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## FEATURE

**The deliberate revolutionary** Gay  
After making his mark on the West Coast, spoken-word artist Tim'm West takes on D.C.

**KIM KRISBERG**  
Friday, April 29, 2005

THE "VIRGIN" steps onto the stage with poem in hand, putting her lips to the mic and pausing for a moment before she lifts her head toward the audience. Then, she slowly unleashes an arsenal of metaphors and similes to let the onlookers know, in no mincing words, that the smell of her lover is no ordinary scent. It's a fierce grip that captures her heart.

When she's done, the audience claps with enthusiasm, a few letting out a holler that signifies they've been there, too.

It was her first time performing at the Front Porch, a relatively new venue in D.C. where spoken-word artists can display their skills on the first Thursday of each month, and no one looks prouder than the show's emcee and founder, Tim'm West. He's sitting next to the stage, smiling as the virgin steps down. As the clock approaches midnight, the intimate back room of D.C.'s Mocha Lounge is standing room only for this monthly spoken word/poetry/music/hip-hop event.

West's Front Porch is a beckoning affair and its performers are opening every closet in the house.

"No matter the story, someone's going to connect," he says. "People can come and be bare and vulnerable."

The Front Porch's artistic mix is a reflection of 32-year-old West himself, an accomplished author, poet, actor, musician, spoken-word and hip-hop artist. He founded Front Porch in December, shortly after moving from California to the District, where he also works coordinating outreach and prevention for the D.C. CARE Consortium, an umbrella group for local organizations in the HIV/AIDS arena.

West began realizing his artistic talents long before building the Front Porch.

HE GREW UP in a rural township outside Taylor, Ark. "[It was] so tiny, it didn't have a name," he says.

West and his seven siblings lived in a three-bedroom house with one room for the girls, one for the boys and one for his mom. They had no running water in the bathroom and still used an outhouse.

Before settling in Arkansas, West recalls being about 3 and roaming the streets of south Dallas with his mother, who asked a stranger for shelter for her and her children. He said that's when he realized the family was homeless.

"We lived this experience that I don't think most of America is aware of," West says. "Urban poverty is centralized, but rural poverty is more invisible."

His mom had done well in high school and then married his father, "this sort of Malcolm X character without the polish," West says. He describes his father as a storefront preacher whose congregation was mostly his own family.

His father, in and out of the family, was the musician. His mother, the singer. And the front porch was where everyone came together to dance, sing and perform. Years later, West's father eventually came to terms with having a gay son, but at first was confused that Tim'm could be a such a "man's man" and still like men — that he was a "gay man of the ESPN variety," West says.

By the time he understood the concepts of relationships and marriage, West knew he wanted to be with a man. He remembers watching "Good Times" and "What's Happening," waiting for the gay character to be introduced.

But being in Taylor, he says it was hard to imagine a world where people could be themselves. When West left for college at Duke University, he finally began meeting more people like himself, although he was still a bit shocked. Before leaving, he had only seen the stereotypes of gay culture — the white leather men and drag queens — "so to see normal black, gay college kids, I was like 'somebody's been lyin'.'"

But more than just meeting other gay people, West more fully realized the extreme poverty he grew up in. His first time back in Taylor after starting college, "I had become this iconic symbol of hope ... there's a lot of pressure to fill the promise of a community," he says.

### MORE FROM THIS AUTHOR

**KIM KRISBERG**

### MORE INFO

The Front Porch takes place on the first Thursday of every month at 8 p.m. at Mocha Lounge, 944 Florida Ave., NW. For details, visit [www.reddirt.biz](http://www.reddirt.biz).

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"We had air conditioned dorm rooms and my family was home with hand fans," he recalls. "I almost had a sense of guilt that I had made it out."

While at Duke, West earned a bachelor's degree in philosophy with an emphasis in women's studies and continued with the creative arts that he had begun in high school. In women's studies classes, he got to talk about gayness in a black context and read poems with gender-free figures.

It was women's studies, he says, that led him to a black gay men's culture. In a way, women's studies reminded him of his own writing experience.

"Writing can be this space where a man can be gay," West explains. "Writing allowed me to thrive and be gay and be myself. You're constantly trying to find these spaces and that's why women's studies appealed to me."

After graduating from Duke, West went on to earn a master's degree in liberal studies and philosophy from the New School in New York City. Then, in 1999, a year into his doctoral studies at Stanford University, he tested positive for HIV.

"I was always very connected to the HIV-positive community," he says. "But you still make mistakes. You still slip."

West took a hiatus from graduate school and threw himself full-time into the arts, although he would later receive a master's degree in modern thought and literature from Stanford.

THE SAME YEAR he found out he was living with the virus, West co-founded the Deep Dickcollective, a group that he describes as the "underground conscious homiesexual mavericks of a movement being affectionately referenced as homohop."

The collective, which was formed in California's Bay Area in response to HIV, still performs together, has recorded acclaimed albums and toured nationally. Part of the group's inspiration, West says, was going to hip-hop shows and hearing artists throw around the word "faggot" and noticing that West and his friends weren't the only ones uncomfortable with it.

Sometimes, Deep Dickcollective even parodies well-known hip-hop songs, such as these lyrics to the tune of Outkast's "Ms. Jackson": "Sorry Ms. Jackson, I like your son; never meant to make his father cry, we thought he told you he was bi."

West also has a successful solo career, with his 2004 debut album "Songs from Red Dirt," a companion to his 2002 book "Red Dirt Revival: A poetic memoir in 6 Breaths."

Both West's music and musings come from his personal experiences and relay an artist who is deeply committed to speaking the truth. Although he has been successful in his own right, he said it's disappointing that black gay club owners don't promote artists such as himself and instead opt to book the more traditional "disco divas."

"I know that with the talent I have, I could go back into the closet and have a record deal," he says. "I'm a little pissed that black gay boys consider buying 50 Cent before they consider buying my CD. ... There's a consciousness behind what you buy."

To help publish more gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender artists struggling to tell their stories, West founded Red Dirt Publishing in 2002. He says most of the authors are gay women of color "who have the courage to speak through personal experience."

West's own poetic memoir, which he describes as a "vulnerable book," in part tries to redefine black masculinity. The memoir is divided by "breaths," because West says he wanted to denote something absolutely necessary for existence, the one thing everybody has in common.

Like the spelling of his first name, which West claims as an affirmation of a childhood speech impediment, his poetry is a declarative affirmation of his life and his love. In the poem "Quickie," he writes:

"Naïve as we once were  
they do not know  
that I also smell your scent  
feel your heart beat too  
our chest-bump is a grind  
our whisper a deferral.  
And they think that I just mean  
that you my boy  
when I say: "what's up nigga?"  
my boy you are too, and then some."

This is the poem West opens with at April's Front Porch gathering. The room is just beginning to fill up as artists sign their names to the open mic list. One by one, performers release their most intimate thoughts on the rhythms of their voices and one after another, the crowd gives up warm applause.

Each Front Porch includes an open mic session as well as featured performers who do longer sets. Michelle Sewell, creator of the poetry and art Web site Poetry Fix, was one such featured poet.

The difference between spoken word and poetry, she says, is that spoken-word artists use their "bodies, voice and the drama to get the information across, to pull the audience on this ride with me."

"My work is designed to have my voice be the vehicle that drives it."

And although D.C. hosts other spoken-word events, an aspect that sets Front Porch apart, Sewell says, is West's drive to make sure it's a co-ed and inclusive affair.

"Tim'm seeks out female features and blends them with male artists," she explains. "And it all comes together like a rich gumbo."

Because of West's efforts, he'll be featured on the cover of the Black Pride Resource Guide, which comes out in May. Jamil Fletcher, who produces the resource guide, says West "represents in an extraordinary way, black gay men — their passion, artistry, pain and sorrow — all of our complexities in one."

And West's Front Porch, he says, has been a great vehicle to showcase alternative talent and bring diverse artists together.

"The common factor is words, experience and music," Fletcher says. "Tim'm has this ability to merge communities."

West says people from around the country have contacted him about starting a Front Porch in their own communities, and he sees the potential for a national movement in all this. He knows that social change is often rooted in the arts.

"I'm too old to be angry; I'm tired of protesting," West says. "But I don't think that makes me less of a revolutionary. It makes me a more decisive, deliberate revolutionary."

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