An Interview with Diana Ross

by Javr Ellis

photos by J.D.



• 1969—*The Stonewall Riots in New York* City herald the beginning of the modern Gay Liberation Movement in America.

Except for a handfull in Tidewater, the word "Gay" hasn't really made it into Virginia. Two local nightspots vie for the fledgling gay community's business.

Tracy was growing up gay in Hampton, perfecting an impersonation of Diana Ross and performing at parties for friends. A transvestite named Bonnie had introduced Tracy, at 15, to the art of female impersonation.

"After I had known Bonnie for about a year, she helped me dress up. When I looked in the mirror I went 'oh, wow!' and Bonnie said: 'do you know who you look like? You look just like Diana Ross.'

"I have always been interested in the theatre and when I was really, really young I really wanted to be an actor. Just do it. Go to Hollywood and make it real big. I'm older now.

"That desire to be an actor took the form of doing impersonations for friends at partines in Hampton.

"I used to do impersonations...all of them were women whether old or young and Diana Ross was one of them."



• 1971—*Gay nightlife in Norfolk was* growing. There were four bars: the Continental, Mickey's, the Ritz and Rapheis. An Awards Board was holding two balls a year--the Beaux Arts and the Winter Fantasy.

Tracy had met a guy from Norfolk. He wanted Tracy to move there.

"I ran to Norfolk immediately after high school. It was necessary. If you have ever been to Hampton you know--Norfolk was the big city, at least for me."

The friends from Hampton proved a lot of encouragement which included getting Tracy involved in the Awards Board competitions. Their support and inspiration was the needed impetus for Tracy to take Diana Ross to the public.

"After a few years of performing at parties, people were saying 'you know this inpersonation thing--you do quite well.' All I knew was that I liked to get dressed up, everday was Mardi Gras.

"My friends said: 'why don't you run for Entertainer of the Year...you're good, you can do it.' So I worked on this number and did it. I didn't win. In fact, I've never won that one."

The scond competition Tracy entered was the Miss Virginia Pageant.

"Bonnie had told me about this ball they had at the Golden Triangle. Then, if you can imagine, there were about one hundred contestants. One hundred people walking down the runway back and forth, back and forth. I was number eighty-something the first year and I didn't do a thing. I don't blame them when I think back how I looked--I was really wretched.

"And after that came the Miss Virginia Title and then New Discovery of the Year. It was a period of high drag... lots of chiffon, lots of feathers and sequins. Everyone looked like a Las Vegas showgirl, headdresses and hair, the whole bit. I wasn't though. I used to always wear jersey dresses."

• 1975—*There was a Gay Freedom Movement* in Norfolk and the Cue had been added to the list of Norfolk's nightspots.

The foot was in the door for Tracy. A regular performer in shows around the city, Tracy was known to most people as Diana. But female impersonators didn't have it easy.

"Things were not as open then. You could be yanked off the street for wearing a dress. It happened to me twice. I like to think of myself as a pioneer in this area. Someone else and I were abductted by the police from the Steak 'n' Egg. We weren't doing a thing...but sitting there. We were really being harassed. The Gay Freedom Movement and the ACLU asked if we wanted to go all the way with it or just take care of it quietly. As there was no dress code in Norfolk, the lawyer said that we had a good case, so we said: 'sure...what the heck.'

"At one time, it was said that you had to wear one article of men's clothing at all times. That was the kind of dumb things people thought. We just didn't know. Anyway, the city dropped the case and no one has been bothered since that I know of."

• 1977—*Anita Bryant was waging her* campaign in Dade County and planning to take it nationwide. The UUGC, the ODU Gay Alliance and the Norfolk Coalition for Human Rights were active in Norfolk. A June appearance by Anita Bryant at Scope drew 600 demonstrators to protest her anti-gay campaign.

Tracy was still performing and still fighting for acceptance in some local areas. Impersonators were an isolated segment of the movement and were a source of disagreement within the lesbian and gay community.

"I try desperately to be just myself...to be known for me. I would hate to think that people had their minds so closed that they wouldn't give me a chance. Wouldn't take the time to see that I'm a person and have something to say."

When Antia came to town Diana was there to greet her. It was a significant act and one that fostered pride.

"I felt like I was really doing something I believed in and I was dling it my way. I really wanted to represent the female impersonators. Say that we too were a part of this thing."

That involvement as oneself and not as what others wanted female impersonators to act and be was particularly important because of the action of a local bar.

"It was a rally...getting up the interest for the Anita Bryant demonstration. We hand't really intended to bring it up but they were all talking about doing this together and how could you do it when there was this bar that had a sign saying 'no drags allowed'. How could you talk about community with things like this when the female impersonators were a sector of the gay community. The people loved it. The bar tore up their sign and threw it out. Later we went in to feel out the turf and it was okay. It was one way when we got involved we felt more a part of it."



• 1978—*Harvey Milk was killed in San* Francisco. The Movement was gearing up for the 10th anniversary of Stonewall and the call for a National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights was growing.

Dignity, Metropolitan Community Church and Parents and Friends of Gays had been added to a growing number of gay groups. The 2nd Tidewater Conference was held at ODU.

'78 was a busy year for Tracy. Asked to perform at the Tidewater Conference, a confrontation occurred which Tracy will remember for a long time.

"When it happened, I was really hurt. It honest to goodness really hurt. I didn't understand what was going on. I felt that the women who got up and made the announcement against drag were trying to sabotage the show. They thought that drag did not have a place at the conference. It surprised me as I have a lot of lesbian friends who had never mentioned it. The women who had planned it thought it was a part of the gay culture and deserved to be there. The audience was abviously enjoying it.

• 1981—*Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority* announces a campaign against Homosexuals in San Francisco.

The UUGC ends its lawsuit against the City of Virginia Beach, the Mandamus Society is formed and a second gay newspaper is published.

Tracy is still at it. Performing the Diana Ross at local gay bars and clubs. But there are changes. Tracy does not see the demise of Diana anytime soon, but there is the need to explore new avenues, to develop new skills and talents.

"I would like to pursue other aspects of the theatre. I'm hind of open for a challenge. When I was in California, I met a woman who encouraged me to try different things.

"I have done Diana for a long time... I enjoy doing it and I still enjoy it, but maybe its time for a change. Diana will always be a part of me. I don't see myself giving it up completely. But if I get into something else, I would probably not have as much time to give to my impersonation of Diana."

Tracy is soft sopken and the southern drawl is punctuated with hands that are constnatly in motion and eyes that dance. But for all the soft spokenness, Tracy is opinionated. The opinions come forward without hesitation and you are left with no doubt about the meaning. For one moment you don't doubt the sincerity of what is being said and you realize instantly that it is this same directness that has made Tracy a favorite as Diana Ross. Whether on stage or off you cannot help but be impressed with how the two are integrated into one person. Each a part of the other--hardly inseperable.

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