

WHERE IS THE LOVE?

After 13 years in queer publishing, *Venus* founder Charlene E. Cothran finds God. By Heather Boerner

When the 38,000 subscribers to the African-American queer magazine *Venus* received the January issue, they got a shock: The mission of the magazine had changed — a lot. It was no longer simply for African Americans “in the life.” Now it’s aimed at African Americans looking to leave the life for a Christianity that’s incompatible with out-and-proud queerness.

The change came from *Venus* publisher and co-founder Charlene E. Cothran, who recently announced that she’s turned her life over to Jesus Christ and is therefore no longer a lesbian.

“My message is to those who want to hear this,” Cothran told the *Windy City Times*. “There are several people who are not going to hear it. I know this is a message that isn’t going to be widely received by many. But those who are struggling, those who are having the same issues that I had — those are the folks I’m talking to.”

Cothran has published *Venus* for 13 years and is a co-founder of Hospitality Atlanta, a social-networking group for lesbians of color. She also lobbied in 1995 for Atlanta’s domestic partnership law, and she helped found the Bayard Rustin Rally and In the Life Atlanta. She didn’t return calls seeking comment.

The change has drawn heated responses from both sides on *Venus*’ blog. For every reader who declared, “Congratulations on leaving the lifestyle,” there were multiple comments

Is Lesbian Media the Same as Feminist Media?

“The crisis from where I sit,” says Amy B. Hoffman, editor of the *Women’s Review of Books*, “is less about the consolidation of ownership than the fact that smaller, radical political and literary publications seem to be having a harder time than usual these days, and the recent collapse of the Independent Press Association has only exacerbated the problem. Also, lesbian media has always been close to — or indistinguishable from — feminist media. ... For example, here I am at *Women’s Review of Books*, and when I go to conferences or need someone to talk to, I sit down with folks from *Bitch*, *Books to Watch Out For*, even *Off Our Backs*, which is still limping along even as *On Our Backs* is gone — an interesting and unexpected development — *In These Times*, *Punk Planet*, *Sinister Wisdom*, *Calyx*, *Lambda Book Report*. It’s a little hard to focus only on specifically lesbian media.”

questioning Cothran’s view of spirituality and her ability to drop queerness like an old suit.

“I cannot fully express the disappointment and sadness I felt after reading your article,” wrote Angela Jordan. “Black lesbians need as many leaders and fighters as we can get our hands on. You have no idea what you have done. You have no idea.”

At press time, a poll on the *Venus* Web site showed that 83.9 percent of readers believed with certainty that they were “in a pleasing fellowship with God and going to heaven even though [they are] gay.”

According to an article in the *Windy City Times*, only six people had canceled their subscriptions in January, but the magazine got more subscriptions from the relatives of queer people. Cothran insists the magazine is not a mouthpiece for the ex-gay movement, which claims to cure people of homosexuality through religion.

Michelle Murrain is a 47-year-old African American and former divinity student. She remembers picking up the magazine three years ago and thinking it was “like *The Advocate* for African Americans.” But now, she says the content focuses less on the African-American community and more on the publication going ex-gay.

“It’s a larger question about the ways in which people feel in conflict with their faith,” she said. “It’s a bigger issue than this one magazine with one editor.”

Having said that, Murrain can’t relate to Cothran’s struggle between religion and sexuality.

“There is this sort of very unfortunate idea among Christians in general and conservative Christians in particular that queerness and faith can’t mix and that being gay is sinful,” she said. “There’s no really good biblical evidence for that. It’s really unfortunate that this had to happen to *Venus*, that the editor feels she has to give up a part of her identity to be faithful to God.”

“The thing that bothers me the most about it, though, is that there are so many subscribers. If you can imagine someone working really hard to be at peace with their identity, and all of a sudden in the mail they get this magazine. That’s really problematic.” ■

