Born This Way

Archbishop Carl Bean is gaga about AIDS advocacy—and his rediscovered disco classic.

March 29, 2011 By Trent Straube

Much has happened to Carl Bean since he recorded the gay disco anthem "I Was Born This Way" back in 1977. In the past 34 years, he left the music industry, founded a church for LGBT African Americans and also started the Minority AIDS Project, which was one of the first agencies to cater to HIV-positive blacks and Latinos in Los Angeles. Add that to what he did *before* 1977 and you've got enough juicy material to fill a book. Bean's memoir—*I Was Born This Way*—came out last summer and is still generating buzz. Now that pop star Lady Gaga has released her own gay anthem "Born This Way," the spotlight is shining yet again on the archbishop. And that's a good thing for HIV/AIDS advocates because Bean is well-versed about the virus, the black church, childhood sexual abuse and a taboo topic he calls "the big piece [of AIDS advocacy] that America and the world is very fearful of discussing."

In the 1960s, you enjoyed a successful career as a gospel singer in Harlem, Newark, Chicago, Los Angeles. Then in 1977, as an openly gay man, you were signed by Berry Gordy to record the gay disco anthem "I Was Born This Way" for a Motown label—and it became a No. 1 hit. But by 1982, you were ordained by the Christian Tabernacle Church, which led to founding your own Unity Fellowship Church of Christ. Was the growing AIDS epidemic a deciding factor in your career switch?

It was heavily in there, but in the beginning my concern was that many of my peers had a hateful idea of God and Christians. How could I say to those peers that there are others who read [the Bible] differently—that was the driving incentive.

But HIV was there at the same time. Having been a black gospel singer, I knew everyone [in the black church] knew that the church organist was gay, that the best singer in the choir was gay, but it was never talked about. But now there [was] this other thing that we [couldn't] ignore. In the gay community, they said Silence=Death [a popular ACT UP slogan]. That personally spoke to me, that you can't be silent now, you can't let people die around you. I just knew I had love for my fellow human beings and that the Christ consciousness in me said, "I am my brother's keeper."

Is that what led you to start the Minority AIDS Project, also in the early '80s?

Absolutely! Someone pulled my collar and said, "We're going to see to it that you get money for the [black] community, but they will never fund a church, so you need a secular, tax-exempt

entity.” After reading about me in USA Today, the National Institute of Mental Health called me and said, “We have been trying to get the black church involved and can’t get them to budge. We were given instructions to enhance what you’re doing and make an example of what’s possible across black America.” That’s what really lifted me into arenas I had no knowledge of. [That and] a core group of black women in L.A. who surrounded me with their love and [helped me get funding].

How has Minority AIDS Project changed over the years?
The biggest thing is now we have a strong mental health component. That’s been my dream—to see a mental health department for [HIV-positive] gay men where they can feel comfortable. If you don’t believe you are worth anything, you’re not going to have safer sex and protect yourself.

And through the church, you run a housing program for people with HIV, called Dignity House. How has that changed over the years?
When I first got Dignity House, it was about hospice care, where people could go to die. In those days, it was young gay men. Now, it’s six transgendered women with dual diagnoses of HIV and substance abuse. We help them become sober and able to live on their own.

Based on your years in the trenches of HIV work, what messages would you like to get out to *POZ* readers and others in the field?
I don’t want us to become lax because we’re too close to HIV and it’s like second nature to us. We need to be reminded that there are still many people being diagnosed who are very fearful of letting anyone else know they are living with virus, still wondering how to tell their family, and if they are going to be [kicked out] of their family. Sometimes they live secretly because of the homophobia. That is a constant reality, and we can’t assume that newly diagnosed people are OK. They’re not! I see kids walk into my pastoral office in 2011 that are no different than folks were in 1983. It’s the same effect when they receive that news.

Meanwhile, the Unity Fellowship Church of Christ continues to grow, with congregations in New Jersey, Brooklyn, California, Baltimore, North and South Carolina, California, Washington, DC, and more. Do all these churches remain, like your original one, focused on the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) community? And what role does HIV play?

All Unity Fellowship churches are LGBT; all my clergy are gay or lesbian. The bulk of my clergy are all men living with the virus. Everyone in the denominations knows it; there are no secrets around that. I say to them, “Create an environment where persons living with AIDS can stand up and testify to what their journey is and how their bodies are doing.”

Are there many straight people in the pews?
Over the years, parents and family have joined. We have women—heterosexual and lesbian—who are comfortable there because they have the virus. But [the church’s purpose of offering Christianity to gay people] is still the same. There’s a hell of a lot of fundamentalism in America, and homophobia among Christians is still rampant—the crap behind [stopping gay marriage

equality] is all church-driven!

In your book, you talk a lot about growing up gay in the black church and the conflicting messages of that environment. Gay people were visible and accepted—but only if it wasn't openly discussed, and at times, they were ridiculed behind their backs. Obviously homophobia and denial exist across the social and racial spectrum, but does the black church have specific challenges in addressing taboo topics?
In any oppressed community, there is an underlying need to appear to be liked. So you go out of your way to hide anything that might point a finger at you for being inferior. For instance, when I first started doing AIDS work, I knew one of the things I'd have to battle [in the black community] is the notion, "Here's something else they're going to blame on us" and "That's those white boys in West Hollywood, but that's one thing that's not us." I had to say, "That's not true."

The most controversial topic you write about in your book has to be childhood sexual abuse. You are very frank about the many instances of abuse in your past, stating that if HIV had been around then, you'd be positive today. You're also very clear that such abuse doesn't cause homosexuality. What has the response been to talking of childhood sexual trauma?
Everywhere I go, every book reading, every single signing, the first thing, when we open up the floor, I hear is, "Thank you for telling my story." The more I talk, the more it comes out [that many people have experienced childhood sexual abuse]—females as well as [straight] men and gay men.

We still have a major problem dealing with human sexuality. We all know there's sex occurring in prison and that it has nothing to do with orientation, but with physical and emotional needs [and with issues of control and violence]. America and the world are very fearful of discussing the truth of human sexuality. And that's what we've got to do to stem the tide, not only of this virus [but also other sexually transmitted infections]—discuss the truth of human sexuality.

Finally, I'd be remiss not to talk about Lady Gaga. I like to imagine that millions of people go online to look up her track "Born This Way" and instead come across your song "I Was Born This Way" and then learn about you! The two songs are not related, but are you getting media attention because of the similarities?

Motown publicity photo, 1977

Yes! It amazes me. And now a gentleman involved in the Gaga tune—he's a cowriter—came to church on Sunday and we had preliminary talks about recording a mix or overdubbing or layering [my vocals onto a Gaga remix]. I said, "Man, I'm a hundred years old. What are you talking about?"

It wouldn't be the first time folks rediscovered the tune. In 1987, the Better Days remix of "I Was Born This Way" became a hit, and you did club events, which raised enough money to financially rescue Minority AIDS Project. Would you be willing to hit the clubs again?

This May, I'll be 67. The only reason I'd [tour] this time is to say, Look at me: Gray hair, I've been a queen my whole life! I've loved and have been loved, and you can do the same. You can live to be a senior, you can have a rich and rewarding life, you can raise children—whatever you want! My very presence refutes all those lies about gay [people]. And that's the best thing I can do at this point in our fight. And that would be a powerful statement.

Archbishop Carl Bean's memoir I Was Born This Way *(Simon & Schuster) is out now. For information on the Unity Fellowship Church Movement, visit* unityfellowshipchurch.org*.*

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