
With Comedian Paul J. Williams

By **C. J. Neumann**
QBliss Senior Editor / Writer

Introduction: Comedian and entertainer Paul J. Williams has been making people laugh for 20 years. his comedy and performing is what he does best, his side splitting humor is his legacy, but his human spirit, and sense of personal pride, made it easy for QBliss to pick him as our June PRIDE 2006 Cover story, we hope that you will see why, in this interview with Paul J. Williams, we are truly honored to have our Senior Editor and Writer C. J. Neumann interview this great performer and proud sprit of humanity here is The QBliss Interview with Paul J. Williams.
~R. Olivera Jr.
QBliss Editor In Chief / Executive Director

The QBliss Interview:

CJN: Thanks for taking the time to talk to me Paul J.

PJW: My pleasure

CJN: I was doing some research on you and I noticed that the bio on your website, (pauljwilliams.com) that there is little about you before high school. Tell us about where you were born and where you grew up.

PJW: I was born in Monroe, Louisiana, the 3rd of three boys and I am 8 and 10 years younger than my brothers so I am what is affectionately known as an "oops-baby". We moved to Texas when I was 2. My father worked for Firestone and had a reputation for being able to get stores that weren't making money and turning them around so Firestone moved him around. When I was a year old we moved to Shreveport (Louisiana), and then when I was 2 they moved my dad to Texas, to Austin. We were in Austin until I was 6, then they moved my father to San Antonio which is where my parents still are to this day and I spent all of my school years in San Antonio, graduating from high school there and then going off to Baylor where both of my brothers had attended school, getting a business degree. After having two brothers that majored in music, I thought I need to do something different, so I majored in business.

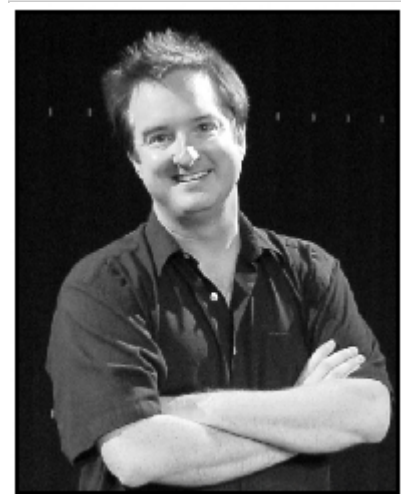


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PJW: And then I got out of school, suffered two job losses in 3 years because the economy tanked, then I thought, Ok, now I am going to do what I want to do, and that's being a performer.

CJN: Was it always comedy?

PJW: No, I never really thought of myself as a comedian. The first thing that I did was a musical because I was a trained singer from childhood. Both of my brothers were musical and I was learning to read music about the same time that I was learning to read books. So I decided to go into any musical performing that I could, so I got a gig in a national touring company of "A Christmas Carol" that went out for about 6 weeks. Then I came back and didn't know really what I wanted to do, so I thought that I would just do community theater, then I decided that I wanted to try to become a studio singer. I heard that studio singers made good money and I knew that I could sing and that I could blend with a buzz saw if I had to. So I took lessons, and worked on my studio work, spent a fortune on making a demo tape, and I look back on that now and think, uhhgh, why did I do that? And I even went to Los Angeles to peddle myself as a studio singer, but it is a very tight-knit group, anywhere you go, Dallas, LA, and I wasn't able to crack that shell, so I did singing telegrams for about a year and a half, which was certainly interesting.

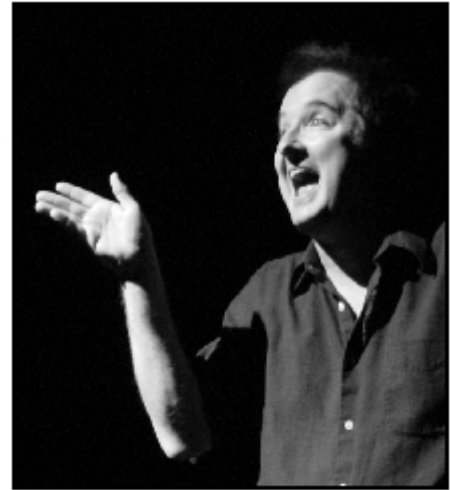


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CJN: How so?

PJW: I always tell people that it was the best and worst job that I ever had. The best job in that it taught me so much about performing in front of people that I don't know, and the worst job because it could be so frigging humiliating!

CJN: What was the worst experience that you had as a singing telegram?

PJW: The worst experience was...we also did strip-a-grams. I didn't have the body to become a stripper, but I did what they called "comic-strips". You know, some goofy guy stripping down to boxer shorts. I had gotten booked to do a bachelor-ette party and apparently my bosses did not make it clear to these girls that I was not a hunky boy, but I was a comic strip, and they thought that they were getting this big Chippendale stripper, and they were, needless to say, very unhappy, and it was humiliating for me...it's one of those nights I will never forget.

CJN: Consequently was it the last performance as a singing telegram?

PJW: You know, I don't remember when that happened, I remember exactly where it was, just not when it was in my career. I just knew that I had to get out of that and I think that was sometime in 1988. This was also about the time I started to do

temp work just being an office temp. I got into a production of *1776* at a new theater in Dallas that had formed, out of that show *Less Miserable* was formed. That was my former comedy group. *Less Miserable* was formed because the director of *1776*...the theater at the time was near the Oak Lawn area in Dallas, and she said, we need to capitalize on this late night crowd down here, so you all are funny, why don't you put something together. I was like Ughh, I don't want to do this, but that's how the whole comedy thing started.

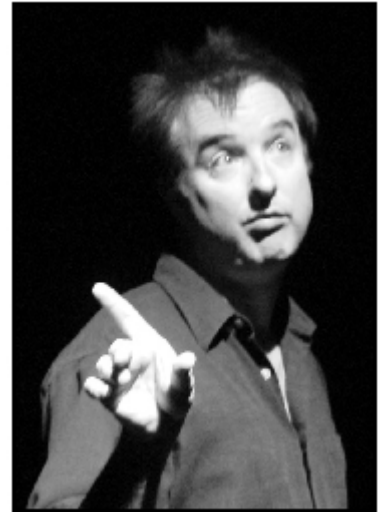


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CJN: *Less Miserable* was the first comedy show that you had?

PJW: Yes, it was myself, Steven Crabtree, and Pat Skinner. And Steven had already been in a comedy group before with two other women. So he had some sketch ideas under his belt, and I had never done sketch comedy, but I thought I can do this. I didn't know Steven that well, Pat and I were good friends, and Steven said that he thought it was a good idea that we have music behind us to help us with segues, so Pat came along as a piano player. I just kind of took off much to our surprise.

We became these little mini celebrities here in Dallas.

CJN: How long ago was that?

PJW: That was '88 to '94, and in the summer of '93 we were performing in Provincetown (Massachusetts) and were sharing a house with a successful lesbian comedian Suzanne Westenhoffer, and she and I took a walk one day and she just said, you know, you all are really funny, it is obvious to me that you are the strong one in the group and you should go out on your own. During this time, the early '90's gay comedy was really the "in" thing, and I said I can't do that, I have to have two other people on stage with me, and she said, no you really need to do this. Well, sure enough I want out on my own, she wrote a couple of jokes for me, gave me encouragement, helped me with bookings, and the rest is history.

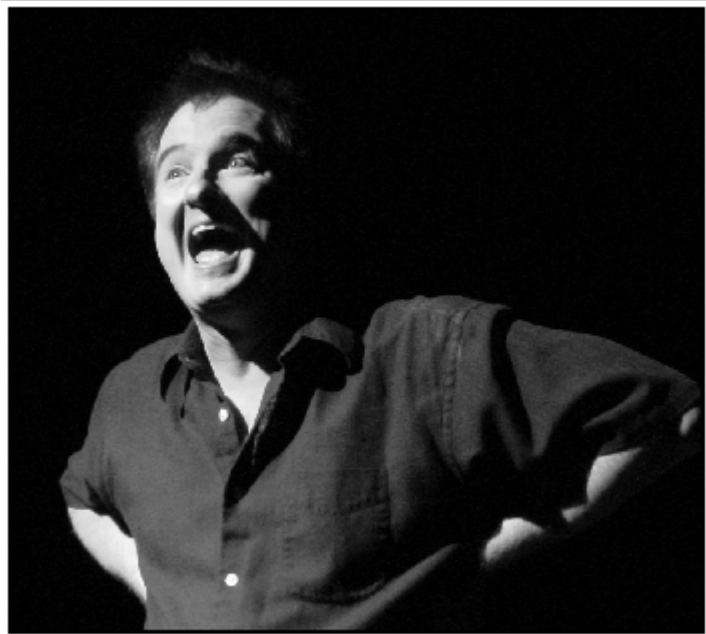


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CJN: So your first solo shows were just stand up or....?

PJW: My first show was a John Elles, here in Dallas and that was in the spring of '94 and I decided that I wanted to go back to Provincetown on my own. So I did a weekend in New York City at *The Duplex* and then went on to Provincetown where I did a month. That was the summer of '94..

CJN: Your latest show "*Dishing It Out*", when was the first time that you performed that show?

PJW: The first performance of *Dishing It Out* was in October of 2000. I got booked to perform for a gay and lesbian arts fair in Charlottesville, North Carolina called *Out Charlotte*, and they always bring in a male and a female entertainer to be their "artists in residence". He has seen me do comedy and said 'I need you to do two nights, stand up one night, and something different the other night, write something, so something' so I had been tossing this idea around the back of my head of stringing all of my characters together into one show because everyone said that my character work was so strong. Because we had been so successful in *Less Miserable*, one of everybody's favorite sketches was these two food servers at *Luby's Cafeteria*. The only way that I can get anything written is if I am on a dead line and someone is forcing my hand on it. And I knew that I had this deadline coming up in October, so I literally sat down and wrote *Dishing It Out* over the course of a weekend in September of 2000 to premiere in October. Then I brought it back to Dallas in 2001 at *The Pocket Sandwich Theater* and did what I call a showcase version of it, that is I invited my home crowd to come and see this piece that I had written, and then let them give me feedback on it. I had heard that Lily Tomlin did that with her shows, she would do work shops of it and let people talk back, so I tried that to see if I could get any insight, and it really did help. It's amazing where you do a show with no costumes or wigs and you let the audience visualize who these characters are, you get the audience to give you insight to insight that you might have missed.



Photo Courtesy Of C. J. Neumann

CJN: I am sure that feedback like that would be helpful

PJW: It helps open your eyes to things that maybe you missed and helps with character development then I came back later in 2001 and did another run of it at *Franks Place* at the *Dallas Theater Center*, then I did a festival in New York City, I was at *Jumpstart Theater* in San Antonio...Its been performed in New York, North Carolina and Texas at this point.

PJW: Oh, and the other thing that I knew was that I needed to have a 3rd eye, so I got my friend Jay Rogers in New York who was in the original cast of "*When Pig's Fly*" off Broadway, and he is from Mississippi and we were good friends, and I knew that he understood these characters. So I gave him the script and we sat down with it and he gave me a lot of stuff, especially for my red neck character Billy Ed that I couldn't have come up with, and taught me the body movement of the characters and really helping me fleshing it out

CJN: Speaking of Billy Ed and the rest of the characters of *Dishing It Out*, just give us a brief summary of who inspired these characters, were they based on individuals or were they a culmination of several people?

PJW: They are all different. The food servers Maude and Quintessa, Maude was based on all the Luby's women that I had seen growing up. She was an amalgam of these hair-netted women behind the counter. Oddly enough, she was one of the characters that when I did the workshop I got a whole different look on her. In my mind she was young, she was like late 20's, early 30's, the audience was saying, 'No, she's 50!' I was like, really? That helped me add new life to her. Quintessa is an African American woman, she is very strongly based on a woman that I worked with in the Cafeteria on the campus at Baylor, Ann White, now deceased, God rest her soul, but she was so crazy, and so out there, so fun, I just got so much from her, it's where I got Quintessa's speech patters. She is very based on Ann. Billy Ed, I knew that I needed to get another male character, and with my father working for Firestone and coming from Northern Louisiana, there are a lot of mechanics in my family, who are just good 'old boys who have a heart of gold, but maybe not that bright. Billy Ed is kind of a combination of my dad and his brother, and I realize now that it sounds like my dad is not a bright man, but that's not true he actually made something of himself, but he did start out as a mechanic.



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PJW: There are lines out of Billy Ed's monologue that came right out of my dad's mouth at one point or another. Sister Helen, obviously inspired my Dana Carvey's Church Lady, but on such a different level. I make her so Southern and so Baptist whereas Carvey's was more universal, and obviously based on several women that I knew growing up in the Baptist church. The Reverend, I hate to say was not my original character. That monologue was actually written by Steve Blow the *Dallas Morning News* Columnist. I created the character, but he wrote the words, I patterned him on any number of itinerate preachers that I had heard growing up. Nelda, interestingly enough was inspired by a guy friend of mine. One year for Halloween he dressed up as a character that he called "The Widow". The Widow was any number of Highland Park women, whose husbands had died so they needed to find something



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to do with their time and make some money so they went into real estate. He was the one that put the gravelly voice on her...he said 'you know all of the real estate women in Highland Park, they drive these big Cadillac's and talk like they've been smoking for years. And I liked that idea, and then I thought, I am not going to put her in Highland Park, I am going to take the opposite extreme and put her in the most white trash suburbia neighborhood I can think of. So any town that I go to, I find out where that is and she sells real estate there.

CJN: The other show that you do that is very popular, *Left Out...And Not Right*, came before *Dishing It Out* is that right?

PJW: Right. When I started getting involved with Cabaret work in New York City. Cabaret shows in New York always have a catchy title so you can market it. So I decided that I was going to do stand up comedy, some monologs and a song or two and I needed a catchy title for my show.

And I thought and thought and thought and this one just kind of came to me, and it was so multi-dimensional...I'm left, politically, I'm out of the closet, I was often left out as a child and as we say in the South, I'm just not right. It's a great title for a show.

PJW: Actually the first title of the show in Provincetown was *The Best Little Homo In Texas*. I decided that I didn't want to pigeon hole myself by having Homo in the title, so I softened it down a bit.

CJN: Who were comedians that were inspirations to you? Are they people that everyone would know or not, or a little of both?

PJW: A little of both, but the largest influence was Lily Tomlin. I discovered her when I was in junior high, and that has a big effect on me. To a lesser degree, Jonathan Winters, I remember watching him as a kid and loving all his characters that he would do. I am very inspired by a woman who is a friend of mine, maybe not as well known, but a female comedian named Jill Turnbow who was a friend of mine in Forth Worth. She did 10 or 15 years on the comedy circuit and I thought that she was just brilliant. She was the first close friend I had who got into comedy. Male comics, Robin Williams because he is so off the cuff, but it was not until I got into the business that I started meeting other comedians that had impressed me, but Lily has always been there since day one.

CJN: You have done a number of gay pride events, but what does gay pride mean to you personally?

PJW: Oh Dear...that's a hard question, because I have done so many pride festivals over the years that it has lost its punch, much as I think that pride festivals have lost some of their meaning over the years. Personally from a dictionary standpoint, gay pride means not having to be in the closet and not having to apologize or feel badly for who I am as a gay man. To me the opposite word of pride is shame, which growing up the Baptist church I was taught, gay equal's shame. So gay pride to me is being out of the closet, not hiding who you are, and being proud of it.

CJN: That is absolutely what it should mean but I agree that some meaning has been lost.



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PJW: Because we have gotten more and more mainstream especially with television, they seem to be more of a celebration as opposed to political statement, or a need to further the cause as it were. I think that gay pride still has a place I just think that it's something that needs to be something that is used wisely. Sometimes I think that people miss the point of gay pride and we do more harm than good.

CJN: Is there anything that you would like to comment about the gay community as a whole? Where do you see it now, and where do you see us going?

PJW: I speak to this issue as someone who lives in Dallas, TX, and someone who has lived in New York City, and the differences between those two gay communities are legion. In New York it is pretty darned easy to be gay because it is very much as live and let live attitude up there and the gay community has a lot more freedom than you do here. Consequently, I think that the gay community in Dallas is exactly that, a community. We are more cohesive, we work for the rights that we get, we don't take anything for granted, and we celebrate the strides we make. Honestly I enjoy being gay in Dallas more than I did in New York, because I don't take anything for granted here, and I did in New York. Now where is the gay community going? I think that answer comes from different places. Worldwide I think we are making strides, but we can never rest and think that everything is hunky-dory, and that is one thing living in Texas that reminds me I live in a red state. I think that we are on the right track because we always have something to fight for. I feel that if we have some cohesiveness and a cause we will continue to move forward until that day when being gay is not an issue and we don't have to fight for it anymore.

CJN: That would be nice and I hope that is in our future. Do you think that it will happen within our lifetime?

PJW: I have no idea, I think that with each generation it gets better. It is better with the younger generation that being gay is not a big issue. I just hope that politics doesn't come in and screw all of that up.

CJN: What is your ultimate dream of where you want your career to go?

PJW: To host the Oscars. I don't think that it's ever going to happen, but that is my ultimate goal. Beyond that, to be successful as a performer and to make people laugh, nothing brings me greater joy than to make people laugh. To be a little more specific on that, I wish I could make my living full time as a comedian, as a member of a house comedy group somewhere, on the road 52 weeks a year, writing on a show, or performing on a television show. But until then, I have to do a myriad of things to keep a roof over my head.

CJN: You have had a good run with *RSVP Cruises* lately. Are you going to continue that? and are you performing in a show on the ship?



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Photo Credit C. J. Neumann

PJW: I'm hoping to, this is still very new for me and so far I am enjoying working for them, they enjoy having me work for them. The contract is up in the fall, but I would be very happy to continue working with them if they choose to go in that direction... Interestingly enough, I don't do a show on the cruise ship. What I am doing for *RSVP* is coming in and helping as host and emcee. They have had the same host and emcee for 20 years, Danny Williams, who is loved by *RSVP* and their passengers, but *RSVP* wants to bring in some new people and as *RSVP* is getting bigger ships they need someone to be able to take some of the load and that is why they are having both of us working now. So, I don't do a show per se, I emcee things, I host, I introduce the headliner entertainers every evening, but I don't get up and do a comedy show for *RSVP*. So when people ask me what show I am doing, I'm not, I am Julie your cruise director.

CJN: Would you like to stay being the emcee or would you like to do both?

PJW: I would like to do both, because people that don't know my work really don't get to see me perform and I'm finding now that after 3 cruises, that I miss having a full 45 minute show every night. But, I am grateful for the job.

CJN: Who was the first person that made you laugh?

PJW: No one has ever asked me before, but I would say Lily Tomlin.

CJN: No one in your family?

PJW: My aunt Ruby. She was my grandfather's sister and she used to go on vacations with us and I can remember she used to look at me across the table and we used to get tickled. She loved to laugh. My grandfather had a great sense of humor too and was always doing silly things. He would be in the car and nothing, and then out of the clear blue grandpa would go, 'At the sound of the tone the time will be 9:00! TPHHHTT!' (*makes a noise*)



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CJN: And I am guessing that was...

PJW: No, he would just make a funny noise with his mouth.

CJN: Oh, Ok I thought that he might have been...well passing gas.

PJW: Oh, no, he wasn't a farter. He would make a funny noise and then go back to driving as if nothing had happened.

CJN: If you could have dinner with 3 people, living or dead, who would they be and why?

PJW: Lily Tomlin, I think that the why on that is obvious. Frank Lloyd Wright, I wanted to be an architect when I was a kid and I was mesmerized with his work. He was famously stubborn and artistic, such a visionary. I think that it would just be neat to visit with him. Ok, this is going to be so gay...Bette Midler!

CJN: Of course

PJW: I couldn't decide on Bette or Carol Burnett, I feel so strongly about both of them, but Bette Midler because she was so brassy! She became such a star and known for her brassiness her devil-may-care attitude, and the passion that she lives her life. She has a great sense of humor. So that is a weird threesome. I would love to have dinner with (Former Texas Governor) Ann Richards too. I have met her, but never had dinner with her..



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CJN: You have been doing your shows in Dallas, what's next for you? Are you planning on doing a new show?

PJW: The next big thing for me right now is *RSVP*. They just got purchased by *Planet Out* and they have all this money coming in, they are doing more cruises next year and my hope is that I will be busy doing more cruises next year and will be focusing my energy on that. Outside of that I have not thought about a new show. If I were to stay here in Dallas, I would love to do more theater. I can't even audition right now because invariably I have a conflict with scheduling. But with *RSVP*, I love meeting new people every day.

CJN: It's like the gay navy...

PJW: Absolutely! But you know I was thinking about something. The idea of being a gay comedian, what does that mean in the 21st century? I have such mixed emotions, I love the fact that I can identify myself as an out, gay comic, but I don't like the idea of it defining my work. The problem with that is too many comedy club or theater owners, won't book me because they think that I will only attract a gay audience. My experience has been that the straight audiences appreciate my humor as much as the gay audiences.

PJW: Last summer I did a cruise that had 50% gay and 50% older straight couples. The straight couples were getting just as much of a kick out of it as the gay people. So, I know I have an appeal that is broader than just the gay community. And while I covet that gay audience and I don't want to limit it to that. So, I hope that the future of gay comics is that there will always be gay and lesbian comics there for all the gay events that we have around the country, but that we also get the opportunities to break out of that box.

CJN: The shows that I have seen are more universal than people might think...It's not a "gay show".

PJW: Right...YA, lots of club owners will say 'we will put you on our gay night'. That is like telling an African American that we will put you on our 'ghetto night'. Why do we have to have just those nights? I am not going to turn down the work, but let me get in front of an audience. Milton Berle, or was it Bob Hope? Anyway, once said that 'comedy that wasn't real isn't good'. You have to speak about your life. Well, I'm gay, I can't do an act without mentioning that or else my comedy will seem very fake. I will say that a lot of my jokes touch on the fact that I'm gay and honestly I wish that I could write more material that didn't mention that. But then you are trading off on the fact that almost every part of my life reflects that I am gay.

CJN: It's reality.

PJW: It's reality! I once saw Elvira Kurt who is a wonderful Canadian lesbian comic, who does the most brilliant bit on a playground and how they are different when she was a kid and how they are now. I laughed so hard, yet I was so envious of that whole bit, I realized that it was so universally funny and it has nothing to do with being gay or lesbian.

CJN: Thank you Paul J. It has been a pleasure.

PJW: Likewise!

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