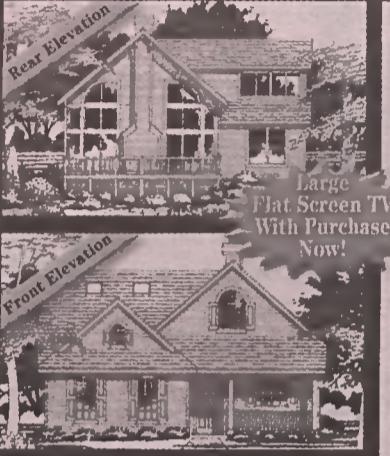


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## Editor's Note

by David Moore . Q-NOTES staff

### Of drag kings and queens



Is anybody still paying attention to drag queens these days?

With more pressing matters at hand like the struggle for gay and lesbian marriage equality, a retro-evolutionary attempt at turning our country into a theocracy by single-minded evangelicals or the distinct possibility of impending global warfare, it seems almost impossible to think of anything frivolous.

I can recall a time in my young adult life when drag queens were the center of queer culture. There was no LGBT community center. No gay business guild and certainly no out and proud bankers or companies like Wachovia and Bank of America to sponsor events like the recent PRIDE Charlotte festival.

Few, if any, openly gay individuals were politically involved — especially in the South. The very notion of demanding the right to same-sex marriage was practically unthinkable.

So who were our figureheads?

In places like San Francisco there was Harvey Milk — and on a national level names like Barbara Gittings, Edmund White and Larry Kramer come to mind.

I would be remiss not to mention local names that made early pathways in that era, like Don King, Mandy Carter, Jim Baxter and Q-NOTES publisher Jim Yarbrough. But still — most gays and lesbians outside of major metropolitan areas in the mid to even late 20th century remained largely closeted for fear of personal safety.

It was a closed community. Our refuge was the smoky dark bar with no windows. Dancing was our shared recreation. Drag queens were our figureheads.

A night or two a week you could see them, done up to the nines with massive manes, pounds of makeup, glittering in sequins, slinking and lip-syncing across a dance floor or a makeshift stage.

In between the pantomime acts, drag queens with a gift of banter would often talk about pertinent matters of the day — glibly, of course — in effect becoming purveyors of news and political opinion.

We paid a lot of attention to them. We watched what they wore, how they moved, what songs they chose to perform and often times we listened to what they had to say.

That all began to change as the 1980s progressed. The AIDS epidemic made activists out of party boys and a growing trend towards coming out meant fewer people were hiding in dark bars. The gay press exploded and mainstream media was chomping at the bit to cover LGBT issues.

By the 1990s drag went mainstream with such performers as RuPaul, Dame Edna and Lady Bunny. "Priscilla, Queen of the Desert," "The Birdcage" and "Too Wong Foo" were hugely successful movies that presented drag queens to the world as comedic, happy-go-lucky court jesters ready to entertain at the drop of a dime. New York's annual "Wigstock" festival attracted fans of the art form to dress in kind for a day while watching some of the most outrageous drag acts known to humanity (it also prompted a film with the same name).

Drag truly was everywhere.

Lesbians finally got in on the act, too,

around that same time. I saw my first drag king show in Atlanta in the early '90s. While gay men had been dressing up as women and entertaining for centuries, "male impersonation" by lesbians never really took off in the same way.

Now there are drag king troupes all around the country.

But what is it, exactly, that makes someone want to dress up in clothes of the opposite sex? Why spend countless hours (not to mention dollars) creating clothing, make-up and hair?

I had a conversation with a young gay man the other day. I had interviewed him once when he was still a high school student trying to form a gay student's group. He's now an aspiring drag diva.

He poked his head in my office door and asked me what I knew about a once well-known Charlotte drag queen named Toni Lenoir.

Lenoir passed away back in the 1990s.

"I've seen her perform on video," he said with stars in his eyes. "She was so incredible."

"I didn't really know her that well," I replied. "We talked a few times. She was pretty nice, as I recall?" I shared a story about a time I saw her perform at a now defunct Charlotte club. While lip-syncing to the SOS Band's "Take Your Time" her beaded wig flew off her head after a particularly sharp dance turn.

"The wig literally disappeared," I told him. "But she kept right on performing with these little Buck Wheat tufts of hair. About an hour later a guy came out to the dance floor with a ladder, climbed up it and snatched the wig from the top of a large mirrored disco ball. Nobody ever figured out exactly how it got there."

Later, after our talk, I recalled a conversation I had with Lenoir following a performance at Scorpio.

"You do that really well," I said.

She sucked in her cheeks and arched her eyebrows at me ever so slightly. "Why, thank you."

She sat down beside me for a moment at the bar and I ordered us both a drink.

"What makes you want to perform?" I asked.

At first she looked at me almost in shock. "I wasn't being rude," I assured her. "I'm just curious. What's the motivating factor? What's the payoff?"

Then she laughed.

"It's fun. People enjoy it. I get a lot of attention."

That summed it up rather nicely for me right there.

The times have certainly changed, the following is smaller and drag has gone from underground to mainstream and now — in some circles — practically passé.

As the LGBT community has attempted to mainstream itself for acceptance by the majority of Americans, fewer gay people want to be gender-bending performers and fewer gay people are paying as much attention to drag queens like they used to.

Although the numbers may be dwindling, they're still out there. Still having fun, still entertaining and still getting that attention they crave.

Drag queens and kings are as much a part of our community as the openly gay bank vice president or the out lesbian business executive. They're part of queer culture — and we should never turn our nose up at the contributions they made. ▀