**Interview with Rachel Michaels**

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Rachel Michaels: Hello?

Interviewer: Hi there, how are you doing?

Rachel Michaels: I’m good, how are you?

Interviewer: I’m good.

Rachel Michaels: Well great, I’ve got some time for you today.

Interviewer: Great, Great, that’s good to hear. I’m sorry we got a little conflicted yesterday, but I’m happy that we were able to work it out.

Rachel Michaels: Yeah it was just one of those days where my dad needed me, then my sister needed me. It was just one of those days where I thought I had time, but I’ve got plenty of time today.

Interviewer: Well good, that happens all the time, it’s completely understandable. So, did you receive the research participation form that I sent to you?

Rachel Michaels: I did, but I didn’t read it. But I can now.

Interviewer: Well that’s okay just so long as you have it you can read it whenever you’ve got the time and you can just e-mail me if you have any questions or concerns, okay?

Rachel Michaels: Okay.

Interviewer: Alright, well we can go ahead and start if you’re ready.

Rachel Michaels: Yeah, sure.

Interviewer: When did you first hear about drag?

Rachel Michaels: Hmmm... The first time, like the very first time I experienced drag when I was probably a teenager. Like 13-14 and I saw Dame Edna Everge on TV. One of the older queens from Britain. It was on NBC and she had her own show called Dame Edna's Hollywood and that the first time I really just knew. You know, there was something about that that I enjoyed.

Interviewer: Was that your initial reaction to it?

Rachel Michaels: It was just this, you know, as a kid, I just didn't know how to describe it. But it was just this overwhelming interest in what I was seeing. This man that was dressed up as this character - with the mob hair and the big glasses. You know? If you know who Dame Edna is. It’s just one of those things that intrigued me as a teenager, and I didn't know why. Of course, years later, of course you know - I know now! (laughs).

Interviewer: When did you start performing as a drag artist?

Rachel Michaels: Let's see, I came out of the closet when I was 18 years old and then I started out doing drag as a Halloween joke. Let’s see, I actually started doing drag for Halloween when I was like 16. I did Dolly Parton at a friend's Halloween contest and the next year it was Tina Turner and then the next year I was Dame Edna. And then when I came out of the closet at 18 I was able to go to the gay bar here in Paducah and then I started doing drag shows as Reba here at 19. I actually did my big Reba illusion for Halloween when I was 19 and I won third place in the Halloween contest. Then, I got invited back to do the shows each and every Wednesday and it just kind of started from there. From a Halloween… to a career.

Interviewer: Is that why you started performing - because you were invited back?

Rachel Michaels: Yeah, I mean, you know at 19 here in Paducah, Kentucky that was the only place you could do that. Then of course, I started going back cause I had an interest in performing. So, they invited me back every Wednesday and it kind of grew from there.

Interviewer: How did your family, friends, and other loved ones receive you becoming a drag artist?

Rachel Michaels: Well, my mother and my grandmother actually helped me in those years when I was growing up. Like doing Dolly... and so forth. Then after I started to come out of the closet, my family received it, uhm, extremely well. Now, some of my distant members that I don't see - they didn't understand. They were more prejudiced about that. My immediate family accepted me right off the bat.

Interviewer: I saw online that your drag name is Rachel Michaels, but you also go by Reba. Is there one you prefer?

Rachel Michaels: Well over the 24 years I started working in the casino look alike shows - you know the professional ones. The gimmick there was that we were men impersonating your favorite female celebrity. So, we started using our own names - our real names - Brad Fennel as Reba McEntire. And so, after I did that, I started, just wanted to be known as myself. I mean, Rachel Michaels is basically a character now instead of just my drag persona. It’s just more of a character - you know, the glamour drag. Everybody usually knows me as Reba anyway. I'm known for a variety of things and they just call me different things, I guess.

Interviewer: Are there particular labels you would use to characterize your drag?

Rachel Michaels: Uhm, labels, hmm. Well, I know I'm funny. I'm a good MC. I'd have to think about you know, certain labels. I don't think I’ve ever really had any labels for myself more than just an entertainer.

Interviewer: Okay. Yeah because there are some labels that we’ve been introduced to, such as glamour queen, male impersonator, comedy queen. I didn't know if you felt yourself align with any of those.

Rachel Michaels: Well, I do prefer uhm... to do my celebrity illusions. My first and foremost thing, I’m a celebrity impersonator. That is what I love to do, and I admire those the most who can look like celebrity. Of course, I admire the drag queens as well. The glamour queens, of course. You know? But my thing is celebrity impersonation.

Interviewer: Right. Who or what has influenced your drag?

Rachel Michaels: Has influenced my drag? Oh wow. Uh, wow. Hmm, well of course, Reba, of course. I was a huge fan of Dolly Parton. Then, there is Dame Edna of course. I've worked with some great people through the years that have influenced me. Like the great Cecile Craig. He does Liza Minnelli and I worked with him in a few shows out in Tahoe and whatnot. He really influenced me in how to be a real professional lookalike. Then of course our MC of the show was James Gypsy Haake. Of course, I mean, his comedy and MC style has really influenced me.

Interviewer: Do you consider your drag political?

Rachel Michaels: Uh, not necessarily. I do speak my mind when I'm MCing. I'll cut some jokes that are kind of sketchy (laughs). A little political here and there. I kind of like to cross the line. To see where that line is with my audience, how far can I go with a joke. Can it be about politics, can it be about religion? Those kinds of things. You know, even racial barriers, I kind of cross those too. Cause you know, I believe in equality and if we can joke about every little thing and then maybe those things will ease up. So, when you come to my show you can expect at least to be offended at least one time, but it is all in fun.

Interviewer: Can you elaborate on any occasions where you’ve made your drag political?

Rachel Michaels: Not necessarily, because I’m all about the show as a whole and, of course, you know I feel a time when I’m out there MCing and I just kind of go off of the energy of the crowd. I don’t think there’s any one instance where I’ve made it political. I’ll talk about anything, really.

Interviewer: Can you talk about what your life is like as a drag artist?

Rachel Michaels: Well, of course, my personal life I am more confident in myself then I was when I was growing up. I was a shy child. But as I've grown up, I've found my voice. It has been through my artistry as a female impersonator just being able to get up and speak my mind and be respected for that.

Interviewer: How often do you perform?

Rachel Michaels: Well, we had a club here for a year-and-a-half called ShowTime. We hadn't had a club in Paducah for about 8 years until we come along. So, we were performing at least every Saturday. But we have a new club that’s coming and I'd like to perform, of course, more than one day a week, but I've been a part of shows where it was two shows a night, six nights a week. Then it was just weekend clubs when I toured back in the day... Now that I'm older and tired, I'd rather have my own club here. I'm in my city so, I don't have to travel as often. You know, 2-3 times a week is my usual.

Interviewer: Where do you regularly perform?

Rachel Michaels: Well, at this time we don't have a local club. I've been doing the regional clubs since August - we closed back in August at ShowTime. I’ve done up at Carbondale and Cape Girardeau, I went to Evansville last weekend. But, you know those dates are few and far between. I'm just waiting on the new club here in Paducah - it will be called the River Rose Lounge. It will be located on Broadway in Paducah.

Interviewer: Very nice, so what goes into getting ready for a performance?

Rachel Michaels: Well, from start to finish it means a couple hours, you know, of prep at home. Where you’re shavin' everything and you’re showerin' and you’re pluckin'. And then when you get time for makeup. It’s just a full coverage of makeup. Cover Girl doesn't cover boy so (laughs). There is several hours of prep on the day of, but of course there is hours and hours of prep with costuming before and hair-styling. There’s a lot of prep that goes into it, more than the audience sees, you know, definitely.

Interviewer: Now do you make your own costumes, or do you buy them?

Rachel Michaels: It’s both. My ex-husband of 18 years he was my costume designer and he would design those for me and make them. Since we've split up I've kind of had to rely on myself as far as being creative. I don't have any sewing skills, I have just minor ones. But yeah, I do make some. I buy certain things and alter it. It is just a variety of ways to make costumes.

Interviewer: What are the biggest challenges to doing drag and being a drag artist?

Rachel Michaels: Well, for me personally I've done it for so long as a career the hardest thing to do is to make the proper money at doing it. That is the biggest thing. It is just so expensive to do and do it right, of course. And to get the clubs to pay you what you are worth is actually the biggest challenge I face.

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

Rachel Michaels: Hmm. So, the question is are we unique here? Is that what you’re asking?

Interviewer: Yeah! Yeah.

Rachel Michaels: Well, I'm the most unique individual here in Paducah. I'm the most notable. The past twenty years I've gone out and done lookalike shows, been on national TV on Sally Jessy Raphael, I've been featured on KVS12 twice as Reba. I've been written up in the newspaper there I’m in Cape Southeast Missourian. I'm probably the most unique individual here. Not to say the other queens aren't. It’s just I've did it more as a career instead of a hobby.

Interviewer: Have you noticed anything different about the places you've been - about the drag scene throughout the country? Have there been any variations?

Rachel Michaels: Oh yeah, there is a great entertainer, her name is Vivika Darko up in Evansville. She has opened my eyes to how extreme you can go. I've had her come perform with us at ShowTime a few times in the past. I'm just noticing a lot of more creativity. A lot of more entertainers that are not just copying other people, they are finding their own look, their own way. That kind of wasn't the way it was when I grew up. You know, you had your elder queens you followed. You did things like them to learn. It seem like the younger generation has now YouTube and the internet and where we didn't have that back in the early 90s. They are able to be influenced to the whole spectrum of drag. There is YouTube videos of all kinds of drag - to glamour, to the character look, to even the extreme look like Vivika.

Interviewer: How has drag impacted or changed you?

Rachel Michaels: Well, as I've said earlier the most important thing is it has built my confidence as an adult. You know, growing up in Kentucky and being shy. I was ashamed of my sexuality cause I didn't understand it growing up but as I've evolved and I’ve matured- especially in the gay community. It really has been a huge build to my confidence, my personal confidence.

Interviewer: If you could go back in time as Rachel Michaels, what advice would Rachel give to your younger self?

Rachel Michaels: Speak up more. Make sure you get what you want. Make sure you get what you are worth. And dump that husband of yours (laughs).

Interviewer: I’m curious if and how your social identities have impacted your experience of drag, can you share about how one or more of your social identities have impacted your drag experience? And this would be like your gender, race, class, religion, sexuality.

Rachel Michaels: I’d have to think about that one. That seems more of an in depth.

Interviewer: It is in depth.

Racheal Michaels: How about we skip that one and we come back to that one.

Interviewer: We’ll come back to that one, alright, how do you define drag?

Rachel Michaels: Drag, how do I define drag? Hmm. It is a wide spectrum. If you had asked me 10 years ago I don't think my answer would be the same as today. It’s an expression of someone’s artistic feelings that is inside them. It can be - these days there are men with beards doing drag. I mean drag make up. There is just so many cross blends now. It’s just really a full spectrum anymore.

Interviewer: What do you think is the purpose of drag?

Rachel Michaels: I'd say the most important thing is artistic expression. I think each individual has a reason to be up there. Whether they are just not getting noticed as themselves or if they were born to be an entertainer. I think the foundation is that they are up there, and they are expressing themselves artistically.

Interviewer: Do you think drag is sexual?

Rachel Michaels: It can be. There is so many facets in the drag world that do cover the sexual aspect of it. That is not me. I like to be sexy in certain characters, but it’s not really been about sex for me or anything like that. But, you know, it takes many kinds in this business. It is a full spectrum.

Interviewer: You said you would more characterize your drag as comedic?

Rachel Michaels: Yeah, I would say I do like to make fun of myself. I don't take myself too seriously. I try to look my best each and every time, but when I get that microphone I kind of poke, make fun of myself cause I am a dude in a dress you know.

Interviewer: When you are in drag what pro-nouns do you use? Do you use he?

Rachel Michaels: Most of the time we just refer to as ourselves as she. You know, Sophia Diamond even as herself as Joe I still call her Sophia or refer to her as she. It is just one of those family history things, I think.

Interviewer: Yeah. Has drag influenced your sexual and gender identity?

Rachel Michaels: Not for me personally. I mean, I identify as a gay male and I've been sure of that now for 25 years.

Interviewer: How do you feel about RuPaul's Drag Race?

Rachel Michaels: Oh, you are gonna get me.... I don't watch that show. I don't watch the show. There is nothing wrong with the show. It has brought drag to a national level of acceptance. And I do commend RuPaul and the girls, I do know some of the girls. For me personally, I've dealt with drag queens for 24 years in the dressing rooms and whatnot. I just don't want it broadcasted into my living room.

Interviewer: I think that's fair.

Rachel Michaels: Hey, I'm all for it. It is just something I haven't done, and what it has done for me as a celebrity impersonator it has knocked certain types of entertainers downhill because the RuPaul Drag Queens are the most sought after right now because of the national exposure. Which is great but on the flip side, it has pushed some of us down where they are not going to pay what we are worth. So, we kind of battle with the bookings.

Interviewer: Right, that is an interesting perspective to have because we don’t get to hear a lot from that because you are turned more towards the RuPaul Drag Queens.

Rachel Michaels: You know, I've worked with Chad Michaels on a few shows. We are personal friends and all. I've worked with a few others, of course Chad is my favorite anyway. He does the greatest Cher in the world - if you ask me. And I'm the best Reba in the world so there we go. But, no. That is my, where I stand with RuPaul. I'm okay with it. At first, I was a little bitter, but as the years have gone on and my life has changed, I see the good things from it. But, on a professional level we are battling for money.

Interviewer: If you could change on thing about drag, the drag scene, or the drag community what would it be or why?

Rachel Michaels: I would change the type of club owners. We need a new generation of club owners who sees the value in each and every entertainer because we have too many clubs that have been established, and you know it is wonderful, that they have done great things for the community, but when it comes down to the drag queens they try to get each queen as cheap as possible. I think that’s just wrong. They are making money off our backs. You know, if the show wasn't there would they come in just for the ambiance they've created and the cocktails the bartenders serving? A lot of people show up for the shows. I feel they take advantage of us because it costs a lot of money to look like that. I wish, and we do have here in Paducah, we’ve got a lesbian couple that is going to treat us wonderfully. I would just change the mentality of the current bar owners or we need a new generation who appreciates what we do.

Interviewer: What do you think are misconceptions people have about drag?

Rachel Michaels: That we want to be a woman. I hate the word transvestite. They all have these certain ideals that we are immoral. That is stemming from being in a rural area basically, but on the flip side of that there are the ones who admire what we do and see what we do, and they find it purely entertaining.

Interviewer: What do you think help change those misconceptions?

Rachel Michaels: Uhm... actually coming to see a show. Taking the time and talk to me for five minutes and I'll change your mind immediately. When I lived in Saxton, Missouri, we didn't have a gay bar over there. I lived there for 12 years with my ex-husband. And I got tired of these gay bars in the area not paying me my worth so, I went up and did my own show at a redneck country bar and it went over extremely well. It was just taking the time to talk to me and see hey, that dude ain't half bad. He is no freak, he’s no degenerate, or pervert. It’s just the way it is.

Interviewer: If you chose, one thing you want people to learn about or from drag what would it be?

Rachel Michaels: Express yourself that is really what it’s about. Finding your own identity and it is good to admire others and for a period of time to get started. But, I would suggest they look deep inside themselves and find that inner character that they want to do. Be independent, be yourself, do what you want to do. Learn from your mistakes, learn from your triumphs - that is what makes a good entertainer.

Interviewer: Absolutely, well that was actually my last question, we can come back to the in-depth question if you’d like or we can skip it, that’s up to you.

Rachel Michaels: You’re going to have to ask me that one again because I’m going to have to think about that one.

Interviewer: Alright, and you can e-mail your answer to me if you’d like.

Rachel Michaels: If you don’t mind sending me that on messenger and I’ll send you my answer to that one.

Interviewer: Alright, I can do that. Well thank you so much for your time this is very helpful to our research.

Rachel Michaels: You’re welcome and I just thank you for inviting me to do this and just let me know when it comes out and we’ll give it a look.

Interviewer: Okay, for sure I will be in touch, okay?

Rachel Michaels: Okay Emily, thank you.