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HARRY JAMES HANSON

Striking Portraits of America's Most Legendary Drag Queens

An ongoing photo series honors the art form's true pioneers during Pride Month and beyond.

BY ARIANA MARSH PUBLISHED: JUN 17, 2020

SAVE ARTICLE

In *Pay It No Mind: The Life and Times of Marsha P. Johnson*, a 2012 documentary filmed shortly before Johnson's death, the activist and drag queen says, "History isn't something you look back at and say it was inevitable. It happens because people make decisions that are sometimes very impulsive and of the moment. But those moments are cumulative realities." Johnson was referencing the Stonewall Riots, which began in lower Manhattan on June 28, 1969, and collectively remain a monumental juncture for civil rights in America.

While the demonstrations—led by Johnson and other trans women of color including Sylvia Rivera and Miss Major Griffin-Gracy—arose in direct response to a local police raid targeting the LGBTQ community, they quickly evolved into a larger retaliation against widespread discrimination and injustice, and signified an important tipping point for the gay liberation movement. Now, as we celebrate Pride Month 51 years later in the midst of another historic cumulative revolution, we are looking back on those figures who were once considered unruly rioters or radical activists, and celebrate them for the barriers they broke down.

It's queer icons like these that Harry James Hanson and Devin Antheus seek to recognize and capture in their ongoing photo series, ***Legends of Drag***. Featuring striking, high-drama photos alongside captivating interviews, the project highlights drag elders from all over the country who were instrumental in securing rights for today's queer community and championing the art of drag. From Darcelle XV, the oldest working drag queen at age 89, to Donna Personna, who participated in the 1966 Compton's Cafeteria Riot in San Francisco, each queen has an extraordinary story to tell.

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"We're creating work that we would have loved to have had as adolescents," explains Hanson, who met Antheus when the two were teenagers growing up in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Now based in Brooklyn, the lifelong drag performer works as an artist and creative director, and serves as the project's photographer. "As queer people coming of age, as teenagers in the Midwest, it would have been incredible to be able to access this kind of archive that chronicles queer history and celebrates it."

The visual component of the projects puts a dizzying spin on royal portraiture: For each shoot, the queen arrives to set completely self-styled and with a made-up face, often flanked by a group of her drag daughters who have tagged along for moral support. "Every shoot we've done has really been each of the queens bringing the fullness of the looks they're able to turn," says Antheus, who lives in San Francisco. Whether dripping in ethereal jewels like Dolly Levi or covered in kaleidoscopic color blocking like Psycadella Façade, the queens' ensembles speak to their own particular brand of drag.

As a lush touch, Antheus, a spirit worker, writer, and floral designer, creates a gorgeous custom floral arrangement for each portrait, selecting blooms based on their seasonality and uniqueness. "I've taken to thinking of the flowers that I do for the queens as being queer in and of themselves. We're using a lot of unique blooms and flowers that are dyed, flowers that are painted," they explain. "For example, carnations are thought of as being fairly pedestrian, but we'll incorporate them in a dynamic way that makes people look at them differently. And we'll use a lot of anthuriums, which are just very queer in and of themselves."

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The resulting photos are explosive, rivaled in charisma only by their accompanying biographies, which cover the queens' illustrious careers and the parties, people, spaces, and memories that defined them. "We also ask them what advice they would have for younger queens and what their relationship with younger drag queens is like, because a focus of the project is about fostering intergenerational exchange," says Hanson.

"Being millennial generation queers, we definitely grew up with a lack of elders specifically because of the AIDS crisis," explains Antheus. "A lot of people who would have been there to show us the way or explain things weren't there."

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Right now, there's one very singular version of drag being celebrated within popular culture largely thanks to the rise of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. While drag going mainstream represents enormous progress, it's also allowed for the erasure of the art form's diverse roots and deeper significance—roots that this project aims to unearth. "Drag is entertainment and it's joyous, and there's so much about the performance aspect of it that is to be celebrated," says Hanson. "But it's important for the children to know that it's not just entertainment on TV, it's also a ritual tradition inherited from our queer ancestors. These elder queens are a bridge between that history and the future generation of drag."

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Currently, we're in the midst of a global pandemic that disproportionately affects the LGBTQ community, people of color, and the elderly. Hanson and Antheus note that some of the queens they have photographed reside in assisted living facilities and that all have been financially strained due to the closure of drag venues and live performance spaces. "There's this twofold dynamic going on, where on the one hand, we have people who do share the collective memory of what it means to survive a plague and what it means to live through what feels like an unprecedented era of pandemic, and on the other, these are the exact people who are most at risk of this particular situation," says Antheus. "There really is this tightrope that we as a project need to walk—trying to receive and preserve and, hopefully, transmit as much of that knowledge as we can so that it isn't lost to us while fighting for and prioritizing the survival of these queens."

If you'd like to help the duo with a tax deductible contribution, **click here**, and be sure to follow the project on Instagram at **@legendsofdrag**. Below, Hanson and Antheus share eight of their newest portraits and accompanying interviews with *BAZAAR.com*.

Darcelle XV, Portland | Scorpio

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Only a few roses remained when we arrived in Portland, the leaves had turned an inferno of colors, and the city was quietly preparing for Halloween. We made the trip just to shoot with one new queen: **Darcelle XV**, the world record holder for oldest working drag queen at the ascended age of 89. In addition to this record, Darcelle is also distinguished from all the other queens we've worked with in that she has owned her own club since the late '60s: the Darcelle XV Showroom, situated just north of downtown, very near to the river.

Darcelle is the author of two books about her long and accomplished life, the most recent of which is titled *Just Call Me Darcelle,* a phrase she repeated while we chatted between shoots. She told us that for a long time she maintained a careful partition between Darcelle and Walter, her given name. She kept them apart for years, but over time, they had integrated, merged into one. “It took a lot of money, balls, and nerve to be Darcelle all these years. Just call me Darcelle.” And yet despite the apparent unity, she still insists on the possibility of multiplicity: “Don’t build a fence around me. I’m not one person, none of us are. We fought to do away with labels; now there is a label for everything.”

For her, the freedoms struggled for by the gay liberation movement were bound up in this possibility of radically remaking any aspect of one’s life or identity. “If you’re not happy—with your friends, family, job, self—move on! Someone once asked me my pronouns, I said, ‘Fuck you! I don’t care what you call me, as long as you’re calling me … and the check clears.’”

Dolly Levi, Los Angeles | Virgo

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Dolly Levi dances to the beat of her own drum, and never misses a beat. Quite literally, we saw her play the tambourine, high kick, cartwheel, and do the splits at Hamburger

Mary's one night in West Hollywood. She arrived at our shoot at the North Hollywood metro station with her flowing goddess dress concealed like a superheroine beneath tear-away boy clothes. The dress, designed by Gabriella Pescucci, was worn by the bride of Dracula in the 2004 film *Van Helsing* and won by Dolly at a studio auction.

The mercury passed 90 degrees on the day of our shoot, but Dolly never broke a sweat. Coming from a classical theater background, her drag is inspired by old MGM films and the cancan dancers of Toulouse-Lautrec. She belongs to the House of St. James, the largest drag family in Orange County. "Drag queen" itself is an identity she eventually came to accept over her previous preference: professional female impersonator. And she truly is an eminent professional. She can give you the nitty-gritty of contract law and a thorough historical materialism of the ever-growing drag industry at the drop of a dime. But she wasn't serving executive realness that summer afternoon; she was channeling Mother Nature herself. When asked what Mother would tell the children, she responded, "Stop. Look. Listen. Live. Respect it. Believe none of what you hear and only half of what you see."

Lady Red Couture, Los Angeles | Gemini

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Lady Red Couture lives up to her name, having hand-made the sequined hip-hugging dress she wore to our West Hollywood shoot. Mother Couture, as she's often known, describes herself as the "largest live-singing drag queen in captivity," and her commanding presence warrants comparison to Patti LaBelle, with the addition of a lime-green tongue piercing.

"I've been around for a long time," she told us, "so anything that sparkles or shines, I'm very good at." Lady Red cohosts the YouTube show *Hey Qween!* with her longtime collaborator, Jonny McGovern, now in its eighth season. The pair interview all the top stars in the drag industry today, and Lady Red's exuberant commentary, unmistakable laugh, and appetite for life have solidified her own place within the pantheon. She's kept busy during quarantine with her podcast and other digital drag offerings "whenever the kids invite me."

When we implored her to elaborate upon her motherly role mentoring younger queens, she confessed, "I call it stealing their energy, because that's really what it is." In return, Mother Couture makes them dresses, beats their faces and bestows them little doses of well-aged wisdom. "I always tell them: Don't live in muck and mire, because it's unnecessary. The devil is on his job, so why shouldn't we be?" She encourages her drag children to be precise in what they ask from the universe, because the universe will always deliver.

Donna Personna, San Francisco | Leo

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With a force of subtle persuasion and magnetic manifestation at 73 years old, **Donna Personna** is more powerful than ever. She cites Jackie O. and Marilyn Monroe as major inspirations, lithely embodying that tension between wife and mistress. Elegant, sultry, vulnerable, she gave it all during our shoot.

In 2014, she starred in *Beautiful by Night,* a documentary about the Hot Box Girls, elder drag queens still performing at Aunt Charlie's in San Francisco's Tenderloin neighborhood. We shot with Donna in 2019, just before she served as the grand marshal of SF's Pride parade, whose theme was Generations of Resistance. Despite being devastated that Pride was canceled this year, Donna remains committed to transmitting a history of queer resistance to the younger generations.

Donna co-wrote and is portrayed in the forthcoming play *Compton's Cafeteria Riot.* She recounts the feeling of liberation and belonging she found as a teenage boy in the eponymous uprising of transgender sex workers, gay hustlers, and hippies depicted in the play. It was slated to debut June 12 and tour through New York and New Orleans, but final plans will have to wait. In the meantime, she's already begun work on an adapted screenplay. We'll all be waiting for this necessary contribution to the queer historical archive. Donna takes great pride in the work, having received a stamp of approval from Susan Stryker, the foremost historian of the 1966 riot. "I'll be pushing up daisies and something I was involved in will still be touching hearts and changing minds, and I adore that."

Donna's impact is felt on a more personal level too: "Trans women in particular want to talk to me and tell me their story, and help them with their challenges. Sometimes it feels like a lot of responsibility. But if seeing me succeed inspires them, that's a wonderful thing. Look, I'm in my 70s, and I'm still here. Not only am I still here, but I'm a playwright, I'm a grand marshal, I'm happy. Life is wonderful."

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The Goddess Bunny, Los Angeles | Capricorn

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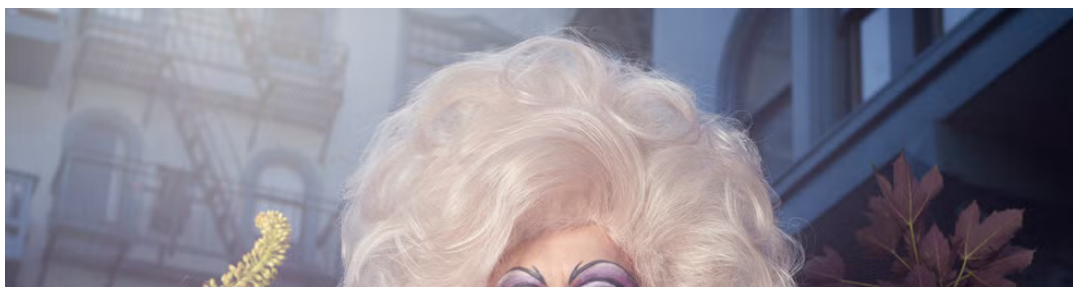
The Goddess Bunny's cult icon status in the Hollywood underground is compounded by her mystifying personal history. By her own account, The Goddess is a descendent of the Italian royal bloodline, worked as Ronald Reagan's personal secretary, dated Ricky Martin when he was 19, and personally discovered Divine's body after her untimely death in 1988—and those are just a few morsels she divulged over brunch.

It's nearly impossible to provide an account of The Goddess's life that doesn't sound sensationalized, because her life has been sensational in every aspect. Even the more concrete biographical details read like the plot of a melodrama: She was stricken with polio as a child and subjected to a number of botched corrective procedures. By the late '70s, she had found her calling as an entertainer and began performing at underground Hollywood clubs. Her live performances synthesized a mix of live singing, lip-synch, and tap dance into a truly one-of-a-kind act. She gained further notoriety for her unabashed sexiness that remained uncompromised by her unique physicality.

Breakthroughs into the mainstream have included *Hollywood Vice Squad* (1986), *Scumbag* (2017), and music videos for Dr. Dre and Marilyn Manson. A video of The Goddess tap-dancing while twirling a parasol achieved proto-viral status in the mid '00s, introducing her work to a new generation of countercultural youth.

Juanita More, San Francisco | Virgo



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As we scouted a shoot location for **Juanita More**, we considered the Ritz-Carlton in San Francisco's Nob Hill. Its massive neoclassical facade felt a fitting backdrop for a queen of her stature, but ultimately, we opted for a more discreet location across the street. As we wrapped our shoot, the valets at the Ritz caught a glimpse of her, and immediately greeted Juanita by name as if she were the mayor. We had expected the hotel staff to shoo us away from the entrance, but instead, they offered to pose with Juanita, holding open the door for their Queen.

Juanita is ubiquitous in San Fran, regularly hosting events and supporting charitable initiatives. Much of her work focuses on memorializing and preserving the legacy of queer spaces in a city where they are increasingly endangered. She hosts a yearly procession visiting those lost places.

When last we spoke, we discussed the recent announcement that the South of Market institution The Stud would not be reopening at its Ninth Street location. She reminisced about sneaking into its Monday nights as a teenager and described the welcoming and eclectic ambience always found there over the decades. She called the news of its closure a huge loss for our community. And still, she believes San Francisco remains a place for oddballs and queers to come discover themselves. Those who do will be greeted by her maternal gaze, whether at one of her innumerable public appearances or looking over them from one of her well-appointed murals scattered throughout the city.

Despite her local fame, she still reports an uncanny feeling every time she sees her face across from Alamo Square, one painted lady among the rest. Ever devoted to her city, even with nightlife spaces presently shuttered, Juanita can be found serving food and face every Friday from the balcony of the Lookout on Market Street.

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Love Connie, Los Angeles | Sagittarius

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We shot with **Love Connie** at the In-N-Out on Sunset Boulevard, where prior to the pandemic, she could be found four times a week. A bayou-raised girl, she's been in Hollywood going on 23 years. Her extroverted and comedic style made quite the scene on the sidewalk that day last summer. "You're just not going to get glamour from me," she insists. But we beg to differ. Whether in a dumpster or on a Parisian runway, Connie stays true to her trademark blend of camp and high-octane antics.

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A champion for working women, she wears over-the-counter Revlon. Her drag is inspired by Debbie Harry, regional beauty queens, Bond girls, Playboy bunnies, and, of course, the final girl horror trope. She's not that innocent though. She confessed to eating nine jars of banana pudding during quarantine. More than anything to come in "that whole new world thing," she's looking forward to the reopening of glory holes, perhaps well-stocked with hand sanitizer.

Connie's staying busy; in addition to having made several cameos in digital drag shows, she also installed a new drag closet in her cozy Hollywood apartment. Expect more to come from her too. She's been working tirelessly on her shelter-in-place workout show inspired by the 20-minute workout videos of decades past. Look out for Connierobics, coming soon!

Psycadella Facade, Los Angeles | Cancer

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Psycadella Facade took her name from the soundtrack of the 1968 sci-fi camp classic *Barbarella,* starring Jane Fonda. Her fully styled name is Princess Psycadella from the Lost Land of Color of the House of Facade. Between her sculptural wigs, maximalist makeup, and bejeweled talons, she truly is a vision from some other polychromatic dimension. The tricolor dress she wore to our shoot was commissioned custom, after she saw it worn by Kelly Clarkson on *The Voice.* It wasn't so much Clarkson's star power that inspired Psycadella, but rather that the colors match the pattern of the pansexual pride flag.

Her drag is influenced by Chi Chi LaRue, local legend Pauline St. James, and, of course, Divine. Psycadella was lucky enough to see the latter perform in L.A. just a few weeks before her untimely death. Never afraid to shatter conventions, Divine broke a table at that performance. Psycadella daydreams about a timeline in which Divine had lived to portray her unfulfilled role on *Married… with Children;* she speculates we might have gotten *Divine's Drag Race* instead of *RuPaul's* if the former's star had continued to rise.

Psycadella is known as a friend of the friendless and the mother to all, a moniker she humbly accepts. In fact, she currently has eight drag daughters, a small crew of whom came as her entourage to our shoot. She says her daughters push her more than anyone to take the opportunities life sets before her.

Psycadella's charity extends beyond her drag family, including a long-running show at AltaMed Health Services, which she cites as a highlight of her drag career. "We had no budget, we bought our own microphone, we performed outside in the courtyard, and people could come get tested and access information about their community programs." Her ethic of reciprocity, inherited from her mother, is not just a facade—it's a foundation for her community.

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