

THE UNDERSTUDY

"God forgives. But somebody has to remember out loud."

GENRE

Gospel Noir
Thriller

FORMAT

2-Hour Feature /
MOTW
5 Acts + Teaser

PRIMARY PLATFORM

Lifetime / OWN
Crossover: BET+,
Netflix

IN THE VEIN OF

GREENLEAF
meets GONE
GIRL, with the
gospel muscle of
THE CLARK
SISTERS

When gospel superstar Tamar Reese collapses mid-concert, her invisible assistant is handed the spotlight as her replacement, then discovers the collapse was a slow poisoning, that her own hands delivered the dose, and that the only way out is to confess, live on the industry's biggest stage, that **she** wrote the hit that made Tamar famous.

SYNOPSIS

Deja Moore has spent a decade in the wings: the voice behind gospel royalty **Tamar Reese**, and the uncredited author of Tamar's signature hit, "Resurrection." When Tamar collapses onstage at Atlanta's Fox Theatre, her manager **Marcus Vane** hands Deja the crown and the fame she always wanted.

But the collapse was murder by inches. Thallium, in the protein shakes Deja carried to Tamar every morning. Marcus poisoned the woman he built, and pre-loaded the assistant to take the fall. With a ten-day countdown to a live awards broadcast, Deja races to assemble the proof, outrun a manager who is always three moves ahead, and face an impossible choice: sing the stolen song and stay a star, or step to the microphone and give back two truths at once, the theft that was hers and the crime that was his. It is a story about who owns a Black woman's voice, and what it costs to finally use your own.

WHY NOW

Ghost-credits, ownership, and "who really made the hit" are front-page conversations across music right now. THE UNDERSTUDY turns that reckoning into a ticking-clock thriller with a gospel spine, a star-making female lead, and a live-broadcast climax built for the group chat and the church pew in the same breath.

THE VOICES

Deja Moore

LEAD • LATE 20S

The gifted, hungry ghostwriter stepping into a dead woman's shoes. Must sing. Invisible creator to full truth-teller.

Tamar Reese

THE QUEEN • 43

Fallen gospel royalty who stole a song, and, maybe, means to give it back before it is too late.

Marcus Vane

ANTAGONIST • 40S

Velvet menace in a good suit. The manager who converts every truth into a marketable lie.

Dr. Eloise Grant

THE ALLY • 50S

The physician who smells the poison nobody with a paycheck will name out loud.

THEMES

- ♦ Authorship and erasure
- ♦ The price of the spotlight
- ♦ Complicity, confession, testimony
- ♦ Who owns a Black woman's voice
- ♦ Faith as reckoning, not comfort

PRODUCTION PROFILE

Runtime: ~2 hours (5 acts + teaser).

Footprint: Contained, Atlanta-forward. Theater, hospital, church, one arena finale.

Engine: Music-driven, original songs, one showstopping live confession.

Register: Female-led, morally complex, broadcast-clean with prestige ambition.

THE HOOK

A whistleblower thriller where the evidence is a song, the murder weapon is a smoothie, and the only safe place to tell the truth is on live television.

Casting Wish-List

A wish-list to signal tone, wattage, and lane. All names are aspirational; availability, quotes, and interest to be confirmed. Voice-forward roles noted. Atlanta-based and gospel-authentic hires strongly encouraged throughout.

DEJA MOORE

LEAD • LATE 20S • SINGS

IDEAL

Coco Jones

ALSO STRONG

Chlöe Bailey • Fantasia Barrino •
Danielle Deadwyler

Needs a true singer-actor who can carry a thriller and a solo hymn. The whole film rides on this face.

TAMAR REESE

THE QUEEN • 40S • SINGS

IDEAL

Taraji P. Henson

ALSO STRONG

Danielle Brooks • Ledisi • Kierra
Sheard

Star wattage plus real pipes. Ledisi or Sheard bring gospel authenticity to the vocal work.

MARCUS VANE

ANTAGONIST • 40S

IDEAL

Mahershala Ali

ALSO STRONG

Aldis Hodge • Morris Chestnut •
Michael Ealy

Charm that curdles. He never raises his voice. The scarier he is at dinner, the better the film plays.

DR. ELOISE GRANT

THE ALLY • 50S

IDEAL

Angela Bassett

ALSO STRONG

Aunjanue Ellis-Taylor • Lynn Whitfield

Precision and moral spine. A castable authority the audience trusts on sight.

DEACON WILLIS

BAND LEADER • 60S

IDEAL

Delroy Lindo

ALSO STRONG

Glynn Turman • Keith David

Twenty-two years of dignity and buried knowledge. Anchors the film's conscience and its music.

ARI COLE

THE OPPORTUNIST • 30S

IDEAL

Kelvin Harrison Jr.

ALSO STRONG

Lakeith Stanfield • Algee Smith

Magnetic and transactional. A younger, scrappier mirror of Marcus, dangerous without tipping into cartoon.

KENDRA

THE INGENUE • 19 • SINGS

IDEAL

Marsai Martin

ALSO STRONG

Priah Ferguson • open to a discovery

The mirror of who Deja used to be. Gets a real act of agency in the climax, so cast for spark.

MOTHER CLARA

CHURCH MOTHER • 70S

IDEAL

Loretta Devine

ALSO STRONG

Phylicia Rashad • Jenifer Lewis

Warmth laid over a compromise she has carried for years. The soul of the church world.

DET. RAY OKAFOR

THE OPEN DOOR • 40S

IDEAL

Sterling K. Brown

ALSO STRONG

Rob Morgan • Wendell Pierce

Patient, decent, unhurried. He is the exit Deja keeps refusing until she cannot.

Authenticity & stunt-casting. Consider a cameo from a genuine gospel figure (a Yolanda Adams, Kierra Sheard, or CeCe Winans type) as a rival nominee, choir lead, or awards presenter to buy instant credibility with the faith audience. The Woodruff Park vigil and Stellar Awards finale are natural homes for real Atlanta choirs and musicians. Pursue Georgia tax-incentive hires across the band, choir, and day-player roles.