Talk to Me (pp. 117-120)

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TALK TO ME. Produced by Joe Fries and Mark Gordon; directed by Kasi Lemmons; screenplay by Michael Genet and Rick Famuyiwa; 2007; 118 minutes. Distributed by Sidney Kimmel Entertainment.

In the late 1960s, the District of Columbia was “Petey Greene’s Washington.” WOL’s unrestrained radio personality Ralph Waldo “Petey” Greene awoke the masses of the district – “P-Town” – with unkempt mannerisms and straight talk that ushered in a new era of radio broadcasting. However, hard times and trials marked Greene’s journey to success.

In the opening scene, Greene shuffles through select LPs with a cigarette in his hand. Pulling the microphone to his mouth, he announces a colorful wakeup call to Lorton Correctional Facility inmates to the tune of James Brown’s “This Is a Man’s World.” Each morning, the warden permitted Greene two twenty-minute segments on the public address system, where he forged his shock-jock style. Not only did the spots on the PA system allow Greene to fulfill his calling, it provided prisoners a sense of release from the harsh reality of the cold, cement barricades that
surrounded them.

One day, Dewey Hughes, a program director for Washington, D.C.'s WOL-AM radio station, visits his brother, Milo, in the Lorton facility. As Hughes begins to leave, Greene dashes to meet him and inquire about a job upon his release. Hughes politely asks Greene to look him up. Greene, a self-proclaimed "miscreant," connives his way out of prison, and immediately seeks out Hughes to obtain a job as a DJ. Greene struts into WOL wearing a bright colored suit, with his flamboyant girlfriend, Vernell Watson, at his side. After he is shunned as an ex-con and denied a job, Greene leaves in a fury because Hughes refuses to give him a chance. Instead of surrender, Greene pickets the station, harasses Hughes, and causes chaos in front of the station until Hughes at last gives him one morning on the air.

Since his on-air experience was confined to prison PAs, Petey Greene has much to learn in the world of broadcasting. From his first day on-air, though, he seeks out to do one thing, and one thing only: speak the truth, or at least his version of it. He begins talking about his childhood, saying that he had "an eighth grade education and a Ph.D. from the streets." He emphasizes that he is a recovering alcoholic, and has "been sober for five [pause] hours." His own life echoes the lives his parents, both of whom still serve prison terms. His inflammatory language and derogatory remarks anger the white establishment that owned the radio station. As a result, they pull him off the air after only a few minutes. However, Dewey Hughes noticed that residents of the district connected with Greene, and heard the truth in what he said, and wanted to hear more. Hughes finagles the staff and puts Greene back on the air after seeing his potential. He hopes that Greene can say the things that he was afraid to say.

Petey Greene's on-air persona established a new format of radio broadcasting in Washington, D.C. His rabble-rousing style kept the phones ringing off the hook. On air, a determined Greene spoke his mind, whether people like it or not, and he welcomed the public to call in and articulate their feelings as well. Callers conversed about everything from seeing Greene down the street to small town politics to unnecessary police brutality. Both Petey Greene and WOL's growing status as representatives of the people delighted Hughes.
When news broke of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination in April 1968, Greene goes on-air to deliver the news. Moments later, the station's crew rushes outside to see the city in flames, as mobs take out their anger on store fronts and housing. Greene hurries back into the station and returns to the airwaves to assuage his listeners' angers. He asks people to stay in their homes and to practice what Dr. King preached. He pleads with those in the streets to calm down and go back home. The lines stay open all night for callers to talk about King's assassination and their pain, and to share their common plight.

As Greene's popularity increases, Hughes asks to be his manager, urging Greene to take on stand-up comedy acts because of his personal anecdotes, and his ability to connect with people. Eventually, Hughes arranges a weekly local access television show, in which Greene hosts local leaders, politicians, and other guests. Greene follows the continual direction of Hughes, but unhappiness is evident as extreme alcoholism takes over Greene's life. As the local television show's fame expands, opportunities blossom for Greene. Much to Hughes excitement, he maneuvers an appearance for Greene on "The Johnny Carson Show," where Hughes always dreamed of performing. Greene, booked as the show's guest comedian, arrives on stage and speaks solemnly, saying that the white people gathered were not "ready for P-Town." Angered and humiliated, Hughes punches Greene as he walks off stage. This altercation causes the two to go their separate ways. Greene continues local stand-up shows and binge drinking. Hughes returns to WOL as a DJ, and gains local prominence through the 1970s. After some time, Hughes purchases WOL.

Years later, Greene's girlfriend Watson appears at Hughes's office to mediate between the two men, since Hughes rejected Greene's attempts at reconciliation. She also delivers news that the years of liquor and hard labor have been hard on Greene. Hughes meets Greene at a local pool hall, where they work out their issues, and rekindle their friendship.

Petey Greene died at the age of 53 from liver cancer. More than 10,000 people attended the wake in January 1984, making it the most attended funeral of a non-public official in Washington, D.C. In the film, Hughes delivers a eulogy considering Greene a man that knew the
beating heart of Washington, D.C., and also his best friend. He ended the eulogy with Greene's radio sign-off: "That's all we got, there ain't no mo'. Time is tight. It's the end of the show. So grab your hand and make a fist. Listen to me and remember this. I tell it to the hot, I tell it to the cold, I tell it to the young, I tell it to the old. I don't want no laughin', don't want no cryin', and most of all, no signifyin'. This is Petey Greene's Washington."

While the screenplay of "Talk to Me" is amazing, and its actors carry out incredible roles with diligence and flair, the actual story lacked much accuracy. Petey Greene, a victim of liver cancer, never fell into an alcoholic black hole at the end of his life, but actually joined a church, and worked with many social and civic groups. Furthermore, after Greene and Hughes departed ways after "The Johnny Carson Show," they never reconciled. In fact, Hughes did not attend the funeral, making the film's glorious and heart-rendering eulogy a complete fabrication.

This tremendous biopic has been years in the making. This movie showed the pivotal effect that Petey Greene, a Washington, D.C. icon, had on the broadcasting industry. Greene virtually created shock-jock programming, a staple of present-day American radio broadcasting. Greene lived and spoke without fear. He refused to become a puppet of any administration or establishment. He gained enormous trust from the D.C. community, which is exceptionally difficult to do in a city of politicians.

"Talk to Me" portrays an incredible relationship between the privileged and the disadvantaged, working together to be what the other could not. This strange relationship left typical audiences unfulfilled because Petey Greene never succeeded at the greatest level possible. Instead, he acknowledged his strengths, and chose them instead. Therein lay the greatest morals of the film: know yourself, speak for yourself, and live your life. Historically, such great principles were exemplified in the life of Petey Greene. However, characters, storylines, and his honest legacy were compromised in the production of the Hollywood bottom line.