

THE LIFE & TIMES OF PETEY GREENE

Don Cheadle stars as Petey Greene in *Talk to Me*.



Michael Gibson

PETEY GREENE WASN'T NO SAINT.

He was a drug addict, a convict (excuse me, ex-convict) and self-styled friend of the pimp and prostitute. He was a fast talker, small time thief and a total lush.

He was also the voice of a city in a time of upheaval and confusion.

Don Cheadle (*Hotel Rwanda*) takes on the role of Petey Greene in Focus Features' new movie *Talk to Me* (in theaters July 13), a piece that takes us back to the days of mesh underwear and flower power to meet an unlikely cultural icon born out of the mid to late 1960s.

Greene was a Washington, D.C. native, born and bred on the streets of the "Chocolate City" to which he would eventually play guidance counselor. His father was incarcerated, and it was his grandmother, whom he affectionately called 'Aunt Pig,' that cared for the young man through his childhood.

In later interviews with the *Washington Post*, he would lament that his grandmother had not lived to see him in his heyday.

Greene made it to high school before dropping out and joining the army while he was still a teen. He shipped out to Korea that year, but the military life was not his racket. By 1953, he'd been discharged for drug abuse.

"When I was begging for wine and whiskey no one ever [treated me]," Greene joked to the *Washington Post*, looking back on his years scrounging for the cash to get drunk. "Now when I go drinking, they say, 'Petey was

drinking with me!'"

At some point, Greene made the decision that if people weren't going to treat him, he was going to treat himself, and, unfortunately for him, Greene talked faster than he ran. Greene landed himself 10 years in the Lorton Reformatory for armed robbery after trapping himself in a freezer locker while running from police.

All of a sudden he was following in the footsteps of his father and every stereotype of black men in 1960s America.

But Greene could not be held. He achieved an early parole after he soothed an allegedly suicidal inmate off of a 300-foot water tower (or flag pole, accounts differ). In 19 minutes, he had the man safely on the ground again, a time span that could not compare to the six months he allegedly spent cajoling his buddy into climbing up there in the first place.

But his little scheme worked, and Greene was paroled for his selfless actions and general good behavior. While serving his sentence, Greene befriended the brother of WOL program director Dewey Hughes played in the movie by Chiwetel Ejiofor (*Children of Men*). Upon Greene's release, Hughes got him a job at WOL on his own show called "Rapping with Petey Greene."

Soon, his confrontational style made him loved by the masses and hated by the elite to whom he gave no quarter.

No subject was off limits. Greene talked about prostitution and teen

At the heart of Focus Features' new movie *Talk to Me* is Petey Greene, an average Joe with a bigger than average mouth who lived in times worth talking about.

RALPH WALDO 'PETEY' GREENE

Talk to Me's real star is an unlikely cultural icon.

BY ASHLEY ARCHIBALD

pregnancy as easily as he attacked politicians and promoted social reforms.

The subjects that he tackled spoke to the hearts and minds of the people who heard him because finally someone was speaking their language. He was catty, he was loud and he was adored.

He spoke during times of crisis, when race riots were rising up all over the country, when some of the key figures in America – both black and white – were being felled by assassins' bullets. He was there for Vietnam and the draft, the moon landing and Woodstock. Momentous times called for a momentous speaker, and this oddball fit the bill.

Greene's hijinks extended far past his substance abuse and verbosity (one he got over, one he didn't). His general notoriety secured him a visit to the White House, an honor he said he would have refused had he known how boring it was going to be. However, he didn't walk out totally empty handed.

"Truly it was very nice," he said in the *Post*. "I even stole a spoon."

If Greene was famed for the "spoon incident," he was even better known for his self-awarded "Ph.D. in poverty." He never forgot where he came from, and to assure his listeners of that fact, Greene invited society's rejects onto his show: prostitutes, pimps, etc.

He was a peacock in an age of pigeons, prancing around in his tie-dyed clothes and buying expensive Cadillacs. But even in his flamboyant moments there was a

message: none of his wealth, popularity or success had come while he was out on the streets wheeling and dealing. He deeply believed that only in America did everyone, no matter what their background, have some opportunity for success.

"I'm concerned about the plight of my people, and I don't come from Africa, and I ain't gonna drive no Cadillac back over there in no jungles," he said to the *Post*. African-Americans were just that – Americans, and when he said it, he was talking to blacks as well as whites.

Before his death from cancer in 1984, Greene was a two-time Emmy winner with his radio show and successful television program "Petey Greene's Washington." He worked with his community through the anti-poverty program United Planning Organization and organized the group Efforts for Ex-Convicts (EFEC).

Greene was different and special because he had a thumb always on the pulse of the people. He spoke to them, and they spoke back because he did not shy away from the harsh truths with which they coped daily.

It's no real wonder that somebody stood up to make a movie out of this heroic and woefully undertold story. Maybe it's even a subconscious call for the next Petey Greene to come forward, someone brazenly unprofessional and shockingly real to point out that something's going wrong in our white picket America.

MAJOR EVENTS OF

1965

Jan. 4: President Lyndon B. Johnson announces his “Great Society” reform package. The central goals were to eliminate poverty, end racial injustice and improve education for all Americans.

The Great Society would eventually lead to Medicare and Medicaid.

Feb. 21: Malcolm X (born Malcolm Little), a Muslim minister and Black Nationalist leader is assassinated. He spent his career pointing out the legal and religious contradictions in white mistreatment of blacks.

March 7: On one of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s marches from Selma to Montgomery, civil rights marchers were gassed and beaten by law enforcement in what was widely condemned as “Bloody Sunday.”

Aug. 6: The Voting Rights Act is passed, a measure meant to make it harder for polling places to deny blacks the vote.

Aug. 11: The Watts riots begin in Los Angeles when a police officer stopped Marquette Frye because he suspected him of driving drunk. Frye’s family attempted to intervene and was arrested.

During this scene, a crowd gathered and began angrily denouncing the actions of the police officers. Eventually the crowd turned violent and for six days raged through the city.

By the end, 34 people had died, 1,032 were injured, 4,000 were arrested and over \$50 to 100 million in damages had been incurred.

Dec. 9: The first time the “Charlie Brown Christmas Special” was aired. It has played continuously every Christmas up to the present day.

Dec. 10: *A Patch of Blue*, a film starring Sidney Poitier and Elizabeth Hartman as an interracial couple, releases in America.

Hartman’s character, Selina D’Arcy, was blind, making the point that race was not a factor in the relationship. Certain scenes had to be edited out for Southern audiences.

MAJOR EVENTS OF

1966

Jan. 13: Robert C. Weaver becomes the first black cabinet member. He was appointed as Secretary to the Housing and Urban Development Committee.

March 19: The first two scholarships in the SEC to be awarded to black athletes in the SEC were given to Greg Page and Nat Northington of the University of Kentucky. From this point on, the population of black athletes began a rapid rise in the United States, particularly in football and basketball.

October: The Black Panthers Party was formed by Huey P. Newton. Based on the teachings of Marxism and Leninism, the Black Panthers aimed to secure equal rights to freedom, property and education for all blacks. They were widely considered to be extremists and were feared particularly by the white majority.

Nov. 8: Edward Brooke becomes the first black person appointed to the Senate. He was elected by the state of Massachusetts and would be the only black man in the Senate until 1993.

Dec. 26: Dr. Moulana Karenga of the California State University of Long Beach created Kwanzaa, a Pan-African celebration meant to create a shared socio-historical consciousness for African-Americans.

MAJOR EVENTS OF

1967

June 16: The Monterey Pop Festival, a three-day musical marathon, takes place in Monterey, Calif. The festival was run entirely non-profit, and all proceeds were donated to various charities. It’s considered to be the precursor to Woodstock.

June 25: Boxing superstar Muhammad Ali was stripped of his heavyweight title because he refused to serve in the army during the Vietnam War.

July 13: A race riot broke out in Newark, New Jersey when a cab driver was arrested and beaten by police officers. Civil rights leaders got the cab driver out of jail and to a hospital, but an angry mob thought the man had died and began a riot that lasted six days. 23 people died, 725 were injured and 1,500 were arrested.

July 15: In Detroit, Mich., a police raid on an after hours bar sparked an angry crowd to start breaking windows in nearby shops. This riot lasted five days in which 43 people died, 1,189 were injured and over 7,000 were arrested.

Aug. 30: Thurgood Marshall was appointed the first black Supreme Court Justice. This was an im-

portant choice on the part of President Johnson who had attempted to brand himself as a Civil Rights president.

Dec. 12: *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*, a film starring Sidney Poitier and Katharine Hepburn, released this year. It was the first film featuring an interracial couple where the parents gave the couple the green light and was shown in its entirety in the south – kiss and all.

MAJOR EVENTS OF

1968

In general, 1968 was a heartbreaking year for America. The Vietnam War took a turn for the worse, and some of the brightest leaders of the age were gunned down. It was a demoralizing year.

Jan. 30: The Tet Offensive, an unexpected attack on the part of the Viet Cong fighters rocks American forces. Though they were eventually beaten back, the VC managed to recapture much of the surrounding countryside.

It achieved its goal of inflicting a major blow to the confidence of the American government, which almost immediately began scaling back its troop escalations. Many consider this to be the turning point toward failure in the Vietnam War.

April 4: Martin Luther King, Jr., the most respected black voice in the Civil Rights movement was killed by

Between 1965 and 1970, America was shaken by wars between peoples, wars between races and good old-fashioned rock ‘n’ roll – and Petey Greene was making his own waves on the air.



Don Cheadle, Chiwetel Ejiofor and Martin Sheen feel the intensity at the WOL station.



Director Kasi Lemmons and Taraji P. Henson

All Photos: Michael Gibson

James Earl Ray. King, whose teachings had included methods of non-violent protest, was considered by moderates to be the acceptable alternative to the Black Panthers and Malcolm X, and his death was a major blow to the movement.

April 4-8: Stokely Carmichael, a black activist, took a crowd around to shops in Washington, D.C. asking them to close in respect after Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination. Many refused and the requests became markedly less polite, eventually resulting in a four-day-long riot that left 12 dead, 1,097 injured and over 6,000 arrested. The rioters caused \$27 million in damages.

June 5: Robert Kennedy was assassinated by Sirhan Sirhan as he passed through a kitchen exit from the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles.

Sept. 17: NBC’s surprise hit “Julia” aired in 1968. It featured a middle



Talk to Me’s Dewey Hughes (Chiwetel Ejiofor) and Petey Greene (Don Cheadle)

class single mother whose struggle was to balance her nursing career with her home life. And she was black. The show was controversial, but ultimately was praised for combating stereotypes.

Oct. 16: At the Mexico Summer Olympics, two Americans participated in the 200-meter race.

Tommie Smith and John Carlos, who won Gold and Bronze respectively, both raised their fists in the black power salute as they stood on the podium during the playing of the American National Anthem. This was not taken well. The two men had great difficulty finding employment over the next several years until eventually they were praised for their courage.

MAJOR EVENTS IN

1969

Jan. 20: Richard Nixon becomes president after having beaten out Hubert Humphrey by only one percent of the popular vote. Nixon is most famous for the infamous Watergate scandal and was impeached for wiretapping the Democratic convention’s planning room. Also, his approach to the Vietnam War, including bombings and invasions of Cambodia and his policy of “Vietnamization” were failures.

June 1: John and Yoko Lennon recorded “Give Peace a Chance,” the peace anthem of the age.

June 28: The Stonewall riots, sparked by police raids on gay bars shocked New York. It was one of the first moments that homosexuals stood up for gay rights.

July 20: Neil Armstrong became the first man to walk on the moon.

Aug. 15: The Woodstock Music Festival, a commercial enterprise that would have turned out great for entrepreneurs if more than 200,000 of the 400,000 participants

had paid. The festival lasted three days and became symbolic of the flower child, free love culture.

Dec. 1: The draft lottery is instituted to garner enough troops to keep the Vietnam War going without accessing Reserve troops due to Johnson’s fear of public backlash. The system was made to be as fair as possible by assigning numbers (1-366) to randomly selected birthdays. The lower your number the more likely to be called up for duty.

MAJOR EVENTS OF

1970

April 4: The legendary rock group the Beatles disband over musical differences.

April 22: The first Earth Day is celebrated. Founded by Gaylord Nelson, 20 million Americans rallied to save the environment. Congress established the Environmental Protection Agency in July of 1970 in response to public outcry against air and water quality, and Earth Day organizers claim this protest was instrumental to that decision.

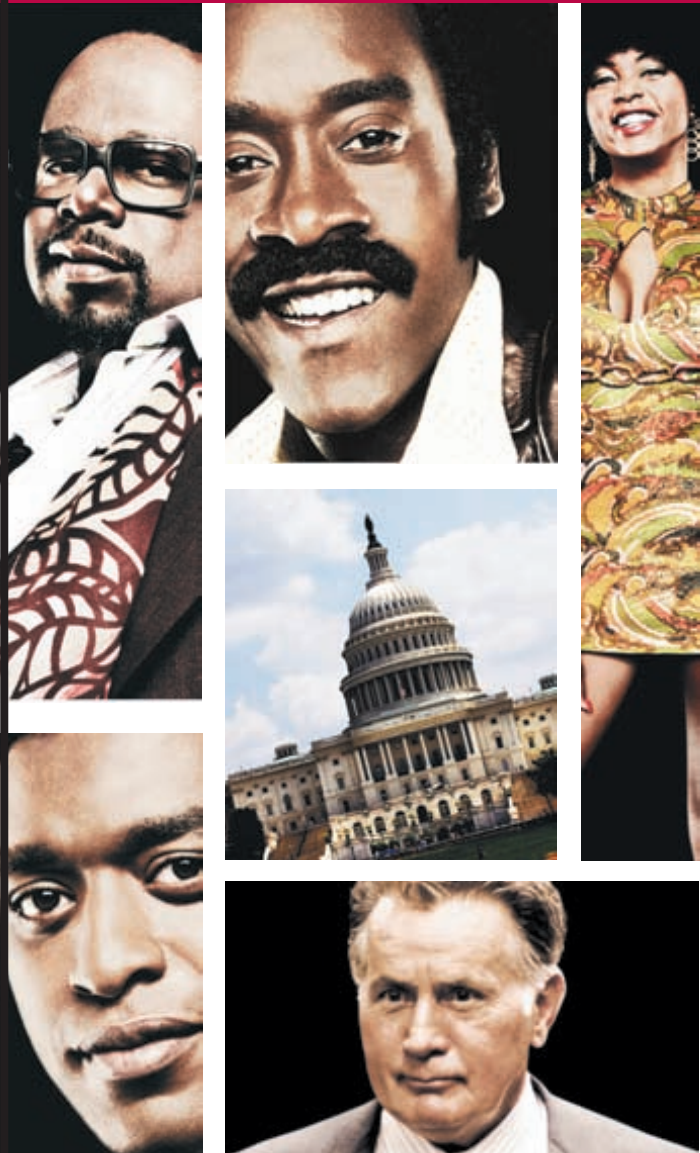
May 4: Four students are shot at Kent State University when the National Guard opened fire on protesters of the Vietnam War. The scene is forever immortalized by the picture of the girl wailing, hunkered over the body of her fallen friend.

Sept. 18: Guitar god Jimi Hendrix died of a drug overdose. Janis Joplin also died in the same year.



Cedric the Entertainer as Green’s rival DJ “Nighthawk” Bob Terry

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Don Cheadle soars into the highest rank of film actors with this role. Will have you talking long after leaving the theatre. Unforgettable. Chiwetel Ejiofor and Taraji P. Henson are magnificent.”

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“FUNNY, POWERFUL AND POIGNANT!

Don Cheadle and Chiwetel Ejiofor are two of the finest actors in films.”

JEFFREY LYONS, NBC’S REEL TALK

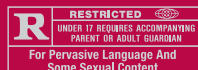
DON CHEADLE CHIWETEL EJIOFOR CEDRIC THE ENTERTAINER TARAJI P. HENSON MIKE EPPS AND MARTIN SHEEN

Never underestimate a man with something to say.

TALKTOME

Inspired by a true story

FOCUS FEATURES AND SIDNEY KIMMEL ENTERTAINMENT PRESENT A MARK GORDON COMPANY/PELAGIUS FILMS PRODUCTION A KASI LEMMONS FILM DON CHEADLE CHIWETEL EJIOFOR
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