

COMMENTARY / CULTURE

# Larry Vickers, little did he know!



"I'm a living example of the truth of the old truism, 'if there's a will there's a way!'" - Larry Vickers.

When I answered my phone last week, the voice on the other end had a familiar sound to it as did his laughter.

Out of the blue I found myself on the line with Paris, France resident Larry Vickers who I grew up with, a guy whose talents I've always admired.

You see, as a 20-year-old from a small, segregated town in Virginia, little did Vickers know when he stepped off the bus into the glitz that met him in New York City where his God given talents would take him. And neither did those of us who proudly claimed him as our native son.

So, after a half century of performing on stages across the globe, Vickers finds himself these days at peace and happily settled into his beloved Paris, the world's epicenter of fine wines, culture and fashion.

Why Paris? Well, like his counterparts in other creative fields – among them James Baldwin, the great Jazz and Blues performers of their times and figures of the Harlem Renaissance - stints in Paris provided validation, renewal and, for some, an escape from the stifling realities of racism in America.

"Coming from a small southern town where we were conditioned to being told 'no,' one of the first things I had to learn was how to say 'yes.' That lesson stuck with me when I think about the many opportunities that came my way throughout my career."

Not long after taking his first step onto the New-York City scene, Vickers landed his first professional job as a dancer in a dinner show starring Hollywood star Alexis Smith. "That was a huge confidence builder," he said. Before long Vickers traveled to Paris and began his professional career at Bruno Coquatrix's Olympia Music Hall.

He later returned to America where he was rapidly getting noticed and was given the featured dance role in the Broadway musical "Purlie," choreographed by Louis Johnson and starring



the Tony Award winners Cleavon Little and Melba Moore.

"The truth is that I did not just show up on stages and TV sets," Vickers pointed out. "There were people of color who opened doors for me. One person even intimated that I reminded him so much of his younger self." It was Lester Wilson, best known for his choreography for "Saturday Night Fever" starring John Travolta, who was instrumental in getting Larry the opportunity to dance on Don Cornelius' "Soul Train."

In 1970, he met Sylvie Vartan, the French pop singer, in New York who invited him to Paris to dance in her show "Sylvie Vartan at the Olympia." While there he began doing television specials, commercials and movies. In one television special he met Line Renaud and became her choreographer for her international touring show.

When Vickers returned to New York to scout for talent for Renaud, he was selected to be one of the five dancers for the "Gypsies in my Soul" European tour with Shirley MacLaine. In 1975, he was invited by Lester Wilson to dance in the MGM movie "Funny Lady" starring Barbara Streisand and Omar Sharif.

As a dancer with increasing fame, Vickers appeared on TV specials with Cher and danced with Goldie Hawn and Liza Minnelli and on the Mary Tyler Moore Hour. He was a featured dancer in "The Wiz," a movie starring Diana Ross and Michael Jackson. Later he danced with Ann-Margret on her disco single, "Love Rush," before returning to Paris to choreograph the comedy "Envoyez la musique" at the Porte Saint Martin Theater. He then choreographed a television movie, "Ca Vous Plait," starring Jean-Pierre Cassel.

Vickers next stop was Hollywood where he joined the production of the



CBS television special "Uptown" starring Cab Calloway. That season, he choreographed shows in Monte Carlo featuring American stars Clint Holmes, Fats Domino, Donna Summers, Sammy Davis, Jr., Whitney Houston, Gregory Hines, Grace Jones and Kool and the Gang.

After staging Grace Jones for a gala in Monte Carlo, Vickers accepted the request from fashion designer Miquel Cruz to stage his fashion show featuring Jones in eight major cities and countries and then was engaged to perform for the Italian Oscars in Switzerland featuring Sophia Loren and Giorgio Armani.

He later relocated to Florida where he staged the first presentation of the Miss Universe pageant for the American Heart Association. While there he was the casting director for the film "Versace murder," and staged and choreographed Eddie Murphy's "Holy Man" with Jeff Goldblum and Priscilla Presley.

After his stay in Florida, Vickers returned to his hometown Staunton, Virginia, and transformed his former high school into a cultural center. There he co-produced the French American

Gospel Music Workshop, hosted guests from France and celebrated the last show of the seven-year exchange at the Espace Pierre Cardin in Paris.

Today Larry continues to express his talents and influences between cinema, television, cabaret, videos and fashion. He is working on a musical tribute to legendary female Blues and Jazz singers and an original opera, "Seven," the evolution of music and dance based on the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice.

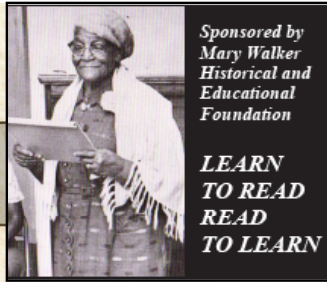
Yes, Larry Vickers! Little did he know.

And little did we know, although we always had a hunch.

© Terry Howard is an award-winning writer and storyteller, a contributing writer with the Chattanooga News Chronicle, The Douglas County Sentinel, The American Diversity Report, Hometown Advantage, The BlackMarket.com, co-founder of the "26 Tiny Paint Brushes" writers' guild, and recipient of the 2019 Dr. Martin Luther King Leadership Award.

## This Week in African American History

### Queen Lili'uokalani 1838-1917



## Hawai'i's Only Reigning Queen

"I, Lili'uokalani of Hawai'i... do hereby protest against the ratification of a certain treaty, which . . . has been signed at Washington . . . purporting to cede those Islands to the territory and dominion of the United States. I declare such a treaty to be an act of wrong toward the native and part-native people of Hawai'i, an invasion of the rights of the ruling chiefs, in violation of international rights both toward my people and toward friendly nations with whom they have made treaties, the perpetuation of the fraud whereby the constitutional government was overthrown, and, finally, an act of gross injustice to me."

—Excerpted from a Letter to President McKinley Protesting the Annexation of Hawai'i, 1897

Lydia Lili'u Loloku Waiania Kamaka'eha (1838–1917), better known as Queen Lili'uokalani, was the Hawaiian Kingdom's only reigning queen and last monarch before the overthrow of the sovereign state. Queen Lili'uokalani presided over the Hawaiian Kingdom during a time of great economic growth. By 1890, 21 international treaties and more than 80 embassies around the world recognized the Hawaiian archipelago. Additionally, Hawai'i and its multiethnic society enjoyed universal suffrage in 1840 (a full 120 years before the United States), universal health care, state neutrality (1855), and a 95 percent literacy rate, the second highest in the world. Deceit and treachery also marked the queen's tenure: on January 17, 1893, the queen was forcefully removed in a coup de main supported

by American troops and warships under the direction of John L. Stevens, U.S. minister to the Hawaiian Kingdom. The United States argued that it needed Hawaiian ports to fight the Spanish-American War deeper in the Pacific, which the Hawaiian Kingdom's neutral status prevented. Despite years of unsuccessful appeals to international states and the United States government, Lili'uokalani was confined at home in Honolulu until her death in 1917. While not an American woman, Queen Lili'uokalani marks a significant voice in the framework of American imperialism. A force to be reckoned with, she protected her country, citizens, and role as sovereign until her passing.



Signed photograph of Lili'uokalani, the last sovereign of the Hawaiian kingdom. Photograph from The Library of Congress

