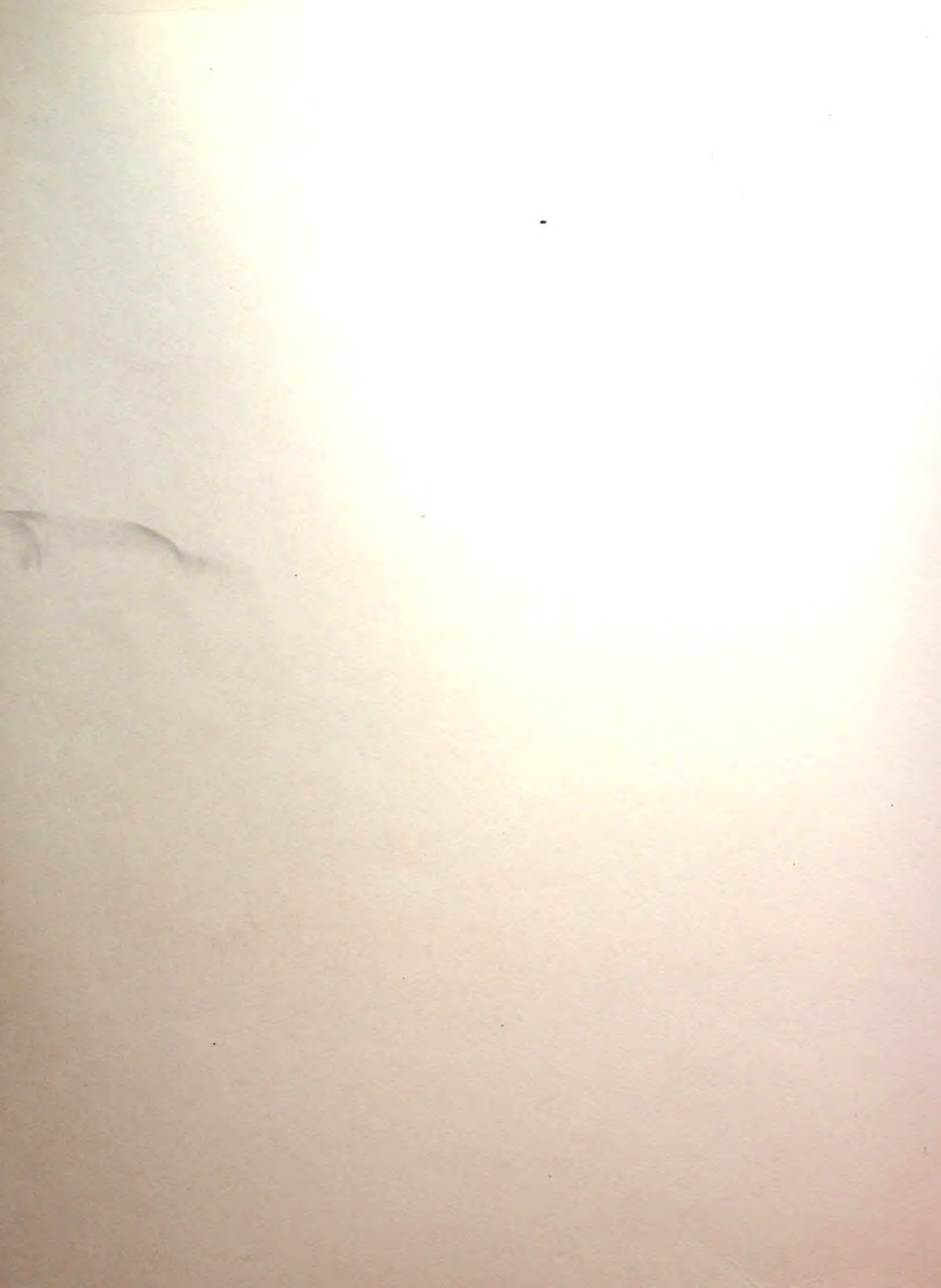


"Magnificent and breathtaking" SUSIE BRIGHT

A man with a goatee and a straw cowboy hat stands on a grassy hill. He is wearing a black Harley-Davidson t-shirt with a red logo and a blue denim shirt over it. He has a large silver belt buckle and a chain on his belt. He is holding a shotgun across his shoulders. The background shows a city and a body of water under a clear sky.

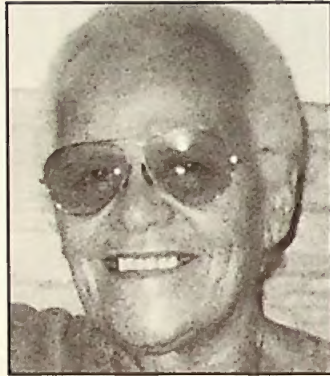
THE DRAG KING BOOK

DEL LAGRACE VOLCANO
JUDITH "JACK" HALBERSTAM



THE DRAG KING BOOK

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This book was inspired by the hundreds of unnamed women who performed as male impersonators in the 1930s/40s/50s and 60s. In recognition of their courage and originality we dedicate this book to Storme DeLaverié, the King of Kings.

THE DRAG KING BOOK

**DEL LAGRACE VOLCANO
JUDITH "JACK" HALBERSTAM**



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Front cover: Duke, King of the Hill, San Francisco, 1997

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Judith "Jack" Halberstam, London, 1997

preface

Del LaGrace Volcano and I met in 1995 at the London International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival. At this festival Del participated in the first London Drag King contest, and I was one of the judges. We immediately hit it off; I had long been an admirer of the photographs published by Del under his former name Della Grace, and we were happy to finally meet. Del and I share a strange history of Anglo-American migration in that I grew up in England but later moved to the United States and Del grew up in the United States but then moved to London. Our transatlantic displacements give us interesting perspectives on various queer cultures in England and America, and also allow us curious lines of affiliation. We both traveled back and forth between New York, London and San Francisco over the course of a two-year period, and we tried to spend time together in all three places.

Both Del and I felt ourselves to be full participants in the Drag King scenes we studied. Del himself actively participates in the London Drag King performances, and I am a longtime regular on the Drag King circuit in New York; while I do not perform on stage, I would say that I am rarely not a Drag King. When Del and I met at the Drag King contest in London in 1995, Del took the stage and began to perform what I would now classify as “fag drag”; I read it at the time as “femme pretender” drag and gave it medium marks. Subsequent conversations with Del inspired me to change my reading of his performances and identifications and I was soon convinced by what he then called his “hermaphrodyke” sense of identity. I have since been well tutored in the subtleties and nuances of the non-butch trans-masculinity that he embodies, and I now recognize his position as a transgender man. As Del embarks upon new photographic projects on trans identities, I can see that once again he is breaking new ground and testing the limits of stable identifications. If Del’s sense of identity and embodiment and relation to performance has undergone subtle transformations over the course of two years, mine has remained somewhat constant, anchored to what might be called transgender butchness.

Del identifies variously as hermaphrodyke, transman, and other complicated self-constructed identities. I identify as a trans-butchtch or a drag butchtch, in other words, a butchtch who is at the transitive edge of female masculinity. I take my masculinity very seriously and I find it nourished and cultivated by immersions in these queer arenas of Drag King theater. I admit that my secret hope in this project was to find a butchtch brotherhood behind the Drag King world, and to find all kinds of continuities between Drag King performance on stage and butchtch identity off stage. Early on I had to give up on this quest and resign myself to celebrating and admiring what was there rather than seeking to insert what I wished were there. I was an erratic and aggressive interviewer and not as good a listener as I should have been. I am fortunate, therefore, that so many of the Drag Kings had such smart and

insightful things to say, and that they forced me to let them say them! I have learned as much from this project about my own desires and identifications as about the activities of the Drag Kings.

In some of my interviews with Drag Kings, the interviewees expressed frustration at my insistent questions and constant formulations and interpretations of performances and styles. What I was doing by questioning, looking and learning was sometimes seen in opposition to what others were doing, namely "having fun." In other words, if I would only loosen up about my categories of drag acts, my strategies of impersonation, my forms of butch drag, the reasoning went, I would soon be able to sit back and have a good time, maybe even get up on stage myself! Let me stress that all this baiting was very friendly and was received as such, and I do want to reassure both the kings and prospective readers that researching and writing this book has been nothing but fun for me, and that my desire to explain and describe and make sense of the drag acts I have seen was my way of taking pleasure in the shows. By presenting my thoughts here, I am finally on stage. Furthermore, I believe that the accounts that I have given here of the vagaries of Drag King performances are far more faithful to the acts themselves than the accounts of the scene which appear in the popular media. By preserving and presenting a small slice of Drag King culture in all its complexity, I hope to counter the mainstream media representations of Drag Kings as supermodels in moustaches. While magazines like *Penthouse* and *Marie Claire* try to use Drag King culture to bolster their lurid fantasies about lesbians with penis envy or playgirls with dicks, this book expresses my interest in precisely what is queer about Drag Kings and their performances.

It is my hope that the Drag Kings who read this book can recognize their contributions to this project and feel proud of what they/we have created. I feel that this book, my text and Del's pictures are as much a part of an evolving scene of gender creativity as the shows and contests and performances that we record. This text is my Drag King act while Del's images are part of his immersion in the Drag King scene. Del changes identities. This simple sentence does not mean to imply that Del is constantly shifting between identities (although he may be), it means that he acts upon identities, his own and others', and alters them by capturing them on film. Having watched him take photos over the past six months, I have been amazed at the ways in which he draws his subjects in, gives them information about himself, information that causes people to trust Del and to give up a little piece of themselves to the camera. He wants the viewer to desire and admire the model; he wants the model to seduce the viewer as he has been seduced. He wants the camera to invest the image with lust as well as beauty, and he wants the model to treat the camera like a mirror. The pictures that you will see in this book are not simply portraits or action shots, posed scenes or impromptu snaps. They are



Drag King Family: Louie (Lulu), Hansi, da Castro, Simo, Del, Svar, Jewels & Gianhi (Gianna), London 1996



Murray Hill & Constituent, New York City, 1997



Dred on the Street, New York City, 1996



Murray Hill for Mayor, New York City, 1997

tributes to a masculinity that Del loves and that he wants to seduce the viewer into loving too. He refuses to fortify his own subject position by making others into objects; Del is his own favorite object (as opposed to his own favorite subject) and while he may not be visible in every frame, one has the feeling that every frame represents a self he would like to inhabit. Del LaGrace Volcano and I hope the text and the images work together to produce an intricate but by no means definitive survey of Drag King culture in at least three urban areas. The text attempts to amplify rather than explain the images, and the images try to theorize Drag King performances rather than just capture them in action. In general, Del's images of Drag Kings in London and New York fetishistically linger upon the accoutrements of Drag King culture. At one moment, Del has his kings strike a pose and he assumes the gaze of the ethnographer or voyeur, but in the next shot he has leaped into the frame and out-kings the kings with his own cheeky masculinity.

Despite the fact that Drag Kings have been featured everywhere recently – *Marie Claire*, *New York Post*, *London Times*, *Penthouse Magazine*, *The Face* and other more eclectic publications² and while drag became such a rage for women that even Demi Moore donned a suit and facial hair for an *Arena* magazine drag spread, the very idea of butch women in drag still seems to be met with revulsion and fear. And yet it is surely only a matter of time, as Murray Hill commented to me, before a Drag King has a talk show or appears on Rosie O'Donnell or hits Hollywood, and when she does, let's hope it's Mo B. Dick with his pompadour and his sleazy asides; let's hope it's Dred as the baddest mackdaddy you ever saw, or Shon as the smooth soul lover; let's hope it's Murray Hill doing one of his outrageous parodies of male middle-aged crisis, Murray as Hugh Hefner with a bunny on each arm, as Bela Karoli with Keri Strug in both arms, as a puffy and bloated Elvis struggling to lift his arms. When Drag Kings hit the prime time, some of us will don our suits and ties, our goatees and moustaches and revel in being king for a day.

acknowledgements

This book was made possible by the generous and full cooperation of many Drag Kings in London, San Francisco and New York. Because we had only very limited finances and time, we were forced to focus more narrowly than we would have liked upon Drag King activity in only a few cities. As many of the Drag Kings themselves acknowledge, much of the foundational work in the production of Drag King culture took place in San Francisco, although New York may actually be the more lively site at present. The names Elvis Herselvis (Leigh Crow) and Annie Toone in particular must be mentioned in relation to the creation of a San Francisco Drag King scene. In New York, Mo B. Dick (Maureen Fischer) was a tireless host and endlessly entertaining tour guide to the intricacies and idiosyncracies of his Drag King fraternity. In

London, Jewels performed a similar role as master of ceremonies, and he was an energetic organizer. Over the course of the past two years, we benefitted from watching multiple performances by Mo B. Dick, Jewels, Dred (Mildred Gerestant), Shon (Shavelle Lashon Sherman), Murray Hill (Betsy Gallagher), Uncle Louis (Kristabelle Munson), Lizerace (Liz Carthaus), Hansi (Hans Scheirl) and Hamish (Maureen MacDonald), the Dodge Bros, Duke, and Elvis Herselvis.

In the text, full names and ages are given for a performer only if the performer consented to appear by her full name. All other performers are named only by their Drag King aliases. All quotations attributed to Drag Kings were taken from a series of interviews conducted by Del and myself over a fifteen-month period. All the Drag Kings featured in this book consented to be photographed and interviewed. As far as pronouns go, I have used "he" and "him" whenever I am referring to a Drag King persona. If and when I refer to the Drag King offstage, I use the pronoun appropriate to the king's off-stage gender identification. Accordingly, a female-identified Drag King will be "he" on stage and in costume, but "she" off stage. A transgender Drag King will be "he" on and off stage.

I would also like to acknowledge the help and support in the writing of this project of Drag Kings Betsy Gallagher and Maureen Fischer. Both Del and I are grateful to Pete Ayrton at Serpent's Tail for believing in the project and to Amy Scholder for her careful reading and editing. I would also like to thank the friends and colleagues whom I have dragged out to shows on many a Sunday night: Esther Newton, Deb Amory, Lisa Duggan, Ira Livingston, Jose Esteban Munoz, Ann Pellegrini, Chandan Reddy, Patti White. And most of all I must express gratitude and love to Gayatri Gopinath who read every word of this text at least three times, patiently and assiduously; there's only one way to say it, she is Queen to my King.

Judith "Jack" Halberstam
New York City, 1998

Parts of this text appeared in "Mackdaddy, Superfly, Rapper: Race, Gender and the Drag King Scene," *Social Text* 52-53, Special Issue "Queer Transsexions of Race, Nation and Gender," edited by Phillip Brian Harper, Anne McClintock, Jose Esteban Munoz and Trish Rosen (Fall 1997): 104-132; and in my book *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).



"Jack" & Gayatri @ Club Casanova, New York City 1997

foreword by Del LaGrace Volcano



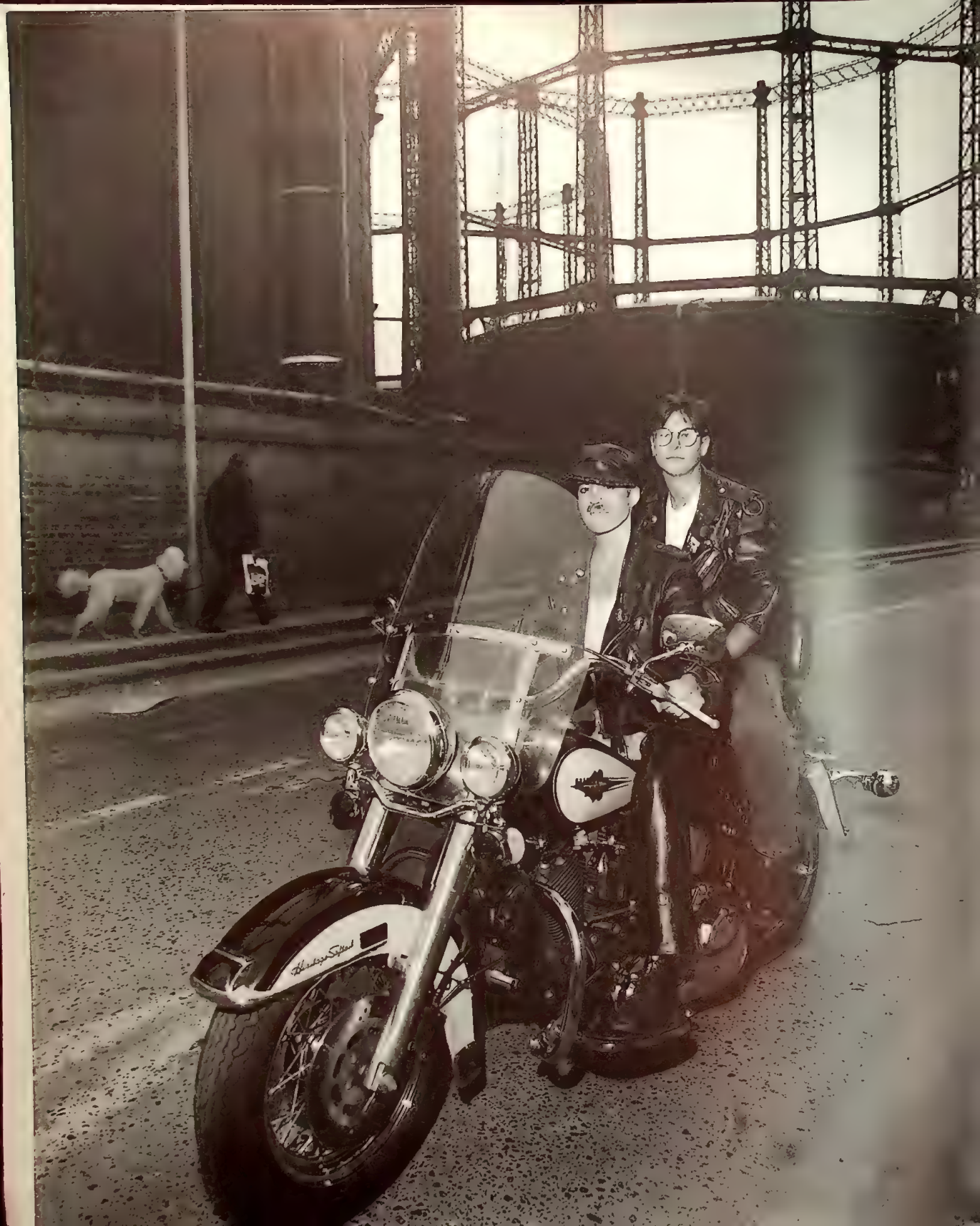
Locating: The Distant Past

I don't remember the first time I heard the term Drag King but I can vividly recall the night I witnessed my first Drag King act. It was San Francisco, 1985. The *On Our Backs/ BurLEZK* gang were putting on strip shows for lesbians at The Baybrick Inn. In the mid-eighties this was an entirely new concept in lesbian nightlife. It had the seductive scent of badgirls and butches—a flavour once outta favour was beginning to take hold. As entertaining as these nights were for most dykes, I felt anxious. I was beginning to worry that maybe I wasn't a "real lesbian" after all. The strippers were all thin women with big hair and long lacquered nails, a look that did absolutely nothing for me but seemed to drive the lesbian audience wild. So when "Martin" took centre stage I was flabbergasted, excited and genuinely confused. According to the publicity BurLEZK was meant to be women stripping for women. So what was a guy doing on stage? (We're talking pre-Chippendale here.) But "Martin" wasn't a man, he was something else altogether, the performer, Shelly Mars. Not a muscle Mary nor a hairy Larry, Martin was the Action Man of oxymorons. Even though in my head I knew he was female, the way she performed Martin's masculinity was lewdly compelling and to me, incredibly seductive. Something clicked and from that moment a fetish was born.

As a baby dyke I suspected that the people I desired most belonged to a very special species. To call this species "female" doesn't quite cut it though I wasn't to realize why for many years. At nineteen I traveled north to San Francisco. There was this person I kept noticing around the Castro. Who was this vision encased in tight brown (not black) leather, with deep chestnut hair, dark grey sideburns and the most inscrutable face I'd ever laid eyes on? Was he a she or was she a he? Discovering the answer became a part-time obsession. I guess what I did next might be considered stalking today. I would follow this guy for hours when I was meant to be house hunting. For the life of me I couldn't understand what s/he was doing just standing around Castro Street corners. I would park myself across the street and stare for hours, or duck n' dive from shop to shop, following, praying not to be noticed and secretly hoping I would be. My prayers were not answered, not immediately anyway. I was too green, just off the farm, so I remained an anonymous young girl with long red hair in flower power skirts for a little while longer. (We did



Del as "Sir Vesuvio", Paris, 1996
photo by Simo Maronati



eventually meet years later and s/he was a she. In a flash I had her on the back of my bike, her strong arms holding me tight as we hurtled across the bay to her place. That night she introduced me to my first SM experience. Delicious but another story altogether.)

Locating: Desire

I've always been boycrazy but somehow it's taken me twenty years to realize what my desire for boys, boydykes, butchdykes and basically all forms of gender variant masculinities is about. I was photographing not only that which I found utterly sublime, or worthy of emulation. I was attempting, through art, through photography, to incorporate that which I wanted to be/come. The photographs I created looking at female masculinities during the 80s and early 90s were to become a harbinger of my future, the latent image a clue that would eventually lead me around the world and back to myself. The pot of gold at the end of the rainbow was the realization that what I was looking for in the people I photographed was a quality that was already within my grasp, a quality that I already possessed and that I now embody. Sometimes this quality is called "masculinity". I'm persistently looking for another, more precise term, but it will have to do for now.

Locating: London

In 1987 I returned to London after a three year absence and became part of the collective running the lesbian/sex/performance club Chain Reaction. The photographs in my first book, *LoveBites*, (GMP 1991), are a testament to this period in dyke culture that witnessed the birth of a proud and defiantly sexual species of lesbian. At Chain Reaction we acted out our sexual fantasies for each other, as much as for the audience, though you'd be hard pressed to detect much separation between performer and audience. At Naive/Knave/Geezer/Bloke the same principle held true. We were all performers! We were all audience! There was the same sense of anarchic playfulness about the performances at Naive/Knave/Geezer/Bloke that there was on the Chain Reaction stage almost a decade earlier. There was a sense of mutual encouragement to "have a go" and have fun. In this London scene no one was permitted to take themselves too seriously.

When I first met Judith Halberstam in 1995 at the London Lesbian & Gay Film Festival she was presenting "Looking Butch: A Rough Guide to Butches in Film" and performing as one of the "celebrity" judges of London's first ever Drag King contest. I was familiar with Judith's writing on film and female masculinities and considered myself to be a fan. (Still do.) I was a contestant along with my friends: the experimental filmmaker Hans Scheirl, who surprised everyone with a sissy boy, necrophilic splatter performance; Wolfie, a seventeenth century Dandy; Jamie Wildman, a YMCA construction worker;



A Gentleman and a Urinal, Chim Reaction, London, 1989



Reynaldo, the Hispanic Soul Daddy crooner; and Jewels Barker, who gave a wonderfully moronic rendition of "The Jet Song" from *West Side Story*. Jewels was pissed (inebriated) and kept forgetting his lines, though we all thought it was part of his act! Of the contest itself let it suffice to say that Hans won, I lost and Jewels was *very* entertaining. From the contestants' point of view we were all winners by virtue of being there. Doing it was its own reward. The added bonus was meeting Jewels, who was to become a great friend and colleague as well as the primary mover and shaker of London's emerging Drag King scene.

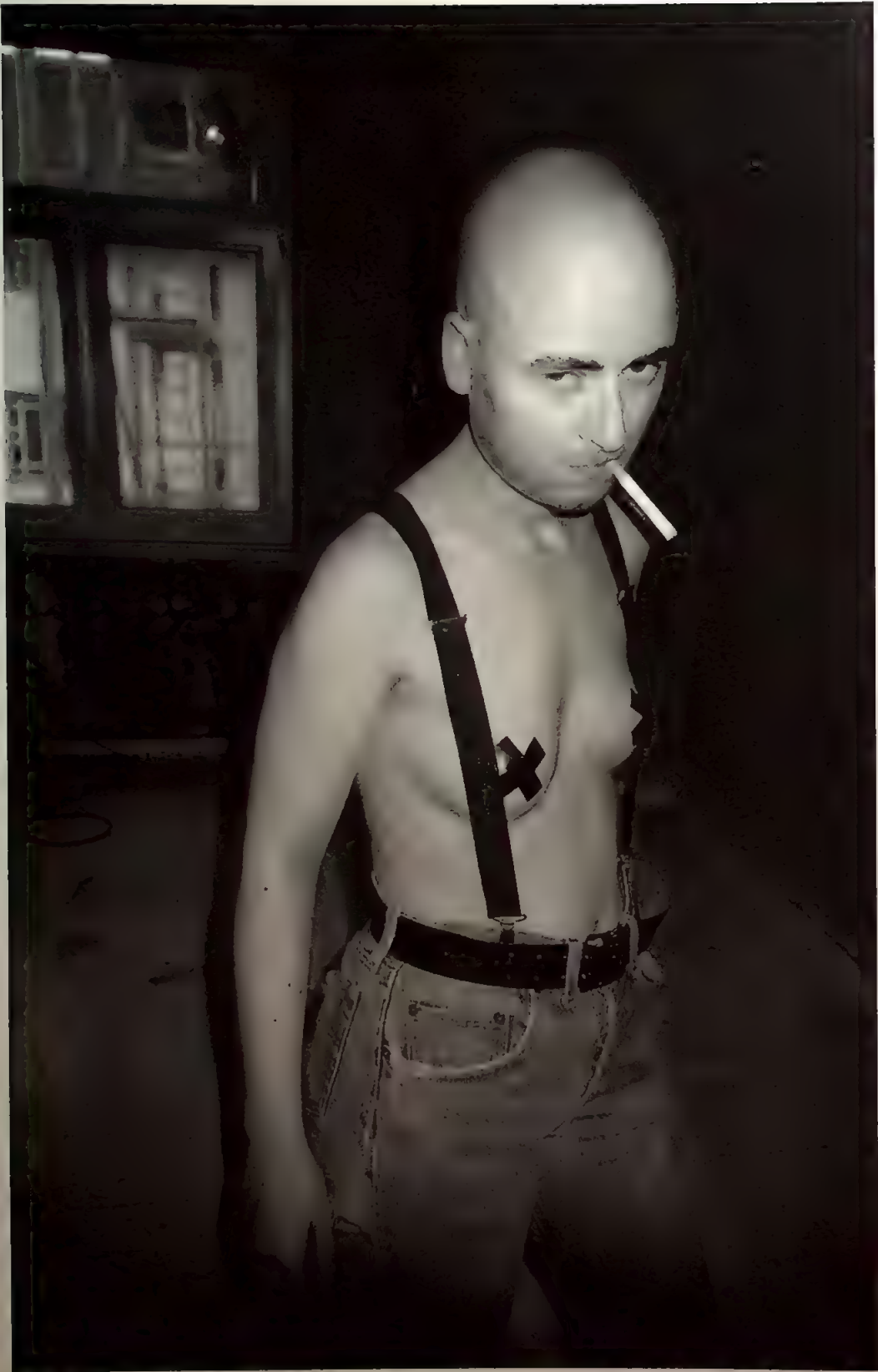
Most of the other contestants had at least a partial or total butch identity whereas I had a complicated and slightly twisted concept of myself in relation to the gender/sexuality naming game. (Some people called it femme top, but that wasn't quite right either.) On stage my Drag King persona was only remotely butch and this had a discordant effect on the audience, as well as the judges. The Mistress of Ceremonies, Valerie Mason John, in her introductions insisted that some of us show her our legs in a mis-guided attempt to equate leg hair with authentic Drag King butchness. My ultra-ego, "Sir Vesuvio", sported the Castro Clone look: black leather jacket & chaps, six inch platform boots and a tight white T-shirt that had a graphic of a flying cock nestled between my tits. (For those of you familiar with the pornographic lexicon I was doing "Swedish".) "You can't be butch, your TITS are too BIG!", jeered one particularly pernicious tranny baiting dyke.

A few weeks before the contest I decided, with the support of my lover, Simo, (a gorgeous Italian boydyke), to let my natural, pre-hormonal beard grow out, thinking this might give me an edge in the contest. It didn't. But it did give me the excuse I needed to stop plucking. Being a woman with masses of facial hair was not exactly a new concept to me. I knew many rural dykes who grew beards but no one with urban cool would dare. The one exception to this is the superlative Jennifer Miller, who features in the film *Juggling Gender* (Tami Gold, USA, 1994) and with exquisite defiance worked in the Coney Island Circus as "The Bearded Lady". I remember saying to her once what so many women would later say to me during my "bearded lady" stage: "I wish I could, if only, someday I would love to see what my beard would look like ..." It wasn't until I fell in love with a butch dyke (Simo) who admired and nurtured my masculine qualities that I realized I had been conforming to the tyrannical imperative of binary gender for years in the misguided belief that if who I desired was butch then by default I must be femme.

When asked, "What's a Drag King?" I reply: "Anyone (regardless of gender) who consciously makes a performance out of masculinity." I had been doing (female) drag for years. It was only by making a "performance" out of femininity that I was able to inhabit a female persona, a femme suit that was



"Lesbian Cock", from the Daddy Boy Dykes series, London, 1992



Bridge Marklind, Not a Neo-Nazi, Berlin, 1997



Johnny DeLuca, Berliner Boxer, Berlin, 1997



Dred, Del & Shane, Backstage @ the HerSHe Bar, New York City, 1996

seldom a comfy fit. But when I donned a Drag King persona it didn't feel like much of an act. I was astounded by how natural it felt to be a guy and be free of the anxieties I had lived with for years around not passing as a "real" woman. (Part of this anxiety was due to certain anatomical anomalies that began to manifest in my body at puberty.) The feeling of comfort and relief I experienced when being perceived as male came as quite a shock to me because I was raised to believe in the power and glory of womanhood. There are some who accuse me of betraying "womanity" by inhabiting what looks and sounds like a male body. BOLLOCKS to that I say! I'm a Gender Terrorist, a walking, talking bomb in The Boys Club. Tick Tock. Tick Tock.

It wasn't long after those first seminal Drag King moments that Jewels Barker opened London's first Drag King club, Naive, with writer and photographer PP Hartnett (who conceived the idea after being inspired by his role as an extra in Hans Scheirl's Cyber-feature *Dandy Dust*). Although PP Hartnett & Jewels Barker's partnership was to be short-lived it managed to give birth to the Brotherhood of Kings which begat Naive begat Knave begat Geezer begat Bloke. The club went from venue to venue but Madame Jo Jo's was my favourite location, situated as it was deep in the heart of sleazy Soho. Jo Jo's was one of London's oldest Drag Revue Bars. It had the mildly tarnished ashtray ambiance of queens gone by. The sheer elegance of it all certainly impressed the tabloids who descended on us like rabid sharks, hungry for a new twist on "lesbian chic". They soon found that something else altogether was going on. Something that was not so easy to exploit, at least, not without a price, both literally and metaphorically speaking.

Locating: Other DK Scenes

Eventually Judith and I would like to continue and extend our explorations into female masculinities outside of the familiar Western European context. "Drag King" is not a universally useful term and in other cultures it is called by other names. It's to those places where crossdressing, butch/femme and transgender overlap that we really want to go. We want to visit Japan where there is a long tradition of cross gender performance and check out The New Marilyn Club made famous by the documentary film, *Shinjuku Boys*, (Kim Longinotto & Jano Williams, UK, 1995) where straight women pay "onabees" (female born "guys"), to entertain them. We would like to investigate the "scenes" in Mexico, South America, South Africa, Southeast Asia, Eastern Europe, Russia and China and if we learn how to make the media really work for us, we will. In the meantime I can offer a brief look at Berlin, Milan and Paris.

Berlin is a strange and fascinating city. It was through the Swiss filmmaker Gabrielle Baur (who is working on a Drag King documentary) that I first heard about the Berliner Drag Kings: Antonio Caputo, Johnny Berlin and

Bridge Markland. I was especially impressed with Mister Berlin's movie star good looks, easy charm and trans-natural visage. ("Trans-natural" is a term I've made up which indicates female born people who easily pass as male without the assistance of hormones or surgery.) Both Johnny and Antonio seem to inhabit the borders of Drag King, butch dyke and trans-natural. (I call this Multiple Personality Desire, a condition to which I wholeheartedly subscribe.) With them I found it nearly impossible to discern what was performance and what wasn't. With Bridge Markland this was absolutely not the case. She was and is a performer first and a Drag King second, or even third. She has many faces, many of which she shared with me on our first meeting. I saw photographs of her transformations from vamp to tramp and personally witnessed her giving birth to a skinhead Neo-Fascist Drag King persona just for my camera. I love this picture. The composition pleases and the content confuses and I find it intensely disturbing. Is it important to know that Bridge is a bisexual Jewish woman living, working and performing in Berlin? Does knowing this make her appropriation of an oppressive image more palatable?

Italy is not a country in which I would have expected to find any Drag Kings. Remember, this is the country that made La Cicciolina, the hyper-feminine porn star, into a politician! Italian lesbians have been fighting the stereotype that "all lesbians want to be men" for years, (it wasn't until a few years ago that lesbianism was even acknowledged in Italy), and androgyny is the only politically correct fashion statement. So I was astounded to be invited to perform and present my Drag King slides as part of an enormous, mainstream Drag King event in Milano. It took place in a cavernous night club called Magazzini Generali deep in Milano's industrial suburbs and packed to the gills with over 1000 young Italians anxious to be in on the latest discovery: Drag Kings. It began with an extremely professional Milanese Drag King fashion show. The long-limbed beauties were certainly supermodels and I would have been a boycrazy mess were it not for the bright red lipstick each and everyone of them slathered their faces with. Authenticity was OUT and there was no room to doubt what gender they *really* belonged to. When the lip-synched musical acts came on there was a dramatic and noticeable change: no lipstick. First up was a George Michael lookalike at his best (Irene did him better than he does himself) singing "I Want Your Sex" to a crowd of hysterical men and women. Honest to god it was like Beatlemania revisited. Women were actually taking off their knickers and throwing them at the stage. With the exception of Dred & Shane at the HerShe Bar in New York I have never before or since seen this kind of audience reaction to a Drag King performance. Considering that the audience was comprised of what looked like generic young heterosexuals, it was even more amazing. Next up was Francesca performing Franco Califano, an Italian Stallion, Tom Jones type of





singer. This performer's gestures and timing decimated the culture of machismo more effectively than Camille Paglia's rantings could ever hope to. For the finale Irene and her band of dirty Drag Kings performed "Nine Inch Nails Go Glastonbury" splattering the screaming audience and *paparazzi* with molten mud while I wimpishly (and wisely) hid behind a friend. Backstage I was introduced to George Michael, aka Irene. Without her Drag King make-up she was an ordinary, somewhat shy and totally unassuming Italian dyke. I was gobsmacked! What a difference a bit of facial hair can make! Here we had a lesbian woman performing as a gay man (pretending to be a straight man) and driving a mostly straight audience into a frenzy. I'll never understand Italian sexuality, but I love it.

I wish I could be more positive about Paris. Of all the urban centres I've been to, in my opinion, Paris is the most reactionary and regressive of European cities, and yes, I'm talking specifically about the lesbian and gay "community". French lesbians have always given me a hard time about my subject choices, insisting that I should be photographing feminine lesbians, like them, rather than butch dykes who they seem to despise.

Early on in our Drag King careers Jewels organized an all-expense paid outing to France, courtesy of some very old Parisian money and some very self-important boys from Folies Pigalle hoping we would provide glory for them to bask in. Our entourage consisted of Jamie Wildman, Simo, Jewels, Ben Dover, Welly, Sophie, our Drag King imposter (who agreed to fill in when one of our original kings dropped out) and me, aka Sir Vesuvio. Our Parisian adventure came to pass as a result of all the publicity that Naive generated in the mainstream press and Eurotunnel which brought the rich into the heart of swinging London from Paris in two and a half hours. All we had to do for them is attend a few parties and allow ourselves be wined and dined like the Kings we were. Not a problem, but after a couple nights of this we were ready to see what queer Paris had to offer. To our utter amazement the reaction to us in lesbian&gay clubs was overwhelmingly hostile. Our Drag King imposter was assaulted and her moustache ripped right off her face. Ben Dover had his hat knocked off, Welly was pushed over and the perpetrators were all lipstick lesbians! They simply did not like us crossdressing in their clubs and felt we were doing their cause a disservice. Some French lesbians seem to be deeply resentful of anything that throws them off their precarious pseudo-feminist perch, which we obviously did.

Locating: Gender

I hope that all this has helped to locate myself and my journey from dyke to Drag King to pansexual trannyboy in a way that makes sense. More crucially, I feel the need to make a public service announcement, add a codicil to this manifesto in order to reassure women that cross dressing, "dragging up", or



Johnny & Del, Berlin, 1997

performing as a Drag King does not mean you are a transsexual in denial or that everyone should follow the Drag King to Trannyboy trajectory. In my dictionary Drag Kings are part of the transgendered spectrum but not everyone who does drag is transgendered or wants to be. An example: A man at a stag party puts on a wig, slaps on the make-up and dons his wife's favourite frock, all for a laugh. His identity as a regular guy, a geezer, a "man's man" is rock solid as far as he's concerned. Linda Evangelista, Cindy Crawford, Christy Turlington and Naomi Campbell have all posed as Drag Kings (Pirelli Calendar 1994) and none of them (as far as I know) have transgendered identities. Their reasons for doing drag are totally different from the magistrate who wears silky see-thru knickers under his judicial robes. Or the butch dyke who goes out packing and passing. Or the Drag Queen that passes as female without effort or MAC make-up.

There are a small but significant percentage of Kings who acknowledge that their Drag King personas are more than a stage act. An even smaller percentage have passed through the Drag King scene and now identify as transgender, transsexual, intersexual or simply gender variant. For some of us, what started out as a performance or an experiment, became the reality of choice. Being a King for me was part of the process I call "intentional mutation". My photographic practise is another part of this lifelong process of mutation and integration, a process which evolved out of a desire to emulate and incorporate those masculine qualities that I find so compelling. My role models have been masculine or butch women and the few bio boys who somehow have managed to escape the narrow parameters of expression permitted to "real men".

I spent my adolescence destroying all the photographs of myself I could find. I simply could not believe the evidence before my eyes. That wasn't me! I kept looking but couldn't see. Where was I? I've been taking photographs for over twenty years and never thought of myself as a self portraitist. Yet if I take a closer look I have to admit that I've been photographing myself surreptitiously, almost without knowing it from the beginning. It's a fact that (with rare exceptions) the only pictures I like (of myself) are the ones I take. Finally, over the years I have persuaded myself to make good my boast to the people I photograph: "I wouldn't ask you to do anything I'm not willing to do myself." It took a long, long time, to make good my boast, to prove to myself that I was willing to give it up, to be looked at, to be *seen*. It's been a minor miracle that I finally like what I see looking back at me. I've imagined the image and become the imago. Hallelujah! A Kingdom Cums!

acknowledgements

I would like to thank each and every King I met and photographed along the way, even those whose image didn't make it into this collection. You are all beautiful and inspiring and it was painful to have to leave any of you "gorgeous geezers" out. Given an ideal budget this book would be four times as big. It was a monumental challenge to find a publisher who was interested in more than a quick buck. My thanks to Pete Ayrton/Serpent's Tail who believed in this book enough to give us colour and let us be the captains of our own ship. Big thanks to Robin Forster @ art'g^o, our dishy designer, for his easy going manner and vast reserves of patience. I knew "it just had to be you". I'm indebted to all the friends who read my rough drafts, let me know which photographs worked for them and gave me places to stay in New York, Berlin and San Francisco. This list includes but is not limited to Cherry Smyth, Jackie McConochie, Billy Goodfellow, Johnny Volcano, Jewels Barker, Jay Prosser, Chuck, Hans Scheirl, Rachel Maddow, Kathy(KT)Thomas, Shoshana Rothaizer, Heather Findlay, Linda Riley, Ira Kormannshaus, Betti Iannucci, Mandy Honeyman, Jill Posner, Susie Bright, Harriet Dodge, Manuela Kay and Storme Delaverié. Thanks to Mary Mizelle in San Francisco and Kathy Danger in New York for acting as my photo assistants at the very last minute. Last but not never least, my heartfelt thanks to Lulu Belliveau. Without Lulu's photo editing and many other skills I could never have brought this project to completion. It's not the first time Lulu's Virginian aptitude for order has rescued my Leonine arse! Finally I must thank Simo Maronati for her steadfast insistence that I am a handsome devil too. She is the King to my Queen.

Del LaGrace Volcano, August, 1998



Twiddle Dee & Twiddle Dum, Simo & Del © Naïve, London 1996

Next page: Hansi's DadaDandy Masterclass: l-r, Master JohnnyBoy, Tino, Wolfie, Delboy, Svar, Gianni, Jewels, Simo/Jack and Hansi. London, 1995



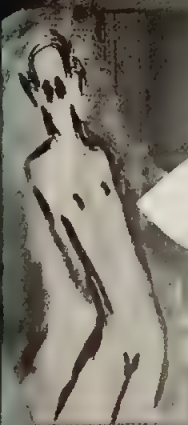
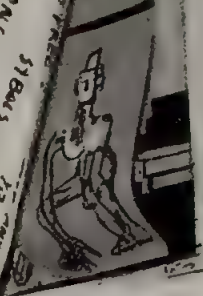
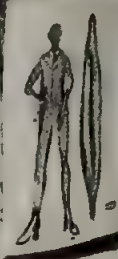


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chapter 1

what is a drag king?

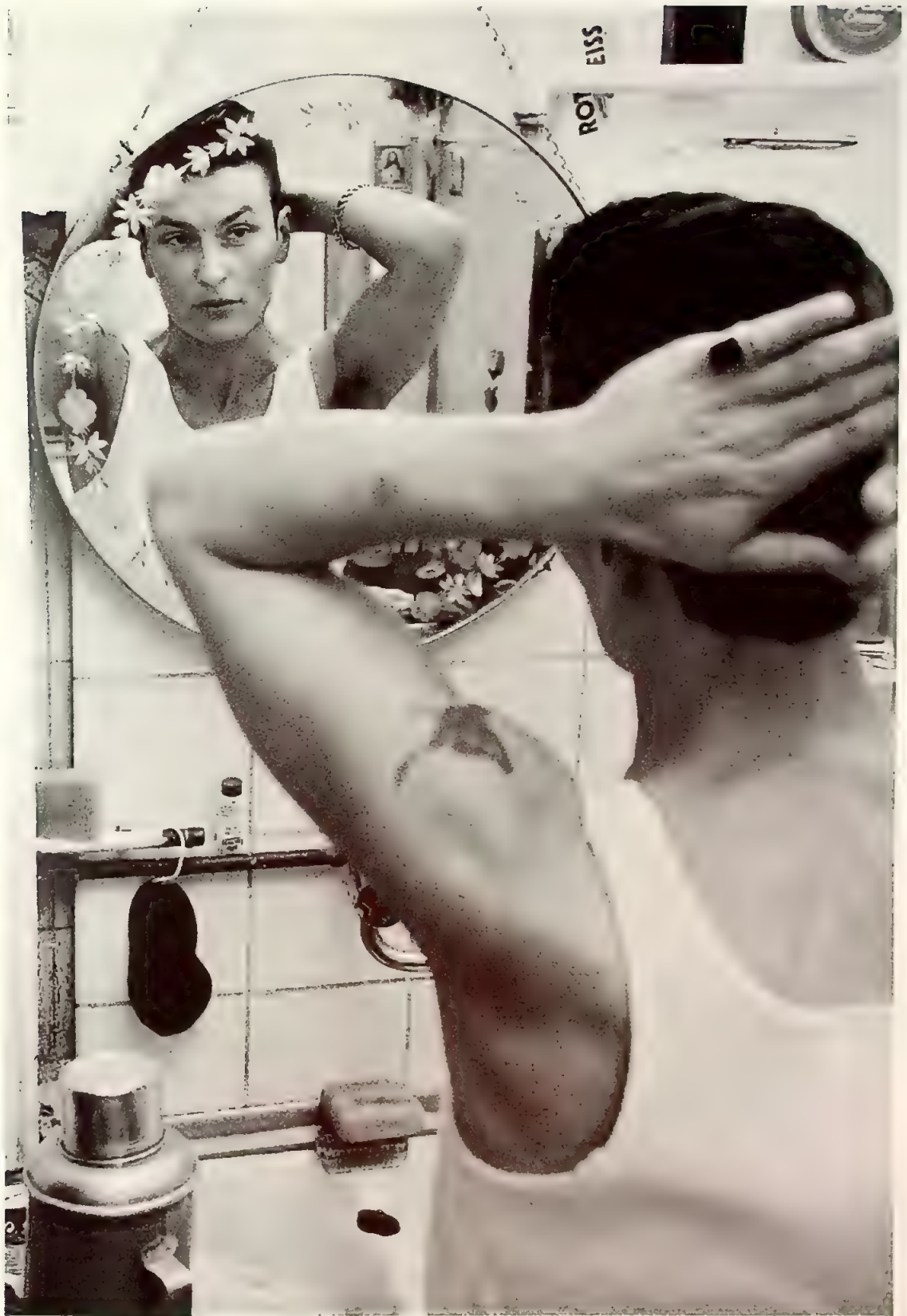
The drag queen symbolizes all that homosexuals say they fear the most in themselves, all that they say they feel guilty about; he symbolizes, in fact, *the stigma*."

Esther Newton, *Mother Camp*

They sport vintage suits and fancy ties, slicked-back hair and neat moustaches, baggy jeans and leather jackets, hats and caps and impressive sideburns. They have imaginative names: Mo B. Dick, Johnny B. Bad, Will Do, Sir Real, Duke, Lucky 7, Jock Strap, Dred, Lizerace, Buster Hymen, Justin Kase, Jewels, Evil Cave Boy, Elvis Herselvis. They perform and strut, lounge and growl, wink and pose. They are tough and convincing and deadlier than the male, and they confuse the boundaries between on and off stage.

The contemporary Drag King is something of a contradiction in terms and an unexpected late-comer to the scene of drag and gender bending. We know all about the drag queen, with her camp impressions of famous and infamous women; we understand the comedy of the cross-dressed man and the slinky power of a discernibly male body in a dress. Indeed, the last two decades of popular film have offered up numerous images of male femininity and the lure of the campy queen. Until recently, there has been a remarkable absence of the cross-dressed woman and her particular brands of masculinity. However, over the last five years, images of masculine women have become more common in mainstream culture, and the butch dyke has made stunning appearances in popular cinema. The Drag King has even become a favorite on the TV talk show circuit. Why Drag Kings? Why now? What are we to make of the multiple images of female cross-dressing and male impersonation that are now edging into popular culture? As I browse my local newspaper, I notice an announcement for the release of a film version of Shakespeare's cross-dressing extravaganza *Twelfth Night*, and nestled up close by is an ad for whiskey featuring a severe but feminine woman with a cigar; the caption reads "Get in touch with your masculine side." Should we be suspicious of this sudden interest in the masculine woman or is it merely the belated recognition within mainstream culture that butchness can be sexy?

Historically speaking, we know of one or two famous male impersonators from the first half of this century. Gladys Bentley, the blues singer of the Harlem Renaissance, regularly donned a butch tuxedo and sang songs about "bulldaggers." Many of her contemporaries such as Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith



Johny & Narcissus, Berlin, 1997



Stafford & Jackie, Hormonal & Non-Hormonal Respectively, London 1995

and Ethel Waters also peppered their lyrics with allusions to “mannish women” and “sissy men,” and together they suggest a lively African-American lesbian tradition of butch desire and male impersonation. Another African-American male impersonator from later on in the 1940s was Storme Delaverié of the Jewel Box Revue. In Michelle Parkerson’s film about Storme, Storme suggests that she fell into male impersonation without thinking about it. Storme was good friends with a man who worked at the Jewel Box Revue, a female impersonation show, and she was enlisted one day to help out. She donned men’s clothes and cut her hair short for the show but, she insists, “the funny thing was I never moved any different than when I was in women’s clothes. I walk the same, I talk the same.” Storme has a lovely baritone voice which, coupled with her handsome features, makes her utterly convincing and charming as a male impersonator.

When trying to explain in Parkerson’s film what it means to be a male impersonator, Storme comments that it is easier than being a female impersonator. The male impersonator, says Storme, “has to take things off” while the female impersonator has to add things. This idea that masculinity can be achieved through a process of paring down also suggests why male impersonation might seem less dramatic than its counterpart. Theater, after all, is about drama and costume, action and lights; but the art of the male impersonator relies upon understatement and cool macho rather than theatricality and histrionics. This presents a bit of a problem, as we will see later, when it comes to making a real act out of male impersonation. The difference between a male impersonator and a Drag King (a term Storme would not use about herself) must lie at least in part upon the ability of the Drag King to make a show out of male impersonation. Theatricality in the Drag King performance relies on all kinds of factors, and many people question whether or not it is “camp”; whether it depends on parody or imitation or realness. Finally, it seems important to explore whether Drag Kings continue to develop their personae off stage or whether they are only interested in being kings for a day.

So, again, what is a Drag King? And to what degree is the Drag King, like the drag queen, both a revered image of queerness and an image associated with shame? For at least one hundred years people have associated some forms of female masculinity with lesbianism, just as they have associated male femininity with being gay. Gay men have turned their alternative forms of femininity into outrageous drag performances, but until recently there has been little evidence to suggest that lesbians have done the same. Drag kings, interestingly enough, have not been a major part of lesbian bar culture between the 50s and the present, and lesbians seem not to have cultivated the same kinds of drag cultures that gay men have. When we talk about “drag butches” from the 50s, for example, we are really referencing a style of dress

that dykes used not to dress up like men but to dress up as butches, as masculine lesbians. If a man in a dress in a gay bar tends to be labeled a drag queen, the same is not true of a woman in a suit in a lesbian bar. She is not labeled a Drag King, and she is not necessarily dressing up as a man. Because many lesbians are heavily invested in the butch role, any definition of the Drag King is complicated. One needs to sort carefully through the relations between being butch and being a Drag King; wearing masculine clothing and dressing up like a man; performing a Drag King act and performing butchness.

A Drag King is a performer who makes masculinity into his or her act (yes, there can be male Drag Kings). The Drag King may make costume into the whole of her performance, or s/he may lip synch or play air guitar or tell crude jokes about "girlies" and "homos." S/he often sports facial hair: sideburns, moustaches or even a goatee and s/he'll wear slick-backed hair or a pompadour or a short back and sides or some kind of hat. There are as many different kinds of Drag Kings as there are Drag King acts, but there are at least two very important and very distinct sub-types related to the presence of a strongly defined butch role: in the first, the Drag King act is continuous with and elaborates an off-stage female masculinity. The "butch" Drag King performs, we might say, what comes naturally, and s/he celebrates her masculinity or distinguishes between her masculinity and male masculinity. In the second, the "femme" Drag King or "androgynous" Drag King assumes her masculinity as an act. S/he understands herself to be engaged in some kind of parody of men and s/he leaves her masculinity behind when she takes off the fake hair and the boxers and the chest binding.

How to use this book: read and look, participate and learn, desire and produce. Examine your own gender, make no assumptions, assign no biological sexes. This book will not suggest that gender-play will change the world; rather it will make some small claims for gender diversity. I try to draw attention to the flexibility of gender in some instances, and the rigidity of gender in others. Sometimes I will point to the deadly serious nature of masculinity for some butch women (and especially for dykes and transgender people); and, at other times, I will delineate the pleasures of taking on masculinity as a game. It seems important to try to mark where the theater ends and where reality begins. But realness becomes a difficult category to pin down in this arena of luscious impersonations, creative interpretations, and theatrical masculinities. Some butch Drag Kings might accuse the femme Drag Kings of not being real and of just playing; some transgender Drag Kings highlight the difference between their real moustaches and the fake facial hair of the other kings; some female-to-male transsexuals see the whole Drag King scene as a trivialization of the gender issues they struggle with on a daily basis. In fact, realness or authenticity is not the best measure of Drag King status, and we can only measure realness in terms of each king's investment and each



Stafford & Jackie, Hormonal & Non-Hormonal Respectively, London 1995



Jackie & Stafford, Non-Hormonal & Hormonal Respectively, London 1995

audience's response.

In opposition to many contemporary popular discussions of gender, I see Drag King theater not purely in terms of the fluidity of gender which, supposedly, opposes the conservatism of rigid and set gender expressions. Indeed, I challenge the notion of gender as fluid and as simply some kind of recreational pursuit or as no more than a choice between different wardrobes. Certainly the Drag King scenes explored here evince huge investments in pleasure and in play, but they are also serious realms for the production of gender difference and the accommodation of gender variance. Many of the Drag Kings Del and I talked with utilized complex and elaborate gender systems and codes, and we try to represent these codes here. For some of the Drag Kings, it must be said, gender codes did constitute an array of fashion options, and some kings, like Dred for example, describe their gender role as fluctuating. Dred says, "I'm not butch or fem. I can be one way one day and another way another day." But other Drag Kings, like Svar Tomcat, give very different perspectives: "My Drag King persona is not so different from my non-Drag King persona. I think as a Drag King my masculinity may be more emphatic, but it is not essentially different."

Often Del presents the kings as multi-dimensional beings, and he does so by refusing the flatness of photography; in two complementary shots of New York king of kings Mo B. Dick, for example, Del utilizes what we might call a "deep surface" technique. He takes the picture in order to reveal both the back and the front of the body, and then in the next picture the front and the back of his subject's body. He uses a mirror to suggest that the body is made up of many surfaces. The effect of representing simultaneous surfaces is to deepen the effect of the image, to make the viewer feel that they are seeing beyond the surface when, in fact, we are just seeing more surface. This technique suggests that he has covered all angles, but also that there are more views than his camera can capture.

Mo B. Dick in the first shot is looking into the mirror with his back to the camera. We are looking therefore over his shoulder, and we watch him watch himself flexing in a kind of mock narcissism in the mirror. The mirror shot invites us to consider our own reflections, but also requires us to observe and participate in the masquerade. Since Mo B. is in his underwear, we should be able to see the illusion of maleness. However, on the contrary, the flex coupled with the perfect facial hair seems to confirm male masculinity. The only give-away is a slight glimpse of the breast binder in the armpit. In this shot, the back of Mo B., rather than the front, reveals him as Drag King - his basketball shirt bears the words "Drag King," marking his performance in a way that the front of his body does not. The other photo captures literally another side of Mo B. Dick, and now he stares directly into the camera and turns his back on the mirror and his own gaze. In this shot, Mo B. gives a smarmy sneer at the



Mister Barker, London, 1996

viewer, and since we are close up to his face, the artificiality of the sideburns and moustache become apparent. But as if to highlight the visibility of the masquerade, Mo B. wears a feather boa in this shot, challenging us to read the flaws in his male masquerade, but oddly leaving his masculinity intact. The words "Drag King" on the shirt are now in reverse, as if to suggest that the whole image has literally been turned around. The mirror writing hints at the reverse technique of this shot and suggests that image and reality have literally been reversed, so that Mo B. seems to have emerged out of the mirror itself. Ultimately, these shots highlight the immensely complex effect of the layering of one gender effect over another.

In some shots, Del captures these multi-dimensional views that threaten never to coalesce into a whole, and in others he is after the vicious feminist humor of male parody as his kings wink and leer, beckon and grin. In still others he dares his kings to love their masculinity and give us something to admire. The camera goes behind the scenes, indeed remains there and makes us doubt that there is anything that is not behind the scenes. Many of the kings, like Del and myself, do what could be considered male drag every day and encounter the multiple slings and arrows of outrageous gender confusion. Others happily keep their gender boundaries intact and continue to draw the lines between male and female. It is only fair to say that Del and I privilege, or at least seek out, the kings who find some material investment in their costumes. We actually went searching for butch kings who wear their masculine clothing as part of an identity. For these kings, we assumed, the game never ends. What we found, of course, was something more complicated than we had imagined. The kings had a range of identifications off stage and the best performer was not necessarily the butchest. We constantly seek to blur the line between on and off stage, but that porous boundary shifts and warps. If the mainstream media has often been thwarted in its hopeful anticipation that Drag Kings are properly feminine women dressing up for a lark; similarly, our search for what we considered provocative butchness and essential queerness beneath the costumes was also constantly thwarted. Drag king performances are neither essentially rebellious and inherently transgressive, nor are they simply a harmless attempt to dress up the feminine in new garb. Some Drag Kings confront us with the limits of gender, others confirm the intransigent nature of categories that we would like to wish away. Some Drag Kings are performers looking to make a buck, others are the heralds of queer future. Above all, they are contradictory, confusing – and intentionally so.



Femme on Top, Polly & Antonio Caputo, Berlin, 1997



Diane Torr, London, 1997





Jack & Jewels, Best Buds, London, 1996

Opposite page: Gianni, Just a Gigolo, London, 1996







The Dodge Bros Go Cholo, San Francisco, 1997





Mario from the Barrio & Vinnie Testosteroni, San Francisco, 1997







Trailer Park Trash, Harry Dodge & Annie Toone, San Francisco, 1997

Opposite page Vinnie & Mario, In the Barrio, San Francisco, 1997

Next page: Drag Kings @ The Diner, San Francisco, 1997









Fig. 16. A. L. S. (left) and N. D. (right), 1997.



chapter 2

h 1

the king is **dead!** long live the king!



“A Whole Lotta Shakin’ Goin’ On!” Elvis Presley

Elvis Presley is to Drag Kings what Liza Minelli is to Drag Queens. Elvis provides a moment in every King’s career when he can perform the impersonator’s dream: a walking, talking, singing, hip-swivelling, lip-curling, hair flipping, leg wagging act with costumes to match. Elvis Herselvis (Leigh Crow) was the first Drag King to capitalize on the kinging of the King and with her jump suits and huge cummerbund belts, Elvis Herselvis became a cult attraction long before the current Drag King craze hit the stands. While Elvis Herselvis has been around for awhile, she has become immensely popular again now that public interest has been caught by Drag King performances. Crow has taken her act on the road as a show called “Elvis Herselvis and the Straight White Males” and she has been written up in *Curve*, *Entertainment Weekly* and many other magazines.

Elvis Herselvis drew national attention in 1996 when an academic cultural studies conference organized around the topic of Elvis invited her to perform. Even though there were other Elvis impersonators of every stripe and color on the bill, Graceland officials became enraged when they learned that a female Elvis would be taking the stage. Elvis Herselvis eventually had to withdraw from the conference after much public outrage. It is hard to believe that in the world of Elvis commodification, where impersonation is the rule, a female impersonator would draw so much fire; but this reaction is just one example of the kernel of fear provoked by the image of a cross-dressing woman. Elvis Herselvis has moved on from the Graceland débâcle to bigger and better things, and nowadays she even seems to have her own impersonators, the sign of a true icon!

When New York’s premier Drag King club, Club Casanova, staged an Elvis night, it took at least three Elvises to perform “the King.” Billed as “The Three Faces of E!” this night promised a young and fresh 50s Elvis, a leather clad 60s Elvis and the 70s fat Elvis. The show was hosted, as always, by Mo B. Dick (the “B” stands for “bodacious”) and that night Mo B. was in high style sporting his extravagant pompadour hairdo and matching sideburns. Mo B. wore a custom-made leopard print furry suit, cut 50s style with drain-pipe legs and narrow hips.

The show began with Mo B. Dick doing a quick schtick: his usual routine

of ogling the "girlies" in the front row and abusing the audience. Then he introduced the first Elvis, Justin Kase. Justin Kase has a kind of organic Drag King aura; he wears very little facial hair (maybe slightly exaggerated sideburns) and he builds on a sturdy butch image. Justin Kase as the King had the greased-back young Elvis look, and he played air-guitar on a finely colored papier maché instrument. With his cowboy shirt and boots, he slickly moved into "Blue Suede Shoes." Justin Kase lip-synched effortlessly and threw in hip thrusting and shaking, signature Elvis moves. He stared down his audience and elicited more than a few screams with his lip curl. When the show ended he politely intoned, "Thank yuh, thank yuh very much," and then proceeded to whack his guitar in Sex Pistols' fashion until it turned into a pinada and showered packets of pork rind into the audience. Grease-paper covered peanut butter sandwiches followed. No one scrambled to pick them up.

Next up was the Drag King DJ, Lizerace. Lizerace deploys a white "homeboy" aesthetic in his function as DJ and wears sweats and undershirts. He sports a small goatee. As 60s Elvis, Lizerace was dressed in black. He had a black silky shirt hanging open to the navel, leather pants showing an obvious bulge and a red necktie. He wore sideburns and was otherwise clean shaven. Lizerace swivelled and swirled to the strains of "Kissing Cousins," an odd little Elvis song with strangely incestuous overtones. This Elvis differed from the earlier Elvis in his sense of showmanship and his exaggerated movements. Lizerace captured the transition from the "aw shucks" Elvis to the Elvis who rehearsed what once came naturally. In the middle of Lizerace's act, a Drag Queen ran on stage as a screaming fan and kissed Elvis wildly, pressing him up against the wall and forcing herself upon him. At the end of his act, Lizerace acknowledged that his mother was in the house and told the audience that his mother had been very helpful with his outfit though she had also given him one piece of criticism: she told him his "packet" was too "high"!

The final act came on after a short break and after Mo B. Dick had kicked an Elvis interloper off the stage: Pencil Kase performing Elvis Costello had tried to get in the act but was told that he was the "wrong" Elvis. The fat Elvis was played by Murray Hill replete with white jump suit, huge shades, and neck towels. Murray Hill is a versatile and camp performer who tends to perform middle-aged sleazy men in his Drag King persona. The fat Elvis came on stage late, perspiring heavily; he crammed pills into his mouth, missed the music cue, and lip-synched out of rhythm with the music. He stomped around the stage giving the impression of a drug haze, threw towels into the audience, and then managed to work his act to a quick climax with a florid and dramatic chorus of "Falling in Love With You." Murray Hill concluded his act with some patent Elvis kung fu moves, and then fell off the stage.

Mo B. Dick returned to the stage and lip-synched to an Elvis impersonator tribute to the king upon his death. The three Elvises filed onto the stage during



The Lounge Lizards, San Francisco, 1997

the song in stage make-up which made them look dead, and they sang the chorus together and took a bow.

“The Three Faces of E!” was a fascinating Drag King show. It managed to depict Elvis himself as an evolving concept over time. The first Elvis was not exactly the purist’s Elvis, but he was noticeably unironic while performing his country/R&B/rockabilly aesthetic. The second Elvis is already an imitation: Elvis performing what Elvis had become: a sex symbol, a showman, a metaphor for masculine performance itself. The last Elvis capitalizes on the

mode of performance of a performance of a performance, and the sweaty and bloated king barely makes the signature moves associated with Elvis. The Drag King performance often works its magic not simply by exploiting a tension between being a woman and performing a man, but by layering multiple performances. The Drag King may be a butch woman who performs male masculinity by allowing some of her butchness to peek through: this, for example, was exactly what Justin Kase did in his Elvis impersonation. He worked with what he had, with his own butch aesthetic, to produce an effect of raw-faced, youthful enthusiasm.

The show itself was rife with layering: all the performers, after all, were kings playing The King. Mo B. Dick also impersonated an Elvis impersonator and Pencil Kase impersonated a punk imitation of the other king – Elvis Costello. The performances of the last two Elvises relied on the first one in that we watched “the three faces of E” build into one representation of what gives Elvis his power. Elvis was the consummate male performer because his entire act was an imitation. He even imitated his down home realness. The clever title of the show, with its reference to the story of a woman with multiple personalities transfers the multiplicity of personality from femininity to masculinity, and suggests that in its most artificial mode, what masculinity imitates is the idea that masculinity is always *real*.

We could say, in general, that one of the ways in which modern white masculinity maintains its cultural sway is by always appropriating for itself the markers and signs of other performances and reproducing them as natural to white masculinity. Another way to show this point using Elvis is to consider how his musical success depended absolutely upon what he borrowed from black music – the blues, soul, R&B, gospel, spirituals. Elvis, in other words, was an imitation. He became the king of rock ‘n’ roll partly because of his ability to assimilate black music and make it seamlessly part of his act. If the drag queen takes what is artificial about femininity (or what has been culturally constructed as artificial) and plays it to the hilt, the Drag King takes what is so-called natural about masculinity and reveals its mechanisms – the tricks and poses, the speech patterns and attitudes that have been seamlessly assimilated into a performance of realness. Elvis impersonation in general marks an inconsistency in the idea that masculinity is not theatrical or performative and provides an ideal form for Drag King theater.



Shelly & Ben Dover, Knave, London, 1996

chapter 3

location.

drag kings in london, san francisco

f

& new york

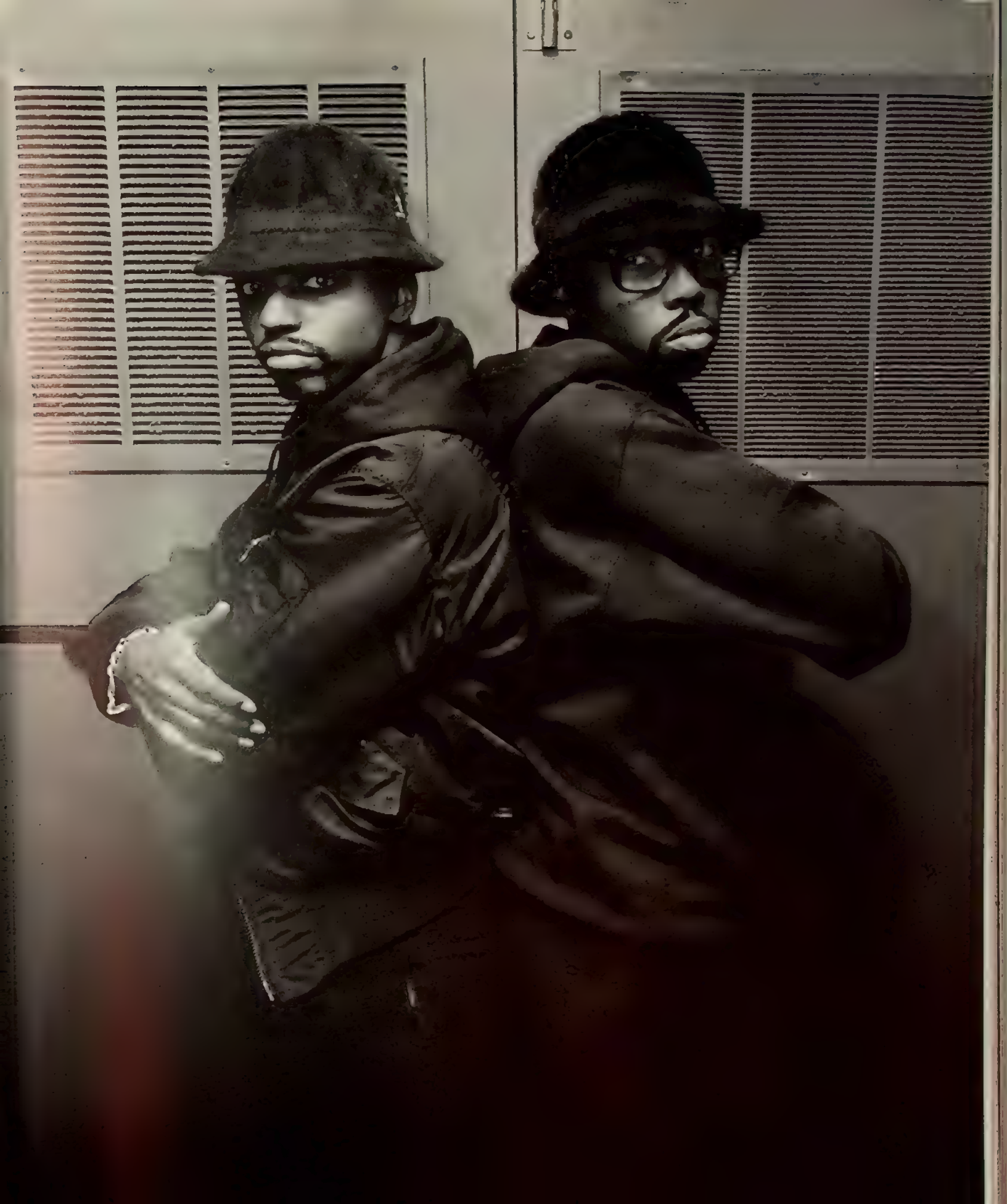
"...city areas with flourishing diversity spout strange and unpredictable uses and peculiar scenes. But this is not the drawback of diversity. This is the point of it."

Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*

New York has been called "the last true city" by Toni Morrison, and it is quite possible that London was the first true city. At any rate, both of these cities, and others, such as San Francisco, qualify as great cities in terms of what Jane Jacobs calls the presence of "flourishing diversity." Indeed, the Drag King thrives on the varied queer nightlife of both London and New York, but also in other urban areas such as San Francisco. Like a vampire, the Drag King avoids the light of day lest the sun's glare reveal the spirit gum holding his goatee in place or the heavily mascara'ed sideburns. The Drag King lives in the cities that never sleep. We began our search for Drag King life in London and New York. We visited San Francisco's scene much later in our research, and for this reason the San Francisco kings feature somewhat less heavily in this narrative. Drag King culture is primarily an urban phenomenon at this particular moment, and it flourishes in the dark corners of the city, transforming erstwhile leather bars into queer cabaret, or turning lesbian clubs into transgender stag parties.

The New York photographs tend to focus on single performers and this reflects the arrangement of the New York scene around theatrical virtuosity. The Drag Kings in New York are mini celebrities for their audiences, and each king produces his own shows and develops his own acts. In London, however, many of the photos are group shots, emphasizing not simply individualistic talents but also a sense of community and interaction.

In New York, the Drag King scene is enlivened by a rich history of avant-garde lesbian performance and with its own incorporations of male drag. The WOW cafe, for example, has long been host to theatrical groups like *Split Britches* and *The Five Lesbian Brothers*, and to gender-conscious performers like Holly Hughes and Peggy Shaw. In 1995 and 96 many of the lesbian clubs in town hosted Drag King contests and encouraged the participants to develop short stage acts. One series of contests instigated by Caroline Cone at HerShe Bar even offered considerable cash prizes for the winners of monthly competitions, and then put on a grand finale with its own little pot of gold for the winner. Buster Hymen led Drag King dating games at Meow Mix, and





Urban Dandies, Nave, London, 1995

other performers like Julie Wheeler and Shelly Mars developed one wo/man shows. Diane Torr, a New York based performance artist, had been running her King-for-a-Day: A Drag King Workshop with much success since 1989. The combination of theatrical tradition, a performance rich history, and diverse queer club activities culminated in the almost explosive emergence of Drag King culture in the 1990s.

Many New York Drag Kings, like Mo B. Dick, report becoming interested in Drag King performance after reading about San Francisco Drag King theater and performers like Elvis Herselvis and Annie Toon. Other Drag Kings in New York, like Dred, say that they got involved in the Drag King scene after watching early performances by kings like Buster Hymen. The Drag Kings in New York were dispersed over many different clubs until Mo B. Dick (with the help of Drag Queen Mistress Formika) started Club Casanova and brought Drag King acts to New York on a weekly basis. Very often in Club Casanova (which, sadly, closed down on December 28, 1997), the small space was cramped with photographers and filmmakers, reporters and writers all trying to capture the moves and grooves of the resident kings. The kings themselves became quite excited by the attention, and many had hopes that the media blitz would lead to bigger and better things. Superfly Drag King star Dred (winner of the 1996 HerShe Bar contests) has been approached to do small modeling jobs and has had write ups in places like *Vibe* magazine; Dred hopes to take her act all the way into mainstream public exposure. Another performer, Shon, echoes Dred's sentiments and says: "I'd like to model in drag, I want designers to make clothing for me. I think this could really fly, and whoever kicks it off could have some great opportunities." Some of the kings, especially the black kings like Dred and Shon, cite the example of RuPaul and suggest that any one of them could do for male impersonation what RuPaul has done for female impersonation. In many ways, this New York scene has been driven by these hopes of celebrity and the beckoning lure of fame and fortune. As Club Casanova king Uncle Louis puts it: "In New York there's a blinding ambition to be a star..."

In London, the evolution of a Drag King scene has predictably been somewhat different. In 1995, the London Gay and Lesbian Film Festival coordinated some events within the festival that focused upon gender and performance. I was asked to come and present a slide show on images of butches in film, and Cherry Smyth, curator of the festival, organized what was billed as "London's First Drag King Contest" to appear before the slideshow. I was to be one of four judges. The acts that night were remarkably entertaining. Del LaGrace Volcano participated in that first Drag King contest, as did Jewels and Hans Scheirl, both of whom were to become organizers of London's Drag King club. Hans won that night with an elaborate performance of a man hanging himself and achieving an orgasm in the process. Hans is a

filmmaker with a skill for special effects; he had rigged up an erect plasticine penis for his act; which he revealed as he simulated death by hanging. The other acts were less idiosyncratic and included lip-synching. But there was a wide range of Drag King masculinities in this first show, including an Anglo-Jamaican lip-synch performer, a sexy construction worker, and a dandy aristocrat.

A Drag King club did emerge from this first contest, and it took place every few weeks in a London Drag Queen space called Madame JoJo's. First called Club Naive, then later named Knave, it transformed into Club Geezer and then Bloke. Some Drag Kings like Jewels and Svar Tomcat note that the club had affiliations with and shared the clientele of other sex clubs in London. The New York club, Club Casanova, on the other hand, seemed to have less in common with lesbian sex clubs, and was more of an East Village phenomenon, indebted to a rich Drag Queen scene with hetero and homo queer clientele, and massive media presence.

At Club Casanova there were as many gay male Drag Kings and Queens in the club as there are lesbian kings and queens; this space allowed for fags and dykes to rub shoulders more than at most other clubs in the city. Interestingly, when a truly mixed queer space finally comes to be, many of the participants are in drag. At the same time, drag among the female club goers is not as pervasive as it is for gay men, and indeed one of the many differences between the London and the New York Drag King scenes is the presence of Drag Kings and cross-dressers in the audience in London. The female Drag Kings in New York are mostly confined to the stage. In London, however, most of the action is off stage, and at least three quarters of the audience arrive at the club in drag of some kind or another. The performances and Drag King contests in London take something of a back seat to the performances in the club itself.

On the night that I attended Club Geezer in London there were at least 300 queer people in a crowded pub. Lesbians, gay men, straight people, transsexuals and transgender people all sported a lively mix of moustaches, goatees, sideburns, full beards, suits, ties, leather daddy gear, and construction uniforms. The theme, of course, was "geezer," and the evening led up to a predictably anti-climactic "Geezer Contest" with prizes donated by local businesses to the best geezers in the crowd. Geezer, of course, references a peculiarly British brand of masculinity that may loosely translate in American vernacular as "a man's man." Club performer Jewels, himself a geezer-style Drag King, defines geezer as "a cocky wide-boy who's full of confidence and a bit too flash." Drag King performer Stanley elaborates on this definition: "I think geezer references a particularly repulsive laddish English masculinity." A geezer then conjures up the image of a sleazy con artist who believes in the power of his own masculine charm and who refers to women as "birds" or "tarts" and enjoys a pint or two at the pub and a good laugh, usually at some



My Russian Poster Boys, Knave, London, 1996



Titty & Tomcat, Naïve @ Madame Jo Jo's, London, 1995

form of toilet humor. The Drag King contest gave us samples of precisely this kind of geezer masculinity. The ten Drag Kings came out in various states of inebriation and one could judge the tenor of geezer humor when the first two contestants both called themselves "Stinky" and made much of their supposed farting abilities. M.C. Del LaGrace Volcano commented upon the redundancy of two stinky Drag Kings and pushed both of them off stage. The Drag Kings who followed performed various versions of mute and flatulent geezer masculinity until finally the crowd warmed to the name "Liam." Liam of course was a parody of Brit pop vocalist Liam Gallagher from the band Oasis; Gallagher has come to represent a specific version of bad boy English behavior, and his double in the Drag King contest drew a big round of applause. For the rest of the Drag Kings, they showed their arses, made coarse noises, belched, spat and slouched off the stage. If you didn't know what a geezer was at the beginning of the evening, by its end you wished you still didn't.

How does one make sense of such a scene? Scholar Tina Papoulias (Drag King name "Stanley") tried to explain what kinds of masculinity and what brands of humor were being parodied at Club Geezer: "Think of a cross between the Carry On films and the Beatles' films...That's the kind of British humor that the Club Geezer performances indulge. They are also parodying the current preoccupation with characters like Liam Gallagher. Such preoccupations trade in a current nostalgia for 60s British culture – bad taste, the Beatles, winning the World Cup – within which there is a glorification of the white working-class lad. Of course, very often the performers of such laddish images are middle class, and their nostalgia manifests as slumming." Papoulias's commentary transforms the rather unappealing geezer performances into a fascinating look at British masculinity, and effectively uncovers the kind of cultural work embedded in Drag King theater.

New York Drag Kings like Mo B. Dick also invest in heavily working-class renditions of dominant masculinity. Mo B. Dick's smarmy Brooklyn guy represents, in a way, an American version of the geezer. Other forms of male masculinity available for parody and imitation and transformation, tend to include garden variety male bigots, sleazy lounge lizards, bombastic rappers and home boys. There is a difference between these imitative performances on stage and the transformative masculinities on display among audience members in limited supply in New York, but abundantly present in London. Those people in drag in the audiences tend not to be imitating men, but actually producing their own gender categories, hybrids of the geezer, the lad, the guy, the boy, the dude, and other forms of masculinity easily divorced from men.

The Drag Kings of San Francisco seem to be a far less unified bunch than the kings of New York and London. While Elvis Herselvis has been



Hans & Amory Pert, Knave, London, 1996



Tomcat & Tits', Geezer, London, 1997

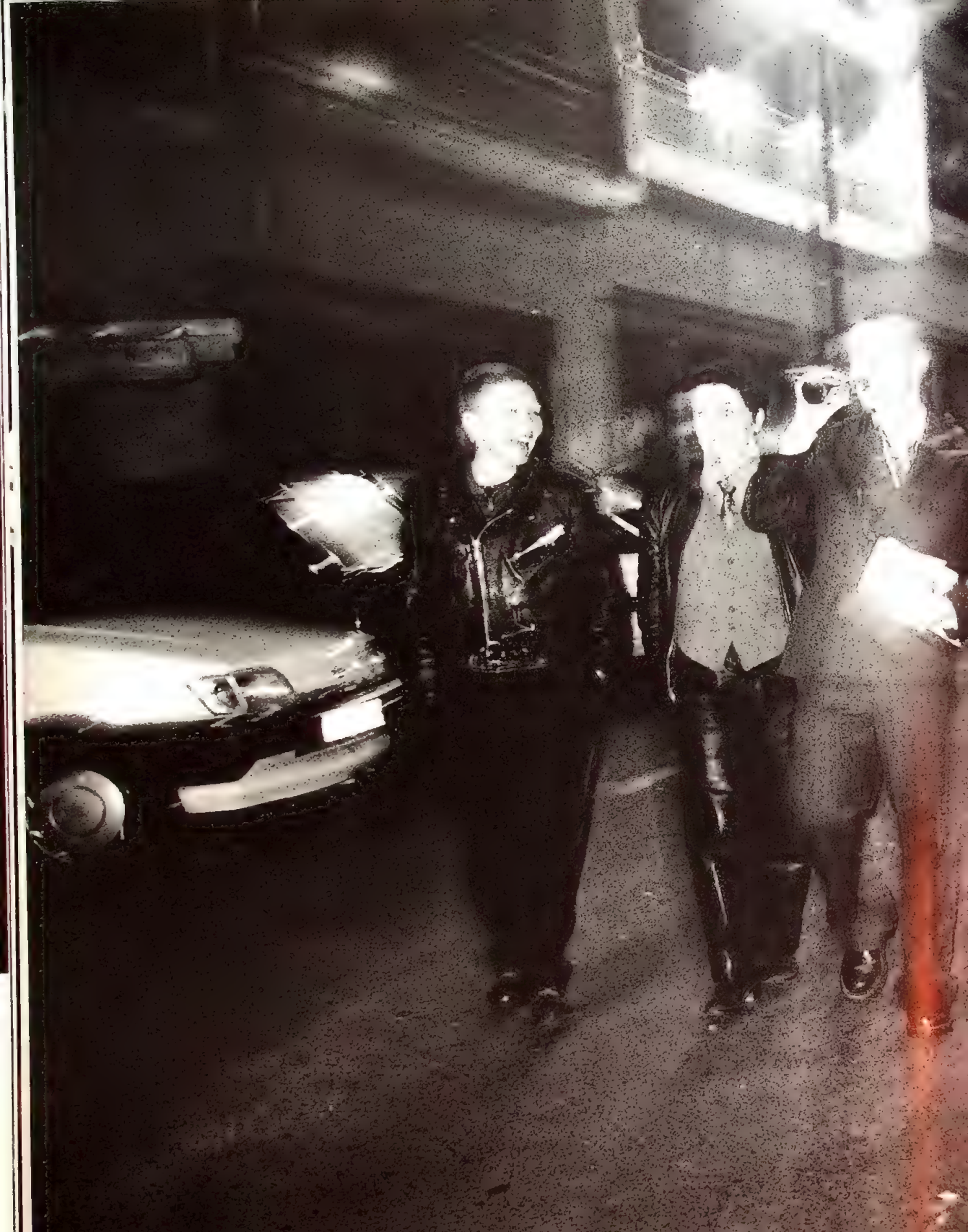


Jack © Folie Pigalle, Paris, 1995

performing in queer clubs for about ten years, Drag King culture has not solidified into a single scene. Partly because San Francisco is home to one of the most lively queer scenes in the country, Drag Kings are a permanent feature of the urban landscape. Butch and transgender/transsexual cultures are also alive and well there and for this reason its drag scene is rather butch and transgender oriented. Some of the San Francisco Drag Kings see the difference between San Francisco and New York in the same terms that Retro used to describe New York ambition. Dodge brother Silas Flipper elaborates: "In New York people really want to make it and obviously if you want to make it big, it is not a bonus to be butch." Flipper goes on to explain why San Francisco has been such fertile ground for all kinds of gender exploration: "We're not as serious here as people might be in Los Angeles or New York because we never assume we are going to make it in a really big way. For this reason I predict that San Francisco will eventually get more attention for its music and performance scene. There's always something fresh and original here." As Flipper astutely points out, once the drive to go mainstream has been eliminated, other more modest and more subcultural aims can prevail. Furthermore, bands like the Dodge Brothers do not distinguish at all between their stage personae and their off-stage identities. When it comes to the Drag King label, the Dodge Bros tell me that they could "take it or leave it" because the masculine rock heroes that they perform on stage are continuous with their own masculinities.

Flipper and Harry Dodge build their Drag King personae on the base of their own masculinities. In a brilliant strategy of impersonation, the Dodge Bros perform only cover versions – they quite self-consciously choose songs that, in Flipper's words, "could sound like we have written them," but which are wholly unoriginal. Doing cover versions and claiming them for one's own (Harry even tells the audience that the band wrote the songs) is like the drag practise of the band itself. The Dodge Bros take on rock star masculinities without ever acknowledging that they are imitating maleness. In this way the masculinities they perform become seamlessly their own.

The distinction between imitating maleness and transforming masculinity is an important one. Let's look at the ways in which male impersonation has caught the fancy of media attention. Both in London and in New York, some Drag Kings mention Diane Torr's Drag-King-for-a-Day Workshop as vital to the proliferation of Drag King scenes. The immense publicity that Torr's workshop has generated indicates the popular interest in male impersonation. While the workshop exists in a complicated relation to queer urban Drag King scenes, it has been extremely important in developing public interest in such a scene, and even in making Drag Kings aware of each others' presence. Torr, a Scottish-born performance artist, has been go-go dancing, gender-bending, and cross-dressing on various stages for the last twenty-five years, and her







Dred & the Drag Queen, HerShe Bar, New York City, 1996

performance career is certainly a testament to her deep-seated commitment to making gender destabilization fun. The Drag-King-for-a-Day Workshop itself has been part of Torr's eclectic repertoire since 1989, and the success of the workshop has taken her all over Europe. Her workshop has been written up in national newspapers, taped for a BBC documentary, and she has made appearances on various talk shows ("Donahue," "Montel Williams," "Jerry Springer").

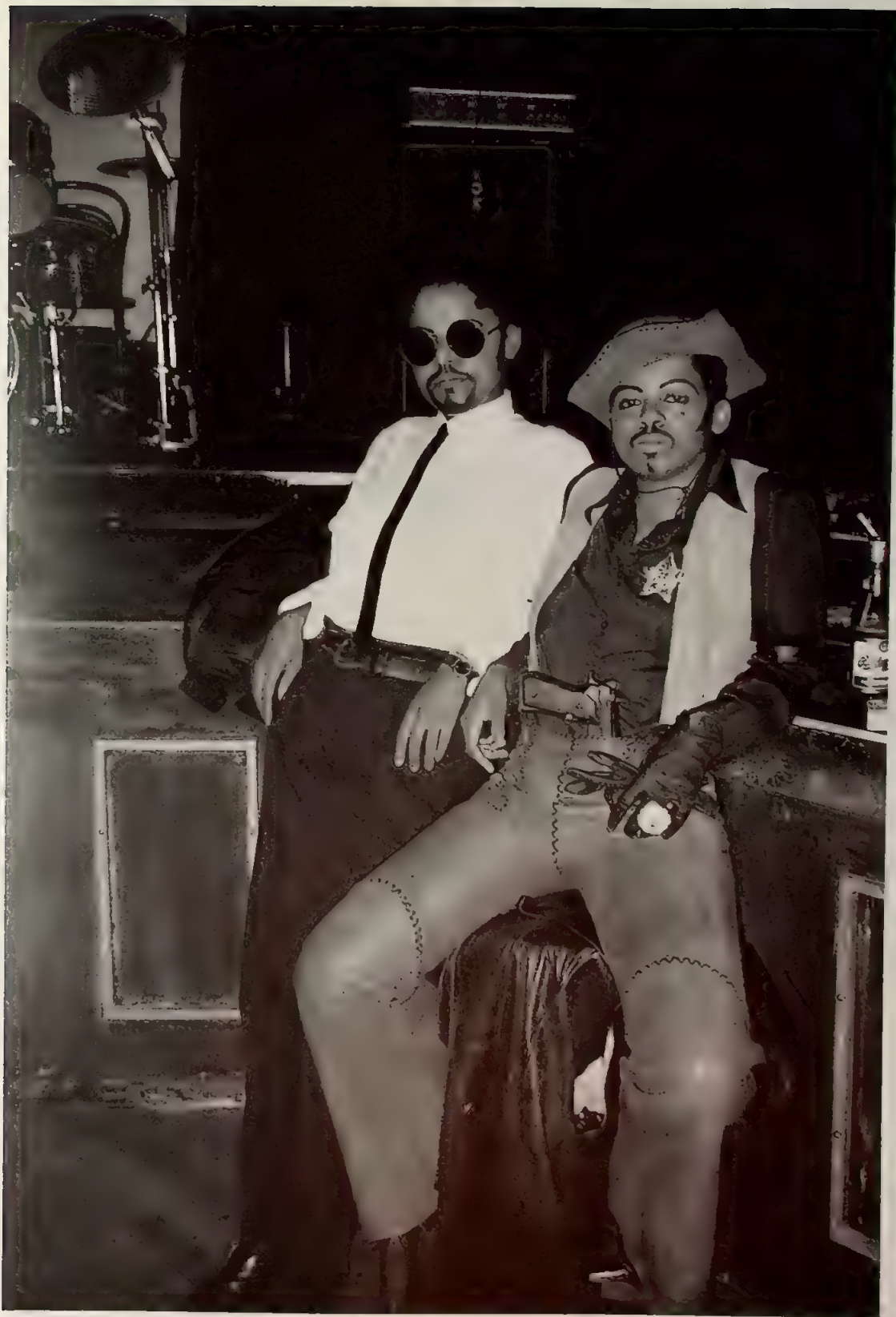
In the Drag-King-for-a-Day Workshop women pay a nominal fee to be instructed in the manly arts of taking up space, dominating conversations, nose-picking, penis-wearing, and generally being rude and piggish. In other words, women become men for a day, and with the appropriate make-up, fake facial hair, and a few lessons in male realness from Torr, they produce a male self to take for a trial run into the real world. Many women describe their experiences of Torr's workshops as mind-blowing or earth-shaking; Torr receives many letters attesting to the drastic and permanent transformations in genderconsciousness that her workshop participants undergo. Torr herself describes her first experience in drag as revelatory – she dressed up and went off to an art opening thinking that everyone would see right through her disguise. Much to her surprise, Torr passed easily and soon found herself being hit on by an interested woman: "She was really coming on strong; I tried to ignore her, I tried walking away from her, but she was in my face with this insistence that I pay attention to her. It was very embarrassing to watch her because I recognized her chat-up technique. That's when I decided to start teaching the workshops. I figured if women could learn about their female behavior and about male behavior, it would be a way of intercepting the so-called natural, normal behavior we've learned and exploring other possibilities." To this end, Torr began teaching women to adopt male persona and showing them that maleness "is not sacred."

In the popular press Torr's workshop tends to be written up as consciousness-raising with a twist, and inevitably the female journalists who enroll in the workshops describe the experience in terms of a reconsolidation of their femininity and their resolute heterosexuality. One journalist, Anna Burnside, writing in *Scotland On Sunday*, describes her relief at the end of the session when, "exhausted, I swap my moustache for lipstick, put on my bra, brush my hair. It feels good to be back home in my own personality. Ben likes me better as Jack, but I like me better as me. Back to walking in curves. Back to being the observed." Clearly, consciousness-raising for straight women and their forays into drag for a day are not to be confused with the kinds of gender performances at work in the queer Drag King clubs I have been discussing. Torr claims that all kinds of women take her workshops, lesbians and transgenders in addition to the usual curious straight participants. But it is more difficult to determine what the appeal of this exercise might be to

women who regularly pass (deliberately or not) as men or who experience their everyday gender expressions as ambiguous. Torr claims that the workshop appeals to queer women because it provides affirmation for an array of gender identifications; it may focus on male impersonation, she suggests, but in general it serves to "highlight gender issues."

An article by Tina Papoulias called "Self-Made Men" suggests that the workshop does not really appeal to lesbians in any broad way. When she took the workshop, Papoulias was surprised to "discover that the majority of the women were straight-identified and had not come to the workshop to explore lesbian masculinities." Papoulias finds her own assumptions about gender and its complex relations to sexual orientation challenged by "the ease with which most women proceeded to build their characters," and she experiences her own transformation and the transformation of her workshop peers as unsettling and empowering all at once. Papoulias concludes her article, however, by remarking on the distance between Torr's workshop and the actual experience of transgender forms of identity: "For all their radical vision, a lot of women who engage in some form of gender play will nevertheless balk at the spectacle of the chemically or surgically transformed body, perhaps because even with the most provocative of disguises we retain the knowledge that there is a 'real' woman underneath. This knowledge soothes us by confirming gender exactly at the point where we have been engaging in its subversion." Papoulias hits here at the heart of the dilemma. For those women who are relieved to unman themselves at the day's end, and who find themselves unsettled and even dismayed by the thought of transsexuality, the workshop has only engaged them in a rather superficial way. Male and female, indeed, as binary categories with highly specific and exclusive rituals, are confirmed and strengthened by Torr's workshop. There is a sense in which the workshop could be seen as a safe way to play with gender, and as damage control of the radically destabilizing fact of transsexuality and transgenderism.

In an interview, Shannon Bell asks Torr why people take the workshop. Torr provides a political justification intended to make the workshop respectable within the terms of feminist consciousness: "Part of what happens at the Drag King-for-a-Day Workshop is that women learn certain things: we don't have to smile, we don't have to concede ground, we don't have to give away territory." Bell sees this political agenda as a nice bonus to what is actually a fun experience of temporary self-transformation. She and Torr both represent gender as something that is essentially fluid and as a series of acts which people can move through at will. Of course, the very existence of transsexuals suggests that for many people, gender is far from fluid and to represent its ideal state as fluid is to implicitly critique people who feel unable for what ever reason to hop back and forth between masculinity and femininity.



Elwood & Buck, Naive, London, 1995



Simon & Jewels, Knave, London 1996

In conversation with Torr, I pushed her to explain what the significance of the workshop might be to contemporary drag scenes. Torr feels that the explosion of interest in Drag Kings stems from her original workshops and performances and she says, "In the last five years, of course, the scene has gathered momentum. But what I did was to physicalize gender theory by allowing people to act out the notion that gender is a series of stylized gestures, that it is something that can be unlearned, relearned and so on."

I think that the Drag King-for-a-Day Workshop does indeed give some women the opportunities to gain some perspective on gender and in this way it certainly can be an incredibly useful experience, but there are also very limited applications for the workshop and it works for only a particular group of women. Torr interprets "gender theory" (and here she mentioned Judith Butler's work) to mean that gender is "a series of stylized gestures" that can be "unlearned and relearned and so on." This conveys the sense that gender is a voluntary enterprise and that a little reconditioning may be all that most people (women in particular) need in order to throw off the gender habits which oppress them. If this were true, of course, then many of the women who take Torr's workshop would not return to femininity with a sense of relief. We can certainly assume that the workshop experience defamiliarizes the experience of gender, but it does not necessarily undo its construction. In other words, some women like being women and the pleasure of femininity is in no way undercut by giving them access to the tricks and ploys of masculinity. What's more, some women have never learned to be feminine and therefore do not need to unlearn it. Some women have learned and also have an innate masculinity. The workshop is a small part of a larger social reconsideration of gender meanings, but it is not an original site for Drag King culture in the way that Torr claims.

The kinds of debates that have sprung up around Torr's workshop are mirrored in the drag communities as a whole, where there is a considerable difference between those women who cross-dress for fun and maintain a stable relation to femininity, and those kings whose performances and costumes are part of their lives as gender-ambiguous people. The gulf that separates the interest that some women might have in cross-dressing and that transgender men might have in performing as Drag Kings also speaks to one of the major differences between the New York, the San Francisco and the London Drag King scenes. In New York, very few of the Drag Kings express anything like transgender aspirations or even butch inclinations, and most see drag as a theatrical costume which allows them to play with gender a little, but which does not necessarily express some deep-seated sense of masculinity. In London and San Francisco, on the other hand, many of the Drag Kings express butch or transgender identifications and understand the Drag King scene as a safe venue for their gender fantasies. Some of the London Drag Kings are actively



Welly & Ben Dover, Paris, 1995





Ode to Brassai, Paris, 1995

taking their male personas off the stage, and these kings pass in every day life as men. Some of the San Francisco kings make the persona into an extension of their butchness.

As even the most cursory glance at the regional differences between Drag King scenes suggests, sexual and gender subcultures vary immensely. New York, San Francisco and London represent just three of the many cities where Drag King performances have become a regular part of lesbian night-life. As we were finishing our research it came to our attention that the most active



Kings @ Club Knave, London, 1996

and exciting new Drag King scene is happening in Columbus, Ohio. This midwestern cultural hub houses a Drag King troupe called the H.I.S. Kings who perform long theatrical sets. At least fifteen Drag Kings perform regularly with the troupe and they plan to take their show on the road. Quite clearly, the Drag King phenomenon is growing and picking up speed in many different cities and it is not at all confined to London or the east and west coasts of the U.S.



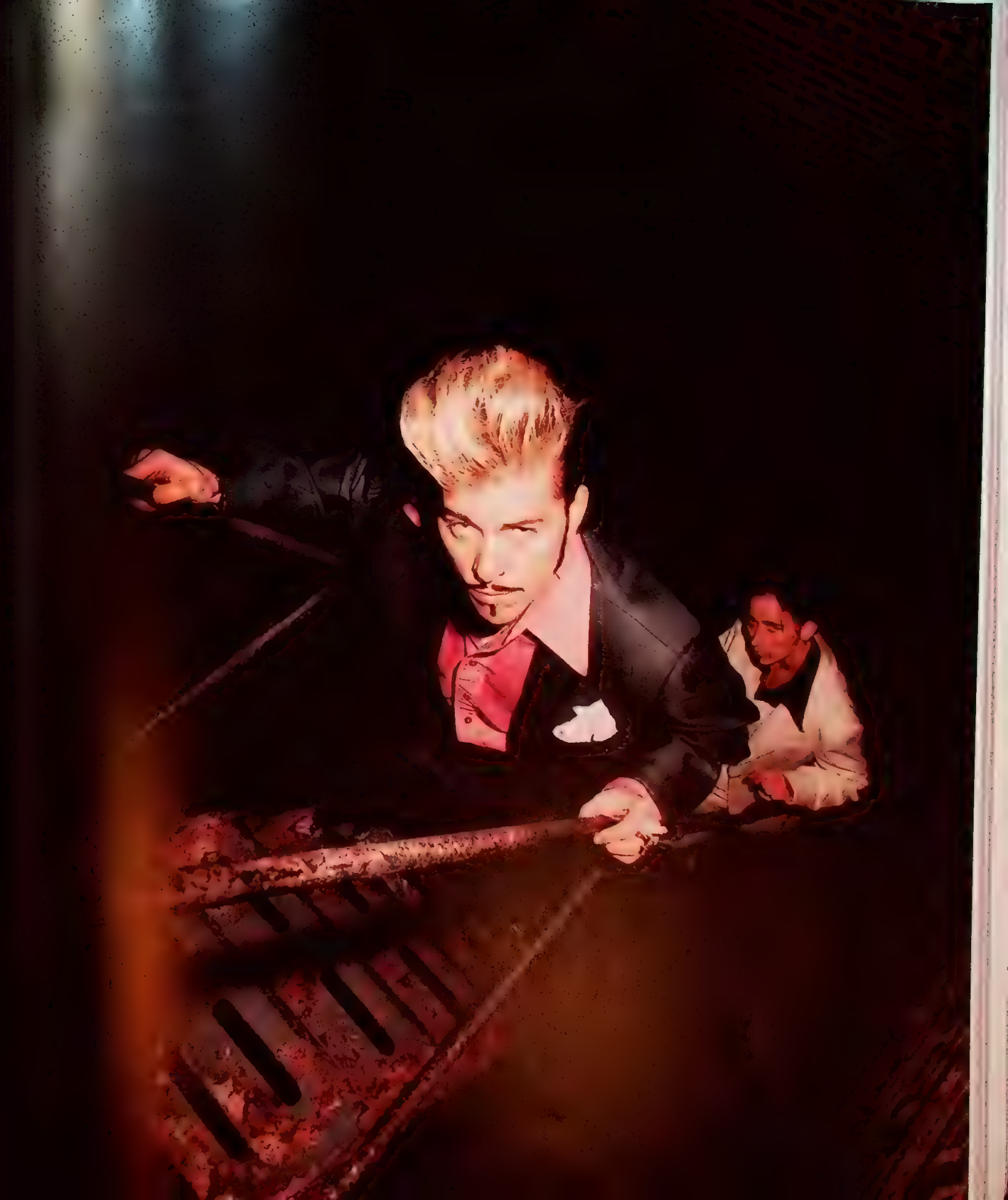
Gormless & Cliché, Paris Metro, 1995



The Likely Lads, Naive @ Madame Jo Jo's, London, 1995



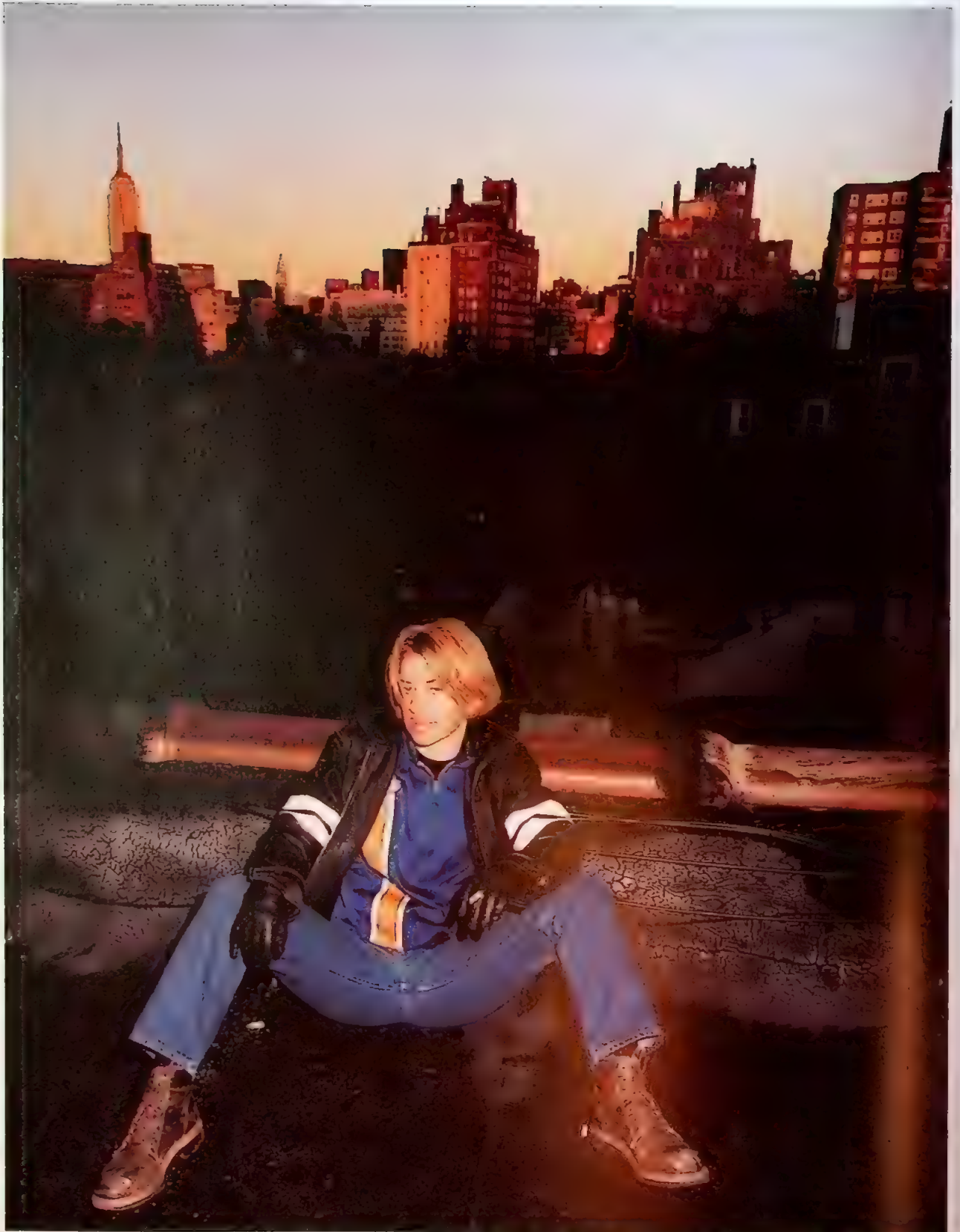
Backstage © the HerShe Bar, New York City, 1996







Jay Blows Mo B, Christopher Street Pier, New York City, 1997





Lizerace, New York City, 1997



Mo B Dick Makes Muscles, New York City, 1997



Mo B Dick "Ain't No Homo", New York City, 1997





Hogs & Heifers, Jay, Mo B Dick, Mario & King, New York City, 1997





Uncle Louie @ the Porno Store, New York City, 1997





Mean Martin, New York City, 1997





Dred, New York City, 1997



chapter 4

i
interview with a drag king # 1:
mo b. dick, new york city, 1996
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"I ain't no homo!" Mo B. (Bodacious) Dick

This interview with Maureen Fischer/Mo B. Dick by Del LaGrace Volcano and me took place at Maureen's Chelsea apartment in New York City. Maureen is an actor and a student, and she runs the Drag King Club in New York, Club Casanova. She is a thirty-one-year old white woman. Names are given as initials: Maureen Fischer (**MF**), Judith Halberstam (**JH**), Del LaGrace Volcano (**DLV**).

MF: People always ask me four questions about being a Drag King.

JH: Ok, what are they?

MF: "How old are you?"; "Are you a lesbian?"; "What do you do to make money?"; "Do your parents know you're a Drag King?"

JH: So there's obviously some curiosity then about the continuity or non-continuity between your on- and off-stage persona. How do you describe the relationship between being queer and being a Drag King?

MF: Stereotypically, for lesbians to be in drag or men's attire is quite unexceptional, so when we get a lot of press, I like to play against that stereotype. For example, I told one reporter that I like Wonderbras and lipstick, and, then when he saw me out of drag he said, "Wow you're so pretty," and he was really shocked.

JH: So the media expects you to be a man-hating lesbian and you take pleasure in defusing that?

MF: Yeah, in fact I have six brothers, I adore my father, I have a lot of male friends, and I try to make Club Casanova into a space that's friendly to men. Other women's clubs around town don't really want men in the space, and I really have no time for that. I like gay men in Drag King spaces.

DLV: Do you think it's important for Drag Kings to stress their femininity and to make clear distinctions between their lives and their performances?

MF: Well, when we first started getting a lot of attention in the press, everybody was very adamant about clarifying that we are feminine women or that we have feminine sides and that we do wear lipstick and bras and it is not

just the butch dyke who is getting into drag: and it's true, there's a whole variety of people who are getting into drag, including straight women!

JH: But what are we to make of this anxiety about the Drag King's essential femininity? Is it generated by the press or are Drag Kings themselves eager to stress their femininity?

MF: Well, the press assumes we are all butches who want to be men, and we become newsworthy because we fly in the face of these stereotypes. It's the twist that everyone's interested in, the idea that some of us are quite feminine and can perform credible masculinity.

JH: Ok, but let's just examine the assumptions about a connection between butchness and male drag rather than dismiss the connection as part of a heinous stereotype. Some butches after all dress in male or masculine clothing everyday, some pass constantly without meaning to and for some butch women, at least, there is a definite erotic charge generated by so-called cross-dressing. So if you are trying to disengage drag from being butch can you give us an explanation for why you were drawn to being a Drag King? Why did *you* want to start dressing and performing as a man? What was the impetus? Were you already a performer of some kind?

MF: No...

JH: Ok, so why did this particular kind of performance draw your attention?

MF: I just did it for fun one night. I dressed up in male drag just to see if I could pass and it was so much fun! I remember just creaming my jeans when I had this big sock stuck in my panties... I was totally turned on. I was going to Meow Mix dressed like this and when I got there nobody even recognized me.

DLV: Were you going to a Drag King event?

MF: No, I was just going out like that.

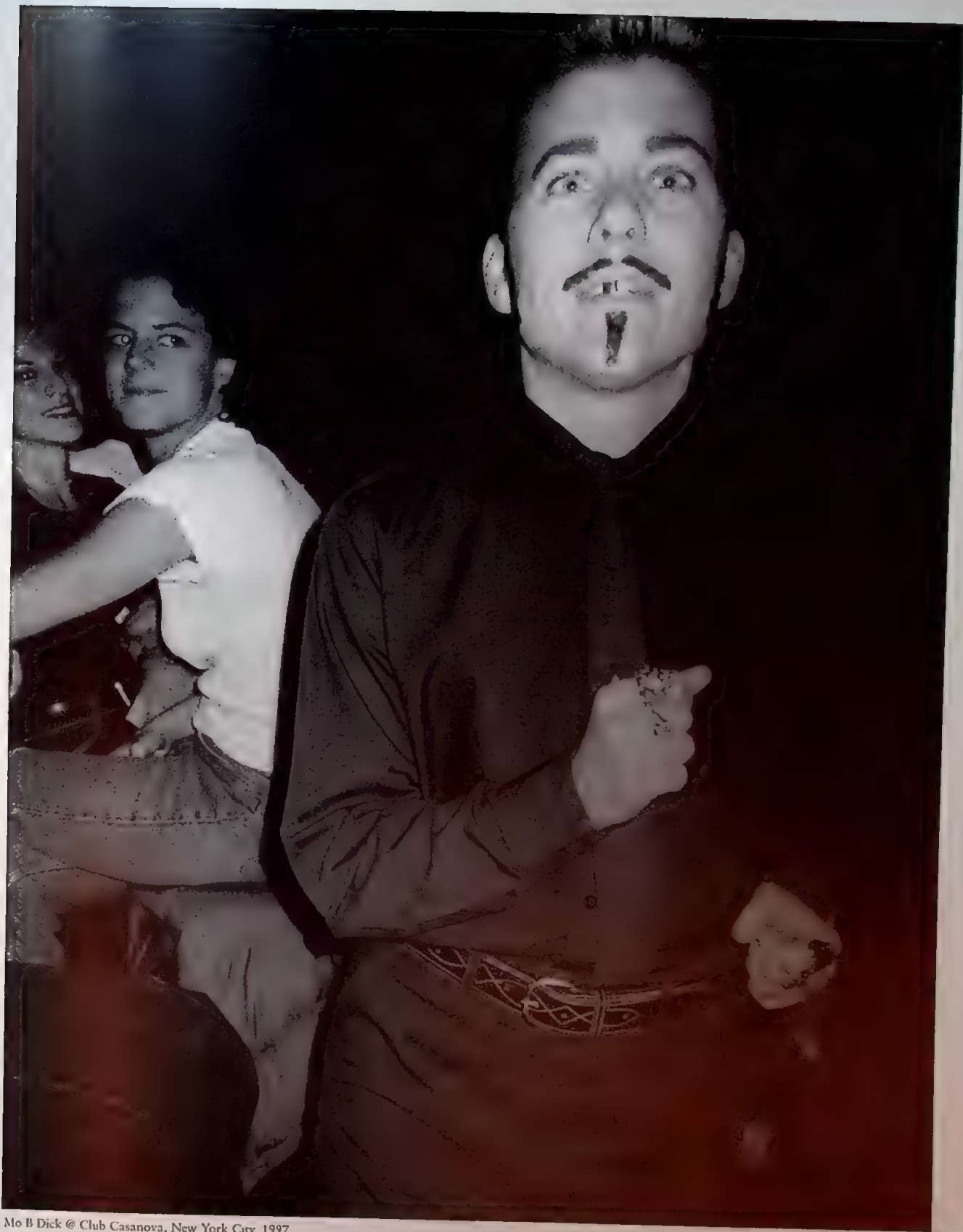
JH: But, again, why cross-dressing? Just to try it out?

MF: Yeah.

DLV: What gave you the idea or inspired you?

MF: Actually I read an article on Drag Kings in San Francisco and right before that I had seen Buster Hymen perform in Provincetown. Someone said I should try it, and I just wasn't interested. But when I read the article about Drag Kings in San Francisco and looked at the pictures of the transformations from women to men, I got excited about the idea and decided to try it out.

JH: So the notion of a huge and dramatic transformation was quite interesting to you?



Mo B Dick @ Club Casanova, New York City, 1997



Drag King Mafioso, London, 1996

MF: Yeah, and finding out how to do it, how to dress up and do the facial hair and everything.

JH: For some Drag Kings, they seem to want to showcase the mechanics of this transformation. For instance, I have seen quite a few acts now where Drag Kings strip down at the end of their act and transform themselves back into women. I personally don't find this act very interesting, it's too obvious, I suppose, and again it seems to reinforce a certain anxiety about asserting one's femininity. What do you make of this?

MF: I agree, because it takes great concentration to stay in character and keep it convincing; the stripping gets tired and it also appeals to some voyeuristic tendency... It's too easy to strip and be a girl, for God's sake, you're a girl every day: the Drag King persona is quite difficult to take on and maintain, and somehow the strip act diminishes that effort.

DLV: Well, I don't like it because it really seems to undermine the desire to perform maleness and take it all the way. The strip confirms what the mainstream media want to stress, that is, that underneath we really are all girls, pretty girls, and therefore we're acceptable, it's only legitimate, in other words, to drag up if underneath you are pretty. But what if you're not a pretty girl, what if you are a butch dyke?

JH: Exactly. The butchness is both what is expected and what is feared. The media and some of the Drag Kings seem to think that as long as the performance of masculinity comes from a feminine woman then it allays the Drag Kings' fears of stereotyping and the media's fear that the Drag Kings may want to usurp male privilege. As you say, Maureen, there are all types of women with all types of investments in the Drag King scene. This variation seems particularly obvious at Club Casanova. How did that club begin?

MF: Once I started going out in drag, I started doing parties with Michael, better known as Misstress Formika, and we decided to host a Drag King contest. It was so successful that we decided then and there, with Misstress Formika's help, knowledge and inspiration, to start a Drag King club, and Club Casanova was born.

JH: What do you think of Drag King contests?

MF: I like them as long as they are entertaining, although I have been to some, at the HerShe Bar for example, which were awful because the women entering them wouldn't do anything, they just walked up on stage and it was like a beauty contest or a popularity contest: if the crowd liked you or your look, you won; if they didn't, you lost.

DLV: And the crowd would respond to what? To realness or butchness? Are they responding to the real masculinity of the women as opposed to their talent or creativity?

MF: It's the crowd's definition of realness because very often the winners were not even Drag Kings to my mind. Sometimes, however, Drag Kings like Dred and Shon and Ananda did win.

DLV: Then what are the competitors who you think are not Drag Kings?

MF: I think they are just very butch women.

JH: But I think the entertainment value in these contests lay in the rapport that the mostly women of color crowd had with butches of color on the stage. They may not, as an audience, have been responding to an act or a performance, but they were responding to butch styles that they appreciated and even adored. Indeed, it was no accident that almost all the winners of those contests were women of color.

MF: Yeah, maybe, but one night at HerShe Bar I was so insulted because this very baby butch woman won, and I had gone to great lengths to prepare: I wore a killer shark skin suit, I did my pompadour, you know, I was stylin' ... and I was working it and she just went up there on a whim in an outfit she wears every day.

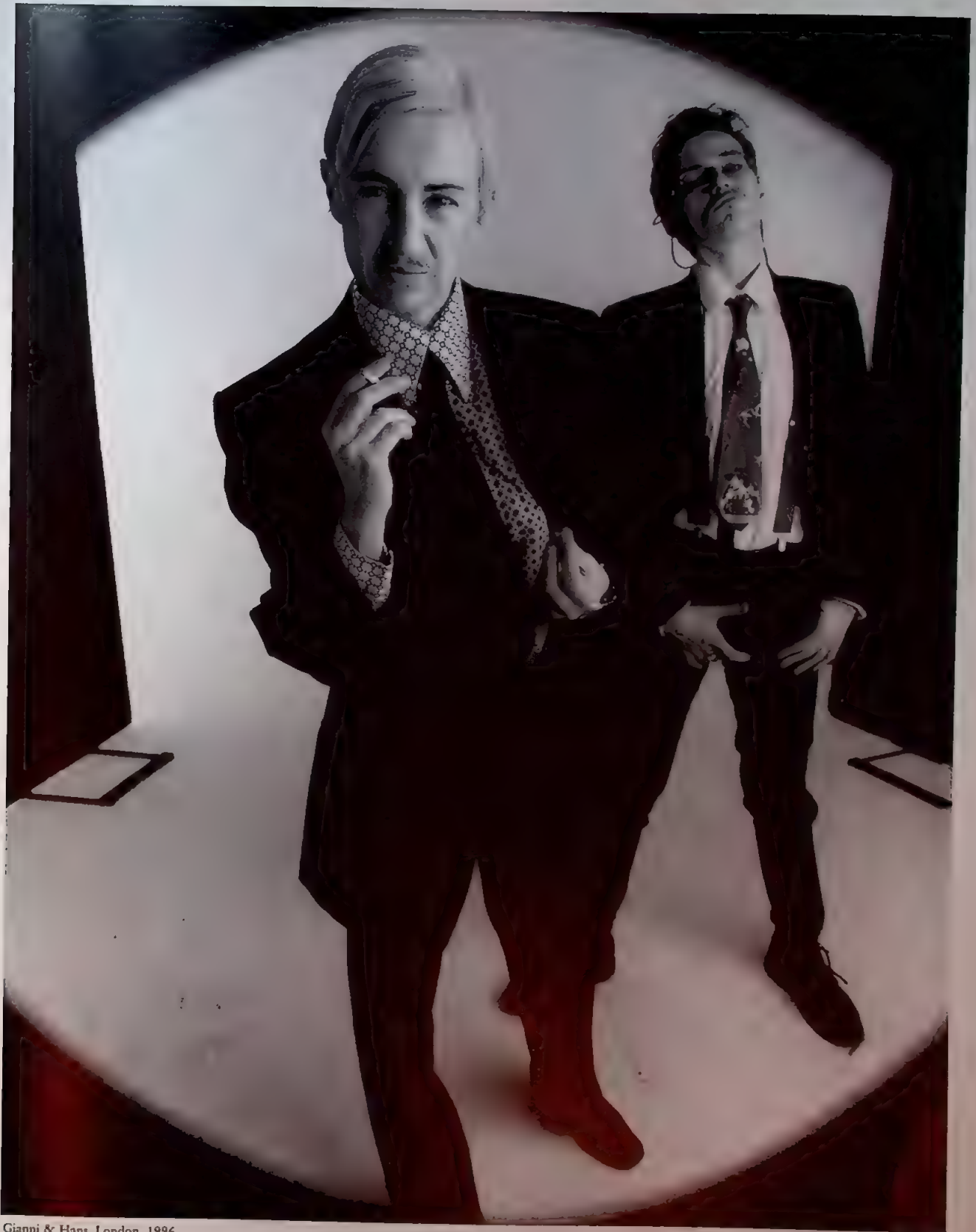
JH: Well, that counts in my set of categories as "butch realness," and for me that is as important a category as the more common act of denaturalizing masculinity. I can see how you would be put out by the disparity between your act and hers, your level of preparation and hers, etc., but I think that the Drag King contests are fascinating because they allow us to see how many variations of masculinity co-exist among women. But what did you do to change this when you put together a Drag King contest? Did you have specific criteria?

MF: Well, I made those kings work. There were three categories. First, the most unique and original talent: one woman brought a drum and played it, someone else did the hoola hoop, and someone else did a magic show. Second, I asked them questions and they had to pick the correct Drag King answer. The last category was formal attire, and they had to walk and show their stuff.

JH: Not to belabor this point, but I do want to return then to the difference between these two kinds of contest. So, one contest is about how butch they are and whether they pass every day; the other one is about how well they can imitate maleness.

MF: Yeah, I guess so, but I just can't understand that HerShe Bar contest. But I must say, it did get all of us out and meeting each other.

JH: Let's get back to the relationship between being a Drag King and being queer. If butch is the masculine version of being a lesbian, and you are not comfortable just being labeled "butch," then what is your relationship to masculinity?



Gianni & Hans, London, 1996

MF: I feel like I have a lot of different sides and they come out at different times.

JH: Ok, then, what kind of guy do you perform? What are you trying to do with this character? Tell us about Mo B. Dick.

MF: He's a really cheesy kind of guy, he's opinionated, macho, always thinks he's right, and is quite riled about any injustices: but he's also sexy and "ruff and tuff"; it's actually taken me a long time to come into my own as him. But once I am on stage, his total schmuck attitudes come all too naturally to me, it's scary. I was laughing my head off at what I came up with as him, I impressed myself! He's a typical Brooklyn guy who mouths off, "I ain't no homo" and "suck my dick" and "fuck you." The crowd love that, they love to hear me say that stuff, it's so funny to me because I see this as total parody and I get off on emulating maleness in such an extreme and crass way.

JH: You perform his homophobic anxiety in a really convincing way.

MF: Yeah, but, I did a song for Coming Out Day though called "Cowboy Love" which is about an interracial homoerotic cowboy romance... I made Mo B. Dick transform himself into a homo for Coming Out Day.

DLV: Do you think that doing this character gives you the permission to be someone or something you otherwise would never come close to? Or else what kind of permission does it afford you? Have you thought about that?

MF: Not in depth because it is just so weird to do this character, he's a real sleazeball pig and he is constantly talking nasty about "girlies" and I don't treat people like that, so I sometimes wonder where my performances come from because they really do come so naturally and so easily to me. I guess I think men like Mo are hilarious, they are so insane, and so my act is an opportunity to emulate some of the worst aspects of male society and make it funny. I also feel that by emulating this behavior I am also appreciating masculinity in my own way. My basic motivation, though, is always to have fun!

JH: In terms of Drag King theater, it's interesting to see what part of maleness a king might pick out to perform: traditional drag queen acts seem to have endless female models: Mae West, Bette Davis, Whitney Houston, Marilyn Monroe... They just have to pick a star and her flamboyance and artificiality make her available for performance. But it's not so easy with men. If you think about it, male movie stars like Tom Cruise, Paul Newman, even Denzel Washington don't provide much material for parody. What are you going to perform, to indisputably reproduce them, when their acts depend on giving the illusion of being natural? So when we think about what to imitate of maleness, we tend to fasten upon sexist pigs, for example, to have something to perform.





What do you notice about maleness that suggests theatricality?

MF: Well, even when you just look at men's and women's bodies, women's are so much more interesting to me. I mean, if I see a man and a woman walking down the street, I am going to look at the woman... because...

JH: Because you "ain't no homo" right?

MF: Yeah, right on! But the way a woman moves is more fluid and sexy, and a man is much more tight and restrained. When I perform Mo B. Dick on stage, I have to be very conscious of my movements. Usually I move around a lot, but as a man I am much more rigid and I hold my body a certain way and it's much stiffer in the torso and there's no wiggle in the hips.

JH: So it's like a flattening out of affect almost?

MF: Yeah, exactly, I was watching a guy recently in an improv class, and he was trying on a wig and trying to emulate a woman. It was interesting because I was able to see more of how men operate in his struggle to lose his masculinity and perform a woman; you could literally see more of his maleness in that struggle because he was a buff gym boy and he was having real trouble shedding his image. I had to emulate him and it was no problem, I could read him like a script.

DLV: It seems to me that the kind of character you perform is a negative parody. He is sleazy and sexist, funny and oddly charming, too, but definitely a negative type. And I'm just wondering whether there are any Drag Kings that try to embrace a positive masculinity?

MF: Well, Laviio performs a smooth Latin Lover; Dred... Well I don't know what Dred's character is.

DLV: She's parodying a blaxploitation character in not necessarily a negative way, but definitely in a parodic way. I think this relates to the ways that we have been discussing race and masculinity. White masculinity is nearly always depicted in its sexist and exploitative mode, but non-white masculinity makes itself available for different kinds of enactments, some of which may come from sincere admiration. Like when Dred and Shon do their R&B act, that show is about paying tribute to certain black male performers and certain black music.

MF: Yes, that's interesting, and I have been trying to think about ways to bring out more of what I admire in masculinity in my own shows, but I find that more difficult. Not to say that Mo doesn't have his charming sides.

DLV: Well, quite, he is very funny...

JH: Has this Drag King act opened up a theatrical future for you? Are you interested now in theater and acting as a career?

MF: Yes, I had wanted to do theater as a kid, but I never pursued it. Now, well now this Drag King stuff seems to be everywhere. Look at *Twelfth Night*, for example; Drag Kings are going to Hollywood and there's a film out with Whoopi Goldberg in which she transforms herself into a white male executive.

JH: Do you have any way of explaining why male impersonation is suddenly a big deal?

MF: That question baffles me. I don't know how electricity works, and similarly I don't know why there'd be a sudden massive surge of interest in Drag Kings. I do think Drag Queens, in part, have paved the way for Drag Kings. It's much easier for us because Drag Queens have created the space and so many queens have said to me that it's about time, in relation to this Drag King explosion. They have embraced us with no animosity or rivalry or jealousy, and I think in the future queens and kings will even work together more.

DLV: Can a guy be a Drag King?

MF: Certainly, often it even gives them a way to be rougher and tougher, and in the same way women can be Drag Queens. Some guys have a special propensity because perhaps they don't have much facial hair or say they can't get their sideburns to grow in, their goatees aren't full. I study men's faces and a lot of them are not masculine!

JH: That's great because what you are saying is that masculinity in men is often quite flawed, and this makes masculinity available for impersonation by men or women.

MF: Yes, it's about flaws, but also about exaggeration, and this is why gay men might impersonate butchness. I like to create an environment in the club where people can try anything... I want people to break down stereotypes and keep people open-minded. One night I did this number, "Are You a Boy or a Girl?" and I wore my strap-on as well as my Wonderbra, my slip and my Drag Queen shoes, I retained my pompadour, and facial hair, and chest hair, and I was very sexy, but I was Mo B. Dick in female drag. You know, I didn't like it...

JH: What do you mean you didn't like it?

MF: I didn't want to be a girl, or rather Mo B. Dick didn't want to be a girl. People were looking at my girliness and for Mo B. Dick that was uncomfortable. For me it would have been fine, but as Mo B. Dick, I had feelings about it, 'cause, you know...

ALL: He ain't no homo...!



chapter 5

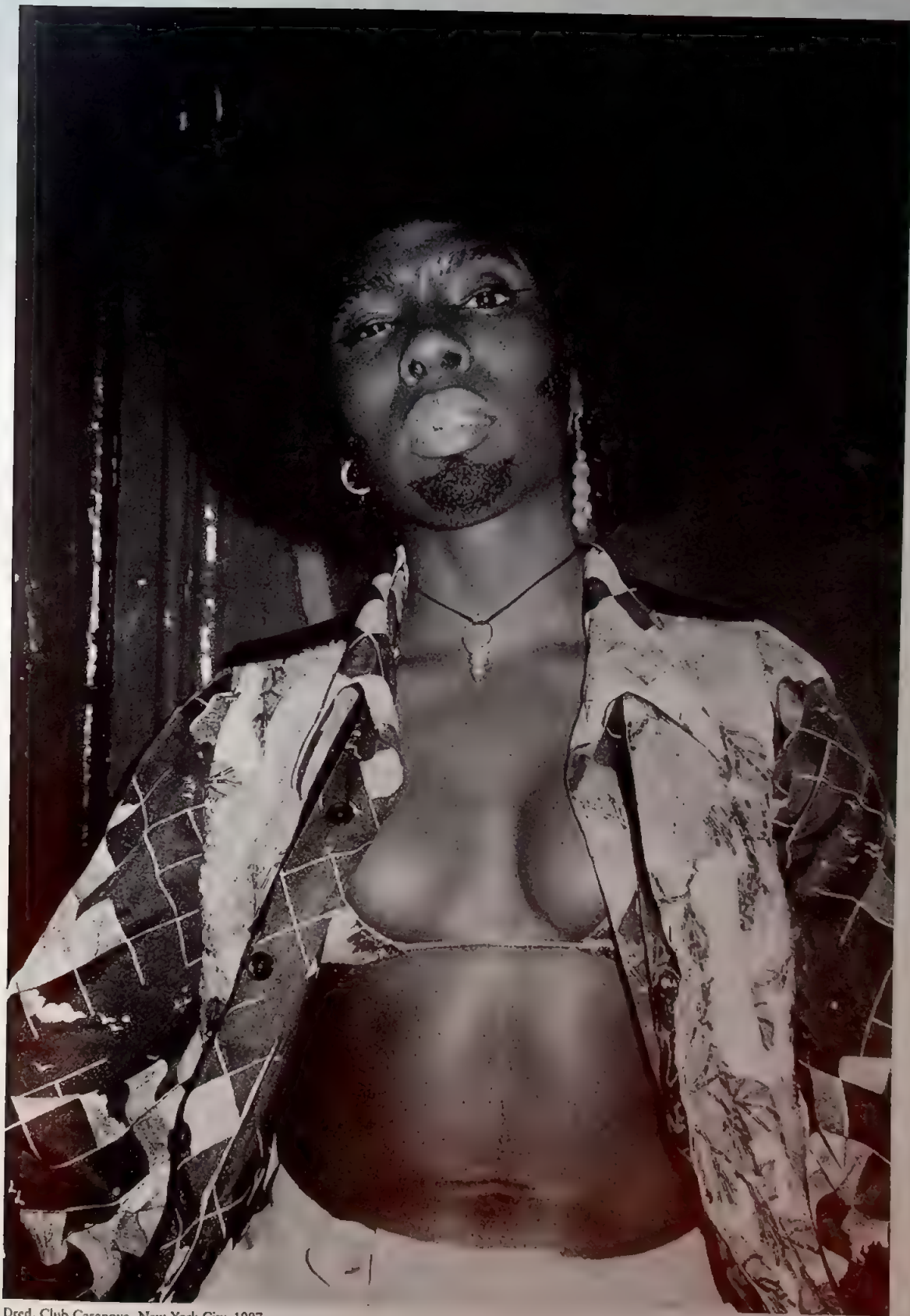
some kind of woman: drag king genders

"I am an aggressive fem. The masculinity I perform is definitely a big part of me but I also have a feminine side. If I were a guy, I'd be a gentleman; I'd always sit with my legs crossed, I'd be very suave, very cool, a kind of quiet storm."

Shon, Drag King performer

Much of the mainstream discomfort or disinterest in Drag Kings has to do with the fear that the costume may never come off, that the performance will become a reality, and that some kind of authentic femininity will be damaged or contaminated by the very impersonation of masculinity. It also has to do with a male fear of being replaced or usurped. Magazines like *Marie Claire* and *Penthouse*, which have rushed to do stories on Drag Kings, also rush to assure their readers that there is no cause for concern, that underneath the costumes, Drag Kings are really beautiful women. Some Drag Kings encourage such speculations, others feel offended by the prescription of compulsory femininity.

With few butch kings in the New York scene (Bud and Justin Kase being the notable exceptions), many kings find labels to be – pardon the pun – simply a drag. Lizerace, for example, a handsome and boyish-looking Drag King who, with even a hint of a goatee, passes easily, claims that she is androgynous and feels that this label gives her more "space to maneuver" than a label like "butch" might. Lizerace admits that she feels sexy in drag, but she still hesitates to make that sexiness into an indication of her off-stage gender identity. Other Drag Kings in New York echoed Lizerace's sentiments. Dred told me: "I am not butch or femme, just whatever I am feeling right then and the women I have gone out with have also been everything – butch or femme or neither. I really don't have a type of woman I like." Dred elaborates: "When I am in drag it does feel natural because I have a lot of masculine energy. Maybe I was a man in my last life." Both Lizerace and Dred stress that their gender identity is fluid and for Dred it may be as simple as "whatever I am feeling right then." But Dred also likes people "knowing that I am a woman in drag. I think it is powerful to show that." Dred's act very often incorporates a strip tease of some kind and will culminate with her exposing her leather bra and pulling an apple out of her pants and taking a bite. For Dred the revelation of the artifice of drag makes her performance powerful and showcases the way a body can look butch and pretty by turns and be



Dred, Club Casanova, New York City, 1997



My Handsome Devil, Paris, 1995





Sophie as a Drag King Imposter, Paris, 1995

convincing as both. At Dred's performances, women are often standing and cheering.

Dred sometimes performs a rap act and an R&B act with another black Drag King, Shon. Shon says she does not identify as butch because she feels she cannot "live up to the label." Shon gives herself a more complicated label: "I am an aggressive fem. I am not going to say that the masculinity I perform is not a part of me, but I also have a feminine side." For Shon, the label "butch" does not adequately address the fact that she feels her femininity or femaleness is an important part of who she is. Shon, however, drives women quite wild in drag, and when she performs with Dred in their R&B show, she is a devastatingly convincing performer and male impersonator who endows her act with a smooth sexiness: "If I were a guy, I'd be a gentleman," Shon tells me. "I'd always sit with my legs crossed, I'd be very suave, very cool, a kind of quiet storm." This idiosyncratic term, "quiet storm," perhaps hints at the kind of gender variance that Shon names as "aggressive fem"; what she produces here is a phrase that would express both her strong masculine appeal and her female embodiment.

Other New York Drag Kings confirm Lizerace's and Dred's descriptions of the power of androgyny. Evil Cave Boy, a performer who often transforms into an animal part way through her act, calls herself both "girly and very boy..."; performance artist Shelly Mars describes herself as a "tomboy" who has "gotten more in touch with my feminine side as I get older." Mo B. Dick also calls herself androgynous and suggests that the real power of the Drag King act lies in the process of transformation.

By comparison with the androgynous kings of New York, the Drag Kings in London almost exclusively identified as butch or transgender. They have very different conceptions of the transformations involved in Drag King theater. The MC of Club Geezer, twenty-five-year-old Jewels, identifies very strongly as butch and admits that being a Drag King has helped her shed a sense of embarrassment about being a masculine woman. The Drag King shows, Jewels says "gave me permission to be as boyish as I want to be." What is more, her Drag King persona, says Jewels, "is not that far from the truth." Her on-stage persona infiltrates her off-stage sense of self and infuses her with a new confidence. A Scottish Drag King, thirty-six-year-old Hamish, also identifies as butch and takes that even further to articulate a specifically homoerotic butchness, which means she is attracted to other masculine women. Many of the London Drag Kings also participate in a homoerotic scene of flirtation between and among the kings and butch-friendly gay men. Some of the butch Drag Kings find that the Drag King space gives them room to flirt with excessive versions of masculinity and also to break down the essential connections between masculinity and maleness. Jewels explains that the Geezer show, for example, was an opportunity to take on a particularly crude form of masculinity. Jewels says: "Most geezers are men, some are women, some are Drag Kings. But it is one of those masculine roles that is completely divorced from identity." I asked Jewels whether there were other such roles in a specifically British context that she would identify as "divorced from identity"? Jewels responded with a whole list: "birds, tarts, lads, mates, love, duckie."

The Geezer show, from Jewels's perspective, unleashed the power of an identification which can easily be unhinged from any notion of biology. Furthermore, the recognition of gender vernaculars or vocabularies allows for the further disruption of seemingly stable gender systems. Del LaGrace Volcano confirmed that these vernaculars record shifts in gender recognition, and he recalls that when he began hormones and started his transgender transition, he noticed that his ambiguity would be recognized by people in his neighborhood: "Right at the top of my road, the men who run the vegetable stand call me 'mate.' But they never used to call me 'mate,' I was always 'love' or 'darlin'." This shift is not exactly representative of a shift from female to male; rather the shift is from feminine type to masculine type. Del is one of a



Jewels & Ms Kimberly, Knave, London, 1996

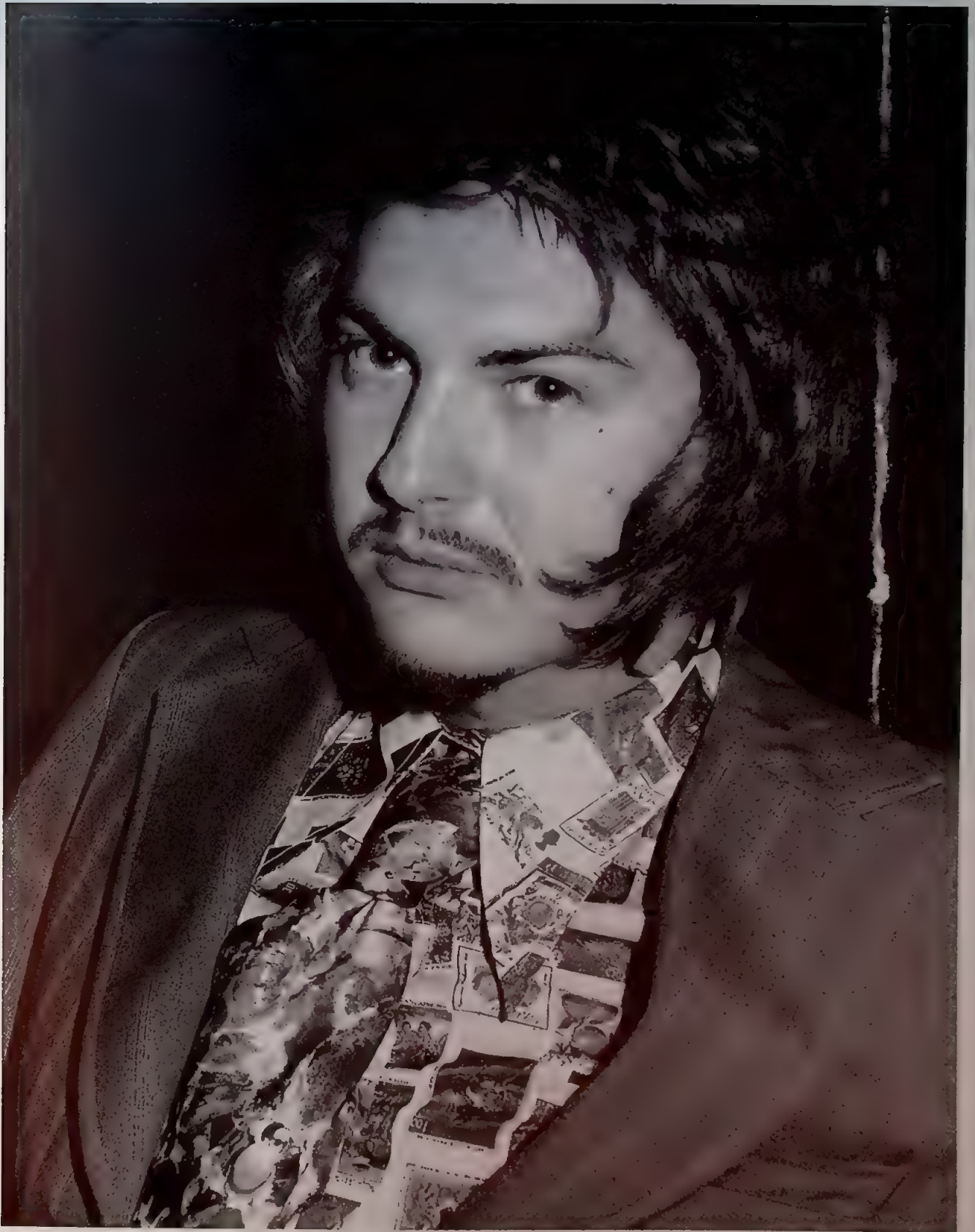
few London Drag Kings who have started taking testosterone and calling themselves transgender. Some of these transgender men do trace this decision back to their involvement in Drag King cultures, but others suggest that Drag King experimentation just confirmed desires they already had.

Del and Hans in very different ways see their transgender evolution as part of a lifetime of experimentation. Del's sense of himself as a "transman" is based on his own atypical biology, but he also positions this identity at the crossroads between dyke and transgender. Del has taken on many different names and identities over the years, including the fabulous hybrid "hermaphrodyke," but his transgender identity is not simply the latest in a long line of changes, it is also related to his general penchant for creating brand new selves. Del has found Drag King culture to be a potent mix of performance that precisely mirrors his own sense of the complicated relations between embodiment and theatricality. Hans, the forty-year-old Austrian filmmaker, also sees his transgender transition as part of a lifetime given over to experimentation. Hans's profoundly experimental films feature all kinds of body mutations and mutilations, transformations and metamorphoses. His current film is called *Dandy Dust*, which features a radically ambiguous character at its center. This futuristic film, with its bold expressionist colors and fantastical special effects, conveys an almost apocalyptic sense of identity. Bodies come apart, identities (and especially gender and sexual identities) disintegrate and transform themselves, unrecognizable physical forms bob and rub manically, creating a nightmarish sense of disorder and desire. If one immerses oneself in Hans's techno-fetish future, then it is not hard to see how his transition from female to transgender might count as just one kind of change in an artist who thrives on perpetual transition. Given Hans's sense of an almost technological relationship between bodies and identities, his explanation for his transition comes as some surprise since it revels in organic imagery: "Transgender means you can actually change secondary gender characteristics without fully changing from female to male. After even one injection, I felt better, more centered; I feel that my body now fills my skin sack, the muscles all feel heavier. My voice is deeper, I feel I have a place and a balance between male and female." Words like "centered" and "balance" seem almost odd in relation to Hans whose philosophy and aesthetic can only be described as cyborgian. When he describes how his body "fills his skin sack," however, one gets a sense of the more technological aspects of Hans's process of self-recreation. But the contradiction between Hans's sense of an authentic self emerging from his skin sack and his aesthetic commitment to futuristic genders ultimately confirm the essentially contradictory project of transgenderism. On the one hand, transgenderism expresses the detachment of sex from gender and signifies the production of new forms of embodiment; on the other hand, however, as many transgender men begin hormones and start

to live as men, transgenderism seems to confirm the dominance of gender binarism.

Another long-time Drag King on the London scene, Svar Tomcat, thirty-six, also describes the effects of testosterone in terms of a new "heaviness" in one's body. Svar comments: "I feel more centered and solid, more natural and much more myself, therefore more solid and dense." Svar credits the Drag King scene with allowing him to express a "deep self" rather than a surface. Svar has a very rich explanation for his transition from female to transgender, and he makes clear that there is a difference between his sense of embodiment and the conventional articulations of "wrong body" experience made by transsexuals. Svar notes that while he has not always wanted to be a man, he has always identified as masculine or as between genders; he has never identified as female. I asked him why he could not accommodate his sense of masculinity within a butch dyke identification, which signifies masculine identification without maleness. Svar had a fascinating answer to this question, which emerged from his frustrations with being a very small person. This frustration, for Svar, combined with a very particular desire to move from boyishness to mannishness within his own brand of masculinity. Svar says: "The feeling of wholeness that I get from T (testosterone) is a relief. It makes me feel that I can grow up at last, develop myself as an adult. I am relieved, simply, to have found an exterior expression for my adult self." Svar articulates here something which is perfectly obvious but which tends to elude contemporary explanations for transsexuality. Some small masculine women are constantly read through their masculinity as "boys," and in order to take on more adult selves they have to choose between female adulthood, male adulthood, or a kind of perpetual masculine adolescence. Few masculine women will simply choose some version of adult womanhood. Testosterone also precipitates in the transgender person a late adolescence – the voice breaks, the skin breaks out, hormones rage. At the end of a period of high volatility, it is quite possible that the boyish woman will emerge as a mannish person.

Del, Hans, and Svar all maintain their sense of belonging to queer dyke communities. They do not renounce their membership within these communities in order to live more consistently as men, and they take their queer masculinities as part of a poly-gendered scene of queerness. These transgender kings have extremely wide parameters for queer identification and all suggest that they are part of a scene in which butch, femme and transgender self-presentations all exceed the terms for normative gender expression. Svar points to the many different kinds of Drag Kings whom he recognizes on the scene: "There are butches dressing up as men; femmes who stick on moustaches and dildos and everything becomes play-drag and interchangeable. I even have a masculine female friend who dresses up in



Amory Pert, Knave, London, 1996

female drag and goes out as a Drag Queen. She really looked like a guy in drag, her presentation was fully layered, and it is safe to say that she was managing to incorporate a femininity into her drag act." Svar's detailed account of different versions of Drag King queerness gives one a sense of an emergent gender community which coheres around notions of drag and playfulness but which retains a sense of the complicated lives people lead because of their non-normative gender appearances.

But this is not to say that the London scene is without controversy. As Svar and Hans relate, there is some tension between transsexuals and transgender Drag Kings in London. Svar tells of a transsexual friend who is publicly accusing him of making light of transsexuality by turning hormone usage and gender transition into a game. This critique assumes that there are real transsexuals and fake transsexuals and that the publicity generated by the playful transgender kings actually detracts from the credibility accorded to "true" transsexuals. Svar responds by saying, "I think what the transgender Drag Kings are doing is simply different from transsexuality, but it does not diminish or marginalize that experience at all. I think a transsexual does not understand what it means to be a transgender and vice versa." Svar's plea for gender diversity and a kind of libertarian attitude to gender variation certainly makes sense. But if it seems odd to accuse transgender men of impinging upon transsexual realness, we have only to compare this dispute with the charges sometimes levied by butch kings against femme kings. Some butch Drag Kings also feel that femme Drag Kings are not so committed to the gender diversity that drag gives rise to and the femme Drag Kings are often accused of simply trying to cash in on the publicity.

The butch Drag Kings in San Francisco make clear distinctions between butch and femme Drag Kings. Dodge Bros Harry Dodge and Silas Flipper describe their own drag performances as intimately related to their off-stage butchness. Harry explicitly discusses the issue of femme versus butch Drag Kings and he suggests that while he finds himself impressed by femme cabaret performances, ultimately, he finds it disturbing to see any glimpse of their femininity during the performance. Harry articulates a very interesting politics of representation here, that since butches do not get rewarded for being butch anywhere in this culture, the Drag King contest becomes one of the very few sites where butch masculinity can be celebrated and praised.

Flipper also comments that he has also thought about the relationship between being butch and being a Drag King, and he suggests that while many butch performers do not necessarily set out to do Drag King acts, ultimately the image of a masculine woman up on stage does become part of the wider definitions of Drag King culture. The Dodge Bros, for example, have become a vital part of the San Francisco Drag King scene, but they did not set out to do Drag King performances. They just wanted to play music and have fun,

and part of their act was sporting drawn on moustaches. Since Harry has also grown his own beard, he did not need fake facial hair to be considered a Drag King. Now that the label has been applied to them, Flipper admits that he would like to be part of an expanding conception of "Drag King." Flipper also thinks that Drag King performances are useful to butches: "For example, butches don't often let themselves dance. There's something very stiff about being butch, and when I dance I do it in a mock femme way, or I do a kind of fag dance because to dance as a butch is very difficult. Maybe butches need dancing classes, I don't know, but being a Drag King does help butches loosen up a bit and expand."

Flipper and Harry clearly do not denigrate femme Drag King performances, but they do try to reserve some special place for the butch Drag King performance, and they demand that we consider butch Drag King theater in relation to a whole set of vulnerabilities which make up the daily life of the butch woman. As Harry says: "In a way, being butch is a very vulnerable thing, so why would you go up on stage and parody that? You can actually do this in San Francisco, but it is harder to do in other places where being butch makes you vulnerable and fragile." Harry and Flipper articulate the very different stakes for the butch and femme or androgynous Drag King performers. While the androgynous Drag King may see her act as a spectacle or a theatrical mode of transformation, the butch Drag King finds in Drag King performances a safe space within which to explore more expansive masculinities.

Obviously the stakes are highest in all identity skirmishes when people feel that their lives and their proclamations about their lives are in danger of being trivialized by the claims others make about them. The Drag King scene, with its panoply of gender identifications, is a testing ground for all kinds of identity politics. One New York Drag King, who does not identify as butch, remarked to me that he was concerned to see some kings only come to Club Casanova in drag on the nights when they were performing. On other nights, he confided, they arrived in full femme gear, as if to assure their audiences of their true femininity. This switching between drag persona and feminine persona clearly irked my informant because he felt that the switch did diminish the power of the drag, and he also felt that it showed a lowered investment in drag on the part of the Drag King. It is quite difficult in fact to determine what the stakes of the drag performance might be for the various performers. Some Drag Kings are simply trying to ride a wave of publicity into the public eye. Others are exposing their own quotidian masculinities to the full glare of public scrutiny. Others still are reinventing themselves and trying out personae in order that they may take the drag act far beyond the stage and out onto the streets, where their safety may depend upon the success of their performance.

chapter 6

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interview with a drag king # 2:
the **dodge** bros, san francisco, 1997

“When I look back at my childhood and remember when no one would even talk to me because I was funny looking and I acted weird, it’s hard to believe that now I can go out with beautiful women. Every once in a while, I nudge Flipper and I say: ‘Beautiful women love us!’”

Harry Dodge, November 1997

This interview with Silas Flipper and Harry Dodge took place at the offices of Planet Out in San Francisco. Writer and filmmaker Jenni Olson and I participated in the interview. Silas Flipper, thirty years old, plays guitar in the punk band Tribe 8, as well as playing for the Dodge Bros. Harry(iet) Dodge, thirty-one, sings for the Dodge Bros, and the two of them own and operate San Francisco’s landmark lesbian cafe, Red Dora’s Bearded Lady Cafe. Harry is well known around San Francisco as a performance artist. Flipper and Harry are currently working together on a film called *By Hook or By Crook*. Names are given as initials: Silas Flipper (**SF**), Harriet Dodge (**HD**), Judith Halberstam (**JH**), Jenni Olson (**JO**).

JH: One of the reasons I really wanted to interview you is because the Dodge Bros, unlike many other Drag Kings, seem to play with butchness and build Drag King personae upon already existing masculinities. This is obviously quite different from a femme Drag King who makes transformation into the main feature of her act.

SF: Yes, well, I wouldn’t even necessarily call myself a Drag King – we didn’t even think of that when we started the band. We were just going for a cowboy look, so we drew on some moustaches. The reason I don’t necessarily consider myself a Drag King is because male or masculine clothing is not drag for me; if I were to wear drag it would be female clothing.

JH: Can Drag King be a more expansive term though? Lots of Drag Queens can be as feminine out of drag as they are in it, so could Drag King apply to butches? In London, for example, there are butch and transgender people doing drag, it’s not just femmes. The question is, can butches lay claim to this term?

HD: This is a really interesting question to me because about a year ago here in San Francisco, I was asked to judge a Drag King contest. When I got there



The Dodge Bros, San Francisco Bay, 1997

I found both butch and femme performers on stage, and I suddenly became confused about what exactly I should be judging – credibility or realness or theatricality? I thought at that time that the butches should and would make the better Drag Kings, and I also thought they should win because, because... well, butches don't get to win anything else and we don't get to see ourselves anywhere else. Since we can never be movie stars, we should at least win the Drag King competitions! I must say I was really impressed by the femme cabaret performers, but as the judge I felt that if I could see the person's femininity, then I didn't think they should win the contest. Still, I give a lot of credit to non-butch Drag Kings, like the kings in New York. They do a really good job.

After the Drag King contest, I thought hard about Drag Kings and felt a bit guilty for the way I judged against the femme Drag Kings. Maybe it should just come down to whoever puts on the best performance. But also maybe butches are not Drag Kings, as Flipper says, maybe we are more about passing. I do think the term Drag King should be as expansive as possible, however.

SF: Keep in mind that we did not put our act together as a self-conscious Drag King act the way I presume many Drag Kings do. We just performed and then people started telling us we were a Drag King band!

JO: So, Drag King is about theater, and you guys are just performing as yourselves?

HD: Yeah, and that's our conflict about using the term Drag King: on stage we perform what we actually are in real life.

SF: Or maybe a cartoon version of that.

JH: The Dodge Bros have a very particular masculine aesthetic though, don't they? It's not exactly your aesthetic, it seems like a country western or hillbilly style.

SF: Well, I actually grew up in a very working-class neighborhood in the Northeast and so it seems perfectly natural for me to play with this particular kind of masculinity. I think class differences are really crucial to drag performances because there are so many different forms of masculinity. In the working-class neighborhoods I grew up in, the straight women also had a butch aesthetic. Basically, I hung out with guys like the ones we perform, so we are recalling and spoofing this working-class masculinity.

JO: And there really seems to be a lot of affection in your parody.

HD: It is not just parody. It is also about identification. I believe it is important to stress that we are not simply spoofing these guys. We actually don't think

it out that clearly. We tend to just get up on stage and try to be entertaining. I am middle class and not from the South, so when I'm on stage I'm just talking like guys I might have known or worked with rather than self-consciously imitating a certain type of man. But I would also have to say that much of what I perform is not borrowed: it is already something that lives within me.

JH: On the subject of authenticity, Harry, tell us about wearing your own beard. After all, for many Drag Kings, applying the facial hair is a major part of the transformation. Since you can and do grow your own beard, does this play into either your Drag King persona or your distance from the Drag King label?

HD: Yeah, lots of Drag Kings are gluing on facial hair, but I already have it. The other Dodge Bros just draw on beards and moustaches with a pen. I think that's funny. The beard definitely comes in handy.

JH: How did you come up with the name The Dodge Bros?

SF: The band is named after Harry, his last name is Dodge.

JH: Do you write all the songs you perform?

HD: We tell the audience that we write all the songs, but we don't, which takes us back to the conversation about authenticity, because while we really are butch and are not just playing at being masculine, at the same time we are the great pretenders on stage in the sense that everything we say and do on stage is a lie!

SF: We actually try to pick songs to perform that people might think we wrote. We do covers of songs like "Had Me A Girl" by Tom Waits, and "Ice Cream Man."

JH: That's brilliant in terms of drag strategies! You do cover versions without acknowledging that they are not originals.

JO: Do you stay with a country sound?

HD: We do, but we are also trying to go for a more rock-a-billy sound. The country songs can be easier to get away with, they are a bit more obscure for our audiences, and they also have a real spare sound.

SF: We are good at making these songs sound like ours, which is perhaps a Drag King thing to do – take something and make it completely your own. I was thinking recently about the difference between Drag Queens and Drag Kings because part of that difference does have to do with realness. Drag Queens, if you think about it, are good at realness and at being graceful, but at the same time they're really funny. The humor is different when women impersonate men.



Del & Harry Dodge, San Francisco, 1997

JO: Why?

SF: It's not as campy to perform a man. I personally think that this is because men have real power in this society, so it is not funny in the same way when you mimic them. What I appreciate about the Drag King scene is that it allows dykes a way to be playful, to embrace their "guy within," if you like, instead of policing masculinities like lesbians used to do in the 70s.

HD: When we started doing the Dodge Bros we were not campy at all. We were much more sincere and quiet about it. But now we go totally over the top!

SF: Yes, but even when we were being sincere, we were still playing it for laughs in some way. We were doing this awkward, clunky guy routine that had a lot of humor to it.

JO: So it retained an element of camp?

SF: Right.

JH: I find it interesting that whether you are doing awkward nerdy boys or an exaggerated rock star performance, you guys tend to perform working-class masculinities. Are wealthy men or men in power simply unavailable for parody? Why do Drag Kings always perform the nerds and the red necks and the sleaze balls?

SF: Well, men in suits are just too boring to imitate with their suits and parted hair, there's no theater there.

JH: You two have very different male personae that you take on when you are on stage. I see Harry as acting out a kind of maverick front-man role, a crazed Eddie Vedder or something and Flipper has got this teen idol or rock star thing down and it really seems to work. The Dodge Bros are genuinely sexy and seem to attract female groupies and everything.

SF: I don't consciously try to do that teen idol thing or the rock hero act in the Dodge Bros, I do that more in Tribe 8; so, every now and then, perhaps when Tribe 8 are playing to a very small crowd, I do close my eyes and imagine that I am playing in Metallica or something for thousands of people. That's also a spoof. We are consciously spoofing cock rock. The music is pretty serious, but the performance is about having fun with stereotypes and letting oneself be a rock star on stage.

HD: The whole thing about performing sleazy guys instead of business men for me has to do with feeling like I do have an alter-ego. But, in general, I find it really difficult to talk about gender stuff. I mean, I can tell you that every

time I go to the bathroom and see the signs for “men’s room” and “women’s room,” I just think to myself, “neither.” But it is pretty hard for me to express how I feel about being butch or performing maleness.

JH: Do you feel that you don’t want to analyze it too closely?

HD: Something like that. For me, I like to act out my maleness or butchness without calling attention to the fact that that is what I am doing, you know?

JO: Yeah, like in your film project with Flipper, *By Hook or By Crook*, don’t you tend to refer to each other using male pronouns? In the script, you call yourselves guys without making any kind of transsexual identification, right?

HD: Exactly. In *By Hook or By Crook* we play two guys who are movie stars living out a fantasy life. They call each other “he” and do all the stuff men do in movies, action heroes and buddy heroes that is, but they are played by us, just as we are, and no one questions why they are being called “he.” Also, in a performance piece I do called “Muddy Little River,” the character is a woman passing as a man, and in the script I will maybe mention this once or twice but that’s it; the rest of the time the character is simply “he,” and he moves through the world as Jimmy and goes on dates with women and no one questions him. I guess that’s my way – I like to acknowledge that at least nominally I am a woman, but then I don’t want to mention it again or explain it because it feels almost too deep and dangerous to talk about it. I think Flipper does a better job at being explicit about gender.

SF: That’s because gender stuff comes up all the time with Tribe 8. But I feel similarly about it – it is hard to talk about, but I know I was really glad to find this word “butch.”

JH: Well, I see that desire to not have to answer questions about one’s gender or about gender oddities as part of the fantasy you are engaging in your film and in your band, because in real life, of course, we are constantly called upon to answer questions about our genders.

JO: The movie is a great fantasy, though, because in the world it creates, these guys are granted their masculinity.

SF: Fantasy is crucial. When we are young, I think, fantasy and taboo fuel our imaginations, and then when we become adults those fantasy worlds get stripped away from us. So Drag Queens and Drag Kings become important and fanciful ways of dipping back into those fantasy lives. I also think mainstream audiences play out their own fantasies through watching drag.

JH: Well, I tend to think that mainstream audiences are interested and fascinated as long as they are assured that there is a beautiful woman with femininity intact beneath the drag. But when the Drag King is a butch,

powerful and attractive to straight women as well as to dykes like you guys, those same audiences get rather nervous.

SF: That's true, but then, I get better looking women than most of those guys anyway!

HD: And that's so weird because when I look back on my childhood and remember when no one would even talk to me because I was funny looking and acted weird, it's hard to believe that now I can go out with beautiful women. Every once in a while, I nudge Flipper and I say: "Beautiful women love us!"

SF: It's true, and obviously this is really threatening to your average heterosexual man. In Tribe 8, we have a song that feeds right into that fear, it goes: "I'm checking out your babe, so what! I'm checking out your babe, she's hot!"

JH: At Club Confidential last night, the MC was Drag Queen Joan Jett Black, and she commented during her act that she had been doing drag for twenty years. This really astounded me. I was trying to imagine whether any Drag Kings performing today would still be doing drag in another twenty years. What do you guys think the future of Drag King might be?

SF: It's hard to say, butch and Drag King and transgender could easily go out of style any day. It seems to be cool to be butch right now, but I don't think we can count on that lasting. Sometimes when something gets a lot of attention and college kids start to write papers about it (no offense) this can be a bad thing. Often something marginal becomes popular only when it reaches middle-class people. For example, I have heard that Drag King scenes have traditionally been black or African-American, and similarly, butch-femme was primarily a working-class bar thing, so it is interesting that Drag Kings become visible now as a white thing. Like, Drag Kings and transgenders are getting a lot of attention right now but I worry that this might commodify what's really interesting about these scenes.

JH: But there doesn't seem to be any deep and abiding mainstream interest in Drag King cultures, no one is trying to make a Drag King movie, I am afraid, or to give Drag Kings a sit com, you know what I mean? Well, except *your* movie, which sounds excellent!

HD: Yeah, *By Hook or By Crook* will be great and when it comes out I will do interviews with the media about the plot, the set designs, the acting, but I will totally refuse to answer any questions about the guys' genders. People have just got to work harder to figure this stuff out for themselves!

chapter 7

class, race and masculinity: the **superfly**, the **macdaddy** and the **rapper**

“In my last life, I was a mackdaddy.” Dred, Winner of the 1996 NY Drag King Contest

Lesbians produce wildly divergent masculinities in many different cultural arenas. As Flipper of the Dodge Bros comments, it is quite possible that Drag King is a black lesbian tradition that has drawn attention only since it has been taken up by a white lesbian community. Since I am examining the various confluences between race and gender in Drag King spaces, I should preface by pointing out that many lesbian scenes are very segregated. Not surprisingly, the clubs which cater to women of color have a different relation to Drag King performances and to the performances of alternative masculinities in general. While I run the risk of over-simplifying in this section by making distinctions between white clubs and women-of-color clubs, the risk seems worthwhile because it allows me to suggest that what we recognize as “Drag King” in one space may pass unremarked in another. In Club Casanova, for example, the woman dressed in drag is usually up on stage and is read immediately as a Drag King, but in other clubs where strict butch-femme codes pertain, as in some Latino/a clubs, for example, a woman in a suit and tie is definitely not on stage, and she is not going to be read as a Drag King.

In London, New York and San Francisco, the pool of Drag Kings who perform regularly in the clubs tend to be white. The Drag King contests, however, do often draw women of color up on stage to compete. It seems strange then that the contests should feature so many women of color, but the Drag King clubs actually feature very few acts by black, Asian or Latina Drag Kings. How do we explain the predominance of white Drag Kings in urban scenes? To a certain extent the Drag King clubs represent the same kind of segregation that characterizes urban lesbian scenes in general: the mainstream clubs tend to attract white women, and women of color populate other lesbian clubs depending upon the neighborhood and the music that might be played there.

Interestingly, in predominantly women-of-color queer spaces, in New York at least, many of the women participate in elaborate and creative versions of butch-femme style, while the more white spaces favor a kind of androgynous or alternative aesthetic (piercings and tattoos). Many of the Drag Kings we interviewed in New York attested to a kind of racialized separation of cultural



spheres. Since butch-femme already exists within some of the women-of-color spaces as a noticeable style, one might expect that these clubs would produce more Drag King culture. This was not true. In a club like Escuelitas, a Latino/a drag bar, all of the drag performances are by men, and men perform both male and female drag. In HerShe Bar, the contests, as I have mentioned, did manage to draw women up on stage from the audience, but many of these women had not dressed up in drag; they simply paraded their butchness to great applause, and maybe threw in a quick rap or a few dance steps. The HerShe Bar contests induced more women into the Drag King scene, but these did not include a large number of women of color.

Much lesbian history tries to locate the racial segregation of public lesbian space as a thing of the past, claiming fully integrated queer spaces as representative of today. However, some women-of-color spaces do tend to cater to many different ethnic women's groups, a split between white and women-of-color spaces does linger on. Few of the Drag Kings I spoke to in either New York or London, white kings and kings of color, were really willing to address the issue of racially split lesbian spaces, but the lack of women of color in the East Village clubs, for example, and the smattering of white women in the midtown clubs, spoke to the persistence of a color barrier.

Two black Drag Kings, Shon and Dred, did find their way into regular Drag King performances from the HerShe Bar contests. Shon, twenty-nine, and Dred, twenty-five, have a wide range of performances: Dred's signature act is a "mackdaddy" from the disco era; Shon is stunning as a hot, crotch-grabbing rapper. Shon and Dred both won HerShe Bar contests and went on to compete in the final showdown against each other. Shon remembers seeing Dred in an early contest: "I said she's definitely gonna win, she's got it! She was excellent. I liked the name, I liked the presence, and I could tell she was good. As a performer myself, I always look for true dramatic talent." Dred thinks Shon is a "smooth" Drag King and remembers seeing Shon as her major competition in the contest; ultimately, the contest came down to the two of them, and it was Dred who walked away with the title. In that contest, Shon recalls that she was asked to answer a question on stage: "What does it mean to you to be a Drag King?" And Shon answered: "It means showing men and women how women should be treated..." This answer is very much in keeping with Shon's smooth Drag King persona and won him plenty of fan support. Shon noticed that more women of color entered the contests as time went on, but she also noted that many of these women did not dress up in drag: "They went up with what they had rather than in drag; they might be boyish naturally or just butch looking."

Both Shon and Dred comment upon the dearth of women of color who are interested in becoming Drag Kings. In a Jackson Five act that Dred and Shon put together, for example, they had to use men for some of the roles. They

have a hard time explaining why more women of color do not get involved but both believe that as time goes on and as Drag King popularity grows, more women of color will develop stage Drag King acts. In their shows, Dred and Shon mix up the music and the style that each of them favor. In their "R&B Old School Show" that they performed at HerShe Bar to an audience of screaming women, they performed for about fifteen minutes and included rap songs by Run DMC. They did the duet "You're All I Need" by Method Man and Mary J. Blige. They also performed a hot and flashy rendition of "No Diggety" by Blackstreet.

Dred and Shon's show is an extremely entertaining combination of male impersonation, perfectly timed lip-synching, and choreographed dance moves. They manage to pull off close replications of the performers they are imitating, and in many of their shows, parody gives way to homage. If many of the white Drag Kings poke gentle fun at white masculinity, Dred and Shon approach black masculinity from a very different angle. Dred comments: "We don't make fun of the music of musicians we perform. We respect them." Shon responds: "Word. I want to perform an image that I respect and that is respectable." Dred amplifies on the meaning of "respectable" here: "Yeah, I'm not about to pull a dildo out of my pants or whatever; I'm not about that." So what is their act about? Shon sums it up: "It's like, I read a book because I am interested in it, and I read a character in the same way." Shon's analogy to reading makes clear the elements of tribute, faithfulness to the original and interpretation that mark her performances. She wants to conjure up an image of the person that she is performing and capture his aura, but she also transforms him through the Drag King performance into a more complex rendition of sexy masculinity. She attempts to read a particular person or group or style because it holds interest for her and offers something back. Shon describes preparing her act: "If I'm trying to get Marvin Gaye, or someone like that who has a real aura, I'll try to get his smile, the way he looks at a woman, or his moves. I want people to look at me and say, 'Yeah, that's Marvin!'"

People definitely look at Shon and Dred and like what they see. Many nights when they perform, the audience is packed with women moved by their performances, screaming and waving to them, and singing along with the words of the songs. Dred and Shon manage to pull off an incredibly sexy show which appeals less to the crowd's sense of humor and more to their desires. Dred and Shon work the crowd well and set up an exchange between them and what can only be called their fans. Of course, it makes all the difference as to where any particular act is performed. At HerShe Bar, Dred and Shon often perform to a very active crowd who participate in the songs and interact vociferously with Dred and Shon. When Dred and Shon performed the same R&B Show at Club Casanova, the atmosphere was quite different. The crowd



was more subdued and many seemed spellbound by the performances, but less interactive. Dred and Shon ironically performed a Run DMC song at Club Casanova called "King of Rock," and one African-American woman from the audience called out: "Yeah, rock that white bullshit!" The song samples and pokes fun at some white rock anthems, and the spectacle of black Drag Kings performing "King of Rock" to a mostly white crowd enacted nicely the satirical dynamic between rap and rock that Run DMC sets up in the song.

Some white Drag Kings perform rap, partly, one assumes, because the stylized moves of the rapper gives the Drag King something quite visible to perform. This Drag King act plays off both the Vanilla Ice phenomenon of the white boy rap, and it captures the performability of black masculinity. Drag king DJ Lizerace (Liz Carthaus), twenty-three, cultivates a hip-hop look and a home-boy sensibility. She regularly performs raps songs, sometimes lip synching and sometimes actually sings over the music. Lizerace most frequently performs Rob Base and Run DMC songs but she also throws in some Beastie Boys songs every now and then: "I do rap songs that I think people will like. I don't try to be the guy, I just take the style..." I asked Lizerace if she thought she was "dragging" or "kinging" black masculinity, but she answered, "No, I definitely don't think I am impersonating black men." She continued, "Nor am I impersonating a white boy who impersonates black rappers." What then? Why did she even choose to do rap? "It just happened, I like that music and it seemed like the obvious thing for me to do as a Drag King act." Even though Lizerace has a sense that she is not performing black masculinity, it is hard not to attach a black masculinity to the rap performance. Also, one has to question the urge to disassociate rap from blackness and to try to make it into simply another version of "pop." Lizerace, curiously, seems to fear being accused of trying to perform something that she is not entitled to and her reluctance to connect her performance to racial drag speaks to some of the anxiety about identity that crops up when cross-racial performances are in question. Dred relates that she once wanted to perform at Club Casanova as George Michael: She comments: "I wanted to do a George Michael song; I loved the song, but I wondered if it would be ok and whether it would go over alright. I decided I could pull it off because this particular song had an R&B influence to it... I was concerned because he was white."

Obviously cross-ethnic performances raise specific issues about race and authenticity for the kings. Lizerace tries to emphasize the availability of all masculinities to all performers and argues for a kind of universal access. Accordingly, if she does a Rob Base song, that song is multiply translated through her masculinity and her rap performance and becomes something very different; it becomes part of the transformation that the Drag King act brings about. Dred suggests that one should approach such cross-ethnic acts

carefully. She emphasizes that she felt she could have performed this particular George Michael song because the song had an R&B feel to it. She too understands herself to be producing an interpretation of an act rather than an impersonation, but she advocates a careful consideration of what the music, the singer and the Drag King performer bring together. Dred's articulation of her translation of the George Michael song provides an intelligent model for cross-ethnic Drag King performance.

Drag King Retro (Kristabelle Munson), twenty-eight, also talks about cross-ethnic performance. Retro is an Asian American Drag King who often performs as an "Uncle Louis, a white trash American truck driver from upstate New York, newly out of prison." Retro feels that there is real power in performing this character and transforming his racism into other kinds of expression. He says: "Having experienced a lot of racism as a transgendered Asian Pacific Islander, I took a lot of pleasure in being able to spoof the visual image of a white trash guy. I don't play him as a racist guy, however; he has a heart of gold, and he's what gay men like to call a 'daddy' or a 'bear.' Retro, then, uses his cross-ethnic performance to tap into the homoerotic potential of the white trash guy and to eliminate the almost essentialist racist component with which white trash masculinity has been associated. Retro also says that he has been developing an Asian drag character "along the lines of Kato, the Asian assistant to super-hero character, the Green Hornet." Uncle Louis loves this character because he is the "first non-subservient Asian character."

In San Francisco there are a very few truly racially mixed lesbian spaces, although in the early 90s Club Q perhaps did the best job of creating a dance space which drew white women and women of color. Club Q even held its own very successful Drag King contests. An original member of the Dodge Bros was Sonny, a Latina Drag King, and at times the Dodge Bros would play with a Cholo aesthetic. Still, as Flipper comments, it made her a little uncomfortable to play with another cultural and racialized form of masculinity. Flipper says, "Obviously that's not my cultural identity." Two Drag Kings in San Francisco who consciously play with Italian and Chicano masculinities are Mario from the Barrio (Gina Dominguez) and Vinnie Testosteroni (Malia Spanyol). Mario and Vinnie are gorgeously excessive personalities. Although Mario and Vinnie do not perform on stage as yet, they are a distinctive presence in San Francisco's lounge Drag King club, Club Confidential. Gina and Malia also create white trash personae and put lots of time and energy into creating their looks.

In London, there are few women of color doing drag performances in the clubs, although some women of color do attend the drag shows. Interestingly enough, however, the performers at Club Geezer are diverse in other ways – many of them are non-English, and the regular performers make up a mostly European cast of characters: Stanley is from Greece, Hans is Austrian, Del is



Retro & Lizarace, New York City, 1997

American, Hamish is Scottish, Simo is Italian. While these differences play an important role in the kinds of masculinities and performances that the London kings produce, they are all also quite conscious of the lack of women of color in the club and at a loss to explain it. These Drag Kings, however, do recognize the ways in which their masculinities operate as raced and classed masculinities, and some are quite adept at describing these functions. Stanley, most notably, talks specifically about what form of white masculinity she taps into, especially when she leaves the space of the club and ventures out in the streets in drag: "My neighborhood is populated by gays and blacks and some Turkish immigrants. I am Greek, but in drag, I seem to embody a very Anglicized chic masculinity, which I very much desire, but which also sends strange and conflicting messages to the people in the streets." Stanley elaborates that he is not simply concerned that he may be a target for queer-bashing – "But I really do have questions about what it means to parade my white imitation of upper-class masculinity in this particular neighborhood." In this extremely important articulation of the meaning and effects of white

masculinity, Stanley manages to reveal how it is that white masculinity becomes visible – either it is turned into a spectacle of working-class masculinity by the Geezer show, or, as in this formulation, it becomes a chic and almost arrogant form of upper-class masculinity. Stanley very bravely states his ambivalence about this performance in terms of both his desire to inhabit that particular form of powerful masculinity, but also in terms of the effects of “parading” this performance in particular neighborhoods.

For some white Drag Kings, passing successfully allows them to tap into empowered versions of maleness and gives them at least temporarily some kind of access to the pleasures and liabilities associated with such social approval. Stanley notes the pleasure he takes in such upper-class chic masculinity, but he is also quite aware that this privilege could play out differently in the streets of his mixed neighborhood where his white maleness and male whiteness become an affront to the less privileged masculinities that he encounters. For the Drag King of color, the “pass” only accesses another kind of trouble. Dred tells a story of trying to hail a cab in New York while out in gangsta drag: “I had my Adidas outfit on and my hat pulled down low. It took me thirty minutes to catch a cab because cabs would slow down, then they would see me and speed by. It felt horrible.” Dred does admit to sometimes feeling safer in drag, but as his cab incident shows, masculinity, at least for the kings of color, is no guarantee of access to forms of social privilege.

For the time being, the Drag King scene continues to reflect the social stratifications that exist among lesbians in general. The shows of the women of color and the white kings are different, appeal to different audiences, and are accorded different receptions depending on where they are performed. The Drag Kings who venture out into the world in drag also experience very different treatment depending on whether they are white or black or brown. For this reason, it would be foolish to pretend that racial differences and racial disharmonies do not affect Drag King cultures. The preponderance of white Drag Kings in this book, then, speaks to the cultivation of Drag King theatricality in white spaces and a tendency towards butch-femme within some clubs frequented by women of color. Shon and Dred, however, represent a bold new horizon for kings of color, as well as a submerged tradition, and as they tour the club circuit of New York bringing smooth R&B, tough and tight rap and nasty mackdaddy funk, we can be sure that they will inspire others to get down on it and follow their lead.



Stanley the Greek, Geezer, London, 1997

chapter 8

+ curtain call ↓

“Gender confusion is a small price to pay for social justice.”

Zippy the Pinhead

The Drag King, we can only hope, is here to stay. The rise or fall of male impersonation and Drag King cultures may indicate how thoroughly we as a society have learned to detach masculinity from men and to defuse the intensity and effect of male authority. While Drag Kings may seem only a very trivial symptom of the collapse of gender binarism or male supremacy, in fact, our tolerance for gender confusion suggests much about how far we are willing to go for social justice.

The future of gender, of course, remains uncertain. Gender rebellion seems to be standard fare in popular magazines, sitcoms, cartoons, mainstream film and it is in full display on many a college campus. But somehow the bending of gender has failed actually to shift the dominance of male and female as the binary poles of gender definitions. Gender play offers us, paradoxically, much room for trial and error, but also little prospect for momentous change. Girls and boys are still raised to be normal men and women, and gender experimentation is far from encouraged. As gender outlaw Kate Bornstein explains: “When I was a kid, everyone else seemed to know they were boys or girls or men or women. That’s something I’ve never known; not then, not today” (*Gender Outlaw*). There are plenty of queer kids, in other words, for whom gender options are not clear and never will become clear. Drag King cultures, of course, are not going to effect some miraculous change which will result in gender tolerance, but it is symptomatic of changes that are ongoing in relation to standards of gender variance.

As I have tried to demonstrate in this book, there are no essential relations between being a masculine person and performing as a Drag King, but there is some relation between performing masculinity and diminishing the natural bonds between masculinity and men. When femmes or feminine straight women perform as Drag Kings, they experience male privilege denied to them in everyday life, and they produce a camp mingling of femininity and masculinity. When butches perform as Drag Kings, they build a new, flashy masculinity upon their own carefully cultivated masculinities and tend to create startling effects of realness and convincing male effect. When transgender Drag Kings put on male drag, they thoroughly detach masculinity from men and even maleness from men. Even gay men have been putting on



Mr. Goodfellow, London, 1998

male drag lately and the effect is to merge a performative masculinity with the flaws and inconsistencies of their ordinary masculinities.

In word and image, Del LaGrace Volcano and I have tried to convey the humor, beauty, strength and the queer pleasures of the Drag King performance. We have watched multiple Elvis impersonations, laconic cowboy drag, sexy bump and grind soulful drag; we have watched remarkable transformations from femme to man, from shyboy to show man, from female to male; we have argued and disputed and discussed theories of drag with each other and with our favorite Drag Kings. Most of all, we have tried to listen, watch and record; produce, inspire and circulate; participate and promote. The Drag King scene is expanding all the time, and as new Drag Kings take the stage and produce new bursts of masculinity and experience new-found notoriety, we could say that we are remaking the terms of normal life. The Drag King, in a way, does not simply expose so-called abnormal desires or abnormal genders, rather he revels in what is already perverse in the normal. The Drag King gives us insight into the vagaries of normal masculinity, its own set of peculiarities, its own way of making those peculiarities seem mundane. We can call this the drag effect and take it out of the drag club and into everyday life as a strategy for restaging everyday life. Gertrude Stein, finally, could have been talking about the Drag King (and maybe she was) when she wrote: "She always says she dislikes the abnormal, it is so obvious. She says the normal is so much more simply complicated and interesting." With the arrival of the Drag King, the normal will never again be the same.

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