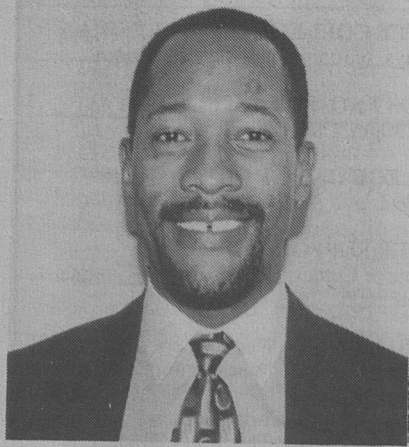


Notes from the Keynote: An interview with Keith St. John



Bennett Law
OITM Staff

(Photo: Bennett Law)
VCLGR Conference keynote speaker
Keith St. John

ALBANY, NY — Keith St. John was the featured morning speaker at the 1995 Conference and Queer Town Meeting of the Vermont Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights on October 28th in Montpelier. He became a national figure in the gay and lesbian community when he was elected to serve on the Albany (NY) Common Council in 1989 making him the first openly gay African-American elected public official in the U.S. From his office in Albany, New York, where he serves as Alderman, 2nd Ward, St. John commented on coalition

politics, growing up black and gay, and the future of the g/l/b movement.

OITM: Can there be gay Republicans? Can a healthy lesbian or gay man participate in the political process from the Republican side of the aisle?

St. John: I'd be naive or dishonest if I were to suggest that there couldn't or shouldn't be a gay or lesbian person who espoused Republican ideals. We're a diverse community. There may be gay and lesbian people who are concerned with their own civil rights and well being who espouse ideals of the Republican Party, such as minimal government intervention and national defense.

OITM: Can or should gay issues be addressed independently of those of other minorities (women's issues, the poor and disenfranchised, communities of color, etc.)?

St. John: There is a relationship that can be drawn among many of these issues, but that's not to say that the issues aren't different enough that they merit something other than a broad brush treatment. There's a value in understanding the distinct nature of each particular issue, but at the same time I don't want to say each should be considered in a complete vacuum. There is an interrelatedness, while some uniqueness.

OITM: In his statement at the Conference, Vermont State Auditor Ed Flanagan suggested that the gay movement in Vermont needs to develop its political savvy, that perhaps gays and lesbians need to make some concessions to the political structure as it exists to enhance our effectiveness in successfully promoting a gay agenda. Do you agree? Can you identify any conscious effort you have made to accommodate the system in an effort to enhance your effectiveness?

St. John: I agree there is benefit in understanding the art of compromise and negotiation, and the importance of being able to work with a great number of people and constituencies to develop the network that we need to propel the movement forward. We need broad base support. What I have found successful for me is to not be as strident as some of the activists. I don't consider myself a gay activist or political activist, though others do. My own success is supported by my ability to go to the middle ground and play against the extremes that the other activists tend to demonstrate.

Being successful takes time. I see and hear all the time that we're too anxious to make substantial progress and don't appreciate the importance of making progress in small steps. It takes a long time to understand how people work and how systems work so we can

work within those systems, to infiltrate them rather than overcome or overpower them.

I worked my way into the system by playing the game while keeping my own ideals and ethics very strong. I try to be a player on the team without reinventing the rules of the game or establishing a new team. I want to be a part of the existing power structure, not create a new one.

OITM: As a gay African-American holding elected office, you are in a rather unique situation. We read and hear in the mainstream press about the racial polarization of America. Can you contrast your experiences coming out as gay with any prejudice you encountered as an African American?

St. John: My mother didn't want my twin sister and me limited by very obvious racial barriers. She was very much a person who found it important for her as a black person to excel in her own right as a person before as a woman, or as black, or as a black woman. She taught us to relate to others divorced from their obvious differences. She wouldn't use her race as an excuse for being mistreated. My race presents a challenge, a reason, or a motivating factor to instill in us the drive to just work harder and prove ourselves as individuals first — as black or gay individuals second. I cannot let my race or sexual orientation cloud my value as an individual.

I have been the recipient of racial discrimination — from the N word to the F word — I have tended to ignore all of that. To do otherwise would rob the energy people need to move themselves forward.

My mother never accepted that I was gay. There's irony there, as it was the way she raised me that enabled me to overcome being gay just as it allowed me to overcome being black.

OITM: Has the positive public sentiment received by Ed Flanagan emboldened you in considering pursuit of higher, perhaps statewide office?

St. John: It's encouraging, although Vermont is very different from New York, particularly Albany County, a rather conservative area.

I envision moving into higher office, but I don't take for granted that moving up may be hard for me. I want to take things one small step at a time. I learn better that way. I don't want to presume to know more than I do. I don't want to spend less time than I need to fully understand the people and structures here. There's more time needed to do what I want to do at this level.

I've been told that I shouldn't consider (a race for the) State Assembly for prospects for a black gay man in this area aren't good, but we'll see. As I get better established here and continue making accomplishments, we'll see if my orientation means a whole hell of a lot down the road.

OITM: Do you have any final thoughts for Vermont's g/l/b community?

St. John: I am very impressed with the work that went into the Conference and the enthusiasm that people there have about the future. Continually develop leadership. It will always be important to reach out to people from a variety of backgrounds. There's a lot we all have to offer. Make work appealing, exciting and comfortable for people, regardless of their limitations and abilities, as we strive to be more inclusive. Allow others to be a part of the movement and a part of the community.

And we can't be blind to the fact that there's a community outside our own. We need to connect to that, too. We need to develop strong working relationships on issues that are not only our own. It's that broadening of our own perspectives that will teach us and allow others to learn about us. ▼

Cliff Townsend Out On His Own: Former Flirtations' solo debut

An OITM Review by Miki Thomas
OITM Staff

ESSEX JUNCTION — I am probably not the best person to review Flirtation Cliff Townsend's debut solo album, *Out Here On My Own*. Cabaret is not exactly my favorite means of entertainment. Given the choice between watching someone at a piano warbling away at the moldy oldies of Tin Pan Alley and an AC/DC tribute band, I would take the AC/DC tribute band, unless of course the cabaret singer starts mixing in "Back in Black" and "Big Balls" into his or her repertoire. This is not to say I don't appreciate a good singer every once in a while, it's just the sameness of the songs chosen and lack of imagination given the arrangements of those songs to which I object.

Out Here On My Own does not do much to change my opinion though there are some nice moments. The biggest problem I have with the album is that damn synthesizer he uses on several of the cuts. Indeed, there is nothing that makes my skin crawl more than a song that has those "boom-chucka" synthesized drums and a synthesizer used to substitute for string and wind arrangements, especially if used to excess. It only succeeds in making the song sound cheap. Examples of this show up on cuts like "I Never Meant to Hurt You," *Godspell's* "Alas For You," *Candide's* "It Must Be So," and most horribly, "Old Man River," which Townsend turns into an aria from a bad opera. Granted, he probably didn't have much of a budget to play with and hence could not afford a full orchestra but there are ways in which he could have arranged a song without overproducing it.

Interestingly enough, he does demonstrate just that several times on the album, thus creating some of the best moments on it. The title song, taken from *Fame*, has Townsend accompanied by a guitar. Its quiet arrangement allows Townsend the opportunity to show off his booming bass voice. Since he was the arranger for the Flirtations during his tenure with the group, it is no surprise that there are several cuts done acappella, with Townsend overdubbing his voice four or five times to create the illusion of a doo wop group. Those cuts, "I Been In the Storm So Long," "Intermission," "You Make Me Feel Brand New" (a 1974 hit for The Stylistics), "The Long Day Closes," "Jingle Bells?" "Shine On Me," and "Tiger Rag" are the most successful on the album, which prove that one does not need that dreaded synthesizer if one has enough talent.

Cliff Townsend does indeed have enough talent to carry an entire album by himself as long as he focuses on what his strengths are and not on electronics. But despite my feelings about *Out Here On My Own*, I still wonder how he would arrange "Big Balls" acappella.

For more information, contact Cliff Townsend, Risco Records, 309 W. 43rd St., New York, NY 10036-6409, (212) 262-1745. ▼



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