

## Joe, Essex, Marlon and Me

By Ron Simmons

We were friends. That's all I can say when people ask about my relationship with Joseph Beam, Essex Hemphill, or Marlon Riggs. We were friends. We were not seeking fame and didn't think any of us would become icons. We were black gay men living, creating, and enjoying life. I reminisce about Marlon whenever I see *Tongues Untied* and I smile whenever someone young shares the impact Essex's work has had in their lives. Today reciting one of Essex's poems seems to be mandatory at any official black gay gathering or diversity event. He would have gotten a kick out of being famous after his death. It's still strange hearing people refer to Joe, Essex and Marlon in the past tense. Only days ago I was hanging out with them and engaging in heated existential conversations about being black and gay.

Joe, I didn't know well. He was handsome, my height, brown-skinned, prematurely balding and four years younger than me. We met at the various conferences of the National Coalition of Black Gays and Lesbians in the mid-80s. I knew him as a writer and the editor of the Coalition's journal, *Black/out: The Magazine of the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays*. Joe seemed serious whenever I saw him but then I only saw him at serious occasions. But even when the occasion wasn't serious, Joe was serious. One incident in Philadelphia that I remember was the time we went to a café for lunch and I didn't leave a tip for the waiter. Joe scowled me, threw extra money on the table and testily explained that he was once a waiter and waiters got below minimum wage because they were expected to get tips. Since then, I tip.

When Joe announced that he was editing the first black gay anthology, *In the Life*, I didn't submit anything because I was in the process of obtaining my doctorate at Howard University and was afraid that a homophobic response from the faculty might jeopardize my degree. By the time he announced a second anthology, I was Dr. Simmons, unafraid and ready to write. I was still writing the first draft of an essay titled "Afrocentric Homosexuality" when Joe died.

In the summer of 1980 I moved to DC after completing two masters' degrees and selling Xerox machines in Albany, New York,. The first time I went to DC was in July 1979 when I attended two weeks of training at the Xerox campus in Leesburg, Virginia. Earlier that spring I had read about the planning of a Third World Gay Conference to coincide with the first national gay march in the newspaper, *Moja: Black = Gay*. The article mentioned ABilly S. Jones as the contact person. Excited that black gay men were finally organizing, I called him immediately. We spoke for over an hour.

When I mentioned to him that I was a writer and had published a magazine at Albany State, Jones suggested I call Sidney Brinkley, the publisher of DC's first black gay magazine, *Blacklight*. Sidney and I were on the phone for nearly three hours and when he learned that I was going to be in Leesburg, he invited me to stay for the weekend. The Saturday I was there, a friend of Sidney's, Gary Martin, hosted a discussion group for black gay men at Sidney's house. It was the first time I experienced being with a group of men and taking part in mature, serious conversation about being black and gay. I returned that October to attend the conference, stayed with Sidney again, and was further introduced to DC's black gay and lesbian community. I was so impressed with the people I met and their friendliness that I knew I had to live in DC.

I didn't want to work a 9 to 5, so I decided to be a professional student and applied for a doctorate and a teaching assistantship at Howard University. I lived off the student stipend and helped Sidney by doing photography and layout for his magazine under the pseudonym "Butch" (don't laugh). Sidney celebrated the magazine's second anniversary in 1981 by throwing a party at a friend's townhouse on P Street, NW. I was mingling among the guests, taking pictures, when I spotted this handsome guy seating near a table with a chess set. I have a thing for short brown-skinned men, so I walked over and introduced myself. He told me his name was Essex Hemphill and months later he would rebuff my sexual advances. I don't remember if we played chess that day.

Essex and I became part of the same social circle. At that time DC was known as a cliquish city and who you knew determined where you were invited. Since every black gay socialite wanted to be featured in Sidney's magazine and I was his photographer, we went to the better house parties. Eventually, the clique I joined though Sidney was a incredible group of talented black gay men and lesbians: performance poets like Essex, Michelle Parkerson, Gate Tate, Gideon Ferebee, Greg Ford, Christopher Prince, and Larry Duckette; musicians, singers and songwriters like Wayson Jones, Dwight Talley and Michael Oby. Some were photographers, painters and dancers. Every weekend there was something to attend: an exhibition, a reading, a music performance, a play or a house party. They were the DC black gay renaissance: talented creative artists brought together in a special time and place. Essex and I were a part of that crowd.

Being friends with Essex meant suffering through good and bad periods. If you were on his shit list you stayed there for a while. I first got on the list in 1982 when I was producing a video on the black literary history of Washington, DC. Essex and Sheila Crider, the scriptwriter, had a falling out during their interview. He was very angry and refused to participate any further. Since I knew him, I

volunteered to speak to him and try to patch things up. He let me know in no uncertain terms that it was unfortunate if I had "unwittingly" involved myself but what had occurred between he and Sheila was unforgiveable and he would never cooperate. He didn't speak to me for over a year.

Our friendship was rekindled in 1983 when he and Michelle Parkerson produced *Murder on Glass*. Michelle asked me to make the title slides and project them on a sheet covering a dead body at a crime scene. I would do similar work in 1987 for their Philadelphia production, *Voicescapes: an urbanmouthpiece*. Working together, Essex and I became friends again and stayed that way for many years. I was sort of his older gay brother who would give him advice time to time, such as the images to use in a production, or a quick lesson in African-American history (one of my majors) in preparation for radio talk shows. Once a particular black homophobic host indigently asked Essex why he had to flout his homosexuality and make it an issue. Why couldn't he be like James Baldwin who everyone knew was gay but since he didn't mention it no one cared? Essex remembered what I had told him about Eldridge Cleaver's book *Soul on Ice* and its attack on James Baldwin's sexuality. "Cleaver did," he replied matter-of-factly. His two-word response silenced the host.

After Joe died, his mother, Dorothy Beam, asked Essex to move into her basement and finish her son's book, *Brother to Brother*. I helped Essex by suggesting two stories, a "First Affair" by Charles R. P. Pouncy and the "Book of Luke" by Guy-Mark Foster. I liked Pouncy's "First Affair" because the story made you wonder and worry for weeks about the fate of the protagonist. The "Book of Luke" I had heard Foster read at an Other Countries event in New York City and was blown away by his telling of the story, particularly the scene where Foster's father shoved his mother's head through a glass door. Essex used both stories.

When he was invited to the National Black Arts Festival in Atlanta, I advised him on the poems he should recite during a panel with Amiri Baraka and Sonia Sanchez. The night before he had done a reading at a local gay bookstore and began with a poem whose first words were "I only have 26 T-cells left." I saw the glowing smiles of admiration on the faces of the young black gay men in the audience, excited about finally seeing their hero, become expressions of sadness, despair and a loss of hope. Essex didn't realize the impact he had on them. He didn't understand how his words affirmed these young men and made their lives real.

To be honest I didn't think Essex was fully aware of the possible homophobic attitude among the audience at the Festival. "This Black Arts Festival crowd is smug in its heterosexuality," I told him. "They would love to hear a poem about a dying homosexual. You shouldn't read that piece." So, we sat on the bed in the hotel

and carefully selected what he would read. First, he read the poem "Family Jewels" about the difficulty of a black man hailing a cab. That won applause from the men. Then he recited "Soft Targets" and spoke of putting nails in heads of Barbie dolls because they didn't tell black girls they were beautiful. The women loved it and shouted amen. The women loved him even more when he read "To Some Supposed Brothers" and asked why black men judge women like slaves having slaves. By then the entire audience was cheering. He ended by reading an excerpt from his essay "Loyalty" that told the "ass splitting truth" of being fucked by the Holy Ghost. They were stunned. Some applauded. Others seem to be confused and unsure of what they had witnessed. Essex and I laughed about that incident for days.

One day, in 1988, when I was teaching full-time in the Radio, TV and Film Department at Howard's School of Communications, I received a call at the office. The man on the phone said his name was Marlon Riggs and that he was producing a documentary film about black gay men called *Tongues Untied*. He mentioned that he had produced a documentary called *Ethnic Notions* and asked if I had heard of it. I had not only heard of it, it was a part of my mass communications class curriculum, and I was embarrassed that I didn't know the name of the filmmaker. To produce *Tongues Untied*, Marlon had reached out to men in Oakland, Chicago, New York and DC. Contacts in one city suggested contacts in another. The men in New York had suggested that he view my photographs of early black involvement in the gay movement beginning in 1971. That spring when Marlon came to DC for pre-production planning, we met at my apartment. He was small, brown-skinned, bald and reserved. Although I was attracted to short, brown-skinned men, I was never attracted to him.

Marlon and I didn't talk much about our personal lives. He told me he taught broadcast journalism at Berkeley. We spoke about films and videos, and shared stories about our experiences as cultural producers. He looked through my slide collection, selected about 30 images and took them with him when he returned to Oakland. Marlon had hoped to give Essex a copy of *Looking for Langston*, a new film produced in London by a black gay filmmaker Isaac Julian. *Looking for Langston* featured Essex's poetry, but since Essex was out of town, Marlon left the tape with me to give to Essex the following day when he returned. I was going to wait until Essex and I could see the film together, but curiosity got the best of me and before I went to bed, I decided to view the first five minutes. I was mesmerized and captivated throughout the entire film. It was the most beautiful and poetic film about black gay men I had ever seen. Essex's poetry told the stories Langston Hughes hinted at, but I believe was afraid to say.

After that first visit, Marlon and I became friends. He would sleep on my sofa whenever he came to DC. I assisted him by getting him access to the university's television studio to film Essex and Wayson Jones performing "now we think as we fuck" and other poems. The opening scenes of Essex, Wayson, Larry Duckette and me greeting each other were taken outside the studio on the corner of 4th and Bryant Streets. He used a close-up of my lips to ask the question, "What is he first: black or gay?" I should have gotten an Oscar for the best homophobe played by a homosexual.

These are the moments that make *Tongue Untied* memorable for me. Before we became Marlon's friends, we were his black gay brothers helping him to make a film. The same was true in other cities. Marlon was a little man living with AIDS who traveled alone across the country with a big camera, sound equipment and lights. His tripod was as tall as he was. Black gay men who didn't know him volunteered to meet him at the airport, carried his equipment, suggested locations and local personalities for filming, and appeared in the film as featured players or faces in the crowd.

We not only worked together, we used each other's work in our work. For example, excerpts from Joe's essay, "Brother to Brother: Words from the Heart", were originally used in a performance by Essex. A year later when Marlon visited DC to do pre-production, he heard a recording of that performance and borrowed the tape. He used Joe's prose and the voices of Essex, Larry, Chris and Gideon chanting "brother to brother" to begin the film's soundtrack and its opening credits. When Marlon asked me to be his still photographer for *Tongues Untied*, its signature photo of Essex in halo embracing Marlon was taken in my living room using a sheet with painted graphics that Essex had used as a backdrop in one of his performances.

When you spoke with Marlon, he had such a serious and quiet demeanor you could tell he had intellect (he graduated from Harvard University.) When I gave him a draft of my essay, "Afrocentric Homosexuality," he returned it weeks later with so many comments and corrections it was dripping red ink. Marlon said the essay was really three essays: a literary criticism, a historically piece, and a philosophical piece. He suggested I expand the literary criticism and drop the rest. I did and when I submitted the finished manuscript to *Brother to Brother*, Essex suggested that I change the title to "Some Thoughts on the Challenges Facing Black Gay Intellectuals." It was my first published essay.

My friendship with Marlon led to my second published piece after Joe Wood, the editor of an anthology on Malcolm X, approached him about submitting an essay. In 1991, Bruce Perry's biography on Malcolm X alleged that Detroit Red, Malcolm's

incarnation as a hustler, made money by letting gay men suck his dick at the YMCA in upper Manhattan. This allegation focusing on Malcolm's sexuality was going to be mentioned in an essay by Arnold Rampersad and Wood wanted to include a gay perceptive in the book. Marlon was too busy to write an essay, so he proposed that we write something together. Wood agreed.

After we brainstormed a series of questions and discussion points about Malcolm X, Marlon and I had three long phone conversations. He recorded the calls, had them transcribed and sent me the transcripts. I edited hundreds of pages of transcripts into a short dialogue between two black gay men on Malcolm X. I knew people would be resistant to the idea of Malcolm engaging in a homosexual act so that shaped my first question. After I finished the manuscript, Marlon agreed to have my name listed first because I was seeking tenure and had to publish. We called the piece "Sexuality, Television and Death: A Black Gay Dialogue on Malcolm X" and I loved the title because it was intriguing. *Black Scholar* called it one of the most insightful and perceptive pieces in the book.

In some ways Marlon was my role model of an intellectual in charge who took the initiative necessary to make a film. I remember in 1990 attending a post-production session in Oakland for his film *Color Adjustment*. The dim control room resembled the bridge of the Starship Enterprise. Marlon sat in a huge leather chair in the center of the room. In front of him were several technicians sitting at consoles flashing colored lights. He and I were the only black people in the room. Everyone stared at a wall of large video monitors. The technicians followed Marlon's script that posted the edits down to the second but many times he would command them to change the timing or try a different effect. They obeyed him without question. Occasionally, a young white woman would enter and ask Marlon if he wanted any water, tea or refreshments. Although I was older, observing their deference towards him made me want to be like Marlon when I grew up.

I was very angry with Marlon and Essex when they died because they did not take my advice on how to stay healthy. All of us were HIV-positive and at that time there were no effective treatments. In 1975 I had started practicing holistic health when I became friends with heterosexual cultural nationalists who taught me a more traditional African way of thinking and healing. In 1991, I joined a self-help support group of HIV-positive black gay men called Us Helping Us, People Into Living, that advocated holistic health involving the mind, body and spirit. I changed my diet and started meditating and fasting. Practicing a holistic approach to my health sustained my immune system and kept me alive until the development of medications that worked. I started the three-drug cocktail in 2003.

Marlon eventually experienced kidney failure and was on dialysis. Plus, he was taking over 20 pills a day. Once when I was on the West Coast, I was appalled when we went to Korea Town and he ordered chicken feet. By then I had known him for several years and didn't mind voicing my opinion. I urged him to change his diet and to leave his lover Jack, an arrogant older white man who felt a strong need to show off his intelligence around black people. He constantly criticized or corrected Marlon in public. I never met a black person who liked Jack including Marlon's friends and family. Jack salvaged scrap for a hobby and their living room was full of dirty junk. Marlon had to stop dialysis at home because mold began growing on the equipment. I begged Marlon to leave Jack and get out of that house.

Marlon had boyfriends and fuck buddies in other cities but I think he stayed with Jack because he was afraid of dying alone. Jack had already buried one lover; Marlon was just another one. After he died, Marlon's mother told me that he and Jack had had a heated argument at the hospital one morning and afterwards Marlon announced that he was going to refuse dialysis. That meant death in a matter of days. True to his word, Marlon released himself from the hospital, went home and died.

Essex also became sicker as his HIV disease progressed. He started needing blood transfusions every few months. Eventually it was a transfusion every couple of weeks. At one point he was staying with his mother in Maryland close to DC. I begged him to see my herbalist, Yemi Bates, for advice on possible alternatives. I told him I would pick him up, drive him to her and pay whatever she charged. He said "Ron, if there was anything that could be done, my doctor would have told me." At that moment, my disappointment in him was devastating. How could he be such a cultural radical who challenged the status quo yet not question medical doctors who admitted that they didn't have a treatment for his fatal disease? He died November 4, 1995.

I was angry for years. Looking back, I realize that I was angrier at Essex's death than Marlon's death perhaps because Essex was a closer friend and within driving distance. I kept thinking of Audre Lorde's essay about people dying stupid. To make matters worse, I had to attend his funeral at his mother's conservative church. The service was a travesty. It was obvious that the minister officiating hadn't known Essex. There was no mention of his gay poetry that had been praised and rewarded with fellowships. The one poem they read had been written years ago in honor of his grandmother. A spokeswoman reminisced about happy family gatherings when everyone would sit around and "laugh" and she pronounced it with such an upper-class Bostonian accent ("*larph*") that you wondered who she was talking about. The Essex we knew had told us about his childhood trauma and the

spousal abuse he witnessed. Months before he died, he was planning to sue one of his relatives for fraud. During the funeral service, there were two separate "calls to Christ" and when they mentioned that anyone could join the church "regardless of their culture" I wondered if they were referring to me since I was the only one wearing traditional African attire.

Essex's gay and lesbian friends who attended the funeral discussed what we should do if the service became too outrageous for our sensibilities. We could disrupt the service if necessary similar to the way Assotto Saint did at writer and activist Donald Woods' funeral. Assotto commandeered the microphone and stated that he was there to affirm Donald as a proud gay man and invited others to stand up and join him. Half the church had stood up. I called our friend, the radical black lesbian and author Barbara Smith, for advice about Essex's impending last rites. She said the funeral was for the family and to let them do whatever they wanted. If we wanted to pay our last respects to Essex, we should do something separate.

So, Essex's friends like Chris, Michelle, Wayson and others began planning. We decided to do a performance of his work the way he would have wanted it done, but to do it right would take time. We had to find an auditorium, rent equipment, assemble a backstage crew and schedule rehearsals. We scheduled the memorial close to his birthday in April. They asked me to give the eulogy. It was very emotional. I cried as I wrote it, every time I read it and when I delivered it.

It cited his humble beginnings in southeast Washington, DC, and his legacy of challenging racism, sexism, homophobia and the local authorities. It spoke of the impact his words had on the lives of black gay men and it ended with excerpts from a letter Essex had received from Linda Evans, a radical white lesbian imprisoned because she so resisted the power structure that she attempted to bomb the nation's Capital. In her letter she told Essex of her deep respect and admiration for his work, and how she would copy his poems and essays by hand so that she could give them to other prisoners. "It's so clear a war of genocide is raging around us," she wrote, "You don't hesitate to talk about it, to rail against it, to call this war by name."

I ended saying, "That is the legacy of Essex Hemphill." Afterwards as people were leaving the auditorium, Essex's mother approached me. No one had noticed her sitting in the front row. "Thank you," she said.

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