

"Tell 'em you heard it from Karen W."

KAREN WILLIAMS

interviewed by Toni Armstrong Jr.

Karen Williams readily admits that performing stand-up comedy "is my way to find sanity amidst the insanity of my life." She tested the performing ground as a ramp model; she also coordinated, produced, and emceed fashion shows. Later, she added her writing talents to the mix, and premiered her comedy act at local Bay Area clubs. In addition to her emceeing and performances at festivals and conferences, she has been seen on Olivia cruises, has done humor workshops, and has been a featured artist/guest speaker at several colleges and universities. She has been a nominee every year since 1989 for the Cable Car Outstanding Comic of the Year Award, and was a finalist three times in the Bay Area Black Comedy Competitions. Her columns and writings have appeared in various publications, including 'Outlines' and 'Aché.' She is the mother of two sons.

HOT WIRE: WHEN DID YOU START PERFORMING?

My actual performing career per se started when I was young. I played guitar for the family, and tapdanced, and actually dreamed of being a dancer. In the '70s I had an all-women dance troupe of four or five. I'm not even sure if we had a name—it was just a group I put together with friends of mine. We were living in Bridgeport, Connecticut, about five women musicians. We did a few performances, and it was a big deal at the time. We wore African garb and did Afro-Haitian stuff; we were an eclectic little group. But I sustained a knee injury, which kind of cut the dance thing out. I had the good fortune to be able to do some modeling later on. You know, most of the time they tell you you're dead when you're thirty, but between twenty-eight and thirty-three I had some good years. I moved to the Bay Area and did some ramp work. I've been a writer all my life. Journal-writing was my youthful consolation, and I'm an avid reader...just that general creative energy looking for an outlet. I went to Bronx High School of Science, so I have all that kind of scientific, analytical-type thinking mixed in

with this artistic stuff. I tried beauty school, and I went to architectural school when I was about thirty.

SO THE COMEDY CAREER...?

The comedy has been kind of an evolution. I always felt this compelling thing about age: by twenty-one I wanted to do this, and by twenty-five I wanted to do this...well, comedy is great, because you can just wake up one day at fifty-five and decide to do comedy. And you've got fifty-five years of your life to put out there. I would be suspicious of someone who's twenty-one and a good comic; you just don't have it yet. So the comedy kind of evolved out of my leaning towards wanting to perform, feeling like I had things to say, challenging all that inner stuff that puts you out on the stage, and my writing. I just look at it as a wealth of background. I did scripts for Columbia on consignment; I was a ghost writer; I've been a speech writer—I've done all these odds-and-ends type things. I had a business writing service of my own for a couple of years—I did word processing, and edited students' papers; even in my early years of college I was the one who stayed up all night doing everyone else's papers.

WHEN DID YOU FIRST START PERFORMING COMEDY?

I did my first performance in July of 1984. It came out of telling someone a funny story about riding the bus in Oakland and having the guy crack up all over the place. He had put on a tape recorder, and I took it home and listened later. Then I was in a Hyatt lounge one night, and a comedian friend of mine named Dap Harris came by. He'd been doing comedy around Oakland for years in local clubs, and he was kind of showboating in front of his friends, "Oh, come see me at such-and-such a club." I blurted out, "I do comedy, too" in front of all these people. (The person I was with said, "You do?") So Dap offered me five minutes of his act, and I was a wreck. He told me to

get there at eight o'clock. My knees were shaking, and I was out of my body with fear. If I were to give my primary motivation for doing comedy—along with all the other performance desires—it's for some kind of inner, I guess you would say, transformation, evolution. I came to grips with the fact that I was dominated by fear, that fear ruled my life, that growing up in New York, the typical family stuff and all of that—I began to see that I was just dominated by my fears. So I asked myself what I could do to just confront these fears head on. I had the information that the number one fear is standing in front of people, and I wanted to challenge myself with that. So the comedy is like a truth or dare kind of thing for me—there is something very raw about standing in front of people, just me, the mic, and my truth. With this guy, I did the show at 11:30, and I was terrified. It was a club by the airport; everyone was black, and everyone was drunk—those were the common denominators. I went up there and this hush fell—they didn't expect me to be funny. I was dressed to the teeth, and six feet tall, and I don't know what they expected—I was very modelly in the beginning. But they liked me. So for a couple of years I did what you'd call the comedy chitlin' circuit around Oakland.

HOW DO YOU SELECT MATERIAL?

The focus of the material back then had more cultural undertones to it, in terms of talking about inner city life. And then I was invited by Marga Gomez to perform during some Gay Day event in June of '86 or '87, and she was very clear in emphasizing to me, "Now you realize this is a Gay Day thing, you know your name's going to be in the paper, and everybody's going to know you're gay..."

WERE YOU OUT THEN?

I call that my second coming out. I'm going to write a book about what it's like to be out for ten or twelve good years and then have a couple of relationships

with guys. I had my son, and then realized that I was still a lesbian. I think it would be interesting—the whole identity process, the whole thing we go through about who's lesbian. I kind of go along with Cheryl Clarke, who says that a lesbian is anyone who calls herself one. Let's forget about all these other definitions. My friends used to tease me and call me a "heterosexual lesbian." One friend insists I just got tired, and one of the guys said he was going to take care of me; I had never been pulled by that before, but I think I was then. It's an incredible thing to truly live your own life, and we don't have many role models. So I think that part of why I accepted Marga's offer and confronted my own homophobia the second time around was because I really wanted to come out again. And wanted

event, I began to get asked to do more and more things within the gay and lesbian community...

...AND YOU STARTED GETTING WOMEN'S FESTIVAL GIGS, AND EMCEEING....

...all that kind of work. So it's been an evolution. I think the first national thing I did was in Bloomington [at the night showcase in 1988], and the following year I emceed the entire festival, which put me out there visibly.

HOW DO YOU SELECT MATERIAL WHEN YOU'RE PERFORMING FOR THE LESBIAN-FEMINIST AUDIENCE?

Well, it's been an interesting thing. I have some very basic things that I use. I'm at a point now where I'm looking to



Karen Williams: "I'm aware of when I'm being confrontational, and I'm not afraid of it. If it means that we end up dialoguing afterwards, or it gets people to think about something—or it gets me to think about something—then it's okay." (Pictured at the 1991 AWMAC conference in Durham last May.)

to come out in a way that would have me serving the community more. That was a conscious thought. Because I came out initially as a black feminist, because I came out with some kind of personal-political agenda, it was important for me to go through all the thinking processes, and make a commitment on that level. I had had a chance to really see that for the most part, the heterosexual community is very involved with itself—and even more specifically, the lesbian community has to take care of itself. I'm a part of that community, and I can make an active contribution to its well-being. From that first

have more time to do more writing. I used to be very prolific. In fact, when I first started, I thought that every act had to be different! Material is an ever-growing thing. I have some stuff that I know will get laughs, so I use it...

...THE VELOUR BLINDS, YOUR IMITATION OF HUMAN NEWBORNS...

...yeah, I love those. You know, singers can get away with singing their favorites, so there's a part of me that knows that even though they've heard it ten times before, people *like* to hear certain routines more than once.

YOU ENJOY THEATER WORK IN GENERAL, RIGHT?

Oh, yes. Lately I find myself moving to do more dramatic acting. I had an opportunity to be in a play that had two extended runs with Theatre Rhinoceros. And I'm also involved with Global Riot [the San Francisco-based gay and lesbian improv group]. We thought we were the only ones, but we found out there's another gay improv group in Atlanta. It's full of brilliant people; it's very exciting.

SO IN THE '90S YOU'RE LOOKING FORWARD TO DOING A COMBINATION OF COMEDY STAND-UP, DRAMATIC THEATER, WRITING, AND TEACHING?

Right. All of those things, and raising my youngest son, and getting my master's degree. It seems like a lot, but...I read a lot of philosophy, and I've read philosophers who say it should be a matter of course that we do three or four things in life; it's just that in this American way of life we compartmentalize things. Like, "Well, I'm a plumber and that's what I must be; can't be a plumber *and* a poet or an artist"—even though most of us end up doing those things because those are the things that sustain us. So I get a chance as a comic to be a poet, to be a philosopher, to set agendas...I'm very aware of when I'm being pointed with the lesbian-feminist community, because I have some real philosophies about how I see us functioning in the world.

HOW DO YOUR PHILOSOPHIES COME OUT IN THE ROUTINES?

Sometimes I don't worry about being funny even, I just put it out there. Things that are going on. Then as a comic—and being so close to what my truth is—it also means that things I'm moving through on a personal level have relevance as issues. For example, I had to confront a battering situation myself, which brought me in tune with what I read about battering within lesbian relationships. I find myself searching for how I can take something like that and make it a transformational thing, how I can put it out to this audience of several hundred or several thousand people I've got in front of me, so that one person who's sitting there in the show and is terrified because she has to go home later and may get her eye punched can have some support. That's what I believe is our strongest point as a community: that whole thing of support. It gets overworked, and we think,

Toni Armstrong Jr.

oh another group—but I don't know where we'd be without these groups. I don't know where I'd be without the groups. I also talk about education. I know a lot of us are teachers, and not just because we need a job. I believe it's out of some inner commitment to the educational system as a whole. Since I have a child, I'm kind of automatically invested in how that system works. You know, in a lot of ways I don't want us to become like the gay males. I'm real aware that we could become totally hedonistic. I have to be careful because I don't want it to sound judgement-filled, but I have opinions about the male approach to life, where everyone is available for you to use. And in fact you've built an entire system that's built on consumerism. I don't want us to become "consumers" of one another's talents and labors and support systems; I want us to be aware that it's circular, it's whole, it's round—and that everyone who participates in it and gets something from it has an *obligation* to put something back in it. That way it can keep existing. I want to see women as a group, lesbians in particular, have wealth, and have excellent health—mental, physical, emotional, spiritual—and raise children who are aware and responsible, and get away from just the caretaking.

BEING GAY MEANS MORE THAN OWNING NICE THINGS AND HAVING SEX WITH PERSONS OF THE SAME GENDER.

Absolutely—that is much too shallow. And to everyone who doesn't want to "get involved," I say, you *are* involved; to not sleep with a man is a radically revolutionary statement, and however quiet you are about it—if you're in the backwoods of Iowa—you are a revolutionary if you decide not to become a consumer in that system. So that's what happens when people come and they sit there; I know that laughter opens people up and that you can put stuff in once they're opened up. I work hard to keep myself relatively informed and pure of spirit, as corny as that sounds, so I don't abuse the power that I have on stage. I'm very aware of it. I look out at the faces, and I can *see* when people really don't want to hear about issues like race. And I don't care, because I'm looking in the face of it, and saying that we have a responsibility to work things out.

WHEN YOU PERFORM IN THE FEMINIST CULTURAL VENUES, YOU PLAY

TO PREDOMINANTLY WHITE LESBIANS. WHAT'S IT LIKE PERFORMING TO DIFFERENT TYPES OF AUDIENCES?

It has evolved. There are so many differences—starting out in black clubs, and having that almost family-like feeling, but in a way *dysfunctional* family-like feeling, because you've got brothers and you've got dads in there. All that kind of oppressive energy stuff. In the beginning, though, I felt I was flying free just because I was doing it. It was radical for black men to see a black woman standing there talking about her experience. I entered the black comedy competitions, and I came in as a finalist, and it was all exciting in that sense to be accepted. But as I've moved more toward the gay and lesbian community and had to confront the homophobia that's definitely in the black community, I've had to undergo radical changes. I find that in mixed gay and lesbian audiences I'm able to say some things that I don't say when I'm just dealing with women. It's all very, very different. And I tend to perform for lesbian audiences because I like the woman-energy that's there. When I play the mixed gay and lesbian, I call the men on their lack of attention to our agenda items, like children, and childcare, and healthcare...

SO DEPENDING ON WHO HAPPENS TO BE IN THE AUDIENCE, YOU TEND TO BE FAIRLY CONFRONTATIONAL ABOUT ISSUES THAT PERTAIN TO THEM.

Yes, I pick the material carefully. And when I'm with white audiences, it becomes very important for me not to get into being just "an entertainer"—as in doing neutral fluff; I'm not that intent on just making people feel good. I don't think that's my focus. If you're a little uncomfortable—if I'm a little uncomfortable, if I have to look into the face of someone who really doesn't like what I have to say—I'm a human being, so that will get to me. I'm aware of when I'm being confrontational, and I'm not afraid of it. If it means that we end up dialoguing afterwards, or it gets people to think about something, or it gets *me* to think about something, then it's okay.

YOUR ACT IS SIGNIFICANTLY DIFFERENT FROM WHAT MOST AUDIENCES EXPECT TO SEE IN FEMINIST CULTURAL VENUES. WHAT KIND OF FEEDBACK HAVE YOU GOTTEN?

Most of the time I have to say people like me, and I have a sense that I like myself. I actually get a lot of, "Oh, you were great," which is good and validating. I listen to thoughtful criticism from people. Sometimes I have gotten things back from people about class stuff. And every now and then, even though it's unspoken, I know that white women don't like it when I say stuff about them being white women. That never really gets said to my face, but I can feel it. I think that sometimes there's a way that this whole color thing has forced people into silence on both sides. I don't think that we're even scratching the surface...

...OH, I THINK YOU'RE GOUGING IT.

I gouge it, yeah, because I know we can all just go along and feel comfortable in the friendships that we have, and the support systems that we have set up—but are we really digging deep and seeing what's really happening? My good friend Margaret Sloan-Hunter does anti-racism workshops; I haven't attended any, because they're for white women. Black women sometimes react to that—like why is it just for white women?—but I really feel that there are some issues that are none of my business, and racism—on that level, in terms of doing that kind of work—is not my business; I have my own issues. And so I agree with Margaret—we each have to do our own work; I say, don't just get settled in on the good job you have, and the fact that now you have this beautiful home, and think you don't really have to be concerned about racism any more, even in your own community. People are not comfortable around race and class issues. And sometimes I feel bad, because it may be perceived that I'm taking stabs at the very people who I feel do more work around issues. I'm very proud of us as a women's community for the work that we do.

PROUD BECAUSE...?

Just in terms of being more conscious of our part. We've had to deal with some type of self-identify stuff and look within, just by being lesbians. We are pioneers of self-exploration, because we've had to figure out how we're going to have this identity and function in the world. It becomes all-absorbing. And I feel like it's a luxury that I can be a black lesbian mom comic, and make a dime doing it....I think of Bessie Smith; I have a heritage of African-American women who have died, leaving behind a legacy of alcohol

ism, or poor health, or no money. I'm able to feed myself doing my craft, and I never forget that, because it's phenomenal. I was typing for fifteen years (and I still type well—about 100 words per minute), so I was able to feed myself while I was doing this other thing. I still occasionally work temp, work days here and there while I'm at home—like everybody else, I've got to pay my rent. I've got kids to take care of, responsibilities like that. But largely I support myself as a comic, and that's a lot.

YOU HAVE A GREAT TIME POKING FUN AT THE "WOMEN O' COLOR" TERM.

I don't know where it came from, and I kind of don't like the hodge-podge of "women of color"—what does that

Armenian, and they don't have any sense of the traditions of their families—they all just think they're "American" now. Well, what's this "American" thing? If I say I'm African-American, it means I'm claiming that I'm of African heritage, and African culture, although I may not know the specific tribe. But even if I know my parents are from North Carolina, there's a place I can go and look at, and get something from. But this saying "of color" gives me nothing; it means nothing.

HISTORICALLY, OF COURSE, IT BEGAN TO POP UP AS A RESULT OF A LOT OF CAUCUS-TYPE WORK, AND IT MEANS "NOT WHITE." SO MANY FEMINISTS AND LESBIANS OF OTHER-THAN-CAUCASIAN HERITAGE HAVE TRADITIONALLY HAD

I really don't know. I'd have to think of something that had a total woman-based something. I'm leaning more towards the reclaiming of the cultural backgrounds. If you have several, then pick one. And in terms of the racial identity, I prefer black, white, yellow, red, brown—you know. And if that's what "of color" is supposed to mean—the alliance of the black, red, yellow, brown, and not white, then I think you need to have parentheses and put that in there, because I don't really know what "of color" means.

YOU ALSO TALK IN YOUR ACT ABOUT THE TERMS "FEMINIST" VERSUS "WOMANIST"...

Like I say, with all due respect to Alice Walker, I just feel as though the word "feminist" still conjures up the idea of mad lesbians running through the '70s seducing housewives, and I think that in some ways women are still afraid of the term. To me, it means what I am—it means that I am a lesbian with a political framework to my life. I like the part about feminism that symbolizes political consciousness.

SPECIFICALLY...?

Specifically that I am a woman-identified woman, that I stake my life on the community of women. "Womanist" sounds to me like it's broader in the sense that it encompasses those women who make alliances with women but want to have relationships with men. That's what it means to me. Although there are feminists who still have relationships with men, I think "feminist" has been more radical from the standpoint that those of us who are lesbian—who could not just come out as lesbians—called ourselves "feminists," and it encompassed more of the lesbian agenda. That's the way I looked at it from the '70s, and "womanist" has come out of the '80s.

FEMINISM MEANS EQUAL RIGHTS FOR WOMEN FIRST, WITH THE NON-NEGOTIABLE SUBCOMPONENTS THAT RACISM IS NOT ACCEPTABLE; HOMOPHOBIA, CLASSISM, AND OTHER -ISMS ARE NOT ACCEPT-

continued on page 54



Left: Baby Karen, born August 13, 1952. Right: Karen Ford (Williams) at a sixth grade assembly at P.S. 69 in the Bronx.

mean? I don't know what it means. And when I talk to other women o' color, they don't know what it means either. Is it skin color? Are we talking about background—are you Philippina? are you Latina? are you Greek? What are you? I don't know what "of color" is supposed to do. It's a blanket that's being thrown over—I don't know if it's being thrown over racial connotations, or over cultural differences. I think we *all* need to reclaim parts of our cultural heritage, that's what I say from the stage. I was at Antioch for a week and I got to sit in a class of students who were all exploring their cultural backgrounds. It was amazing how little these nineteen- and twenty-year-olds knew about their backgrounds. You know, some of their parents come from Russia, or they're

TO BE WITH MOSTLY WHITE WOMEN IN ORDER TO BE IN A FEMINIST COMMUNITY. THE DESIRE TO MEET AND BE WITH LESBIANS WHO ARE OTHER-THAN-WHITE HAS BEEN ONGOING, ESPECIALLY IN FESTIVAL SETTINGS.

Then even saying "non white" might be better.

AS I UNDERSTAND IT, THE TERM "WOMEN OF COLOR" HAS BEEN INTENDED TO BE INCLUSIONARY RATHER THAN EXCLUSIONARY.

I just think the term "of color" is too generic.

WHAT WOULD YOU REPLACE IT WITH?

ABOUT THE WRITER: Toni Armstrong Jr. has full-time careers in both special education and women's music & culture. Interests include movies, sign language, vampires, neurophysiology, pinball, 'The Brady Bunch,' and the occasional nap.