**Interview with Janessa Markstone-Mornett Highland**

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Interviewer: When did you first hear about drag, and what was your initial reaction to it?

Janessa Markstone-Mornett Highland: Um, so I was in Springfield, Missouri, that's where I came out and went to college there. Um, and I went to Latin Vibe, which was the only eighteen and up bar there, I didn't really know there was a drag show going on, I was there with this guy I was on a date with, and we walked in and there was a drag queen on stage and her name was Victoria VonDutch, and she looked just like one of my high school girlfriends. So, at first I was kind of confused, as to who she was, cause I might've pregamed a little bit before going out. I thought it was kind of cool, I didn't really get it, and I was really new to the whole gay scene anyway, so I didn't give it much attention. And then, actually as I spent more time going out to the gay bars, I actually didn't like drag, at all. I wanted to like dance and party and I didn't understand pageants and I specifically remember one night I was there, at Martha's, which is the other gay bar in Springfield, and there were having the Miss Missouri US of A at Large Pageant. I remember sitting on the patio, like being a bratty like twenty-year-old, and I was mad, like why are they taking all of my dance time? And all of that, and it wasn't until I backup danced for one of the drag queens at a pageant that I started to like kind of get it and fall in love with it.

Interviewer: Awesome, so with that being said, when did you start performing as a drag artist, and why did you start performing/appreciating it?

Janessa Markstone-Mornett Highland: Yeah, so I've always been a theater kid, and so I went to college and I was a theater education major, um, I actually started as a stripper, which was kind of a unique start. There were like 3-4 of us in St. Louis that actually started in Springfield as strippers, so I started that and was costuming and I in mixes, and it was very more like performance art where you took your clothes off, kind of, but really it was still stripping. Looking back it really wasn't all that great, but I did that. Then Akasha Royale, who actually lives in St. Louis now, we became very good friends. But she called me, and they were doing their first male pageant in Springfield, it was Mr. Latin Vibe, and there was somebody running she didn't want to win, so she was trying to find someone else who was talented enough to maybe beat them? So, she called me, and you know, told me she didn't want this person to win and asked me if I would do it. I was like, "I don't even know what a pageant is, but what do I need to do?" and she was like, "You're just gonna do everything I tell you to do." and so she put everything together for me, and choreographed my talent number, and all of that stuff, and I actually ended up winning. And that was kind of the first dive into pageantry. And as Mr. Latin Vibe, I was asked to do a turnabout show where like all the popular, or like well-known gay boys were put in drag by the drag queens and we raised money for the AIDS Project in the Ozarks. So that was the first time I was ever in drag, and it just kind of took off from there.

Interviewer: So, how did your family, friends, loved ones, how did they kind of receive you becoming a queen?

Janessa Markstone-Mornett Highland: Yeah, so everyone in my family knows, except for my dad, my dad still doesn't know. He wasn't super comfortable with me being gay. So, I don't know how he would handle the drag thing. But, initially, my mom found out on Facebook because I have two separate Facebook accounts, and I guess Janessa came up on her People You Might Know, and she started scrolling through pictures and thought "This looks oddly like my son with makeup on." Cause when I first started, it looked a lot like me, but with makeup on. So, she was okay with it, she didn't really get it at first. Like she asked if I wanted to be a woman, and all of that. The way I explained it was it's like acting, but instead of playing a character, like I would in a play, I played a character that I write the script for. And when I explained it that way, she kind of got it and as the rest of my family found out, they kind of got it, and then it really kind of got appreciation this past year when I ran for Miss America and I placed in the top five, and I showed my step-mom and my sisters videos and they were like, “This is like really a big deal.” And saw how much effort and talent went into it. It wasn't just like going to the mall and buying a dress and putting some chapstick on and walking around the bar. You know? They really started to understand the art behind it. And the things that go into it.

Interviewer: Awesome. So, where does your drag name come from?

Janessa Markstone-Mornett Highland: Yeah, so when I was a stripper, my name was Jace Silent, and Highland was the street I grew up on, so Highland Lake Dr. where I grew up. So totally cliché, and the person who like made all of my costumes and stuff helped me pick Jace, we thought it was like kind of a hot name or whatever, so when I started doing drag, for some reason I thought it was important that my initials were the same. Cause I was like doing drag as Janessa but also doing performances as Jace. And so, it was like, Jace and Janessa Highland, it was kind of cute it's like where it came from. And there's not like a bunch of J names to pick from as a girl. I didn't like Justice, there was already a Justice in Springfield. I didn’t like Jamie, or Jessica. I was almost Jessica, and then Janessa. That's what it was.

Interviewer: I've actually never met anyone named Janessa.

Janessa Markstone-Mornett Highland: Yeah, I never really either. I was like scrolling through unique J names and it came up with that one and I was like I think that that's it.

Interviewer: How do you find your stripper name? Isn’t it like your first pet and the street you grew up on.

Janessa Markstone-Mornett Highland: Yeah so, I stole the street I grew up on, so. My first pet was Diane, so I didn't think that would work for the stripper name. It’s a terrible dog name.

Interviewer: I think it's hilarious when people name their pet like actual human names for dog names. Like my friend has a cat named Rhonda. Rhonda the cat.

Janessa Markstone-Mornett Highland: Yeah, it was Diane the Saint Bernard, so.

Interviewer: So, there's a lot of terms in styles of drag, you know, varying from drag queens, kings, glamour queen, male impersonator, comedy queen, etc. Are there any particular labels you use to describe your drag? Or, if so, what is your type of drag?

Janessa Markstone-Mornett Highland: Yeah, I would say like I'm kind of an old school traditional pageant queen. And that’s kind of you know, not drag didn't start with that. It started, really, with just performers you know, like at Stonewall the first person to throw a stone was a black transgender sex worker. It wasn't pageant drag, wasn't that. But pageant drag came like really popular and became kind of an outlet for our community to come together every year. And that's what really attracted me to drag. And that's the style of drag I personally do all of the time. Very glamorous, I do a lot of older-school music, I'm not a top 40 artist, I'm not a dancer. I'm more of an actress that's kind of the venue that I follow and I just found that I really fit well into pageantry and that was where I found my niche. So that's what I'd use to describe myself. Kind of old school pageant queen.

Interviewer: That’s interesting. Your type of drag, I mean I remember you mentioning you had that fundraiser yesterday, or you know all of these different events. So, would you say that your type of drag affects your life as a drag artist? Like do you think it opens new avenues for you to put on new events like this as a more of a pageant queen?

Janessa Markstone-Mornett Highland: I think you, know it doesn't really matter the type of drag you do, it matters what your personal drive is for drag. I think that, well I know that there are club kids and there are people that do opposite types of drag that I do, that still put on very successful fundraisers and they do those things. I think pageantry has made it and opens some doors for me, especially in St. Louis, the very pageant-oriented town. Miss Missouri is held here frequently, there’s a lot of Miss Missouri's that have lived here. I was the 45th, Vega is our 46th, so it's very old, and a lot of these bar owners have been around for a lot of that time. So, they just have good connections to that, and so being involved in the pageants and things led me to meet the right people to put these events on. So, in that aspect, that's really helped a lot of the fundraisers that I do. Like I’m doing another one next week, I'm coming in and doing a turnabout show and painting a bunch of faces for people, and I'm bartending the event afterwards, so just kind of being in a role, like Miss Missouri, that’s respected and looked up to has opened the door for people to invite me to those types of things. So, it definitely has helped.

Interviewer: That's interesting. So, I mean I know you kind of mentioned the original glam drag, but is there a specific person or instance that has influenced your drag?

Janessa Markstone-Mornett Highland: Um, like I really gathered a lot of influence from a lot of people. I would say that my biggest influence in drag is my drag mother, Alicia. We just became really close over the past two years, but we kind of have like a unique, missed each other a couple times in life path, so I'm from Springfield, and I was one of the show directors at Martha's and there had been only 5-6 of us in the whole time it has been opened, which is over 30 years. So very small group of us have ever been a show director. When I started doing drag, Alicia had already moved, but she was one of the like, first or second show directors and she was like a legend there, and like she had won Miss Missouri USA, and she had won USA at large, and like she was like this famous pageant queen who had moved to Florida, and so she was kind of a legend that I had always heard of and looked up to. And then we met a couple years after that, at a pageant when she had come back to Springfield. She didn't know who I was, or any of that, like just another guy she had met at the bar, because I wasn't in drag. But it meant a lot to me, and then when I ran for Miss St. Louis, I reached out to her to make my Mary Poppins costume, because she had done Mary Poppins when she won Miss USA at Large, I knew how incredibly talented she was. And we really just became really fast friends, but she's really changed, not necessarily changed the style of drag that I do, but she's really enhanced it and really helped me really hone in on it. And also she's taught me a lot about how to be the best person that I can be in this role. Because it is different, it's like being a celebrity without any of the pay. Like people are always watching what you're doing and they're always watching what you're saying and even when you don't mean for things to come across certain ways you just have to be a little more self-conscious of what you do and say when you're out. I mean she's really taught me how to do that, without changing my personality. She always said how to be a star without acting like one. And that's the lesson I've learned from her. So, she’s probably been the biggest influence.

Interviewer: Okay, so we've been talking about if drag is political, and how there’s so many ways to make your drag political and how you can have your voice heard, your stance heard I guess I should say. So, would you say your drag is political?

Janessa Markstone-Mornett Highland: Um, I would say I don't consider my drag performances political. I don't think I have ever used my platform on stage to voice my opinion, as far as an entertainment setting goes. To me, you know drag is about helping people forget about life for a couple hours and giving them an escape from that, but on the other hand, I've made my political views known by volunteering my time and even my stage presence to stuff like that. Like I've done political fundraisers for people I believe in, I've done charity events for groups that might fall on different ends of the political spectrum that I align with, and that's how I show my support and make it political. But it's outside of when I'm being paid to entertain you. I try to keep politics and religion and anything really controversial out of the show atmosphere, and if I'm gonna insert that into drag, it’s at an event specifically for that cause. And that's how I show my support.

Interviewer: So, can you talk about what your life is like as a drag artist? You mentioned how you have to be a star without acting like one, you know, how to use your platform but not let it overcome you, I guess?

Janessa Markstone-Mornett Highland: Yeah, it's definitely a unique lifestyle, I mean it's like having the best of both world and the worst of some at the same time. You know? Especially when you start doing pageants, like you start racking up titles and accomplishments and things, people start to look at you differently, and they look up to you, which is a lot pressure. One, because you have to act right when you go out cause people, you know, just like we do with celebrities, like a celebrity goes out and does something that if you or I did would be fine. Like they got really drunk at the bar, and like hanging out of the top of a limo driving down the road or people take pictures and make them look like a mess, and the same stuff happens. So, you give up a little bit of your freedom to your privacy and normal mistakes a 20-something year old would make like drunk at the bar aren't acceptable to Janessa Highland to do at the bar. So that part is hard. But at the same token, I get a lot of perks and opportunities and so sometimes it's frustrating. But you know I just got to go to Colorado as one of the top five for Miss America and spent a whole weekend in Colorado, which was beautiful, they paid to have us come there and have a show, and that's something that I would not be able to do, you know, as Nick. It was probably a $5,000-6,000 vacation, to go there, and it was something that I was privileged enough to get to do. So, it's a give and take. And sometimes, you want to pull your hair out, but other times it's really rewarding.

Interviewer: Cool, yeah you kind of have to find the balance of like living your best life, and you know.

Janessa Markstone-Mornett Highland: Knowing there's responsibilities that come with that.

Interviewer: Totally, you mentioned that you have a drag mother, but are you a part of a family, house or collective? If so, could you tell me a little about it.

Janessa Markstone-Mornett Highland: Yeah, so Alicia is like the mother of our entire family, the Markstones, there’s a lot of us, but there are kind of some offshoots of that. Like when I started drag, the very first person to help put me in drag was Victoria Von Dutch, which was the same person I walked in and saw, my very first drag performer I ever saw. And like, was my roommate and we were really close, and she never really wanted any drag children, or a house to be in charge of, she just really helped me and gave me costumes to borrow, teach me how to paint my face, all of that. But the first actual drag mother that I had is Devion Mornett, and she's the show director currently at Martha's in Springfield and was when I was there. And I still call her Momma and she will always be my drag mother. But Alicia is like the mother of our house. Alicia right now, we live together and we're roommates, and so like really really close, still really close with Devion, but it's also a unique situation. Because all of the Markstones are different personalities and we also all performers, so all very exaggerated personalities. So, it's really beautiful but also at times we fight like any other family would, just happens when we fight we're a little more dramatic about it. So sometimes it's you know, a very beautiful thing, but you have to know going into it that you're dealing with people who are actors and actresses who can be high-strung sometimes.

Interviewer: Gotta pick your battles.

Janessa Markstone-Mornett Highland: Yeah, but it's most beautiful thing about the Markstones, to me, is that yes, we're very supportive of each other in drag and stuff like that, but we're also there for each other. Like these are the first people I'd go to with my problems, if something happens in my life, or if I need help outside of drag, or if I just need to vent or cry, and that's the relationship that we have. We watch out for each other. If somebody's really broke this week, we'll pick up the pieces behind them. We'll take them to lunch, and it's a give and take. It's really a family, not just being a clique out at the bar.

Interviewer: How often would you say you perform and where do you predominantly perform?

Janessa Markstone-Mornett Highland: So right now, I'm not on cast anymore, I've been on cast a couple different times in my drag career, so I performed quite a bit as Miss Missouri, which I just stepped down from, but I traveled the state with that. And then, locally, I perform probably anywhere from like 6-10 times a month, just kind of varies, it's all booked out a month at a time so one month I might be working more than others, but predominantly I work at Bar:PM, its where I was yesterday for that event. And then, I work probably twice a month there, on a weekend like Friday or Saturday and then I have one Sunday a month that I host. I work a lot at Rehab, in the Grove. Bastille every once in a while. Most mostly Rehab and Bar:PM. It’s a really good time.

Interviewer: What goes into getting ready?

Janessa Markstone-Mornett Highland: Yeah, you know, obviously, putting the makeup on and the hair and all of that stuff. And that takes, you know, it used to take me a long time when I first started, like 4 hours and now I can do it in like 45 minutes. But there's a lot of behind the scenes that goes into that. You've got to design your costume. There's a lots of ways to go about it like there’s a lot of songs I just like pick a costume that kind of works that I already have, or I'll make a costume that works for a lot of things. But there is sometimes like you hear a song and you're like, oh my gosh I really want to do that, and you come up with a vision in your head. That's a long process. Of learning the song, then designing the costume, building the costume, and embellishing the costume, so there's a lot that goes into it. It just kind of depends. A regular, every day show, if I'm not doing anything like super unique, for that specific show, I kind of just pull pieces of what I already have, but especially when you first start and you don't have any drag, a lot of it was, I just heard the song on the radio, I love it, I wanna do it now I have to make the costume for it, especially when you start. There's a lot of work put into it.

Interviewer: What would you say are the biggest challenges in drag and being a drag artist?

Janessa Markstone-Mornett Highland: Umm, I think, learning kind of what I said, like how to balance being popular and liked, and balance that in the responsibilities that people put on that. Like I said, you are kind of the party and people look up to you. I've had some really beautiful moments, like you don't even know the impact that you have on someone's life. You're out at the bar, and you happen to pick a song that really spoke to them, and they kind of look up to you from afar and you don't know if that person, in the 5 minutes you've talked to them, what impacts you've had on them. So that's a lot to understand. That's a lot to process, so that part is kind of hard. It's also kind of difficult on your dating life, it takes a very specific person who is willing to date a drag queen, because we do have these two separate lives, and we’re always busy. I've had some relationships that didn't work out because they couldn't handle that I was popular, and everybody wanted to talk to me. It was a lot of pressure being Janessa's boyfriend, and not being you at the bar. Like always being referred to as her other half. So that's been a challenge. It can be exhausting. It can be a lot of work. There's lots of challenges but it's a beautiful blessing just comes with responsibilities.

Interviewer: Is there anything unique to the drag scene where you live compared to other places in the country or in the world?

Janessa Markstone-Mornett Highland: So what’s really cool is that, I've had the opportunity to travel quite a bit with drag. Drag is like super regional and it's some of it's pageant based, cause there are like 5-6 really large national pageants, and each one has categories that specifically look for something different and like Missouri happens to be like a very heavily America state which is very traditional drag, very detail oriented, and big hair, big costumes and you know all of that. Whereas, some of the other pageant systems in other places that are really popular are more about creativity, or they're more about glamour, and being beautiful and natural looking. So that plays a part in the drag that's different, but even setting pageants aside, just aesthetics here are different. Here, you get a lot of old school glamour red-carpet type looks. And in Florida you get a lot of sexy, beachy looks, and in Texas they love big hair, here it kind of varies. So, it's cool to travel and see how different everyone is. When I went to that trip in Colorado, for top five in Miss America and we're all from different spots. So you had 2 people from Texas, me (Janessa) from Missouri, you had Alexis Mattel from Florida, and you had a queen from New York. So you had like Southern drag, Florida coastal drag, New York City drag, Missouri drag, middle of the state drag. So, it was cool to see in the show how different we all were. Everything from our costumes to our hair, to our song choices. It was all the same caliber, and everybody was stunning, and it was really fun, and a great show, but the variety was super unique.

Interviewer: Cool. So how would you identify in terms of your sex, gender identity, and gender expression out of drag?

Janessa Markstone-Mornett Highland: Yeah, so I am a cisgendered male, and so I identify as just a gay man. The whole nonbinary thing is kind of new to me, so I've never felt like that at all. I've always felt like a boy that happens to play a character.

Interviewer: What pronouns do you use out of drag?

Janessa Markstone-Mornett Highland: I use he, and she, honestly when I first started drag everyone was 'gal'. When I first came to the gay bar everybody and all of your friends called you gal, or said "hey girl" and all that stuff. And pronouns weren't really an issue when I first came out, it’s something that’s very new. The generation behind me is kind of really embraced that. But I totally understand and respect that, but to me it's never been offensive. Like a lot of people are really delicate with "well do I call you Janessa?" or "do I call you Nick?" or "do I call you he?" or "do I call you she?" and in all honestly, most of my friends call me Janessa, or a lot of them call me Big Jan, that's kind of my nickname. So, we're out in a restaurant together, me Alicia and Brooklyn, and all of us have nicknames. We call Brooklyn Connie, and [pronouns] never affected me or bothered me.

Interviewer: Has drag influenced your sex or gender identity? If so, how?

Janessa Markstone-Mornett Highland: Not really, at all. I've always kind of kept them separate. You know there are a lot of different people who do drag for different reasons, and mine was always kind of the theatrical escape. I'm more of an actress and I've always been known for my ballads and slow songs and I actually use it selfishly a lot. I'll use a song that like portrays how I’m feeling and I can get my emotions out on stage and I get to tell a room full of 100 people how I'm feeling without ever telling them what the problem is. And they pay you to do it! So it's you're paying me to be my counselor. So that was my motivation. But a lot of people, including members of my family, they do drag because they did identify as a girl, and they didn't know how to go about that, so they kind of started in drag and then they became transgender. Even some of them have quit drag once its served its purpose, and they're just transgender people now. So it hasn't ever been my motivation. I've only ran across a couple people, I dated a guy I think was attracted to Janessa, also attracted to Nick, but also had some attraction to Janessa. And I tried to keep an open mind about it, but it just isn't for me. I can't identify as Janessa sexually.

Interviewer: That's interesting, that's something I never would have considered. Do you think you're theater background has kind of influenced having the contrast between Nick and Janessa?

Janessa Markstone-Mornett Highland: Yeah I think I definitely do, I mean cause doing drag really was a theatrical escape. When I was younger, I always wanted to be a Broadway star, but not everyone gets to do that, like this is my outlet to still be involved in theater and to do something that I love, and perform. At first I didn't realize how powerful it would be, but now that I've realized this is my character and I write her script, she is everything I want her to be. It's really cool to have your own character that you get to play throughout your life. So it definitely did. She is an exaggerated version of Nick, but a completely separate entity. She doesn't really have a sex life. So that's all been reinforced by that. Absolutely.

Interviewer: How has drag impacted/changed you?

Janessa Markstone-Mornett Highland: I think it's helped my self-confidence. Like I was not a very confident boy. And I still am a little shy and a little reserved as a boy as opposed to Janessa, we are two totally different people when we go out. So I think it's helped really build some of the characteristics that Nick lacks, or isn't so strong in. It's really easy to go out, she doesn't exist. She's a mask, the makeup is a mask, and the hair is a mask, and you can be ostentatious and over the top and push boundaries and stuff while you're in drag, because that's what is expected. She's supposed to be over the top. But it's also taught me some great life lessons. Interview is one of the categories at Miss America, you sit in front of a panel of 5 judges, and doing that allows me to go to a job interview with one person like "this is all you got?" "You're the only one here?" So it's easy. A lot of that has transitioned over. it's also really allowed me to do things that I've always wanted to do but can't afford. Like the traveling and things like that. But also to give back. I've always believed in charity and things like that. And if I can write a check to fix problems that I think are important I would, but I can't and this is an opportunity to use something that doesn't cost me anything but my time and my talent to raise money for a cause that I believe in. So that's a great outlet that Nick doesn't make enough money to do.

Interviewer: If you could go back and as Janessa, what advice would you give to your younger self?

Janessa Markstone-Mornett Highland: So I always kind of compare this drag to growing up in real life as well. You start, and you're super eager and excited and you're kind of starstruck by these people that are more seasoned than you, and their teaching you these tricks, and you're really eager to learn. Then you start to get good, and people start to tell you how pretty you are, even if you're not at the time, and you kind of get into this like bratty teenage years, where like you know everything and you don't need them anymore, and you're the new kid in the scene, and that's just the old lady. You know that bratty phase. Hopefully you come out of that, not everybody does, luckily I did. I don't know that I could change it, and I don't know if I would want to. I think it's made me the person that I am now. But I would like to go back and tell younger Janessa to be a little kinder to people, and not be quite so mean. Like don't get so wrapped up in the compliments and become a mean girl. It's natural. It’s like the popular girl in high school, she's mean all of the times and when you become popular, it's kind of intoxicating. You kind of get drunk on all that love and compliments and being in positions of power, being a show director. Until you grow up a little more in drag you don't realize all of the responsibilities that comes with it and sometimes you do things that you'll have to apologize for later.

Interviewer: That's interesting. I’m curious on how your social identities have impacted your experience of drag, or vice versa, how has impacted your identities. And could you share one or more of your social identities, such as race, class, age, geography, religion, size, sexuality or the interaction of these social identities have impacted your experience of drag?

Janessa Markstone-Mornett Highland: Yeah, and everybody's a little different, some people keep things a lot more separate than I do. Because I've been around for so long, and pronouns have never been a thing, I've never forced people to keep me separate at the bar. Nick doesn't really have a huge social presence in the gay community. Like I go out, but people still recognize me as Janessa out of drag. I don't mind it so much, sometimes it's a little frustrating cause sometimes you just wanna go out and like go somewhere everyone knows your name and drag isn't what we're talking about tonight, or you wanna go flirt with a boy that doesn't look at you as the drag queen on stage last night. So that part of it has kind of been impacted a little bit. But I'm really happy with Janessa's social presence, like I said, the perks that come with that, I'd definitely say she has a much more social presence in the gay scene than Nick does. And I've had to use other outlets for Nick's social presence. Although I have friends that don't do drag, I'd say my social life revolves around drag, which is my passion so it's okay, but it definitely has shifted the more years I've been involved in drag, the less the social presence Nick has.

Interviewer: So, this is kind of just your personal ideas about drag, so how would you define drag overall?

Janessa Markstone-Mornett Highland: I would say a couple years ago I was really matter of fact that drag is a man or transgender woman portraying the ideal woman. I didn't understand club kid drag, I didn't like it. I actually in my bratty years spoke out against it that I didn't think it should be in bars. But the older I've gotten and the more open I've been to at least going to see it. I would define drag as any kind of performance art, that is street legal that you want to put on stage. It's an exaggerated version of real life. It's just all about exaggeration. I still believe that if you're going to do drag differently, you're going to be a club kid, or you're gonna be a bioqueen, you should strive to look like everyone else in the show as far as quality goes. So if you're going to be a club kid, there's this performer, his name is Axel Andrews, I actually really admire him, I think he's incredibly talented. He does club kid drag, he's boy bodied but does all kinds of exaggerated makeup sometimes he does characters, other times he's like kind of normal-kind of drag face. But the caliber to which he does his art form is the same caliber as the national entertainers, and the national title holders that are in the show. So they're doing traditional drag and he's doing something totally opposite. Like they look like they fit in the show together. So that's kind of my new approach to this, I love all types of drag, I think it's great a variety in the show, but everyone has to look like they fit in the same category of drag.

Interviewer: Can you explain what kid club drag is?

Janessa Markstone-Mornett Highland: Yeah, so there's a lot of club kid performers at Attitudes. Club kid was kind of the all-encompassing term for bioqueens, nonbinary, before all of those- you always had like drag king and drag queen and those were kind of the two, then club kid came into the scene and picked up all of the pieces for everything else that was left out of those two groups. Club kid is probably a little outdated, I don't know I'll have to look that up, if that is still used, but that was always the term I was kind of taught, but it's kind of an umbrella to cover everyone that didn't do traditional, pageant girl drag. They're doing something different, performances artist might be more of the direction they're going now instead of club kid. I think the club kid scene kind of started in like rave bars and stuff like that, is there they found their niche. So it probably it a little outdated. Maybe performance artist is the right word, I don't know I'll have to look that up.

Interviewer: Thank you for that, cause I had no idea. So what do you think is the overall purpose of drag?

Janessa Markstone-Mornett Highland: I think that it serves two overall purposes. It's a creative expression for the performer themselves, and it in my time, I found that most entertainers they gave baggage and have something broken about them, and there's something that they've been through, and this is kind of their way for coping with that, growing and some of its hiding and some of it is giving them an outlet to do things that they may not be comfortable to do for themselves, so I think it serves that purpose for the actual person performing. But I think for all entertainers, our job and the other purpose is to help people forget about how their life sucks sometimes. It's an escape from your bad day at work, it's an escape from your fight with your boyfriend or girlfriend. It's an escape for a tragedy that's happened, it’s a safe place for you to laugh, or cry, or wanting to get up and dance, or smile like that is the whole purpose of entertainment. That's why we have movies, and books, and TV and drag queens. It's an escape from life.

Interviewer: That's a really interesting comparison. Obviously it's a form of entertainment, but the comparing it to movies or books I've never considered. Do you think drag is sexual? Why or why not?

Janessa Markstone-Mornett Highland: It's not for me, but it definitely is for some people. I think a lot of thing have changed in the past 10 years. When I started drag, there was no Grindr or Bumble or Tinder, you go to a gay bar and that's how you meet people. I think back then, and especially older entertainers, because that's who I've kind of been around, a lot of them whom are transgender used drag to get into that and express that. Because being transgender was a much more taboo thing 20 years ago or 10 years ago, compared to drag, that still was taboo, but not as taboo in the gay community. So I think for those people who identify as female or nonbinary even now part of it might be sexual, or maybe just their sexual character that they have. But for me, I've never seen it as sexual, but I could see how it could be that way.

Interviewer: What are your thoughts on RuPaul's Drag Race?

Janessa Markstone-Mornett Highland: I honestly am not a very big fan of RuPaul's Drag Race. I think it's done some incredible things as far as bringing drag to the mainstream, but I also think it's done some incredibly detrimental things. They portray us as a very catty way, because it's reality television, which is understandable. But they've also caused a large income disparagement between local performing drag queens. In all honesty, a lot of the people on the show aren't very talented. And they show up to work and they're a mess, they show up in a $20 dress from Amazon, and they're gonna get paid $6,000 dollars. The caliber that they bring isn't the same caliber as the people working for free or $25-$50 locally. That's caused a lot of issues. They're also not very nice people. I've worked with 7 of them in my career, and a lot of them have been very incredibly kind people. Chad Michaels, Alexis Mateo was really great, Raja was really great, I won't say the names of the others that weren't so great. The last interaction I had with a RuPaul's Drag Race girl was at a pride event in Missouri, and there was an entire cast of local queens, by local I mean we drove from all over the state. We came in a very low price to be there, the show was supposed to start at 10, she didn't show up until 10:45. And she had been in town all afternoon, was sleeping her hangover off from the night before where she was posting all over Instagram that she was out partying and probably doing some things she shouldn't be doing. When she arrived at the show, she didn't even know what music she was going to do, she was 45 minutes late, she wore two Amazon stretch dresses you could buy for $19.95. She pulled out a plastic sac to put on, and she was incredibly rude to the cast of entertainers that she had already been rude to for not showing up. She didn't recognize the cast or any of their importance. When someone introduced themselves as a national title holder she responded, "oh honey everyone thinks they're a star". And it was that kind of attitude and that's what's traveling the country representing drag, and I think it's incredibly disappointing. Big bummer. You're given this platform and an incredible amount of money and opportunity. Like I said, not all of them are like that. It's been the younger ones that have been like that. There are people on the show that have started drag like three months ago, and I don't think that is an accurate representation of what their best drag in the country is about. The purpose of the show isn't to put the best drag in the country, it's to put the messes on television, and picking one of the better ones to win. But those messes are the ones traveling the country representing drag and getting booked, because they're on TV. So that part I don't care for.

Interviewer: If you could change one thing about drag, the drag scene, drag community, etc. what would it be and why?

Janessa Markstone-Mornett Highland: I think the biggest issue I'd like to change is a multifaceted issue and is kind of like a merry-go-round. There's no way to really fix it, it's just going to evolve around time. I wish that it paid what it was worth to do. I wish it was more financially beneficial. Not that that's why most of us do it, but that has changed a lot. When I first came out to the bars, before Grindr and being able to find a boyfriend/girlfriend from your couch, you had to go out. So drag was very well supported. When it was less mainstream, it was supported less by the community because it was theirs. It was the gay communities' celebrities. They didn't belong to everyone, they belong to just the gay bars. Gay bars are much more safe places. So it's kind of cool that we don't need that anymore, but I wish there was a way to bring that back to drag, because a lot of the entertainers that are older than me, who I look up to, that's all they've ever done their entire life, is entertain. And for the 20+ years they've entertained, they've made enough money to live comfortable lives. They never made enough money to be wealthy, but they made enough money to live by. And never really planned for an end to that, because they didn't ever see it coming. And now, the community is saturated and more mainstream. A lot of those people have been left some homeless and jobless, and no support from the community they spent 20 years entertaining and raising money and more of that. So I'd like to find more of a stable place. And there are some things that have happened to fix that, drag has kind of evolved the gay bars and a lot of places don't even identify as gay bars. They are everybody kind of bars but there happens to be a lot of gay people and drag shows. But there are some venues, like Hamburger Mary's, and there are more venues that have opened up that cater to a much wider audience that are giving drag performers a more stable income to make up for the difference the gay bars have left out. But unfortunately there's just not enough of them open to support drag. So I'd like to see that change.

Interviewer: What do you think are the misconceptions people have about drag? Where do you think it comes from? And how do you think you can help to change that?

Janessa Markstone-Mornett Highland: I think the very first one, especially if you're the first drag queen anybody's ever met, and they start talking to you, a lot of people don't understand, like my mom asked me, "do you want to be a woman?" that's the first question. And it's a very valid question. If you knew nothing about drag that would be the first question I would ask. I think a lot of the other misconceptions are the cattiness and the drama, and all of that that is put on national television. I think the way you change that is doing exactly what we're doing. Just talking about it. I get wrapped up in these conversational a lot when I'm out at the bar because I'm passionate about it, and people ask me questions and I'm okay with answering them, and the more you talk to people, they ask a lot of questions and you can kind of change their opinion. I'm really fortunate and one of my passions is a non-profit cinema in Jeff City, and I host a drag show there about 6-8 times a year. Jeff City is incredibly republican and is also the heart of Missouri politics. And because it's a non-profit cinema and a fundraising show we donate all of our tips back to the cinema to help fund them. They show very taboo movies and things and their whole motto is education through art. Which is something I'm very close with in my drag. There's a lot of liberal people in Jeff City who will bring their friends out, but a lot of times they will bring people out who don't necessarily want to be at a drag show. They come in with one conception, and in the end I'll have conversations with them and they say thank you for changing my perception on this. And the only way you're going to do that is to continue to put it out there and talk about it.

Interviewer: Lastly, if you could change one thing/learn about drag, what would it be?

Janessa Markstone-Mornett Highland: I think it would be, that's a tough question. I think I would want them to learn there are people behind the performer. I think that is most important to remember. I think it's really easy to see us out every Friday and Saturday, and that's our job, we're supposed to be the party. But you have to remember there is a person behind that entertainer. There's a lot of bashing of entertainers online. She's busted or she's terrible and everyone's drag is different, everyone's audience member connects with a different entertainer. There are some people that think I'm incredibly talented, and there are other people who think I'm really boring. And that's okay. I appeal to certain people and not others. But I think some people forget sometimes that in their passionate praise of one entertainer, or their expressing that they don't like another entertainer, they forget that there is an actual person behind that persona. Who does have feelings, and they can get hurt. So I think that that's the thing I would want people to learn.

Interviewer: Awesome, I appreciate it very much!

Janessa Markstone-Mornett Highland: Of course!