

HAIR APPARENT

Feature Report on N.Y.C. Drag Kings

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What a drag! Mo B Dick, the undisputed king of New York's swaggeringly studly drag king scene, can't seem to slice off his six-and-a-half inches of engorged latex manhood. Tug, tug, tug. Finally it gives, and Dick hurls his fake dick into the cheering audience from the small stage at Club Casanova. The crowd go wilder.

Club Casanova is the Sunday soirée in the East Village that is the epicenter of American drag king-ism — lesbian, female-to-male cross-dressing as performance art. This particular Casanova session is a tribute to trash filmmaker John Waters, himself an avowed drag king fan. So tonight Mo B Dick has reinvented himself as Mole McHenry, the leering, foul-mouthed professional wrestler from Waters' 1974 sleazefest *Desperate Living* — the butch dyke who turned dick-slicing into an art form long before America had ever heard of Lorena Bobbitt.

Or drag kings for that matter, of whom transgendered McHenry was an obvious precursor. Sporting glued-on sideburns, visible crotch bulges and a swaggering cool, Mo B Dick's peers include Dred, Labio, Justin Kase, Lizerace and Murray Hill. As well as putting lesbian camp on the map, these new kings of New York are currently injecting some much-needed testosterone into a nightlife climate thrown into disarray by political hostility from the city fathers, police pressure and tired old drag queens miming to show tunes.

Having emerged a few years ago, they have come to a new prominence during a crisis period of sorts in New York clubland. Venues have been closed by the NYPD for various infractions including overcrowding, drug use and operating without a cabaret licence — the enigmatic, City Hall-issued permit that allows dancing in establishments that serve alcohol. Clubland has also been tarnished by the sinister deeds of the drug-addled "club kids," Manhattan's last, pre-drag kings nightlife subculture of note. The key figure on this scene, Michael Alig, is currently in prison accused of brutally murdering his friend and drug-dealer Angel Melendez.

These factors, combined with the absurd political maneuvers of a Republican mayor — whose controversial "Quality of Life" campaign has transformed much of the city into a cheery zone of chain stores, theme restaurants and family-oriented musicals based on animated Disney films — has made nightclubbing akin to drinking and dancing under a police state. Those who were once drawn to the Big Apple out of a desire to take a walk on the wild side must these days look a little bit harder for the Candy Darlings of this generation.

Earlier this year, Murray Hill, a 52-year-old redundant subway-token-booth clerk from Brooklyn with two kids and a curvy Bible school instructor wife, decided to run for mayor of New York City on the mid-life-crisis/drag-king ticket. His creator, 26-year-old School of Visual Arts graduate Betsey Gallagher, received a grant for Mr. Hill's political cause — she's getting paid to write her thesis about performing as a drag king mayoral candidate in the run-up to the November elections.

Outraged that Republican Mayor Rudolf Giuliani would don drag (which he did last autumn after a benefit stage performance of *Victor/Victoria*) yet continue to shut down a distressing number of clubs in which drag kings and queens make their living as performers and promoters, Hill has spent the last few months giving media interviews and rousing campaign speeches in New York clubs, and attracting a rabid following of cocktail-swilling young voters.

“My impetus as a drag king is political and academic,” says Gallagher. “It functions as my feminist agenda, but I can use it as entertainment and as a means of dealing with this city’s nightlife troubles. I want to push this character into the mainstream.”

And it’s happening — cuddly, much-loved Murray Hill, which Gallagher based party on her love for Benny Hill, has managed to unite gay and straight clubgoers like no downtown drag queen ever has.

She has also inspired New York filmmakers to produce a mock campaign film about her mayoral bid called *Murray for Mayor*. This is just one of a fist of drag-king related projects being made up in editing suites; right now, the world stage is theirs for the taking.

Waters has cast Mo B Dick in his new film, *Pecker*, currently filming in Baltimore; two internationally financed documentaries are being filmed in Manhattan; and the tellingly titled *Kings* is doing the rounds on the festival circuit. In this 50-minute edgy, black-and-white low-budgeter, Penelope Tuedae (the reigning “It Girl” of New York nightlife) portrays a gender-curious woman who finds out the hard way what it means to be uncomfortable in your own skin after reinventing herself as a drag king. A drag king — gender theorists and original sinners take note — called Adam.

Maureen Fischer, who founded Club Casanova in March 1996 with downtown drag queen Misstress Formika, first donned male drag two years ago. Just for the sheer fun of it, she says brightly, “and to see if I could pass.” She did. “I thought you had to be butch in order to be a drag king,” she recalls, describing her initial drag makeover as nothing short of a turn-on: “I stuffed socks in my panties and went out on the town. I was creaming my jeans in the cab on the way home.”

Fischer then set out to create the Casanova’s sexist, leering, vulgarity-spewing, pompadour-heavy master of ceremonies. Enter Mo B Dick, whom she lovingly calls “this schmuck from Brooklyn preoccupied with tits, ass, and pussy. The kind of person you’d look at and say ‘What a dick!’”

With the aid of stick-on rockabilly sideburns and a gold-capped tooth custom-made in Brooklyn, Fischer modeled Mo after some random slob she glimpsed lolling on the subway one day. “He had a beer gut, polyester shorts, cheesy shoes and maroon socks. I took one look at him and said: ‘That’s hot!’”

Another night, another show.... The 999999s is clubland’s Fellini-esque Sunday night lounge extravaganza, co-founded by Penelope Tuedae. This evening Dred, a.k.a. 26-year-old Mildred Gerestant, winner of the 1996 Drag King of the Year contest at popular lesbian hangout Her/She Bar, has taken the stage to genderbend for the world premiere of *Kings*, in which she has a

brief role. Decked out in Seventies *Superfly* garb, including a fierce afro and some painted-on sideburns, Dred begins by lip-synching to Issac Hayes' "Shaft." Halfway through the performance he begins to shed his mack-daddy pimp attire, revealing Mildred's breasts and shaved head — surprise, she's Grace Jones.

Brooklyn native Gerestant, a self-described "lesbian since I was born," found male drag to be her social salvation. "I've been butch and femme, top and bottom," Gerestant explains, "and so drag feels natural to me. As a child I grew up shy. I was teased a lot. I was the ugly duckling. Now I'm one of the popular ones. But I have this side that likes to stay hidden."

Mildred finishes the act to the tune of "Pull Up To the Bumper," coyly removing (and taking a bite out of) the apple she uses as Dred's manhood. It's a brilliantly smooth performance and one that sends the predominantly straight, white crowd at The 99999s into feverish applause. The most interesting of New York's drag kings, Dred offers a camped-up version of the predatory urban black male — a stereotype that continues to fill many New Yorkers with hysteria and, erm, dream. "I've been on the streets in drag as a man," Gerestant avows, "and I can't catch a cab. This can't be a coincidence."

Of course the big question on everyone's mind is: what took the drag kings so long? Drag queens have been a visible part of New York nightlife for decades. They've even infiltrated mainstream American culture, winning over unsuspecting fans, including the fickle American family (*Mrs. Doubtfire* was a huge box-office success, and was shown in a recent family-oriented drag-queen film festival at New York's Lincoln Center). RuPaul has a hit TV talk show, while Howard Stern was made over as woman for the cover of his bestselling book *Miss America*.

Drag king DJ and performer Lizerace (a.k.a. Elizabeth Carthaus), whose drag persona consists of a rhyme-busting, streetwise hip-hop-obsessed white teenager with menacing facial hair, cites lesbian chic as a catalyst for the drag kings' sudden vogue.

"You see a lot more lesbians in mainstream culture, not to mention a lot more women playing with androgyny," Carthaus says. "Female androgyny gets exalted in Calvin Klein ads. There's an intrigue about that, even outside the fashion industry."

In contrast with all those hyperbolic early-Nineties outbreaks of lesbian chic and the ceaseless is-she-or-isn't-she rounds of gossip that preceded it, the current pattern is for stars to come out, enjoy the attention, and then get on with what made them successful in the first place. Ellen DeGeneres and Anne Heche's 15 minutes of sexual preference-specific fame may have become staple talk-show material, but it caused much less controversy than gender transpotters and conservative American politicians predicted.

But will drag kings find the same mainstream acceptance as their drag queen counterparts? Will Murray Hill get a chat show like RuPaul? Will Lizerace become a bejeweled housewives' favorite? Will Dred be able to hail a cab?

One wonders. Elvis Herselvis, a San Francisco-based drag-king performer and Elvis Presley impersonator, attracted national media attention last year after being hired by Graceland to perform at an Elvis convention. Graceland officials pulled their funding of the event at the last

minute after learning that it was a woman who would be taking the stage as Elvis — officially, as reaffirmed by the messianic fervor that greeted last month's 20th anniversary of his death, the U.S.A.'s most sacred icon.

"There is something threatening about a drag king," admits Judith Halberstam, a professor of literature at the University of San Diego. She has spent two years observing drag kings in New York, San Francisco, London and Berlin for a book, *Drag Kings* (to be published by Serpent's Tail next year), in collaboration with London-based transgendered photographer Del LaGrace — a self-proclaimed "hermaphrodyke" who lives life as a man.

"We encourage men to get in touch with their femininity, to think about how to become mothers, to become more nurturing," says Halberstam, also author of next year's *Female Masculinities* (Duke University Press). "But there is no encouragement for women to express their masculinity, and that's because masculinity is a site of empowerment. The beauty of the drag king performance makes you aware how much masculinity is performative and theatrical. It's easy to dress up as a woman, but how the hell are you going to make maleness into a costume, into drama? Drag queens emulate movie stars like Bette Davis or Joan Crawford. It's not very easy for a woman to do Paul Newman."

Media fascination with drag kings in New York has reached a level of sheer pandemonium. Filmmakers, journalists and photographers are descending on Casanova each week eager to capture on film and in print the club's inventive genderfuck performances. That, and it's equally genderfuck crowd of gays, straights, trannies, queens and unsures that have made the event so entertaining and unpredictable.

One week saw Dred take the stage as Little Richard, fondling a go-go dancer's size 46F breasts as he lip-synched "The Girl Can't Help It." Another week featured a live set by a drag-king rockabilly band from Atlanta. Another, an amateur talent contest in which two aspiring kings tied for first place and had to lapdance Bob, Casanova's mega-chested female mascot, for the main prize.

"I just think they're my kind of gals," gushes John Waters, always on to today's subversive American cultural niche before it becomes tomorrow's MTV-friendly corporate concept. "To me they're much more exciting than drag queens, but it's really just a new take on it. When we have families loving drag queens, then we need something new."

Waters' ideal drag king, he confesses, possesses the face of Johnny Cash and the body of Marilyn Monroe. "Drag kings these days look sexy enough that I want to sleep with them, and that alarms me!" admits the bad-taste maestro, whose trademark moustache suddenly seems so much less exciting compared to Murray Hill's own. ■