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## Hey Queens!

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HEY QUEENS!

By

Virginia Grace Temple

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford, MS

May 2022

Approved By

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Advisor: Dr. Jaime Harker

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Reader: Dr. Theresa Starkey

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Reader: Professor Vanessa Gregory

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Virginia Grace Temple

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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my friend Kaylee who helped introduce me to drag and to everyone who guided and encouraged me throughout the year. Thank you.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A special thanks to Dr. Jaime Harker for helping me through the process of completing this thesis. Also, a special thanks to Austin and my parents for helping and supporting me through the process as well.

## ABSTRACT

### Hey Queens!

Drag has been a part of society since as early as Ancient Greece. However, the art form has evolved throughout the centuries and is still evolving today. Modern day drag is commonly associated with RuPaul Charles and his achievements as a drag performer. He has helped pave the way for present and future drag performers to express themselves through the art form. The mainstreaming of drag has had numerous positive and negative impacts on the LGBTQIA+ community. This thesis documents the history of the art form and how it interacts with individual performers and society. This thesis consists of two parts: the audio podcast and the written script.

## PREFACE

The idea behind this thesis is to provide a written and audio documentation about the art of drag. I hope to provide an easy and accessible outlet to help educate listeners and/or readers about the art form.

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## **Episode 1: Drag Then and Now**

### INTRODUCTION

Hey queens! Welcome to “Hey Queens!”, a podcast where I dive into the history of drag, how the culture interacts with the world through media, as well as how the art form interacts with the individuals themselves. My name is Grace Temple and I am a senior Journalism major and this is my honors thesis for the University of Mississippi. The goal of this podcast is to inform the average person on the culture and influence of drag. This podcast is also for people like me, who might not be a part of the community, but are interested in the art form, and want to learn more about the culture behind it. Today’s episode is all about the history of drag and how drag became the art form we see today.

Drag and queer culture have had an immeasurable impact on American culture despite the fact that the majority of people are unaware of what they even are. Common phrases like “werk” or “throwing shade” came from queer culture, specifically people of color in queer culture. Even the title of this podcast, “hey queens” is another example of common phrases that have been adopted from drag and queer culture. Another example is Madonna’s song “Vogue,” that came from the term “voguing” which was a major part of ballroom culture in the 80s. However, it was commonly thought to be referencing the popular magazine.

*Mother Camp*, a novel written by Esther Newton, documents female impersonators in America in the 1960s. She documents elements of their culture, personal lives, and careers as drag entertainers. In her book, she describes an aspect of drag known as “camp.” According to Newton, “Camp is not a thing. Most broadly it signifies a relationship between things, people, and activities or qualities, and homosexuality.” (Newton 105). Her informers say that camp is in the eye of the beholder and camp taste is always changing. Newton believes that camp is broken down to three basic characteristics: incongruity, theatricality, and humor (106). Camp has continued to be seen in society and drag culture today. In 2019, the Met Gala theme was “camp.” It is interesting how many celebrities as well as viewers who were, and possibly still are, confused about what camp meant. It was interesting how this event helped mainstream the idea and fashion of camp.

Drag is everywhere and has influenced society for centuries, and I want to provide an easily accessible resource for people to understand queer culture, and more specifically, drag culture. Today’s episode is titled “Drag: Then & Now.” In this episode, I will cover some of the history of drag starting at the very beginning and discussing how it has become the version of itself we see today.

## EARLY DRAG

The present-day term “drag” commonly refers to someone who dresses in clothing that is conventionally worn by the opposite sex. However, this concept of drag is nothing new to society. Ever since the beginnings of theater, actors have performed in drag. Dressing in drag began as a way to exclude women from the theater, but over time men and women have

performed as the opposite sex to better understand gender and society (Rimalower). In his article, “From Ancient Greece to *Angry Inch*, Take a Look at the History of Drag in Theatre”, author Ben Rimalower covers major moments of drag in theater history, specifically in Ancient Greece, Shakespearean theater, Kabuki, Opera, Victorian and Modern Drag.

In Ancient Greece and Shakespearean theater, men would act in female roles because women were not allowed to participate in theater. However, in Ancient Greece theater all men could play female roles, but in Shakespearean theater, adolescent boys would play female roles because they had less broad shoulders and looked more “feminine.” It is interesting how young men would play feminine roles in Shakespearean theater because it creates the illusion that a woman *could* be playing this role. It creates a more performative aspect to the show and adds to the believability of the role. An example that this makes me think of is how on Broadway, the musical *Peter Pan* cast a woman to play Peter, because her voice would be higher and her physique might closely resemble that of the young boy.

According to Rimalower, Kabuki began as a female-only art form where women would play both genders, but in the 16th century, women were banned from performing. Kabuki became a mass form of entertainment when Japan opened to the West. This rise in mass popularity has allowed for the legacy of Kabuki to still be seen in modern-day Japan. Even though most theater companies today are male-cast only, some have opened up to women as well (Rimalower). This almost roundabout way of using specific genders for specific roles was very intriguing to learn about. It shows the shift of gender roles in Japanese society and it is interesting that only some theater companies have opened up to women.

In Western opera, both men and women have played roles of the opposite sex mostly based on singing range. In Rimalower's article, he explains that "At times, [women's] roles were played by castrati, men who were neutered before adolescence so as to preserve their prepubescent feminine-sounding voices." On the other end of the spectrum and less extreme, women would play "pants roles", or play male roles. The term "drag" was believed to be coined in the Victorian era (1831-1901) because of the fashion of long, heavy skirts that would be worn by men playing female roles that would drag along the stage. This idea that the term "drag" dates all the way back to the 1800s is something that I found very interesting.

Today, most people associate drag and drag performers with RuPaul. But before RuPaul and the ballroom scenes of the 1980s and 90s, the black LGBTQ+ community flourished in the Harlem ballroom scene dating all the way back to the late 1800s (News Staff). Drag balls first began in 1869 within the Hamilton Lodge in Harlem, New York. It became a safe location for gay men to hang out (Stabbe). The ball scene at the Hamilton Lodge fueled an explosion of art, culture and music and created a vibrant gay nightlife (News Staff). The most famous of the balls during this time was the Hamilton Lounge Ball that took place annually at the Rockland Palace.

At the time, it was illegal to dress in clothes traditionally worn by the opposite sex, but the drag balls created a safe space for drag performers to walk around openly. The balls typically made it into the newspapers and received both positive and negative coverage, but the public viewed these balls as immoral and wrong (News Staff). In 1916, a reform organization called the Committee of Fourteen investigated some of the balls and reported what scandals they witnessed (Stabbe). It is common knowledge that being a homosexual in the early 1900s was considered

illegal in the United States. However, I was really kind of shocked to learn about the actual timeline of LGBTQ+ rights and discrimination in the U.S.

This is a bit of a sidebar, but I believe it is important to include since drag culture is heavily intertwined with queer culture and the rights of queer individuals. CNN has a pretty good article that chronicles a timeline of milestones in LGBTQIA+ rights that I wanted to mention. For instance, in 1978, Gilbert Baker created and stitched together the first rainbow flag after being inspired to develop a symbol of pride and hope for the LGBTQ community. Or that in March of 1982, Wisconsin became the first state to outlaw discrimination based on sexual orientation. Also it was interesting to find that it wasn't until 2012 that the U.S. had its first openly gay politician, Tammy Baldwin ("LGBTQ Rights"). For anyone who is interested in learning more about timelines and legislation referring to LGBTQ+ rights, I would highly recommend looking at this article and others like it. There are also several diagrams that show when states legalized same-sex marriage. For instance, as of now only 37 states have actually legalized same-sex marriage and Mississippi is one of the states who have not explicitly legalized it. The point being that even though we have made great strides, there is still more to be done. However, I will talk more about this in a later episode.

Modern-day drag has evolved into its own art form that consists of both drag kings and drag performers (queer men and women who dress in clothes traditionally worn by the opposite sex). "Some of those artists have identified as transgender while for others it has been just playing a character. For some, it's a character, but one they don't take off, challenging society at times with the open rebellion against traditional gender roles," (Rimalower, 2015). Drag as an art

is not entirely new, but the connotations and how it has been used in entertainment and personal lives has changed and evolved throughout the centuries.

## BALLROOMS AND UNREST: THE 60s AND 70s

Over time, the balls evolved and in the 1960s and 70s the first house, House of LaBeija, was created. In the ballroom community, houses were structured like families. Parents of the houses were known as mothers and fathers, and other members of the houses were their children. The ballrooms allowed for individuals to create a new family and community in a space where they were truly accepted. These families provided support for young people who had been shunned by their own families. Ballrooms were created to essentially celebrate life. They were created to celebrate yourself, your culture, and be unapologetic in a safe space surrounded by friends and supporters (News Staff).

Along with the safe spaces of ballrooms, queer individuals found safe spaces in other places. One important place was the Stonewall Inn in New York City. A major event to know in understanding drag history, as well as LGBTQIA+ history, is the Stonewall riots in 1969. Stonewall Inn was located in Greenwich Village in New York City that acted as a safe place for the queer community in the city. Like I said before, in 1969, homosexual acts were illegal in every state except Illinois. During this time, bars and restaurants could get shut down just for having gay employees or serving gay individuals. Most gay clubs and bars were operating under the Mafia. The Mafia would pay off police officers to look the other way to save their business. However, police raids of gay bars were extremely common and could be violent. On the night of the Stonewall riots, members of the LGBTQIA+ community fought back. In an article by Sarah Pruitt for History.com, she describes a timeline of the Stonewall riots:

- i. June 24, 1969: Police arrest Stonewall employees, confiscate alcohol.**
- ii. June 27-28, 1969: Stonewall crowd erupts after police arrest and rough up patrons.**
- iii. Early hours of June 28, 1969: Transgender women resist arrest. Bottles are thrown at the police.**
- iv. Close to 4 a.m. June 28, 1969: Police retreat and barricade themselves inside Stonewall.**
- v. June 28-29: Stonewall reopens, supporters gather. Police beat and tear gas crowds.**
- vi. June 29-July 1, 1969: Stonewall becomes a gathering point for LGBT activists.**
- vii. July 2, 1969: Gay activists protest newspaper coverage.**
- viii. June 28, 1970: First Gay Pride parade sets off from Stonewall.**

This monumental event paved the way for future generations of queer individuals and activists to fight against discrimination and to encourage them to be themselves. In the transition into the new decade, drag and other queer art forms continued to evolve and expand as an ever growing form of self-expression.

#### PAGEANTRY (1970S AND BEYOND)

The ballroom scene was not the only place where drag performers could compete. Miss Gay America is the first national pageant for drag performers. According to the MGA's website, the pageant began at The Watch Your Hat and Coat Saloon in Nashville, TN in 1972. Norman Jones, the first to be crowned, bought the pageant from its original owner in 1975 in the hope "of one day growing the pageant system to be most prestigious and most respectful pageant for female impersonators in the world," according to their website. In the world of drag pageantry, the Miss Gay America is still the most respected and largest pageant for drag performers. Each winner of the 'Miss Gay America system' receives a "Symbol of Excellence." This title represents professionalism and quality as a drag performer ("About MGA"). This pageant and others across the country have allowed for drag performers to compete on a national scale. It has also created a subculture of drag that is reminiscent of other pageants such as the Miss America pageant. It showcases a 'polished' type of drag. While being gay was still illegal at its beginning,

Miss Gay America has evolved and allowed for performers to showcase their talents throughout the years. In contrast with the underground ballrooms, pageantry helped allow drag performers to gain recognition and shine in a public space.

#### FROM OUTCASTS TO ICONS, THE CLUB KIDS (80s AND 90s)

In the 80s and 90s, nightclubs such as Palladium, Limelight, and Areana in New York were safe havens for young and queer creatives, artists, and outcasts who soon became known as the Club Kids. Their extravagant makeup and style were one of a kind. Club Kids were known for their glitter, wigs, platform boots, piercings, and more. They commanded attention wherever they went. A unique aspect of Club Kid was that they were not trying to conform to how gender was supposed to look. They focused more on dismantling gender, and pushing boundaries of social norms.

In an article written by Elyssa Goodman, young people would have a world in these nightclubs where queerness was something to celebrate. Club kids became party-goers, influencers, event producers and more. Famous names like Susanne Bartsch, James St. James, Amanda Lepore and RuPaul were among the Club Kids. People took inspiration from Club Kid attitude, style, looks and lifestyles. Not only were these influences seen in New York, but internationally. Books, movies, fashion, design, art, and film all took inspiration from Club Kid. Musicians like Elton John, and designers like Calvin Klein and Jean Paul Gautier found muses in the Club Kid world.

#### “PARIS IN BURNING” BALLROOMS CONT. (1980s and 90s)



In a period of rampant homophobia, transphobia, as well as the AIDS epidemic, during the 1980s and 90s the LGBTQIA+ community continued to find refuge in the underground ballroom scenes of New York. A glimpse into the ballroom world and its legendary houses was documented in “Paris is Burning.” This documentary was released in 1990, but is still a prominent outlet for audiences to learn about the balls and the African-American and LatinX people who participated in them. The documentary explores race, class, gender, and sexuality in America during this time. It gave an up close and personal account of ballroom culture and some of the people who called the ballrooms home. The documentary interviewed renowned drag performers, including Willi Ninja, Pepper LaBeija and Dorian Corey. Ballrooms in the 80s and 90s are reminiscent of those in the 60s and 70s.

I personally have seen this documentary several times, and I would say it is a perfect film to watch to understand ball culture as well as get a glimpse into queer culture. Many scenes and quotes from the film are still referenced today.

Ballroom culture consisted of houses or families that consisted of mothers or fathers and their children. The houses would act as individual teams who would compete against each other in numerous “categories.” Contestants of the category would be judged on their talent, clothing, and “realness” of their drag. “Realness” of drag was a drag queen or king’s ability to pass as a member of the group they were portraying. The more realistic the portrayal, the higher the score in the category. Many categories were judged if the person could go out in public and not get “clocked” or noticed. In “Paris is Burning,” Dorian Corey says, [audio] “When they're undetectable and they can walk out of that ballroom into the sunlight and onto the subway and get home, and still have all their clothes and no blood running off their bodies- those are the

femme realness queens...and usually it's a category for young queens" (Livingston). Houses and contestants who win trophies eventually earn "legendary" status.

In a world of discrimination, queer individuals who strove to be famous, could find fame and recognition in the ballroom scene. Corey also says in the documentary, "In real life you can't get a job as an executive unless you have the educational background and the opportunity. Now, the fact that you are not an executive is merely because of the social standing of life...In a ballroom you can be anything you want" (Livingston). The documentary also goes into detail about the personal lives of the queer individuals who take part in the balls. Venus Xtravaganza, and most likely several others, become sex workers to support themselves while others shoplift to find clothes to wear in categories. Many individuals have been shunned from their homes and are homeless.

The documentary shows the complexities of the drag culture as individuals struggle to survive while expressing their identities and desires through drag. In an interview in 1991, Livingston said, "This is a film that is important for anyone to see, whether they're gay or not. It's about how we're all influenced by the media; how we strive to meet the demands of the media by trying to look like Vogue models or by owning a big car... And it's about survival. It's about people who have a lot of prejudices against them and who have learned to survive with wit, dignity and energy. It's a little story about how we all survive" (Koltnow). This documentary was revolutionary during its time, but still is relevant and important today. No matter what time period it is, everyone is trying to survive and be themselves.

Drag and queer culture has evolved so much from decade to decade and still is evolving today. Important figures such as RuPaul have helped pave the way for current and

future drag performers through breaking barriers and transforming drag culture in numerous ways. That concludes this episode of “Hey Queens!” Tune in for the next episode where I will cover today’s “Queen of Drag” herself, RuPaul. Until next time, bye queens!

## **Episode 2: RuPaul & *RuPaul's Drag Race***

### INTRODUCTION

Hey queens! Welcome to “Hey Queens!”, a podcast where I dive into the history of drag, how the culture interacts with the world, as well as how the art form interacts with the individuals themselves. My name is Grace Temple and I am a senior Visual Journalism major and this is my honors thesis for the University of Mississippi. The goal of this podcast is to inform the average person on the culture and influence of drag. This podcast is also for people like me, who might not be a part of the community, but are interested in the art form, and want to learn more about the culture behind it. Today’s episode is all about RuPaul Charles, one of the most influential drag performers of this time. I will also discuss and analyze “RuPaul’s Drag Race” which is a reality drag competition show hosted by RuPaul.

### DRAG & RUPAUL (80s to today)

Emerging from the ballroom scene of the 80s and 90s, RuPaul is one of the most well known drag performers in the profession. He is the face of modern-day drag and is a legacy amongst drag culture. But how did this happen? And for those asking, who is RuPaul? And why is he so important to drag and queer communities?

RuPaul Charles was born in San Francisco, California in 1960. RuPaul states in his autobiography and in interviews that his mother named him after “rue,” which is an ingredient used primarily in gumbo. He says that his mother gave him this name to make sure his name was unique. From birth, his mother believed her son would someday be famous. To help garner this

sought after fame, when he was just 15 years old, RuPaul moved to Atlanta, Georgia to pursue studies in the performing arts.

In 1982, RuPaul first appeared on the local television show, *The American Music Show*. The program was a young public series that aired weekly late at night on the Atlanta cable access channel from 1981 to 2005. The show featured local talent and created a connection between Atlanta's music and club scene with the show. In high school, RuPaul wrote a letter to the TV program and then was invited onto the show. RuPaul and his punk rock band named RuPaul and the U-Hauls performed on the show regularly (Howard, 22). Soon after, RuPaul joined the punk rock band the Wee Wee Poles as the lead vocalist. This was the first time Ru experimented with androgynous looks to gain a following, but soon began to explore the art more (Davenport 136-139). These bands allowed for Charles to make TV appearances, perform at clubs, and experience his first time in drag.

Once the band had broken up, RuPaul found himself very poor, so he headed back to Atlanta where he met his life-long friend, Lady Bunny, who, at the time, was known as Bunny Hickory Dickory Dock. In the mid 1980s, Lady Bunny created "Wigstock" which was essentially Woodstock for drag performers. It was the largest drag festival that lasted for 21 years in New York. According to Davenport, both RuPaul and Lady Bunny "used drag as an outlet for mocking the established orders of identity and popular culture" during their time in Atlanta (Davenport 144). After their meeting, RuPaul began to act in low budget punk films where he debuted on screen as a drag queen. One of the films was "Starbooty", which was an underground film produced and starring RuPaul himself and Lady Bunny.

In the next few years, RuPaul made numerous achievements in his career in drag and beyond. By the late 1980s, RuPaul was back in New York and was an active member of the Club Kid scene, befriending many of the other members. Susanne Bartch often hired him to appear at her parties. At this time he met his closest friend, Michelle Visage. Ru became a staple in New York's nightlife and in 1989; RuPaul was crowned club world's "Queen of Manhattan" (Ward 2021). He also gained national exposure when he danced as an extra in The B-52's music video "Love Shack" which was released in 1989.

RuPaul gained worldwide recognition and fame after the release of his album "Supermodel of the World" in 1993. In 1994, RuPaul became the first drag queen to land a major cosmetics campaign when he was the spokesperson for MAC Cosmetics. RuPaul used this platform to raise money for the MAC AIDS Fund. In 1996, RuPaul debuted his first TV talk show, The RuPaul Show which aired on VH1 which was co-hosted with Michelle Visage. It was one of the first TV shows to be hosted by an openly gay person. This show had famous guests such as Cher, Diana Ross, and Nirvana to name a few. RuPaul was nominated and won a few awards for this work and the show itself. Despite the popularity, the show only ran for two years (Ward 2021).

In 1998, RuPaul stepped out of the limelight for a bit. RuPaul truly made his mark on cultural America through his reality TV competition show titled *RuPaul's Drag Race*. The competition show aired on Logo starting in 2009. Once again, Michelle Visage was alongside Ru acting as one of the co-hosts and judges. *RuPaul's Drag Race* is still on air and has developed several spin-off series. For example, *Untucked*, *RuPaul's Drag Race All Stars* and *RuPaul's Drag Race UK* to name a few.

These shows have “revolutionized the portrayal of the LGBTQ+ community on screen.” In 2016, he won his very first Emmy and has been nominated for several other awards for “RuPaul’s Drag Race” (Ward 2021). In March of 2018, RuPaul Charles became the first drag queen to have a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame (“RuPaul Andre Charles”). Most recently, RuPaul was awarded an Emmy at the 2021 Emmy Awards for Outstanding Competition Program, and now holds the record for the most decorated Black artist in Emmy history.

Throughout the years, RuPaul has excelled in his careers as a singer, actor, and drag queen. It is no wonder that he is seen as the most famous drag queen of this time. He has paved the way for young LGBTQIA+ individuals as well as become an inspiration of hard work and determination for everyone. And that's why they call him “Mother.”

“LET THE BEST DRAG QUEEN WIN”

As I mentioned earlier in this episode, RuPaul’s fame has been greatly accelerated by his hit drag competition show *RuPaul’s Drag Race*. This show has gained constant popularity since its debut in 2009. The inspired TV shows such as *Drag Race UK* and *Drag Race Canada* have also gained immense popularity as the art of drag continues to expand in coverage throughout the world. This show has been monumental for all of the performers who appear on the show. It has allowed for performers who appear on the show to gain traction and expand their professional careers. Drag performers such as Shangela, Trixie Mattel, Bob the Drag Queen and many others have landed roles in other TV shows and movies as well have expanded their careers in other ways. Trixie now has a prevalent musical career as well. Performers may start off as local “celebrities” performing in their hometowns, but after appearing on *Drag Race* are able to perform nationally and even globally.

So for those who haven't watched Drag Race here is some information about the show. An average season of *RuPaul's Drag Race* ranges from 10 to 14 episodes. There are fourteen seasons right now, six All Stars seasons and then 16 seasons of Untucked. In each season, the performers compete against each other in mini-challenges and maxi-challenges. These range from design challenges, musical challenges, and comedy challenges. Since season 4, the performers compete for the crown of "America's Next Drag Superstar" as well as a \$100,000 prize.

A typical season has viewers meet the performers who are competing in that particular season in the first episode. In this show, entrances are everything. First impressions in the workroom lead to some of the most iconic scenes in the show. Notably, Laganga Estranga's "come one season six let's get sickening!" Little one liners like this often gain an individual queen extreme popularity with audiences. Another example is season 10's contestant Vanessa Vanjie Mateo, who was eliminated on the first episode of the season. As she sashayed away, she walked backwards saying, "Miss Vanjie, Miss Vanjie, Miss Vanjie." Her exit made her one of the most memorable performers to appear on the show and come back for another chance on Season 11.

I first discovered this show when I was in high school in 2015. It was my first true exposure to the art of drag. It has a great way of having the drama of a reality show, witty gimmicks and comedy, combated by heartfelt and emotional stories from the performers themselves as they open up about their personal lives.

In an article published in Gay Times, author Sam Damshenas describes why *RuPaul's Drag Race* is the most important queer TV show through interviews with performers who have



been on the show. According to Damshenas, “The show has become the highest-rated television program on Logo TV and airs internationally in countries such as Australia, Brazil, Canada, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Latin America, Spain, Sweden, the Philippines, the UK and Thailand.” The show has gained major traction in the past decade and has even guest starred major celebrities as judges. Stars such as Lady Gaga, Ariana Grande, Adam Lambert, Jeff Goldblum, Christina Aguilera to name a few.

The article quotes season 10 contestant Blair St. Clair. St. Clair states, “I think one of the most important things, for me, about Drag Race is because it’s gone mainstream, it has created and allowed to go mainstream.” It also is monumental because the show educates viewers on real, serious issues happening in the community such as HIV/AIDS, depression, sexual assault, racism, homophobia, transphobia, and other persecutions for being gay. Aja who was on season 9 and All Stars 3 said, “It’s a way for people to see not just the gays, but also the gender binary blur. It interests me how many heterosexual, cisgender people are viewing the shows these days, even the straight men.”

It also allows for performers to open up about personal stories. Many performers on the show express that their parents do not know that they are gay or even that they perform in drag. Jinkx Monsoon, season five winner, and Bebe Zahara Benet, season one winner both praise the show’s ability to share these stories and how they bring people closer together. “The reason why people are loving the show and tuning in because of the human side,” Benet said. “It was the heart. People were able to relate to us as human beings.” Damshenas states that other LGBTQIA+ shows have touched on important issues- “such as Will & Grace, Queer Eye and

Queer As Folk” but have not touched on as many topics or been as inclusive of a whole community.

Even though it is a major television program for the LGBTQIA+ community it is constantly changing and evolving. It encourages and includes diverse performers from diverse backgrounds, but still has a way to go. Season nine debuted the first transgender contestant, Peppermint. In the article, Peppermint argued that the show is not about “trans folk or trans issues,” and hopes that the show will become more inclusive in the future. This article was written in 2018, so the show has evolved to include more inclusive language and contestants. I will cover this topic in more detail in the next episode.

Damshenas says “The show [RuPaul] has built has brought so much brightness (and shade), entertainment, and even in some cases a lifeline to queer youth. Through the performers’ stories, we as a community have gained so much strength, empathy, laughter and one-liners, and long may that continue.” *RuPaul’s Drag Race* has shown in more ways than one that it is so influential in today’s society for the queer community and beyond. It has allowed for drag performers to boost their careers and tell their stories on a national and global level.

Alright, that concludes this episode of “Hey Queens!” Next episode I will cover the positives of mainstreaming drag. Specifically, how drag culture and social media have had a great impact on each other. Thank you all so much for listening and I hope you enjoyed. Until next time, bye queens!

### **Episode 3: Drag in Media & Politics Part 1**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Hey queens! Welcome to “Hey Queens!”, a podcast where I dive into the history of drag, how the culture interacts with the world, as well as how the art form interacts with the individuals themselves. My name is Grace Temple and I am a senior Journalism major and this is my honors thesis for the University of Mississippi. The goal of this podcast is to inform the average person on the culture and influence of drag. This podcast is also for people like me, who might not be a part of the community, but are interested in the art form, and want to learn more about the culture behind it.

Today’s episode is all about the intersectionality of drag and the media. Specifically how the culture and individuals are influenced by the media, as well as how the media is influenced by the drag performers. This includes how the performers use their social platforms to boost their careers as well as how performers use their platforms to advocate for LGBTQIA+ rights.

#### **POSITIVES OF MAINSTREAMING DRAG**

In today’s age, social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and YouTube have been extremely beneficial to drag performers' personal and professional careers. I first discovered drag through YouTube videos which then later led to me watching RuPaul’s Drag Race on television. Television platforms such as Netflix, Hulu, Logo, HBO, and VH1 have also been used to help propel the art form of drag and its performers into mainstream media.

In an article by Frankie Wallace, he explains that social media allows for individuals who feel alone, vulnerable to find a sense of community. “Many social media circles are considered safe spaces where LGBT people can share their stories and feelings without fear of judgment. This allows social media to be a safe haven for the many people around the world who face discrimination and harassment in their daily lives” (Wallace).

Wallace also points out that “[s]ocial media not only helps the LGBT people to feel a sense of normality; it also helps to normalize this community to outsiders who may not have much exposure to LGBT people in their day-to-day lives” (Wallace). For instance, social and mainstream media have allowed for drag performers to further their careers by making movies, or appearing in movies and TV shows. There are several movies that are made and star drag performers such as *Paris is Burning*, *Cherry Pop*, *Hurricane Bianca*, *This is Drag*, *Jinkx Monsoon: Drag Becomes Him*, and many more. Several other movies and TV shows feature famous drag performers. Movies and TV shows such as *A Star is Born*, *Rent*, *The Prom*, *Dumplin’*, *AJ and the Queen*, *Super Drags*, to name a few.

Platforms such as film have allowed performers to perform on a much larger scale than ever before. It has become a more normal instance to see a drag performer in film. YouTube have also been a great outlet for drag performers. World of Wonder has allowed for many video series such as *Tea with Tati*, *Wait, What?*, *UNHhhh*, *Alyssa’s Secret* and *Fashion Photo Ruvie*. These video series have been an extra outlet for contestants of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* to make content after their appearances on the popular television show.

Outlets such as these have allowed for drag performers to boost their careers and create a name for themselves that extends past Drag Race. It allows for them to be seen by the average

person who might not have heard of them before. These platforms create an intersection between queer communities and viewers of all ages and sexualities. As I have mentioned before, drag performers are able to tackle a multitude of career opportunities as public personalities, actors and actresses, musical performers, and more. Without mainstream media, these performers would have a much harder time, maybe even impossible, growing their outreach.

## DRAG AND ACTIVISM

In several ways, social media has positively impacted individual lives. It allows for people to connect and tell their stories. This is not foreign to members of the drag community. Drag is a unique medium that allows for individuals to challenge social norms and advocate for the philosophy that it is okay to be who you are. Social media allows for drag performers to interact with each other, promote their careers and performances as well as freely speak on their social and political views.

In a video titled “Power of Drag” from Qeerty on YouTube. This video discusses community building by drag performers as well as transgender and queer individuals who have run for office. The video includes stories and interviews from Bob the Drag Queen, Nina West, Maebe A. Girl, Marti Cummings and Honey Mahogany. These individuals cover topics such as spreading awareness for anti-trans bills and using a political platform for good. They speak about representing their community and supporting disenfranchised individuals.

In the thesis written by Nathan Workman, he cites from a book by Middlemost, that former contestants on the show, *RuPaul’s Drag Race* use their infamy from the show for LGBTQ+ activism. Some, such as the Vixen, were active advocates before their appearance on

the show, but many use their new fame on social media to advocate against social and political issues against the LGBTQ+ community. This was seen very recently on a grand scale during the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement. In an article written in USA Today, authors Josh Riverra and David Oliver explain how Black drag performers rally support for the BLM movements and Pride:

With Pride month celebrations halted amid the corona virus pandemic, Black drag performers are continuing their legacy of protesting inequalities in the U.S. by taking to the streets in support of the Black Lives Matter movement, donating to social justice organizations, supporting Black businesses and using their social media platforms to spread messages of support and to share resources.

The article also includes a link to a video with performers Peppermint and Bob the Drag Queen talking about the intersectionality between the BLM movement and the LGBTQIA+ community.

While these issues are still going on, this is not the first time there have been members of the LGBTQIA+ community fighting against social and political issues. The article points out that “we owe Pride to black transgender women” (Rivera). As I mentioned in the first episode of this podcast, the Stonewall riots are a major part of Black and LGBTQIA+ history. Martha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera were transgender activists and drag performers of color who are pivotal figures in the uprising and fighters for LGBTQIA+ rights.

While Stonewall was a pivotal movement for LGBTQIA+ rights, it was not the first fight for gay rights. An article title “Gay Rights” on History.com documents different movements for

LGBTQIA+ rights, notably the Homophile Years in the 1950s. Harry Hay founded the Mattachine Foundation, the first gay rights group in the nation, in 1950. It was founded in Los Angeles and created the term 'homophile.' The organization hosted discussion groups and activities to hopefully improve the lives of gay men.

Two years later, the founding member, Dale Jennings, created another organization called One, Inc. The organization was also open to women and published the first pro-gay magazine, ONE. After Jennings and Hay were kicked out of the organization for their 'communism,' the members of the Foundation recreated the organization to become the Mattachine Society. This society sparked the second gay publication, *The Mattachine Review* and the first lesbian organization, the Daughters of Bilitis. This organization published the first lesbian publication, *The Ladder*. However, this movement faced a lot of setbacks because at the time, being gay was considered a mental disorder and under the Eisenhower administration, banned gay people from federal jobs (Editors).

While this movement did not make a big splash in the fight for LGBTQIA+ rights, it does document the efforts of gay individuals made. This and other movements like it show the struggles gay men and women faced as they tried to step out of the shadows to be seen and heard by the public. Several movements like those during the Homophile years were peaceful campaigns to allow for expression and recognition that gay individuals deserve to be seen and heard too.

A notable, modern-day activist is the drag performer Son of a Tutu. Son of a Tutu was born in Nigeria and originally worked in finance in New York City before becoming a drag performer after 9/11. She moved to London and developed her drag persona, Son of a Tutu. Son

of a Tutu spread awareness for the lack of LGBTQ+ rights in Nigeria. Son of a Tutu has spoken about her experiences as a queer person of color, an immigrant and being queer in the workplace. She also shares her stories of surviving beatings and family expectations (Bernard). Son of a Tutu is another great example of how drag performers are able to use their experiences and platforms to advocate for gay rights. She is one of many individuals in the public eye who have inspired and influenced the fight for LGBTQIA+ equality.

Overall, streaming platforms and multimedia platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram have allowed for performers to use their social platforms to boost their careers as well as advocate for LGBTQIA+ rights. This mainstreaming of the art form has boosted drag performers' reach and has allowed for performers to use their own social media accounts to interact with the community in vastly different ways.

Alright, that concludes this episode of "Hey Queens!" Next episode I will cover the negatives of mainstreaming drag. Specifically, how mainstreaming drag has contributed to negative stereotypes and norming a particular view on the art. Thank you all so much for listening and I hope you enjoyed it. Until next time, bye queens!



## Episode 4: Drag in Media & Politics Part 2

### INTRODUCTION

Hey queens! Welcome to “Hey Queens!”, a podcast where I dive into the history of drag, how the culture interacts with the world, as well as how the art form interacts with the individuals themselves. My name is Grace Temple and I am a senior Journalism major at the University of Mississippi and this is my honors thesis. The goal of this podcast is to inform the average person on the culture and influence of drag. This podcast is also for people like me, who might not be a part of the community, but are interested in the art form, and want to learn more about the culture behind it.

Today’s episode is the second part of last episode all about the intersectionality of drag and the media. Specifically how the culture and individuals are influenced by the media, as well as how the media is influenced by the drag performers. This episode is a little more somber as it covers the negatives of mainstreaming drag such as negative stereotypes and normalizes a particular view on the art form and culture.

### NEGATIVES OF MAINSTREAMING DRAG

I talked briefly in the last episode about the negatives *RuPaul’s Drag Race* has created for the drag and queer community. Even though there are numerous positives of the show on the community, there are still several criticisms to the show itself and how it portrays drag as an art form. It also has received criticisms for its “diversity” and how it should be more inclusive to all forms of drag.

In an article titled, "How mainstream Media has Damaged the Drag Community" author Logan Burns states:

Drag was originally an art form meant to push the boundaries on the social construct of gender, consisting of performers from all sides of the LGBTQ community. However, with growing popularity and exposure, a lot of the "less digestible" performers have been disregarded in favor of their cis-male counterparts.

He also states that mainstream media has almost exclusively ignored many trans, female and queer performers in the drag community. Burns also brings up a good point that even though *Rupaul's Drag Race* has done a lot of good by bringing exposure to gay issues, it redefines drag to a new generation by excluding these groups. The article includes a quote from RuPaul: "Drag loses its sense of danger and its sense of irony once it's not men doing it, because at its core it's a social statement and a big f-you to male-dominated culture." (Note: this article was written in April of 2019- since then there have been trans/female drag performers on the show) As a result of mainstream media, trans, female, and queer drag performers still have not been given the necessary exposure they deserve.

Burns quotes an article in *Dazed* called "Why do some people want to stop women performing drag?" by Jake Hall. The article addresses the evident rejection and harassment of female performers. A quote from the article states, "Queer nightlife is still extremely male-dominated- (...) If women are allowed through the door, many report that they are harassed, groped, or jeered at by gay men. I've seen it myself too —" (Burns). The article by Burns also includes a quote from the short documentary "Can't drag us down: meet London's female

queens” published in *Broadly* by nonbinary performer Victoria Sin in 2015. She testifies, “the worst misogyny that I’ve encountered has been (in) gay spaces, (gay men) basically looking me in the eye and telling me (...) I hate you because you’re a woman and this is not your space” (Burns). Documentations such as these illustrate that trans and female performers receive hostility from their own community. The article concludes by asking mainstream media such as *RuPaul’s Drag Race* to open up to trans and female performers or else they will continue to be negatively viewed and treated.

Following up with this idea that *RuPaul’s Drag Race* supports this idea of the homonormative drag performer, I remember something from the show that always struck me as odd. Watching an episode of an older season of the show, after all the performers walk on the runway the judges give constructive criticism about the performers’ fashion and looks on the runway. However, there are some instances where the judges criticize the performers’ drag individually.

I remember an instance where Michelle Visage criticized performers on their silhouette. There would be criticisms about how a performer would not wear a breastplate or “fake boobs” in their look or even the performer’s silhouette did not fit a certain mold of “femininity.” The show strives to explore different forms of drag and what it means to individuals, but there are times where it is very obvious that the show wants to see a certain form of drag. It creates a metaphorical box that the performers must fit in. Now, that is not to say that the show isn’t changing and progressing to become more inclusive. It just still has hurdles to go through in the process.

As I mentioned before, there has been some more diversity in the drag race. So far, there have been 20 transgender contestants on the show, including: Peppermint, Kylie Sonique Love,

Carmen Carrera, Jiggly Caliente, Kenya Michaels, Gia Gunn, Monica Beverley Hills, and Stacy Layne Matthews. Most of the performers came out as transgender after they competed on the show (Neveling). In the past year, a big change came to *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Ru changed wording on the show to be more inclusive. Instead of “Gentlemen, start your engines, and may the best woman win” at the beginning of season 13 it was changed to “Racers, start your engines, and may the best drag queen win”. At the beginning of season 14, RuPaul changed the intro songs as well to reflect this new language.

This was a major change for contestants on the show and viewers of the show. Season 13 was also the first season to have a transgender man on the show; Gottmik. Season 14 even welcomed the show's first ever straight drag performer, Maddy Morpheus. As time goes on, the show has evolved and has made progress towards an even more inclusive environment, but it still has ways to go.

In recent years, the show has made huge strides towards creating a more inclusive and diverse group of contestants for its ever-growing audience. Since the show has such a large following, its growing inclusion is saying great things for the community and the development of mainstreamed drag. It is important to have these spaces where different sub cultures of drag are able to flourish and be seen. Historically, drag and queer spaces have been underground and hidden. The mainstreaming of drag has allowed for those who were in the shadows to thrive in the limelight. We have seen drag expand into the mainstream like never before, but it is equally crucial to value all the other spaces that aren't mainstream.

Well, this concludes my podcast “Hey Queens”! Thank you all so much for listening and I hope you enjoyed it. Special thanks to everyone who has helped me create this for listeners like you. Until next time, bye queens!

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