Teddy Pendergrass: If You Don’t Know Me tells the story of the King of Philadelphia, as one of the commentators in the film describes him. But, like so many great stories of kings, this is a tragic tale. The cult of the iconic Philly Soul singer with one of the sexiest voices ever laid to tape has been growing in recent years, a resurgence traceable to around the time Kanye name-checked him as part of the roll call of Soul and R&B legends on The College Dropout’s ‘Slow Jamz’. Towards the end of Olivia Lichtenstein’s thrilling and moving documentary on the singer’s life his family state that he should be better known and that’s the mission of the film in part, for sure, but – thankfully – it’s never a simple hagiography,.

The film uses the full arsenal of music doc weapons at its disposal – interviews, archives, reconstructions and the like – but its most powerful choice is foreshadowing. It can easily be such a maudlin and clumsy device but here it works wonderfully, maybe because the most powerful foreshadowing is unintentional and can be read into the subtext. The name of Teddy Pendergrass has become somewhat of a shorthand for a particularly sexual and muscular black male vocal style, one he unmistakably was at the forefront of and the film celebrates this aspect of his career. The sequences of Pendergrass at his peak are sensational and the film ensures that the politics of race in his music and performance are foregrounded. This allows the rest of the film to coalesce fluidly around this theme, as race is a prominent part of the tragedies of his life, at least in the film’s reading.

The clearest tragedy is the final section of the film and the final act of his life, his paralysing car accident and the rehabilitation into a recording and performing star again. The film opens with his stunning Rolls Royce leaving a palatial estate and cruising the streets of his kingdom, Philadelphia. Half way through we learn that this car made him the target of police attention as he felt the curse of being a successful black man and was frequently stopped and harassed. The film is direct about the sad relevance of this in 2019, one of several times the filmmaker links the past to the present neatly. The recurrence of the Rolls Royce is symbolic of what’s to come but also symbolic of the complicated figure that Pendergrass was, the enigmatic and complex figure at the heart of the film.

There’s no shying away from his past, as a hustling young man on the streets of Philadelphia, and how success as a singer was not the clean break from the tough times of young adulthood it is so often painted. Instead, his past affiliations came into show business with him and another tragedy followed with death of his girlfriend, Taaz Lang, who was murdered (her death has never been solved). More grist to the tragic king story mill. The film, maybe due to the involvement of so many of Pendergrass’s family and friends, doesn’t commit to delving into the idea that Teddy was more involved in the event than he let on and the reticence leaves a taste that takes a while to subside but it’s arguably better than a macabre, sensationalist, true-crime expose approach.

Pendergrass is a tragic victim here too. His love ripped from him, he is stunned and grieving. The film’s use of foreshadowing is dripping with dramatic irony, viewing the events some forty years later. The clearest and saddest element of the story is how Pendergrass was treated when arguably the star attraction of Harold Melvin & the Bluenotes, pioneers of the Philly sound. A superb band, responsible for many hits and a unique sonic contribution to pop music, at the centre of it all stands Pendergrass, this uniquely sensual and direct performer, transforming every syllable of the songs into something darkly erotic and soulful. Everybody saw and knew this, none clearer than Melvin, who pushed his name to the fore, pushing Teddy into a strange purgatory. The lack of visible recognition as well as the standard contractual exploitation locked him into a band that he was the star of but saw no reward for. When he escaped, he had a period of great success, before tragedy struck again and locked him inside his own body.

All this suggests that the film is a sad and downbeat affair, yet despite the obvious low points the film is a celebration, of a man who rose from nothing to regaling Sammy Davis Jr on chat shows and who, as the last sequence of the film shows, defied the odds of many doctors and not only sang again, but recorded beautiful work and even sang at Live Aid in a homecoming show that puts Queen’s supposed UK triumph to shame. Lichtenstein’s film manages the tricky feat of making this oft seen footage seem fresh whilst revealing in glorious detail the events of a remarkable life that led to a pinnacle that no-one could have predicted. Except maybe Pendergrass’s mum, who appears in the film, still going and still proud of her little boy, the little boy who wowed everyone in Church back in Philly and went on to become a superstar.

Teddy Pendergrass: If You Don’t Know Me by Olivia Lichtenstein is at UK cinemas from 19 February