and his team have transformed the property into a vast, modern production studio for his shows and movies such as *Black Panther*. The lot features 12 soundstages named after prominent African-American stars like Oprah Winfrey, Denzel Washington and Will Smith, 40 buildings on the National Historic Registry and a fictional neighborhood called Maxineville, a tribute to his mom. For his new BET+ show *The Oval*, Perry even built a replica of the White House. After having worked on Hollywood movies “where I’m the only black person on-set,” he hires diverse crews, including people who previously “haven’t had a shot in this business,” he says. “We rock it every day.”



The studio has a dozen world-class soundstages with plans to add eight to 10 more.

Downtown Atlanta is only 10 minutes away.

The Mansion is four homes in one—with different facades.

he says. “But I knew if I worked really hard, things would come together.” One day he was watching *The Oprah Winfrey Show* when he was struck with inspiration. On the episode, Winfrey talked about the healing power of writing. Perry sunk his energy into scripts, which turned out to be therapeutic. “As I dug into writing and started understanding the motivations of characters, that helped me understand my own behaviors,” he says. “I could untie some of those strings and get to full healing.” In 1998 Perry staged his first play, *I Know I’ve Been Changed*, about two brothers who survived child abuse. In 2000 Perry introduced his famous alter ego, Madea (a southern term for “mother dear”), in the play *I Can Do Bad All by Myself*, which was a runaway hit. By 2005 Perry had turned his theater success into movie box office gold. He cobbled together \$5.5 million to make *Diary*, which grossed over \$50 million.

In 2007 Perry was invited to Winfrey’s Legends Ball. “Nobody really knew who I was,” Perry recalls. “I’m looking around, and there’s Barbra Streisand, Tom Cruise, Diana Ross, Tina Turner. I’m like, ‘What am I doing here in this room?’ At the end of the weekend, I said, ‘I’m going to leave here dreaming bigger.’” Now worth more than \$1 billion, his entertainment empire includes movie, TV and theater production. “I finally got my shot,” he says. “I was running from poverty, and I didn’t want to be homeless again.”

Losing His Mom—and Becoming a Dad

Throughout his life his biggest fan was his mother. “Every time I wrote a movie and one of the characters was a black woman who’s in a bad situation or she’s been hurt or abused, it was all subconscious for my mother,” he says. “I wanted her to understand that she was worthy of more than what she was living in.” Even when her son was making millions, Maxine stayed determinedly frugal. With a laugh, Perry recalls one Mother’s Day when he had several dresses delivered to her home. When she saw a \$600 price tag on one of them, she sent all of them back. “My mother called me up, ‘A \$600 dress? Get this s--- out of here!’ She went to Ross and bought a bunch of dresses for less.” When Maxine died in 2009 at age 64 due to complications from diabetes, Perry was devastated. “I still grieve for her,” he says. “Sometimes I wake up from crying, because I miss her so much.”

Perry is grateful his mother got to see his success—but wishes even more that she had been able to meet his son Aman, 4, whom he welcomed with his girlfriend of almost a decade, Gelila Bekele, 36, a model and documentary filmmaker. “He’s my greatest joy,” Perry says with a wide grin. “He’s at that age where he’s very curious about

‘All the gratitude that I have inside me—it’s just overwhelming’



HAIR: BRION JOHNSON; MAKEUP: SYRETTA BELL; STYLIST: CRYSTAL RENEE HAYLET; PREVIOUS SPREAD: CLOD KRISTE FROM LEFT; COURTESY TYLER PERRY (2); COURTESY DAVIS; GEORGE BURNS; (A) STYL: DINA SUND; FILMMAAGIC

everything. Watching him learn and discover is wonderful.” Perry says fatherhood “has mellowed me out. I’m a pretty intense person.”

It’s also helped him come to terms with his past. Perry recalls having to discipline Aman for giving his nanny a hard time. “I had her leave the room, and I sat him down. I got down to his level, eye to eye, and was saying how disappointed I was, how he shouldn’t behave that way. I watched this child, who’s very smart, get it. He apologized to his nanny, to his mom, to me. I had to rush out of the room because I lost it. Gelila comes in and she asks, ‘Are you okay?’ I’m in tears because nobody had ever spoken to me that way as a child, as if I was a person.” Aman, he adds, “has been my healer through all of this. When I think of my father, I think, ‘How could you be so cruel to something this pure?’”

Acutely conscious of raising his son amid wealth, Perry says he and Bekele “are very careful about how much we give him.” Aman hasn’t watched TV, doesn’t know what his dad does for a living and has yet to meet a certain foul-mouthed grandmother who says “hellur.” “He has not seen Madea yet,” says Perry, laughing. “I can’t wait for that conversation. I’m sure some ratty-ass kid in school is going to tell him, ‘Your dad is Madea,’ so we’ll see what happens.”

Building a Legacy

In 2015 the mogul purchased more than 300 acres of historic Fort McPherson with the vision of building a studio rivaling any in Hollywood. He now has nine shows in production, including *The Oval* (a White House drama starring Perry as the presidential butler) and *Sistas*, about a group of single black women, both for his partnership with the new streaming service BET+. The property has also hosted productions from *Black Panther* to the upcoming movie *Just Mercy*. On Oct. 5 Perry will celebrate the grand opening by hosting a glitzy gala, with guests expected to include Win-



His Partner in Life

Perry and model Gelila Bekele, 36 (in 2011), have been together more than a decade. “I’m not much of a relationship person because of the work and the business,” he admits. “It takes a special person to tolerate 18-hour days. My family holds me up, they call me on it, they let me know when I’m working too hard, they make me take care of myself.”

TYLER PERRY'S EMPIRE BY THE NUMBERS
\$500 MILLION
 Box office revenue from the Madea movies
OVER 500,000
 People who worked at Tyler Perry Studios in the past year
\$1 BILLION
 Perry's estimated net worth

His Inspiration

Perry tried often to spoil his mom Maxine (in 2008), who rebuffed him, never believing she deserved it. “I think she would be alive today had she felt at any point that she was worthy of good things,” he says.

frey, Denzel Washington, Will Smith and Halle Berry. (As for Madea, he retired the character after last March’s *A Madea Family Funeral*. “I stayed that course bringing joy and laughter and lifting people,” he says. “It had its purpose and its power. For right now I’m done. We’ll see.”)

A priority for Perry is using his success to help others. Many staffers at his studio are “former inmates and drug addicts,” he says. “We’re side by side.” He supports causes such as education and women’s rights through his Tyler Perry Foundation, and he plans “to build a compound for trafficked children and LGBTQ youth who have been put out of homes and battered women,” he says. “I’ve done a lot of work with them through Covenant House. I want this amazing compound where everyone is trained in different fields of work where they feel like they are okay and protected.” Perry also responds to local news stories, such as the time he bought a home for 88-year-old Rosa Ransby and her 4-year-old great-great-granddaughter after their house burned down. “It’s a cliché, but it’s true—to whom much is given, much is required,” he says. “I remember when \$20 would have made the difference for me.”

He sometimes drives by “the pay-by-the-week hotel” on the outskirts of Atlanta where he lived when he was struggling. “To be sitting in my office, looking out onto downtown Atlanta, that’s pretty powerful,” he says. “I can’t even begin to put it into words other than to say, ‘Thank you God.’” After all he has overcome, he says, “I feel whole. I don’t need to push any further to have anything more. This is beyond what I ever dreamed.” ●

