



Before curtain call, when genders are more easily ascertained



Performers spend the final minutes before hitting the stage perfecting every minute detail of their appearance



Onstage at last: Miss Gay America thrills crowd

# FEMALE IMPERSONATORS

## Bars across state feature sequined, provocative — men

By JIM ZOOK  
Editor

Lavish is not the word to describe this cavernous dressing room. Lit by antiquated fluorescent fixtures, the floor of scuffed green and gray tile lies beneath a towering ceiling. This setting seems better suited for a 19th-century sweat shop.

This is no typical boudoir. Sequined gowns and strands of pearls adorn the makeshift clothes racks. The performers shuffle and glide across the floor, searching for a misplaced tube of lipstick or just the right pair of earrings. The sweetish aroma of perfume and the smoke from that last nervous drag on a cigarette cloud the room.

Any backstage newcomer will soon realize the ceiling isn't the only thing that towers. Some of these glamorous figures touching up their mascara can nearly touch that ceiling.

When you're a 6'1" man in pumps, you have a unique perspective.

More than a dozen of the state's best female impersonators gathered Saturday night to honor the public's favorites in their trade. The N.C. Applause Awards, held annually to recognize the top impersonators performing in the state's gay bars, are the Oscars of female impersonation in North Carolina. The show was held at one of the Triangle's largest gay bars, The Power Company in Durham.

The performers assert that female impersonation is not an obscure, perverse art form relegated to Times Square. It's 'big business' entertainment that can be found not only in N.C.'s major cities, but in medium-

sized Tar Heel towns such as Hickory and Jacksonville.

"It's become the form of entertainment in gay bars and in a lot of other places like Atlantic City," said Katrina Sharr of Wilmington, a 24-year-old, five-year veteran. "I don't know how it came about, but it's the illusion. When they (the audience) really get off and enjoy it is when you look real."

Boy, do they ever look real. A fledgling follower of the art is amazed at the completeness of the transformation from everyday man to knockout woman. The changeover is bolstered by the performers' referring to their co-stars as "girls" and calling each other by their female stage names. (To maintain convenience and anonymity, this story will do the same.)

But it's a transformation most of the performers vow will remain as temporary and easy for them to change into and out of as a Pierre Cardin creation.

"There's a change in the person as far as the image you're giving," Katrina said as she touched up her cherry red lip gloss. "You're giving people what they expect, what they want to see — something more feminine. But my thoughts are still mine because it's still me underneath. If anything, it lets you see things from two points of view."

Molding a typical man into a voluptuous woman is time-consuming and requires painstakingly meticulous preparation. The performers said as much as four hours of painting, padding and primping are necessary preliminaries to every show.

"I put foam rubber on the side to make my hips, then I smooth them down with dance tights to give

the illusion of a woman's body," said Durham's Diana Lee Bishop. "It gets rid of my male physique and gives me a more feminine physique."

But the primping is the easy part. They must create a durable look, one that will hold up for six to eight minutes of choreographed lip synching to songs by stars as diverse as Patti LaBelle and Annie Lennox. Creating this image takes a physical toll on their bodies each time they perform.

"When I first started it was a lot easier," said Melissa Montgomery of Hickory, whose flowing, flaming red wig gives her the appearance of a 6'4" Ann-Margret. "Now, the worst thing is getting my body together. I have to pad more and get on all these hose and tights."

As a performer prepares to descend from the upstairs dressing room onto the dance floor, a last gulp of their favorite drink soothes the nerves. The music and lights set the tone for the upcoming performer — upbeat and energetic, or slower and more dramatic.

Audience participation is essential to the success of each number. Choruses of boisterous whistles and whoops fill the club as the performer launches into her act. To show their thanks, appreciative followers flood the stage during each number, offering dollar bills and a touching clench of hands or a kiss on the cheek for support. The performers agree that each of them can provide some people an emotional boost by vicariously representing their favorite star.

"Certainly, people see their favorite stars in the



Cohorts help each other keep every hair in place



Posture completes the effect

Photos by  
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