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One-on-One With Tim'm West

Tim'm West Journeys Into Self-Love -- for All

By Keith Green

July/August 2005

One wintry Saturday evening, amid mountains of drama and mayhem at the release party for the Kevin's Room CD project at Club Reunion in Chicago, I was introduced to one of the most moving black gay men I've ever met. His smile immediately captured me. His poetry moved me. Without even knowing who he was, I was scheduled as the opening artist for Tim'm West. I was stoked because he remembered me from a performance I had done at Atlanta Black Gay Pride the year before. The words that he wrote in my personal copy of his book, Red Dirt Revival, continue to resound in my head: "Keith ... continue to keep it really real." In an effort to do just that, I chose to profile him for the return of "One-on-One."



Keith Green: Tell me about your upbringing.

Tim'm West: I was born to a pretty religious family. My father is an evangelist, and my mother was very much a devoted preacher's wife and full-time mother. We struggled financially a lot, which is different from some people's notion of a ministerial family. My pops was more of the storefront evangelical type, so his family was about half the congregation. We grew up very poor. I grew up understanding hunger and living without some of the basic household items that many take for granted. This also made me very humble about the things I gained after college. My religious upbringing ingrained a lot of my sense of ethics but also raised lots of questions. Being aware of my sexuality at an early age, lots of things didn't add up, and I was keenly sensitive to the irony of the "do as I say, not as I do" mentality that is rampant in many religious environments.

KG: Where did you go to school?

TW: I graduated from Taylor High School (a small, rural public high school in Lower Arkansas). I went to Duke University for my B.A. (Philosophy and Women's Studies). Going from Taylor High to Duke was a major culture shock. I also went to The New School (NYC) for my first M.A. (Liberal Studies and Philosophy) and Stanford University for my second M.A. (Modern Thought and

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Literature).

KG: What is your sexual preference? Has it always been that way? If no, when and how did it come to change?

TW: I don't like speaking of my sexuality in terms of a "preference." It's an orientation as I see it. I've always aspired to love men, for as long as I understood romantic attraction. As I've gotten older, I've also acknowledged some attraction to womyn. I seldom pursue those attractions because most womyn cannot deal with a man being honest about his attraction to other men. The opposite is not true, so it presents a bit of a double standard. I'm not comfortable with the term bisexual because it suggests that the choice is either/or, when in fact, society devalues only one of those choices (no one's going to mock or bash me if I'm with a woman). I don't like the term same gender loving because I've also loved womyn and want to be remembered as a man who did. I'm a man who loves men (and sometimes womyn). My orientation is not so much always changing as it is evolving.

KG: What kind of work do you do?

TW: I currently work in HIV/AIDS as an Outreach Coordinator. I consider myself to be an educator and hope to eventually get back in a high school or college, sharing my wisdom and experience. I think of myself as a writer. My writing has many mediums: songs, rap, poetry, journalism, scholarly work, and essay.

KG: When were you diagnosed with HIV?

TW: I was actually diagnosed with AIDS on June 27, 1999. I only had 192 T-cells. I'm now well over 1,000 and have been undetectable for most of the time I've been diagnosed.

KG: Are you currently on medication?

TW: Yes -- Efavir, Zerit, and Viramune.

KG: What other therapies or activities or regimens, if any, do you practice in order to maintain such excellent health?

TW: I meditate some, but mainly I play basketball several days a week and workout a bit less than that. I'm a little perturbed by the gym boy culture. I'm a daddy in training and I celebrate that. (Laughs.) I'll probably look my best when I'm 35 or 40.

KG: What impact has your diagnosis had on your life in general?

TW: There's a saying that we should live our lives as if we were dying. When faced with the possibility of death, this became true for me. The quality of my life and experiences changed dramatically after my diagnosis, but not necessarily for the worse. Having to deal with medications and stigma aren't things I would wish on anyone, but I do challenge people to make positive life changes before such a situation occurs. Depression and self-loathing were more responsible for me getting HIV than my inconsistent use of condoms. Maybe the health departments will finally "get it." If we don't deal with the surrounding issues, then giving people condoms, or medications, or whatever, won't do a thing. HIV is preventable, but those who have it must mobilize as a community to become more visible and to renounce the shame. People's attitudes will never change if we remain silent and invisible. We allow people to demonize and mythologize us like vampires or something.

KG: What impact has your diagnosis had on your professional life specifically?

TW: Having AIDS hasn't had much impact on my professional life. I've always been out about my status, in part because I'm a fairly well-known author, writer, poet, and emcee who has written about it extensively. That said, it's more trouble for me to keep my status a secret. I'm fortunate that I'm confident about my abilities, so I try not to let people make me feel that I'm less deserving of any position because of my HIV status. I suppose there are some

fields I have not considered working in because of my status; but the same problems occur around my sexuality. Fortunately, I've had good "coming out" practice, being a gay-identified man and all. If I shrink for others, like I have something to be shameful about, then they might treat me as my body language and spirit expects. If I take the Rosa Parks seat as if it's mine to have, then they'll have to respond accordingly, even if that means a battle. We too often do not take ownership of things that are due us as black gay men or people living with AIDS.

KG: Who would you list as the three most influential people in your life?

TW: My mother is my most influential person, without a doubt. She is the strongest person I know, and I've learned immense lessons from her -- many not through what she's said to me, but through her actions. She's incredibly forgiving, loving, and gracious. She's taken the cards dealt her and raised a full-house, so to speak. I think about how young she was raising me and my seven siblings, and it amazes me how brilliant she was: as a money manager where there were no funds beyond AFDC [Aid to Families with Dependent Children] or food stamps; how great a counselor she was, when it came to conflicts between me and my siblings; how attentive she was as a parent, when it came to advocating for her children in schools. Being a traditional Southern black woman, there are a lot of topics I've been careful about broaching with her, but she always seems to surprise me, when I'm bold enough to bring things up.

My dad is a huge influence as well -- for teaching me both how to be a man and how not to be a man, through both good and bad examples. My father continues to grow and learn lessons, and I've become more forgiving of him over the years, though we seldom even talk.

I suppose we all need heroes of some sort. I only once got an opportunity to meet Essex Hemphill, but he definitely gave me an example of a man who would be unashamedly same-gender loving and sex-positive in spite of his HIV status, and one who wrote with an urgency that I have seldom had to grapple with. Black gay men of his era were forced out of closets by this horrible disease, and unfortunately, the meds came and many of us have chosen to hide again. I'm hoping to create a new ethic, in the spirit of Essex, Melvin Dixon, Assotto Saint, Marlon Riggs, and so many others.

KG: What book has had the most significant influence on you?

TW: *Coming to Writing* by Helene Cixous is my most influential book. She's a French-Algerian feminist writer who wrote of coming up in a chaotic world where so many things seemed unjust and how writing became her savior -- a way she invented the world she wanted to build for herself and make it come true. I think that my writing, while rooted in personal experience, is as much about projecting the world I'd like to live in: free from erotophobia, AIDSphobia, homophobia, racism, misogyny, and class prejudice.

KG: What prompted your book *Red Dirt Revival*, and the corresponding CD *Songs from Red Dirt*?

TW: My first public works would have to be testimonial. I know there are a lot of issues men don't want to confront, and my book and CD were literary and musical projections of my rites of passage from shame and silence into self-love. I am hoping to create one of many templates or blueprints for how we can be different kind of men: self-loving, honorable, more honest with ourselves, men of integrity, and men committed to our communities.

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