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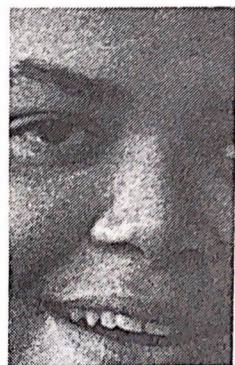
VOLUME 3, NUMBER 2



Stephanie



Byrd



Evolution of a Writer

BATTERING
"Besides, She Loves Her"

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A Mistress Moderately Fair, and more!

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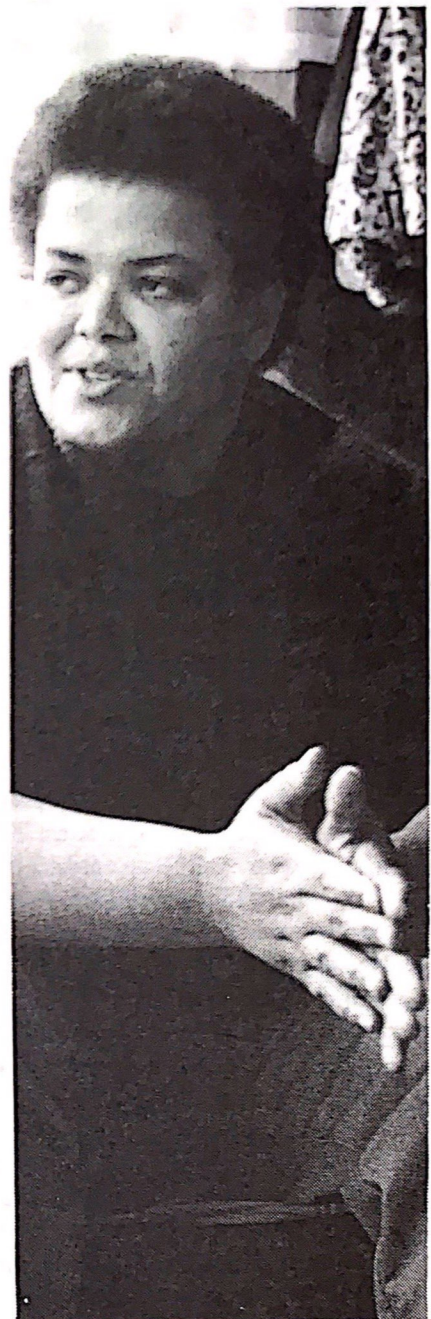
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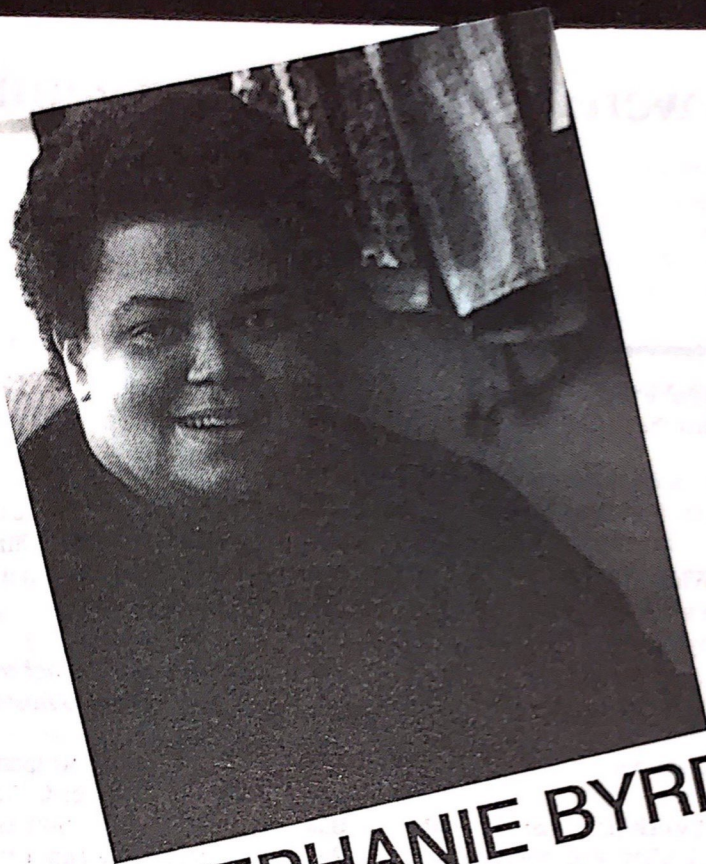


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A CONVERSATION WITH

Photo by Susan Fleischman



STEPHANIE BYRD

Terri L. Jewell

Stephanie Byrd is a Black Lesbian Feminist poet, writer, and community activist. Her works include two books of poetry; an essay, "The Politics of the Black Lesbian" (*Gay Community News*, 1975); her poetry has appeared in *Common Lives/Lesbian Lives* and *Sinister Wisdom*, and will appear in *Sing Heavenly Muse*. Ms. Byrd was raised in Indiana, was a Latin major at Ball State University and was an anti-war activist in the late '60s and early '70s. She was interviewed last fall in Michigan by Terri Jewell.

BYRD: When I was about 6 or 7, one of the neighbors called me a Lesbian. I [asked] my grandmother about it and she told me that being a Lesbian was about loving women, women loving women... And that it was all right to be a Lesbian if I really loved someone. And since I was in love with my little next-door neighbor, I went out and told everyone that we were Lesbians. My mother was furious and I think that was the first time I heard about Lesbians. The second time, I was 12 and I was asked to put down... my goals in life. I had put down that my goals were to be a brain surgeon, a lawyer and a Lesbian. I was sent to the office. I realized... that something was terribly wrong... and they said, "Well, do you know what a Lesbian is?"

And I said, "It's a person who lives on the Isle of Lesbos," because I had looked it up in the dictionary. They let me go, feeling secure that I really didn't know what I was talking about. It's funny that about a year later I was sent to the office again for being a Communist... because I asked for the Communist Manifesto in the school library so we could compare it to the Declaration of Independence.

When I was 17, I realized there was something wrong with being a Lesbian socially. I tried to become straight and hooked up with this guy who turned out to be gay. By the time I was 19, I realized that none of this was working, so I just went back to being a Lesbian again. It was very hard, though, because at 19 you're kind of a sexual

"...my goals were to be a brain surgeon, a lawyer and a Lesbian."

libertine. You're not straight, you're not gay... you're just in heat. Being a Lesbian was just the best and easiest way for me to be.

When did you start writing?

When I was 17... When I graduated from high school, I started writing poetry seriously and actually had a contest with my little gay boyfriend. We would write a book of poetry a month and that summer I produced three books of poetry, all of which I burned.

Why?

I have destroyed my work in the past, I'd say all together, four books of poetry... I have a tendency to lose control of my temper and as a result, my reason. I would burn my work as a cleansing act. A ritual... There have been times in my life when even the writing is not enough to cleanse.

So, writing is not always enough to cleanse what?

Oh, I call them the Terrors. They are anxieties and fears that somehow combine into a feeling so large they seem to consume me from the inside out. I think some actress in a Neil Simon play once called them the "Red Meanies."

What has survived of your writing?

There is a book of my poetry called *25 Years of Malcontent* which is now out of print. When I finished [it], it was the result of seven years of serious writing, the last three of which I wrote every day for at least two hours a day, sometimes eight, depending on whether or not I was employed. It was released in 1976 and published by Good Gay Poets in Boston. As with most first works by a writer,

it's somewhat autobiographical, describing things and events that I observed or was involved in... There is a poem about a white suffragette I had met in Texas. She was a wonderful, wonderful woman well into her 60s. This was in 1972. She told me to be true to my roots... The whole time I was in Boston I don't think I ever really convinced myself that I was anything but a Black woman from Indiana.

Were you aware of the Combahee River Collective [when you first went to Boston]?

In 1974, the women who eventually evolved into the Combahee River Collective were the National Black Feminist Organization, of which I was a member. We used to meet as a support group at the Women's Center in Cambridge. We would talk about a number of things. Barbara Smith was there and she developed guidelines on how we were to support each other. It was very much like consciousness-raising. I remember the group being an open group and a lot of [Black] women coming who were straight and battered. Some of them were successful, some... were very poor, some... were working-class women. [Sometimes] outsiders would come and discover that there were Black Lesbians there and they would flip out with a great deal of hysteria and arguing and name-calling. And those were the early meetings. But the thing I remember is these women coming who had been so battered... that... a support group wasn't going to do it for them. I heard someone say recently that one of the best cures for mental illness for Black people is Black culture and I wanted the group to be more committed to the creation and preservation of Black women's culture. But that was really difficult to do with the Combahee River Collective because the group soon was not all Black. And the support group was very much committed to combating racism and sexism and anti-Semitism and class oppression, so any minority woman had to be included... I had a great deal of difficulty synthesizing the presence and



Photo by Susan Fitchman

the issues of the minority women who were not Black into the issues that involved me. I was something of a Black Separatist, I suppose.

In reading their statement, the group was against separatism and wanted to work with Black men...

Well, I never heard them say anything about working with any men when I was in the group. They talked about working with white women. All the other [minority] concerns just turned into a wave that seemed to obliterate what I was hoping would become a Black Feminist support group. And as Black Feminists, in retrospect, I realize now that I was hoping that we could do something to address the needs of some of those women who were coming to us who had been stabbed or shot or beaten and threatened and didn't know how to leave their husbands or didn't know how to address life without a man. These women needed a separatist environment in which to heal. Maybe later on, this whole multi-ethnic Feminist vanguard could include them, but for then and for now, too, it doesn't. It does not address the needs of these Black women.

In your opinion, why are we Black women so afraid of having our own groups and projects exclusively?

Oh, it's much easier to address everyone else's needs rather than your own. You know that from dealing with your own problems. It is much easier to go out and find someone else who has a bigger problem or a different problem and work on their problem for them than to deal with your own mess. And, essentially, that's what we have

been doing all along historically. We think we CAN'T do it by ourselves. And the reason why we can't do it by ourselves is because "they" will annihilate us. We have to get away from this paranoia... When the group started, there were only three of us, including myself, who said they were Lesbians... The other women introduced themselves by talking about where they went to graduate school and what their interests were, etc., but no one else said they were Lesbians. After several months, though, some of the other women came out.

What made you leave the group?

I was heavily into my poetry, doing a lot of writing and readings. And I wanted to do more cultural things. I read all over Boston: University of Massachusetts, Boston; Faneuil Hall, which is the Town

Hall in Boston... In 1976 I decided I couldn't maintain the separatist pose any longer, that I would have to become involved with the Gay and Lesbian Rights Movement... I found that despite what the Combahee River Collective said about separatism, they were very anti-male. I had met a lot of Black gay men who had been decent to me and had been brotherly. I felt the least I could do was return in kind. So I became more involved in the Gay and Lesbian Rights Movement, but always, ALWAYS my focus was on US as Black people. Not just as Black women but as Black people. And in writing my poetry, because I am a Black woman, I was creating Black women's culture. And those things were becoming clearer and clearer to me... And I didn't need a large support group to give me an identity. My identity was growing out of MY growing as a Black woman artist; I was creating Black women's art. And as a Black person who has a Black father and Black male

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“...it's much easier to address everyone else's needs rather than your own.”

cousins and Black uncles and a Black grandfather, I had a duty to protect their rights as Black people. The only way I could do that, because I couldn't do it within the homophobic Black community, was to do it with the Gay and Lesbian Rights Movement.

Tell me about your second book.

My second book is self-published, *A Distant Footstep On The Plain*. It was in the late 1970s. I had been asked to read some poetry at International Women's Day at Cambridge's YWCA. I read a poem called "On Black Women Dying" . . . with the accompaniment of music. That's where "Hermanas" made its first appearance. It was a conga and a guitar. That's it. After that, I got telephone calls to do it again, so we got together and we performed more . . . In 1979 I became unemployed, so I had more time to write. I was moving furniture and doing odd jobs around the city. It was a tough period in my life. I was hungry a lot.

Why and how did you self-publish A Distant Footstep On The Plain?

I was working on the Boston and Maine Railroad [as a crossing tender] at the time I finished my second book and I couldn't find a publisher for it . . . I had a friend

who was a typographer and she worked [on it for free]. She gave me the negative . . . We took it to a local, small neighborhood newspaper that donated their space and we laid out the book in 24 hours. And then we drove it to the printer's, it went to press, and a week later I went back and picked up three crates of it. It cost me \$600 for 600 copies.

Why the title A Distant Footstep On The Plain?

I was from Indiana. In a sense, it is my being true to my roots. It is a reaffirmation of who I am and where I'm from. A distant footstep on the plain. That's what I was at one time.

I have a manuscript in the works now. It's tentatively entitled *American Mongrel -- Faces With No Names*. I've been working on it now for several years and it's getting ready to go into its third revision. I figure by the time I go over it for the third time, it will be ready. I feel good about this work. It feels better than the second book. It's a different kind of work, probably closer to the first work. Maybe it's a culmination for me. V

ED. NOTE: *A Distant Footstep On The Plain* is available by sending \$3.50 to Ms. Byrd at 1534 Bailey Street, Apt. 2, Lansing, MI 48910.



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