

ONE STEP BEYOND

by Lynnell S. Long

Family & Pride

On May 30, it will be one year since my mother died. My mother was a minister, and I'm sure, for her, having her son become her daughter was not one of the easiest things to accept. About six months before she died, I felt as if she was beginning to accept me as her daughter. She started to call me she, and Lynnell, and she demanded that my nieces and nephews call me Aunt Lynnell.

When someone close to you dies, there is a grieving process—I am still grieving. I ask myself: Am I grieving the loss of a mother I never had, or am I grieving the loss of a mother that was finally becoming the mother I needed, then taken away from me? I am grieving both. I forgave my mother for the things that happened in my childhood. The times she took me to the doctor, and requested that I be given testosterone, because I was growing breasts. I forgave her for not accepting me as her daughter when I was younger. I had to forgive her. How can I hate her for not



accepting me as a woman, when there were times I didn't accept myself? Although I knew I was a girl at the age of 8, I found life to be easier if I just forgot about it, and pretended to be a guy.

Before my mother died, we were becoming friends. I was allowing her to know me, the real me, not the facade I presented to the world. I introduced her to Lynnell, the woman. The sensitive, loving woman that only wanted to be held and loved by her mother. She introduced me to a mother that had her beliefs, but was beginning to change for the love of her daughter. My mother died May 30, 1996 from cancer. I never bothered to come out to relatives that were not in my immediate family. I thought once my immediate family started to accept me as I am, then I would call my uncles, aunts, and cousins, and tell them. My plan was interrupted by the death of my mother. Unless I wanted to

go backwards, they were going to meet Lynnell more prematurely than I planned.

The morning of the funeral, I was scared and nervous. Scared because I was afraid they wouldn't take me seriously. I was afraid one of my relatives would get drunk and make fun of me or something. I was nervous because, although I don't consider my relatives prejudiced, there are those occasional, "I hate the white man" things, and my girlfriend is white. I was worried about them insulting her. To make a long story short: My uncle refused to accept my gender. My cousins kept staring the entire time, never asking me any questions. But one of my aunts came up to me, kissed me, and said she was proud of me for having the courage to be myself. She said she always knew about me, and wondered when was I going to stop hiding. My 73-year-old Aunt Arpolia, out of all my relatives that were at the funeral, is the most supportive. She lives on 39th and Rhodes, but after my uncle died years ago, I never visited.

I never realized the value of a

family until the funeral. It struck me how many of my relatives were homophobes and against me changing my gender. I talk to my aunt regularly now. I always bring her a copy of BLACKLINES, which she shares with her lesbian friends. It feels good to have someone else in my family nurture me in my writing and motivate me to go further. I miss my mother, and think of her all the time. I can feel her presence, and at times can hear her voice. Every time I perform, I picture her sitting in the audience, smiling big, like proud mother. As I write about her, tears come to my eyes. My innerkids still cry out at night for mommy. They refuse to accept that she's dead. No one can replace my mother, or the love of a mother. But it seems just as Goddess took my mother from me, she put someone in my life, my Aunt Arpolia, whom I almost forgot about. I love my mother, and I thank Goddess for Aunt Arpolia.

A lot of people have questions about transsexuality, but don't know how to ask. This is your chance to ask me anything, for my July article. If you don't want your name printed, say so. E-mail [redacted]. Deadline: June 1

answer, "I studied with my drum."

What are some of your high lights so far in your career?

After a performance, when someone comes up and says, "needed to hear what you said today" or "I feel so inspired, so happy and empowered," or "I feel like I could make things happen." Another was performing El Salvador in 1979. Here I am, this African-American woman out of the ghettos of Jersey City, felt proud to be representing musicians from the U.S., but I also felt I was representing African-American people and building allies directly with the Salvadorian people's struggle. grew up with fire, gunshots, death, and drugs, but El Salvador was the only time that felt that I could die.

What do you feel when you performing, and an audience getting your message?

The feeling is non-separation. It's not me and them, it's a oneness, it's a wholeness.

MUSIC from 20

some paid gigs. I worked solo for three years after that.

You started with congas, now play mostly djembe, and also ashiko and udu drums in different styles. How did you learn?

Some I learned by going into music stores and listening. As I have gotten older, jazz, which feels like a mature music. From jazz came reggae—Bob Marley and Peter Tosh—and out of that grew a very strong interest in and appreciation of world music. I have had a total of 10 actual structured lessons. I was a working musician, there was an opportunity to play, so I had the confidence, and I did it.

In your workshops, what do you tell people about learning?

I tell people to play. Whether you take a class with me ever again or with anybody else is not important. What is important is to develop a relationship with your instrument. When people ask me who I studied with, I

African-American authors up for 'Lammies'



Among the finalists for the 9th Lambda Literary Awards are *Honey, Honey, Miss Thang* by Leon Pettitway, an anthropological study of Black transgendered hustlers; late African-American gay activist *Assotto Saint's* posthumous *Spells of a Voodoo Doll*; and *Lush Life* (FSG), the biography of gay musician Billy Strayhorn.

Award recipients will be announced in Chicago Friday, May 30, 1997; event tickets are \$75 each. Call (202) 462-7924. Chicago's A Real Read will perform for the attendees.

Meanwhile, Gerber/Hart Library hosts a reception in honor of the African-American nominees, Saturday, May 31, 7-9 p.m., 3352 N. Paulina, (773) 883-3003. The funds raised will help support the collection of materials related to African-American lesbian/gay/trans history.

And Lambda nominee Leon Pettitway, a professor of criminal justice at Indiana University, will discuss his book at People Like Us Books May 31, 3 p.m., 1115 W. Belmont, (773) 248-6363.



Leon Pettitway (TOP) and Billy Strayhorn.

C.C. Carter Speaks the Truth About 'Hips'

by Lynnell S. Long

"These are my hips ... my West Indian father loved my Dominican mother and they mixed up the spices to create the recipe for these hips/ cause my hips are hip/ they swing a jazz tune/ they bop a blues beat/ they talk a rap rhythm/ they beat a drum solo."

—From C.C. Carter's book, *The Many Phases of Womanhood*

From the DuSable Museum, to the Chicago Black Lesbians and Gays Unity Conference, to Mountain Moving Coffeehouse (where Lajaunessee Jordan had several C.C. moments), C.C. Carter's poem "Herstory of my hips" has been performed all over Chicago, and she has received more than one standing ovation for her performance.

C.C. Carter, a teacher for a South Suburban Middle School, is also a performer, writer, poet, and professional dancer—and she is making a name for herself. Her first book, *Love Letters To My Love*, sold more than 200 copies. Her second book, *The Many Phases of Womanhood*, sold more than 100 copies in the first three weeks. Her third book, *Coming Out of the Darkness*, is expected to be released in October.

The question most people want to know is: Who is C.C. Carter? "C.C. Carter is a persona of someone I always wanted to be like: my mother, Judith Jamison, Maya Angelou and Nikki Giovanni," C.C. said. "I am 48 hours in a day and 10 days a week. I like to think of myself as somebody that, whether I'm your type, or whether I'm someone you're interested in, I would always want someone to look at me and say, 'that's a lady.'"

C.C. Carter was born and raised in Little Rock, Ark. She moved to Chicago in 1967, and moved to New York at the age of 15. She returned to Chicago after finishing college to teach.

"My children. ... That's my true calling. I'm a great teacher if I do say so myself. I've seen children that have to go to psy-



C.C. performs 'Hips' at the BLACKLINES' first anniversary party in February. Photo by Patrick Robinson

choanalysis and guidance counselors that say they [the children] were going through phases. My vehicle is, I get their whole life story through drama and dance. That's why they made me teacher of the year," said C.C.

C.C.'s poem "Herstory of my hips" has become her trademark and the poem has given women with 'Hips' a better outlook on life. "It was a self-esteem enhancer, it was never meant to be performed. It's dedicated to women who are full figured, women that had to hear what I had to hear, and thought it was bad to be us. And there is nothing wrong with us. There is nothing wrong with having hips. My grandmother once told me, 'there is nothing wrong with carrying your history on your back, you have a legacy of history.' I use my work to touch women, if you happen to be lesbian or transgendered, or whatever, however YOU identify



C.C. at WordRising's May Open Mic at Paris. Photo by Tracy Baim

yourself," says C.C. Carter.

What's next for C.C. Carter? "A Real Read, the performance ensemble I'm a member of, is performing in June at the

Bailiwick Arts Center. The other members of A Real Read are: Sanford Gaylord, Byron Stewart, Somalia [redacted] Shannon [redacted] Beja [redacted] and of course you, Lynnell S. Long.

"I'm also shopping for national publishers, and I have interviews with bookstores. I'd like to thank K.L. [redacted] my dear friend, and my lover Verna for all their help in making this possible."

What is C.C. Carter's philosophy for life? "Women are God's gift for womanity. God in all her ultimate wisdom knew that we were precious elements, so she made us to be her diamond necklaces, ruby bracelets, emerald earrings, and onyx brooches—knowing that we were created to shine and adorn while here on earth."

The Real 'Fifth Element': Homosexuality

If the new film *The Fifth Element* is any indication, gay will be the hallmark of the 23rd Century. *Element* is a simple story of good versus evil, with delightfully subversive homo undertones. The deliriously beautiful production design (courtesy of Digital Domain, and



Chris Tucker as DJ Ruby Rhod.

queer costume designer Jean-Paul Gaultier) turns the film into wickedly campy fun. Notorious action lout Bruce Willis, with short, bleached hair and sleeveless ribbed t-shirts, looks eerily like Gaultier himself, but the homo fun really begins with the entrance of African-American actor Chris Tucker, as flaming DJ Ruby Rhod. When I interviewed Tucker about the film, he expressed surprisingly homophobic concern about how he would be perceived by his friends: "What are the brothers going to think?" He then mimicked their possible reactions, saying, "What the hell have they done to you out in Hollywood? Got you dressed up like a damn faggot!" The finished film changed his opinion, though. He told me that after seeing his scenes in context, he thought, "Cool, that'll work. That's cool." More important than protecting his masculine reputation, Tucker wanted to work closely with director Luc Besson to create a memorable character. "People want to be entertained. You've got to take that risk," Tucker explained. With a high-pitched squeal and out-of-this-world hairdos, Tucker's self-described cross between Michael Jackson and Prince must be seen to be believed. Moments after his flaming character is introduced, Besson virtually breaks out a fire extinguisher by including a scene of Tucker engaging in sex with a woman.

—Paige Turner

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'97

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Month
events.



Lisa Moore

Author of
*does your
mama know?*,
Black lesbian
coming-out
stories, comes
to Chicago.
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