

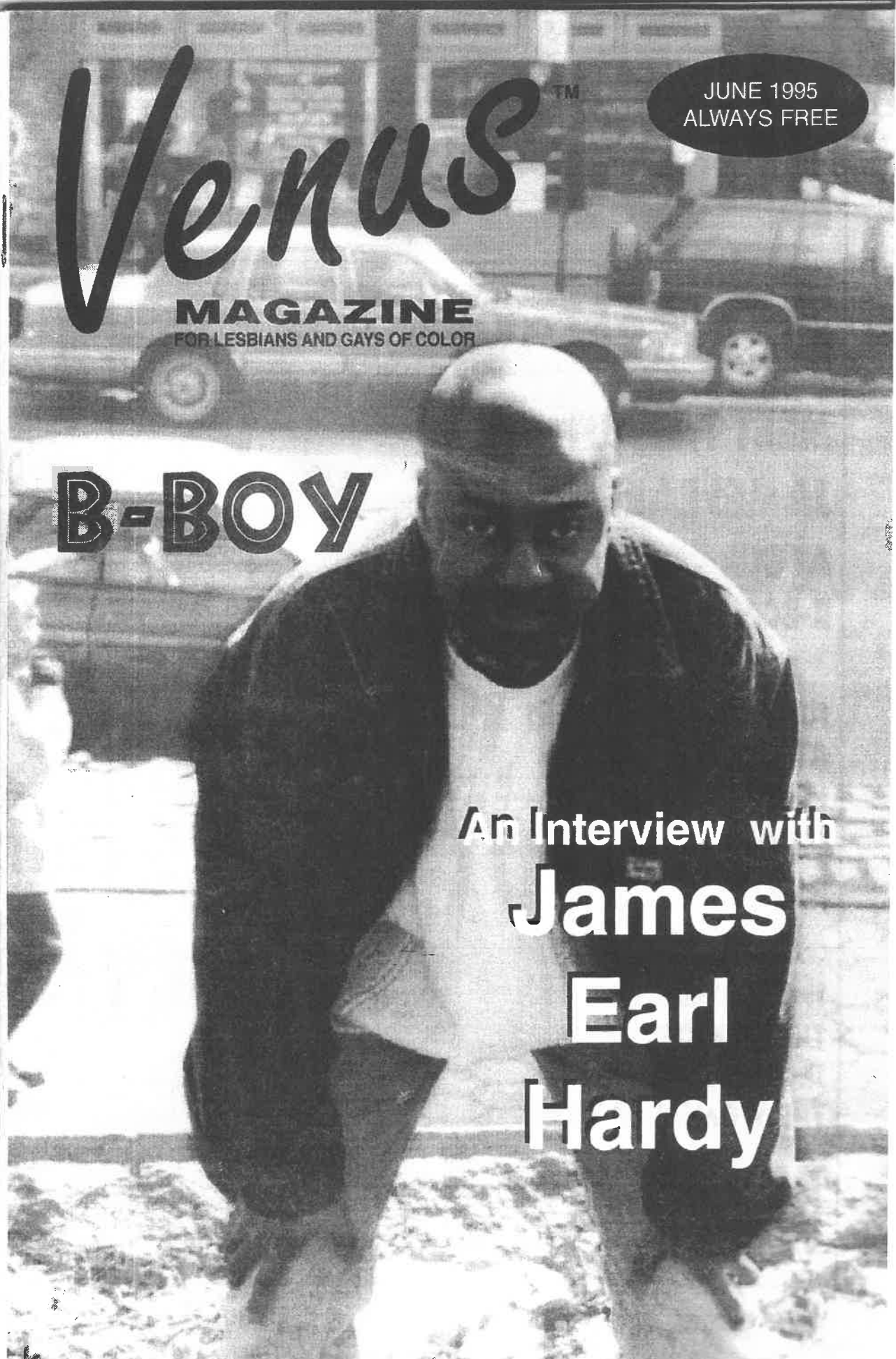
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B-BOY

An Interview with
**James
Earl
Hardy**



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PERSPECTIVES

An Interview with James Earl Hardy

by Douglas Jones

The byline of *B-Boy Blues* reads, "seriously sexy, fiercely funny, Black-on-Black love story. In this, his first novel, Brooklyn born author James Earl Hardy, 28, gives us a view into the world of Black gay men which is exactly that. It is an engaging and whimsical story which invites readers into the lives of the quick witted and fiery Mitchell, and his boyfriend, B-Boy extraordinaire, Raheim. As the story offers a contemporary perspective of the lives of Black gay men sans the pandering to the

White gay world which permeates too many of our stories, Hardy has achieved phenomenal success, just consult the Lambda Literary List (at 25,000+ copies sold, the book holds the number two spot) or ask Hardy's publisher, Alyson Publications. And, of course, success is not without its controversy.

Venus Magazine: What inspired you to write the book?

James Earl Hardy: Simply that there was not a story which I could point to on the bookshelf that mirrored the world that I and many of the people whom I know, specifically brothers live in. So, after years

of complaining about not seeing it, I decided maybe I should just write the book myself. And that's what I did.

VM: The most prevalent theme is how we as Black gay men love one another. In terms of constructing a Black gay identity, is this meant to be a step in that direction?

JEH: Well, yes, I think so. Personally, I don't think many of us really love and value ourselves for who we are as Black gay and bisexual men. It's hard to do that in a society where your life is devalued and debased and degraded every single day, not only in



Photo by Alvin Agarrot

so-called mainstream media and images, but in the so-called Black community and the so-called lesbian and gay community. I hope that *B-Boy Blues* is a beginning for us as Black gay and bi-sexual men to really create images, works, and other things that really say who we are and what we are about. I hope these things will affirm us in a way that only we can really do because, quite frankly, *B-Boy Blues* would not have been written if I or someone else did not come along and say that we have to stop waiting for other folks to define us. Only we can define ourselves.

VM: I hear you. You mentioned

something that I wanted to touch on: The homophobia, the racism, whether or not it's internalized, how can we as Black gay and bisexual men begin to strip those exterior layers away so that we are not hiding from ourselves, nor from each other, but rather coming to a point where we can build with one another a viable, visible community?

JEH: That's a hard question to answer because well, one thing I tell people often is that B-Boy Blues is just one story about the lives that some gay and bi-sexual men of African descent may lead and I don't believe that there is a clear cut agenda that we can put forth that all Black gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, and transgendered people are going to embrace in order for us to overcome the 'isms' and 'phobias' that we need to overcome. We're a very diverse group of people, so I don't really know how to answer that question. It's kind of dangerous to put forth one program that will try to tackle some of those issues because not everyone is going to agree that that's the way that it should be done. That will have a lot to do with where one is geographically, where one is socially and politically, culturally, spiritually, and sexually. But one thing we all have to do and it's something that hasn't happened yet is acknowledge how all of those 'isms' and 'phobias' impact on our lives and snap out of this denial.

VM: Denial of...?

JEH: Well, I think that too many of us have become so complacent in our repression and oppression that we will not challenge the 'isms' and 'phobias' that happen around us. How many of us have actually sat in choir log or in the congregation at a church and heard a minister or a so-called brother or sister in fellowship denounce homosexuals. That is where it has to begin, it has to start at home. I guess what I'm trying to say is that we cannot expect to challenge

America, society, if we have not tended to the business in our own backyard.

VM: It starts with the truth of our reality, individually

JEH: Oh, definitely.

VM: About affirming— images outwardly, Raheim is an intensely sexual person and we as a community, especially a community of Black gay men, seem to glorify that B-Boy, banji boy look. By reinforcing that are we not feeding into the objectification of ourselves and brothers as sexual monsters?

JEH: I don't see Raheim as a sexual monster. This has been put forth to me before and what I've always said is that people have the bad habit of projecting their own issues and ideologies on the work. Raheim is just one individual and neither he nor any other character in the book, as well as the book itself, can be all things to all people. The thing I find most disturbing about some of the comments that are made about Raheim is that most people reduce him to nothing but rough trade. You know, here is an individual who, throughout the course of a story, shows us that he most certainly is not. Quite frankly I don't think that there is anything wrong with Raheim being sexual because we are all sexual beings.

VM: Well, not sexual so much as intensely sexual. You know the imagery of the baggy pants, the larger than life image of being straight-up-and-down hard. And, yes, we do see Raheim's growth, but so much of his growth occurs towards the end of the book, and I wonder if this depiction intensifies the debate over Black gay men with larger-than-life penises and hotter-than-reality sexual libidos?

JEH: Well, I don't think that B-Boy Blues is going to make people believe what they don't already believe. That's the point I'm trying to make. For example, I responded to an individual's letter this past week in

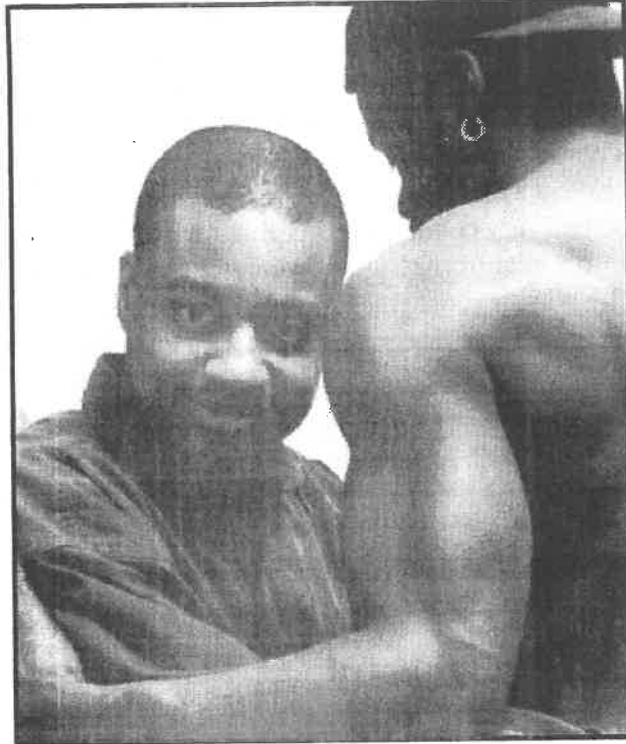


Photo by John Bernard Jones

which he accuses me of emasculating, castrating, and finally cutting Raheim down to size at the end of the book. Now, he did not say why he felt that way, but my guess, and judging from what he did say about the story, is that he was particularly disturbed that here was this big, bad B-Boy who decided that he was going to give himself to the man he loved. Quite frankly, those are the types of pathologies that we need to address: Raheim being this big, bad B-Boy, so we, unfortunately, think that there is only one way he can be: he's a real man, he's a top! he could not possibly be a bottom. Addressing specifically what you asked me, Raheim's personality, his aura, his being, is very sexual. Just because he is that way does not mean that he represents that stereotypical model. I don't think that he does.

VM: You definitely give us an image of Mitch and Raheim struggling, both inwardly, with themselves, and outwardly,

with each other and the world in which they live. As Black gay and bi-sexual men trying to build community, is this giving us hope for the future?

JEH: I sincerely hope so. That is one thing which many people who have written me have said: The novel has given them hope. I've been accused of giving people a happy ending and I don't see it as such. Mitchell and Raheim may have reunited at the end of the story but they have a lot of growing to do, both as a couple and as individuals, so I really see it as a beginning. But, let's say it is a happy ending, so what! What's wrong with stories about us that allow us to be happy at the end? I think we're so conditioned to see ourselves tragically, to always seeing

ourselves struggling and never coming to a point where we can be at peace that when we're presented with a story that is not so much the opposite, but has an alternative ending, we freak out. We need to realize that there's nothing wrong with being happy. And if we do think that there is something wrong with being happy then we've got a problem.

VM: There's something wrong with that. You're out there trying to offer somebody a view to freedom and they're saying, 'Oh, no, just keep me in shackles.'

JEH: Exactly.

VM: We also get a view of Raheim and Mitch struggling through their masculine and feminine issues. Besides being ultimately real in not just our relationships, but our daily lives, what was that commentary about?

JEH: I would hope that after seeing that story played out that folks would realize that it really does not make sense to play

those types of roles. We always seem to have this checklist that individuals whom we come across have to fulfill. When Mitchell and Raheim first meet each other it's obvious that they've already assigned each other a role that they both, for the most part, feel very comfortable in. But, really, who benefits from that and who are they really playing those roles for? You know, I think too often that we, as homosexuals, fall into the trap of copying the relationship behavior of heterosexuals. So, though as lesbian and gay people our answer to the popular talk show question, 'Who's the man and who's the woman?' is almost always, 'Nobody's the man and nobody's the woman,' we know that's not true because we play it out every day of our lives in the relationships that we have with people of the same sex. It's important for us to realize that we do it, but it's even more important for us to realize why we do it. I don't think most of us realize that we're not so much doing that because we want to, but because society says we have to, we're simply conditioned to think that way. When you grow up in a society where you're constantly bombarded with images of heterosexual coupling, relationships, and romance, you are naturally going to adopt those morals and values. It's important to realize that they just might not be the right thing for you.

VM: Issues of coming out: We've already stated that this is a story which is moving towards the beginning of creating community. As a community of Black lesbian and gay people we are just now trying to come out to ourselves, let alone our families. And when we do finally come out, too many of us are dismembered from our communities and our families. That being the case, is the relationship of ease and comfort between Mitch and his family a realistic and fair depiction?

JEH: I think so. Let me tell you why.

Mitchell's family is not perfect, but they have come to respect him for who he is because of the loss of a loved one. And that type of scenario happens a lot, and not just in our community, in terms of people of African descent, but in all racial, cultural, and ethnic groups. It isn't until someone dies of AIDS - usually that's the case - that it's discovered that someone was gay, lesbian, bi, or transgendered and some soul searching starts. Of course, Mitchell's family situation does not exist everywhere, but it does exist. And I'm sure that if Mitchell was distant and detached from his family, folks would probably be saying, why does Hardy have to be so predictable? I was not going to endorse pathology, quite frankly. We have enough images of Black families not supporting their lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, and transgendered members, so there was no need for me to recreate that negativity. But, I don't think his family situation is idyllic, as some people have said. His family does not, for the most part, accept him as a gay man. What they have done, instead, is try to understand him. Mind you, Mitchell, for the most part, has somewhat playful conversations with his Mother about Raheim, but his relationship with his step-father is still on edge because he is a gay man. And, quiet as it's kept, people talk about Adam, his brother, being so accepting of him, but people need to pay close attention to what Adam says about Raheim specifically.

VM: When Mitchell asks him what he thinks of Raheim, Adam says 'he's a real man.' What does he mean by that?

JEH: Adam means Raheim is just like him, and Mitchell isn't. So, on the surface while Adam loves his brother and will probably love him until the day he dies, he is still very uncomfortable with him being gay. And that connection is drawn through the presentation of Raheim as a model of so-called homosexuality which he [Adam]

did not even think existed. Really the only person in Mitchell's family who seems to open up arms to him is Aunt Ruth. I'm sure most of us know an Aunt Ruth. I don't see Mitchell's family situation as unrealistic at all. Quite frankly, we need to stop complaining when we don't see an image that presents us pathologically, we need to get out of that mode.

VM: But, I wonder about our conditioning, I wonder about our growth, I wonder if we don't talk about all the things that hurt, and get all the hurt out there how can we start to talk about the things that heal? You know what I mean?

JEH: Yeah.

VM: What sort of support have you received? I see Dr. Farajaje-Jones and E. Lynn Harris have both supported you. What other support have you received from the gay and lesbian community, other

Black gay writers, or just writers and society in general?

JEH: For the most part the Black gay and bi-sexual men whom I've met on the book tour have been very supportive and they basically have thanked me for telling their story. That is very profound, because when you create something as an artist, you hope that people will in some way embrace it, but you can never imagine the type of love that people will offer because of something that you have written. Nothing I have ever written has elicited the type of response that

B-Boy Blues has had. I never could have been prepared for it.

VM: Well, no one else is presenting us with positive images of ourselves and saying that it's okay for us to be Black gay men and for us to, possibly, love one another. Certainly you knew that the response was going to be enormous.

JEH: Well, I expected B-Boy Blues to fulfill a hunger because, as you said, there's never been a story like this told before. But

you can never predict the way people will respond to your work. I think B-Boy Blues also poses a very big challenge, particularly to us. I think it has challenged us to really look at ourselves as gay and bi-sexual men. It has forced us to really look in the mirror.

VM: Do you think we like what we see?

JEH: I don't

think many of us are comfortable with the image. I have gotten some flack from folks about the story I tell, the way I tell it, some of the depictions of the characters, the ending. But often times those reactions say much more about those people than about the work. In terms of Black heterosexual folks I do have some Black heterosexual fans, overall, there's been a deafening silence from them.. Especially the Black media. I've gotten almost no coverage in the Black heterosexual media. For the Black media it has been a question



Photo by Alvin Agarrot is taken in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, NY, across from Spike Lee's Joint. This is the neighborhood that B-Boy Blues' protagonist, Mitchell Crawford, lives.

of acknowledging a 'lifestyle' with which they are not comfortable. It forces conversation about something they don't want to talk about. The White gay media doesn't understand it. For too many of the White gay and lesbian publications who have taken it upon themselves to review B-Boy Blues, there has been this very condescending, catty attitude and tone. Either they review the author, whom they do not know, because they don't like what they're reading or they review the book I did not write. In other words, "Why did Mr. Hardy have to present the story in this too Black, too strong voice? Why couldn't it have been done in a multi-cultural way? Etc., etc. It's funny that White folks would expect me, an author of color, to affirm them as White gay people and White authors have not been held to the same standard when it comes to their



Photo by Bernard Jones

characterizations of people of color. But, I expected all of that. I told Alyson Publications before B-Boy Blues was released, 'Do not expect a mountain pile of clips from the White gay and lesbian press or from the Black heterosexual press to send out with B-Boy Blues, because you will not get it.' Unfortunately, it's a fact of life. We're dealing with two distinct, so-called communities that, for the most part, only want to respect and accept only one part of us. Black gay fiction in the past decade has meant stories about Black gay men that place us in a White gay world. Then, here comes B-Boy Blues which places us in the type of world that most of us live in and love in and they just can't take it. They just can't handle it. I have not been at all surprised by those responses, but I would hope that the debate that B-Boy Blues has seemed to stir in some lesbian and gay circles, and some Black circles, and some Black lesbian and gay circles, will at least encourage people to try to understand that there are different worlds out there that exist apart from their own and that in order for us to understand one another and to appreciate each other for who we are, we need to respect those differences. That's something that neither the White gay camp nor the Black heterosexual camp wants to do.

VM: It's interesting that you started speaking about that because I want you to comment on the struggle that you had bringing the book to the marketplace and then its subsequent success and how that is a direct reflection of the inability of publishers, agents, etc., to understand and accept the fact that there are realities different from what they're used to, but still entirely valuable and substantial.

JEH: Yeah, the book was turned down by some two dozen publishers and that didn't surprise me either. But, I believe that most of those publishers now realize that not

only is there a market out here for these types of stories, but that they have to change their way of thinking when it comes to the market itself. In other words, yes! Black people read. The validity of a title cannot be measured on the question of whether or not White people are going to read this book. We're talking about stories with universal themes. I just wish one of those very absent-minded, close-minded publishers would have just thought for a moment and said, 'Well, this is a love story.' The only difference here is that this is about two Black men. Many heterosexual women who have read the book told me, 'I was sixty, seventy, eighty pages into the story and it just completely slipped my mind that I was reading a story about two Black men. I could see myself in Mitchell's shoes.' I believe that our stories are very distinct because they're about us, but we're human just like everyone else. Unfortunately, the bottom line is the dollar and because some of these publishers have seen that B-Boy Blues has sold twenty-five-thousand copies in less than six months, they're definitely going to try to jump on the band wagon. 'We need to find ourselves a James Earl Hardy.' It's that Spike Lee syndrome again. I wish that the so-called White gay and lesbian community would not be so hostile and indifferent and that the so-called Black community would not be so silent... But, I guess that's a lot to hope and wish for (chuckles).

VM: Hey, but we've been some praying people for a long time (more chuckles).

JEH: See.

VM: Those struggles, the initial reception of the book or the lack thereof, how has that dictated the need for us, as Black gay and lesbian folks, to support one another, be it in ventures such as this publishing or networking and establishing everyday connections? Again, you commented earlier on the presence of this pathology

of tragedy, but there also seems to be this pathology of competition, 'I'm the only one. I'm the only one that can exist, this is all that we need to hear right here and right now.'

JEH: I'll allude to something you said earlier about wanting freedom. They're too many of us walking around in a post-traumatic slave-syndrome state. We are afraid to think for ourselves, afraid to do for ourselves. We feel that we need the affirmation and validation of White people-gay, straight, bi, or otherwise - to do or say anything for ourselves. It's a sickness and it has to be treated as a sickness. I do believe that projects like B-Boy Blues can help in the healing and make us realize that it's up to us, it's our destiny, it's our fate and only we can shape it, only we can form it, only we can make it happen.

VM: Well, in terms of writing, what are your plans for the future? Can we expect to hear more from Mitch, Raheim, and Junior?

JEH: Oh, definitely, there will be a sequel. I don't know when it's coming out, but I have begun to work on it.

VM: This has been a wonderful, wonderful conversation and I've thoroughly enjoyed it. On behalf of Venus Magazine, I'd like to thank you for your time and your example.

JEH: Thank you. It's with the support of publications like Venus that we get to reach our target audience. You guys also are making history, because every single periodical, every single book, every single poem, every letter, that we write today will help so many others tomorrow. So, we're just recording history together.

VM: Absolutely. Well, I look forward to seeing you at Charis Bookstore on June 16 and at Outwrite on June 17.

Doug Jones is a novelist from Brooklyn, NY

