

The Lady Chablis: Hiding Her Candy

by Tim Nasson

Her claim to super stardom began to materialize when she was sought out by author John Berendt to be featured in his book *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*. That little book has come a long way in the three years it has resided on THE NEW YORK TIMES BEST SELLER list.

Not many, if anyone, figured the book about Savannah, Ga., and some of its inhabitants, was destined for the reception it has met, let alone a spin-off book. Next to Berendt, the one to benefit most from the *Midnight* success is a petite, Black, 5'5", 105-pound, size-three woman named The Lady Chablis, and author of the newly released autobiography *Hiding My Candy*.

That's right. Her legal name is The Lady Chablis. And The Lady is a she. Don't tell her otherwise. "Girl. Some people need to bite their tongues. And let me tell you, gay associates are the most critical. I am the wrong girl to push, honey. Nobody has the right to talk about, touch or label me," she begins. "You don't label a person. Society has a habit of labeling me as a Black drag queen. Honey, buildings and streets get labeled. I believe God gave everyone three things. A heart, a soul and a spirit. How I feel on the inside is what nobody can tell me. I consider myself 'an impersonator of the female.'"

After performing at Hotlanta for four days, Chablis is "taking a hiatus from performing for a while" to concentrate on promoting her book. She's also playing herself in the film version of *Midnight*, being made by actor/director Clint Eastwood.

Hiding My Candy, is an expose of her life beginning at childhood and working its way through the good and bad times of her life thus far. At almost 40, The Lady has been involved in situations all too common for many and unheard of by others. "I'm glad I was able to tell my story in print," she says, "because it's a story that many can relate to. Whether you are gay or straight. Black or white. Fat or skinny. There is something



Lady Chablis

in the book one can relate to, whether it's going to church or going to jail for stealing a pair of cheap earrings."

This unbridled and delicious humor makes *Hiding My Candy* a hoot to read and is probably what has made Miss Chablis the sought after performer she is today, sometimes making upwards of \$7,000 for a half-hour show.

Recalling her life growing up in Florida and the women friends she had, she explains quite succinctly how it was that she got so good at what she does. "Women taught me everything from what size panties to buy, to how to seduce a man. They taught me how to use a man, how to wash floors. What love is all about. And most importantly that women have power. If they all get together and close their legs baby, they'll be no more men. So we do have power, hon."

In between comedic moments in the book, there are also accounts of brutality bestowed upon Benjamin Edward Knox, as The Lady was known in her earlier years. These moments of barbarism, equally shared by her family, clergy and teachers, don't phase her as much as one would expect. "I don't look at my childhood years as dysfunctional

ones. I was born into the family I was meant for. I don't blame anyone for anything. Those years prepared me for my future and made a much stronger person out of me." She recoils when mention is made that sympathy or pity should be showered upon her for the torment she went through in school and through her life up until where she has now gotten.

Chablis has an explanation and reason for everything and explains her reasons for wearing women's clothes starting in her mid teenage years. "I did not like wearing men's clothes. I do not like the way men or women look at me when I am wearing men's clothes. Because I had the courage to wear women's clothes at 16, nobody had the courage to call me names.

"I am proud to be a woman. The highest compliment that I can receive is from a woman who says to me, 'I wish I looked as good as you.'"

The Lady's granunama, as she calls her, played a significant part in her deciding to regularly wear women's clothes. "My grandmother gave me her approval. I then prayed and made my decision and have never thought back on it."

Her decision for writing the book was an economical and

social one. She eloquently explains, "Since I got all those straight folks attention in *Midnight ...*, I figured why not tell them my whole story. How hard it is to pay the rent once people find out who you are and you then lose your job. I believe if you lose something, a job or whatever, the Lord will see to it that you get it back." She is not without a little vanity and gets upset when drag queens come up to her and say that they could have told the same story. "I say girl, you weren't given the chance. I was, so I've done it."

When approached by Pocket Books to do her story, The Lady inadvertently played a game that she won at. "They called me up on the phone and made me this offer. I told them I'd think about it. When they called me back I said I wanted \$100,000 and they accepted. I never thought they would pay me that much." Maybe she should have asked for a quarter million. Better yet, she may have an additional career as an agent.

When talking about romance in person or in her book, The Lady is quick to point out that she is not interested in a man's color. "What I do look for in a man, and it is men that I like, are naturally fine bodies. Not those bodies that are made up at the gym. A man who goes to the gym and gets all those fake looking muscles is comparable to me if I went and got myself some breast implants. Give me my hormones and natural little titties and a real man and I'm a happy girl."

Speaking of men, Miss Chablis has managed to put herself in *A Crying Game* situation or two. For a long while she was dating a 19-year-old Black boy who didn't know that Lady was packing something between her legs. When he got wind of the situation he was bothered at first. Eventually he came 'round and made up with Chablis. "The thing that attracts men to me is my aura, grace and style. After

Turn to the next page

UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL

Leon E. Pettway, Author of *Honey, Honey, Miss Thang* by Lynnell S. Long

"I think they call me faggot when I went off to school because I had long hair, I didn't walk like a boy, I didn't want to play tag with the boys, I wanted to jump rope with the girls. ... I'd go over there and play with the dollhouse and the dolls with the girls."

— Monique, one of the transgendered individual in *Honey, Honey, Miss Thang*

Leon E. Pettway was in Chicago May 31 for his booksigning held at People Like Us Books. I not only had the pleasure of interviewing Pettway, I also introduced him to a crowd at the Gerber/Hart Library, where there was a reception for the African-American nominees for the Lambda Literary Awards (Pettway's book did not win). After his booksigning, we decided to go to a local coffeehouse for the interview.

Lynnell S. Long: What motivated you to write a book about members of the transgendered community?

Leon E. Pettway: When I started thinking about doing a gay book, the most compelling, interesting, articulate, passionate people happened to be people who were transgendered. They had this incredible sense of who they were, and where they fit, so they were the ones.

LSL: Where did you come up with the title, honey, honey, Miss Thang?

LEP: That's kind of a funny story ... he [his publisher] said, "What do you think you're going to call the book?" I said, "These people always talk about being authentic, and I think maybe we'll call it *Being Real*." There was a real long pause—silence, he didn't say anything so I said, "I take it you don't like that title." He said,

"No ... titles are not supposed to tell you what the book is about; titles are supposed to be used as a marketing device." I started playing and I said, "Why don't we call it, *Honey, Honey, Miss Thang*?" and he said that's a great title.

LSL: Is there a message you're trying to get through to the Black community in this book?

LEP: Not only the Black community—I wanted people to recognize the humanity of people a lot of people would identify as being dysfunctional, sick, pathological. ... You can't read that book and not see their humanity, it ain't possible.

LSL: How did you manage to keep your professional opinion out of the book?

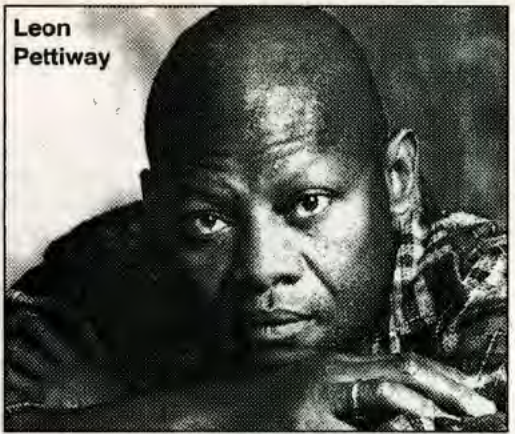
LEP: This is a source of real tension. ... Some traditional scholars would say what I should have done is ... found things, talked about them, and told people what it meant, from the stand point from a so-called expert. These people are human beings who have a story, and they are just as capable of telling their story, and saying exactly what it means, as I am. What I do is provide a frame—context to prepare the reader for the story, and that's my job. The book is designed to make the reader do the work.

LSL: What do you hope society will learn from this book?

LEP: I really hope that ... people will re-think what it means to be different. I think in the final analysis everyone strives for creativity, and I can't think of any more creative thing that somebody can do with one's body than to do what these women did. I hope people become much more sensitive to the plight of those people that are defined as "the other," and people become much more compassionate.

LSL: Do you think the African-American community is beginning to accept the transgendered community?

Leon Pettway



LEP: You're talking to a really old guy. I don't see the Black community being particularly able to embrace differences ... when it comes to sexuality. I would like to think it's getting better, by more Black gay folks owning up to who they are, biting the bullet. The most powerful position in life is simply being who you are.

LSL: Will your book open more doors for Black writers, transgendered or gay?

LEP: I would hope so, because ... more people [in the Black community need to] come to grips with their sexuality.

LSL: Your book touches on a lot of subjects like prostitution, rape, and AIDS. Did you intentionally add the topic of AIDS, trying to talk about everything?

LEP: No, it was funny the way that happened. I was always reluctant to ask the girls about their HIV status. [With Monique.] she said, she was wondering if I was going to ask her, and she wondered what she would say. She trusted me enough to tell me.

Leon Pettway's second book, *Working It*, about women living through drugs and crime, is due out this fall. Pettway is currently an associate professor, Department of Criminal Justice, at Indiana University, Bloomington. He lives in Indianapolis, with his lover, Rick.

LADY from 20

that you don't know. Every man has sooner or later made a decision to become either my boyfriend or platonic friend. When I'm going out with a man who wants to be with a woman, I try to carry myself as a woman. This way nobody knows. The men get off on it and I get off on it. Relationships are all about how you feel about yourself. I only care about what three people think about me. My gramma, God and me."

"I just don't want people judging me or anyone else. I'm

almost 40 and have small hands, small feet and a small frame. These are God-given features. I can go out of my house without makeup and still look like a woman. It takes all kinds honey. Some straight folk want to be married. Some want to be single. ... Some Black folk decide to wear sport suits with pants hanging halfway down their asses with one pant leg up and the other down. If that makes them feel good, what can I say?"

With a book's success, sometimes comes a movie deal. She says about *Midnight*: "I was flown out to Hollywood by

Warner Brothers ... to meet Clint. We spent three hours with each other talking about a range of things but mostly about myself, since that is my favorite subject of course. I got the impression that Clint wanted me to play myself in his movie. All I know is that if he doesn't pick me to play me I'm going to crash the set. You just wait." There were talks about Diana Ross playing Chablis—but *The Lady* won.

It would be even more remarkable if Chablis was picked to play herself in a film version of her own book *Hiding My Candy*. There is that chance.

As a bonus, *Hiding* includes some of *The Lady's* favorite recipes. She knows that you get to a man through his stomach and therefore likes to cook. There are recipes of everything from Kickin' Chicken to Calling Collards and Bitchin' Biscuits.

If nothing else, the book *Hiding My Candy* will provide all with a fascinating insight into the life of a person who was determined to be who they felt they were and stopped at absolutely nothing to acquire that dream. It may also inspire others to finally be who they feel they should be.

ONE STEP BEYOND

by **Lynnell S. Long**
Transsexual Lesbians

"There's just something about women. ... The way she holds me and strokes my womanhood. ... The way she squirms and wiggles when I crawl into bed. ... Yeah, there's just something about women."

—Somilia Smith [from her poem, "A love poem, disguised by women for the sake of anonymity."]

In the past, I have been told, since I am a lesbian, I am not a real transsexual. Although no one in the lesbian community has ever told me I wasn't a real lesbian [to my face], I know some lesbians do not consider transsexual lesbians, real lesbians.

Let's look at that word real. The dictionary defines real as: Not imaginary, fictional, or pretended. Although I don't like the word transsexual, clinically, I am a transsexual. It's not something I made up; I'm not imaginary, or fictional. I am a woman that loves women. I have always loved women.



Being a lesbian is what I am, not what I "pretend" to be.

So we have established that I am neither imaginary, fictional, nor pretending. I am a transsexual lesbian, or as I prefer to be labelled, "A Sunsetting Lesbian." It seems a transsexual lesbian's fight is never over. After we come to grips with the fact that we are women, born with a birth defect, we soon must find comfort with dating women, as women—as lesbians.

Once I accepted myself as a woman, my next struggle was to accept myself as a lesbian. It wasn't easy since my mother was a minister, and preached against homosexuality. As a teenager, I found it difficult to date girls. Not because I wasn't interested in them sexually, but because I identified as a woman, and being a lesbian on top of it was a no, no. I found the only way I could make love to girls at a young age was by

pretending I was a guy. That led me to pretending most of my life. After awhile, I realized I couldn't pretend anymore. I soon became asexual.

Years later, after I accepted myself as a woman and became Lynnell Stephanie, I discovered the real fight had just begun. Two years prior, I started dating men, because I thought it was only natural for a woman to date a man. I thought life would be easier if I went along with the program. Although breaking up with my first and last boyfriend wasn't easy, I thank goddess I did, otherwise I would probably still be in the closet. I started accepting the fact that I am very much attracted to women, and I must be a lesbian. I started dating women again, this time accepting I am a woman and a lesbian. I felt more comfortable.

The question people seem to ask the most is: If I'm comfortable dating and making love to women, why do I want to have the sex change? The answer is easy. I do love making love to my girlfriend Cobalt, and if you're wondering how we make love, the answer is: The same way most lesbians do, except my dildo isn't detachable. Being a woman and a lesbian is not about sex, it's about

who I am as a person. I can't make a decision about having a sex change based on the way I have sex. I really must thank genetic lesbians: the only way I ever felt comfortable as a lesbian, was by knowing the different methods lesbians make love. I learned having intercourse makes me no different than lesbians that use strap-ons. Some trans lesbians remain in the closet until after they have the sex change, and then come out as lesbians, hoping to blend into society. They say it's because they don't think a genetic woman will want them before they had the surgery. I asked them where they were looking. We are going into the next millennium. There are some lesbians that will never accept trans lesbians as we are. There are some lesbians that do accept us as lesbians, but will never date us. And then there are lesbians that have no hang-ups about dating, and being sexual, with a trans lesbian. I am in love with a genetic woman, and we have been together for over a year. Although sex is a part of our relationship, it is only a part of it. The love we share is genuine; we are two women loving each other: we are real lesbians.

E-mail [redacted]

Morrison in Chicago

Nobel and Pulitzer Prize-winning author Toni Morrison will be a visiting scholar at the University of Chicago beginning next year. She will be at U of C for six weeks annually for three years. She is currently a professor of Humanities at Princeton University.

Shabazz burned

Betty Shabazz, Malcolm X's widow, is in the hospital in critical condition after being burned in a fire at her home. Shabazz, 63, was burned over 80 percent of her body. Her grandson, Malcolm, 12, reportedly tried to kill her because he did not like living with her after having been in trouble at home, reports say.

JEAN from 25

I guess I'm a academic wannabe, bourgeoisie-aspiring type nigga, but I ain't gotta be. I know the academy will run game on free-thinkers and play 'em, even though in an atmosphere of higher learnin', they supposed to get props.

But smart niggas have already peeped the fame—that American education ain't never been about educatin' as much as it's been about indoctrinatin'. That's why niggas everywhere flunkin' out now. I ain't exactly sayin' we dropouts cause of an organized mass movement against systemic oppression and marginalization: All I'm sayin' is—Damn, niggas ain't stupid!

That's why when somebody asked me was I down with Ebonics, I said, "Hell yeah!" I told 'em later for bourgie knee-

grows who think Ebonics is a source of Black shame. You woulda thought Knee-grows woulda traded in shame for anger when they saw Rodney King get beat down like a dog. Them same Knee-grows still mad at Rev. Al Sharpton for havin' a perm in the pulpit, and at Dr. Joycelyn Elders for tellin' lil brothas and sistahs that it's better to play with yourself than to get fucked by the establishment.

Now some years ago, the rapper Rakim said, "It's not where you from—it's where you at," which should be a fundamental precept for education. When lil brothas and sistahs come to class sayin', "I be, you be, he/she be," we have to begin with that language and create an English curriculum that recognizes what that lil brotha or sistah is sayin'. Ain't no alternative.

In his last book, John Edgar

Wideman dropped much needed knowledge when he wrote:

"young (niggas) feel rootless, deserted, adrift in a world no one has prepared them to understand. A void ahead, a void behind, they've been abandoned in a tractless wilderness where the natural instinct to survive exacts behavior that reflects the raw, brutal circumstances trapping them." That's exactly why ain't nobody listenin' to that "Down with dope, up with hope," ring-around-the-rosey, gimme that old-time religion yakkity-yak Rev. Jackson pushin', but niggas watchin' Minister Farrakhan. Now I ain't never said Farrakhan was the answer, but I have enough damn sense to know resistance ain't the problem. And if you ain't with me on that yet, that's cool, too, because like anything, good analysis takes a lil time.

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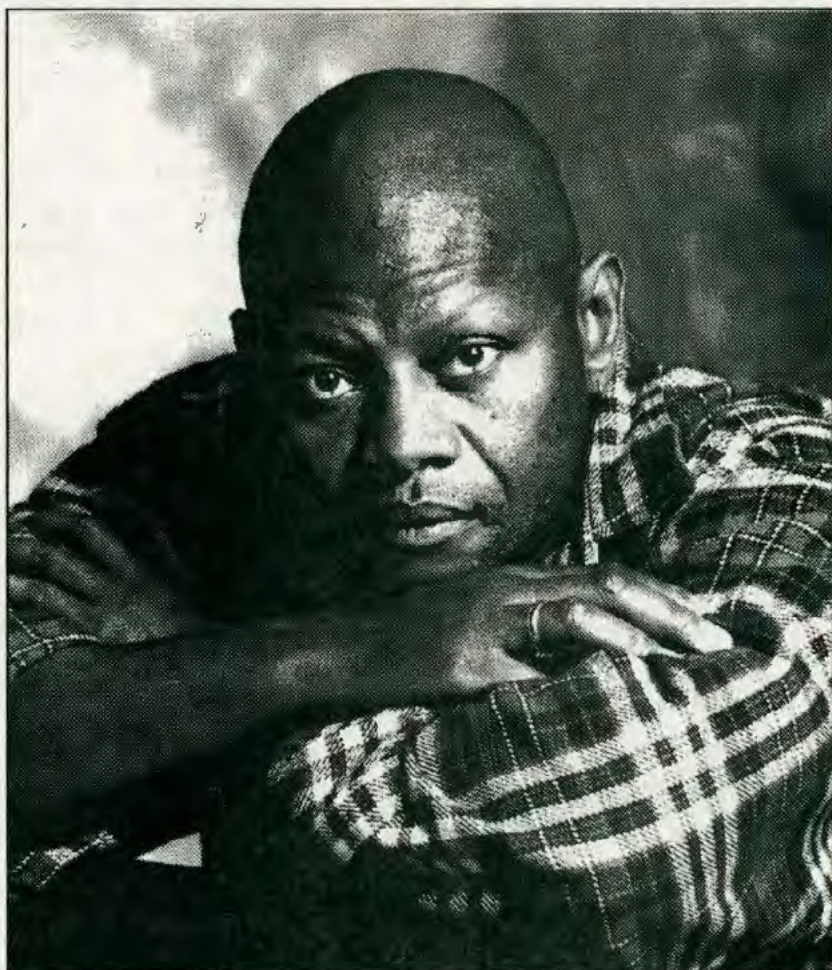
LINES

JULY 1997, Vol. 2, No. 6 Free/\$2 outside Chicago EXPRESSIONS FROM BLACK GAY, LESBIAN, BISEXUAL & TRANSGENDERED LIFE

*Honey, Honey,
Miss Thang ...*

LEON PETTIWAY

speaks out about his
book on Black
transgendered
street kids.
See page 21.



Mary Morten tapped
for Mayor's liaison.
See page 11.



Lady Chablis

She's the toast
of the South—
and Clinton
Eastwood cast
The Lady as
herself in a
new film. See
page 20 for an
interview.



Chaka Kahn: She's got to be real,
performing in Chicago. See page 12.