Interview with Holly Haliwell

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**Holly:** The drag name?

**Carson:** Yeah.

**Holly:** Hi, Holly Haliwell, drag performer, drag queen. I don't know what else you want me to say introductory wise.

**Carson:** I think that's good. Anything else we'll talk about in the questions.

**Holly:** [Unclear] works.

**Carson:** Okay. When did you first hear about drag, and what was your initial reaction to it?

**Holly:** Um, I guess my first exposure to drag was when I first went out to... started going to the bars. Um, in Carbondale, you can get into certain clubs at 19. So, um, I had recently moved down to Southern Illinois area, didn't know many people, so... but I had heard of one local gay bar, quote-unquote gay bar in Carbondale, so I, I went, uh, shy little 19-year-old, to that bar and saw my first drag show there, um, with some of the local legends and, uh, fell in love. I've al-- it was not a hard jump for me because I grew up in the theatre world, in the performing world, and for a while, I had been on the production side of things. And so, I saw this new form of performance and thought it would be a great way for me to, kind of, dive back in to the onstage stuff versus the offstage side that I'd been, kind of, accustomed to previously.

**Carson:** How did your friends, family, or loved ones react to you becoming a drag artist?

**Holly:** Um, I guess friend-wise I stayed, kind of, within my circle, and so, I had bar friends andm and, and that kinda community that I had developed and grown through a few years. Because I didn't... I started going out and being in the drag area and world, kind of, at 19 and slowly... didn't start performing until I was 21. So, I befriended people and watched and listened and was a spectator for a while to, kind of, soak it all in and learn. And so, when I finally said, “Okay, I want to try and do this,” some of the queens were like, “Girl, you don't know what you're in for. You don't... you don't want to do this. Trust, trust me, you don't want to do this.” And I'm like, "Okay, I want to try though, still want to try." And...

**Carson:** [Unclear].

**Holly:** Yes. And so, they were... they were supportive though, and they helped getting me into it. And then, family-wise, I didn't tell my family for a long time, um... and then, when I fin-- uh, I finally told my mom, and she was kinda confused, and wasn't really sure, like, what all went into it and anything. But after I showed her some pictures and we, kind of, eased into it a little bit, and, kind of, explained that it wasn't... it wasn't me, like, wanting to transition or anything to... uh, gender dysphoria or any type of big extreme. It was just my... it was a version of performance for me. And so, it's me putting on... for me, anyways, drag is me putting on a character and stepping into that character for an evening or a show or a period of time. And I put on that persona, and then, at the end of the night, it all comes off. And that's not the case for everybody. Some people use it as a way to, uh, cope and get to understand more of their gender identity and then whatnot. And it's, kind of, like, a stepping stone. That's fine, and that's great for some people, but that's not what it is for me. But...

**Carson:** Where does your drag name come from?

**Holly:** Um, I am actually kind of [laughing] a TV nerd. And so, the TV show Charmed, I grew up with, and was kind of a big nerd when it came to that show. And so, my favorite character of that TV show is, uh... her name is Piper, Piper Halliwell. That's... uh, the show is about sisters named the Halliwell Sisters. And the actress' first name is Holly, Holly Marie Combs. And so, I took Holly and Halliwell and put them together. And it fit for me because I really do love that show, and it's also about, uh, paganism and witchcraft, which I am a practicing pagan. And so, I took elements of that from my own personal life to try and incorporate into my drag persona.

**Carson:** So, I know that there are a lot of, like, terms and types and styles of drag. Are there any particular labels you would use to characterize your drag?

**Holly:** Um, I don't like to say I fit any one specific box. I mean, you have your pageant queens and your glamor queens and your camp queens and your comedy queens and all that. And I think I take a little bit from each thing. Um, I've done pageants, I still do pageants, um, but I also... and so, I have that glamor side and... but I also have more of the, like, the Broadway stage theatre side when it comes to, like, [unclear]. And so, I can bring a little bit of comedy into my act as well. So, I don't think... it's great to have a niche, and I do... uh, Broadway and theatre will always be, kind of, like, my go to, but I don't try to limit myself to one specific box.

**Carson:** Makes sense. Who or what has influenced your drag, besides Charmed, of course? [Laughs].

**Holly:** [Laughs] Right. Um, I'd say theatre in... I mean, just theatre and the Broadway world influenced my drag a lot. Um, one of the big aspects or, or attributes that I'm personally known for is my celebrity impersonation of Liza Minnelli. Um, when I started drag, people were like, “Oh, you should try and do her.” And I'll be honest, I didn't know a lot about Liza. I was bad... I was a bad theatre kid, bad, young 19-year-old theatre kid. But as I started researching more, um, I fell in love with her, and I've embraced my celebrity doppelganger, and have really dove into her style of theatre and her style of performance. And so, even when I'm not doing Liza, I'll still find myself doing a gesture or a stylistic move that maybe she would do. So, I would say... and she's helped actually... just being able to do that type of character has helped get me bookings and helped progress and, and push my drag career forward some. So, I, I do owe my... a lot of my skills to her.

But I also want to, like, give credit where credit's due, and acknowledge the, the local entertainers that I drew from and that helped me out as I got started. But just the local legends that... 'Cause I never really had a... tangent, sorry. I never really had a specific, like, drag mother or a person that... one specific person that took me under their wing. I had... I was lucky enough to have two or three, um, and that I took little bits and pieces from that helped inspire me to, uh, grow and become the entertainer that I am today.

**Carson:** Do you consider your drag political or, like, drag in general?

**Holly:** Um, maybe not mine, specific, but I think drag as a whole inherently is, is... has a touch of politic--politics to it. Um, some of the greatest, uh, historical moments, um, were pushed forward by drag queens. You look at things like Stonewall and gay rights movement and a lot of those fights for equality and, um, progress in the LGBT community were spearheaded by drag performers and drag artists, specifically Black trans drag, uh, people, drag personas. And yes, there is... there always is going to be a note of politics to it. But that shouldn't be what everybody totally focuses on, because at the end of the day, we're also here to have fun. So, it's good to push boundaries here and remember what we're fighting for. And we've made so much headway so far, and there's always room continue. But at the same time, too, it's still good to be able to laugh and still be lighthearted.

**Carson:** Can you talk about, like, what your life is like as a drag artist? Like, how often, where you perform, what goes into getting ready for a performance?

**Holly:** Yeah. Um, I... obviously, through the pandemic, we... performance has been limited, but even before that, we... personally, I wasn't able to perform as much as I probably would have liked to. And that just has to do with the area that we're in currently, um, with the one establishment, that local establishment that we had to perform at closed down. And so, we were, kind of, nomadic and jumping around from establishment to establishment, wherever we could find a place that would host a show here and there. And so, we didn't really have a home per se.

But we have been lucky enough over the past couple years to find a few, um, local, kind of, dive bar, hole in the walls, places that you wouldn't even really expect to ever see a drag show. Like, what would be considered super straight, kind of, like, country bars, that actually have been very welcoming. There’s one in Hurst, Illinois that we've done, and, uh, had many shows at, and they have become really welcoming. And it's great to see some of these just odd towns, small towns, their, you know, side bars that have actually welcomed us in and then, you know, wanted to see it and explore and just, again, wanna come out and have fun. And that’s what this was all about at the end of the day, it was just coming out and having a good night.

And then, um, just outside of Southern Illinois, I've been fortunate to be able to do a little bit of traveling to other towns around Cape Girardeau, Evansville, Indiana, um, couple places in Tennessee and Kentucky, few other places in Missouri, so...

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

**Holly:** Um, honestly, it's, it’s probably the preparation. Like, I'll be rea... like, I'll get booked for a show, and I'll be like, "Oh yeah, I'm so excited for this show." And then the day co-- the day of comes, and I'll be like, "Oh god, I'm tired, I don't want to do all this." Because at the end of the day, it is... it's probably... it's a two-plus-hour process for me. And I know some people that can put on a 30-minute face and look gorgeous and whatever. And that's not me. I, I do like to take my time. And, uh, it, it does involve some preparation, um, just physically and mentally, uh, picking your numbers that you want to do, uh, rehearsing those in your head and, and making [unclear] your words and all that. And then, just physically sitting down, taking... and basically, reshaping your whole, entire face and physique to, uh, come and form the illusion of a female impersonator, so...

**Carson:** How do you identify in terms of your sex?

**Holly:** I have some really big bushy eyebrows, too, so they take... they're a good 15 to 20-minute process of making these disappear [laughs].

**Carson:** [Laughs] Sounds like so much fun.

**Holly:** Yes.

**Carson:** How do you identify in terms of your sex, gender identity, or gender expression out of drag?

**Holly:** I identify as a male, cisgender male, um, and I... people have, um... as time’s have gone on, people have reassessed the term of drag queen versus drag artist versus performer and all that. And I grew up, kind of, old school, and so, I will always be a queen. I don't put labels, I mean, I don't find it necessary to be neutral when it comes to identity and things like that. Um, at the end of the day, I am a queen, I'll be... I'll be a queen. If you want to be an artist, that’s kind of... that's fine, you can go be your artist, be your whatever, but I'm royalty; I'll be a queen [laughs]. Um, but yeah, out of drag, I live my life as a cisgendered male, gay male.

**Carson:** Like, it's weird, and, like, I know you, but I still have to ask these [laughs].

**Holly:** Yeah, I understand.

**Carson:** Has drag impacted your confidence as a person when you are out of drag?

**Holly:** I would say to an extent, I mean, there's... it... there's the... a sense of... um, how do I word this? Once you get all in it, there is a sense of, kind of, like, I know a lot of people have used this term before, but it's almost a sense of armor. And you have this, kind of, protective forcefield on you. And so, it is empowering to an extent, and it does help, kind of, bring out a new side of you that maybe you wouldn't normally, in your everyday life, present. And so, there is a certain level of confidence, and, and air that you put on, I guess, when, when Holly comes out.

And I can see that every now and then if, like, you're in more of a hostile situation or you, you were, kind of, in a confrontational situation in your everyday life, there's times where you can, kind of, tap into that, um, to, to relate to and to [inaudible] life. But at the same time, I, daily, normally, I... I'm an overall, kind of, quiet person. I like to classify myself as an extroverted introvert. I can be social and out there when I need to be, and when I have to be around people for work or for whatever. But at the end of the day, I would rather... like, I get peopled out, and I need to come home and just be the introvert that I secretly am. And so, Holly does bring out the more extroverted side of me and helps, uh, that... fuel that, I'd say.

**Carson:** Here's the Drag Race-style question. If you could go back and...

**Holly:** Ah, yeah.

**Carson:** [Unclear] Holly, what advice would you give to your younger self?

**Holly:** Um, advice I'd give to my younger self. I would say just listen, listen. I see so many younger queens starting out too that... I guess, you talked about Drag Race for a second, that that's the only type of drag they've ever seen. That's the only drag they've ever been exposed to. And so, they think that by watching that television show that they know... they know how it works, and they know the ropes and everything. And Drag Race has, has helped bring drag into more of a mainstream territory and has, has exposed more people to drag. But what you see on that show isn't necessarily how it works in the day-to-day world, in the, uh, everyday drag performing world. That's a more grandiose perspective and a more over-the-top, not everyone's spending thousands of dollars on outfits and, and has a full stage and, you know, has half a... hundreds of thousands of dollars in production and lighting and all that stuff, and a whole team to put their stuff together.

So, when you're getting started, stay humble, and I would tell my younger self to stay humble and to listen to your mentors and to the people that are... that have... the seasoned queens that have done this and been around and... 'cause they know what they're talking about, and they're gonna help you if you, uh, are receptive to it and are receptive to the, the constructive criticism that they're... you’re given.

**Carson:** How do you feel about Drag Race?

**Holly:** Um, I [unclear] I touched on [unclear] a second, but I can go in a little bit more. Drag Race... I started drag... Drag Race had already premiered. I think they were in prob-- I don’t know what they were in, but I [inaudible] drag in... I was 21, so it was 2011. I think Season 1 of Drag Race was 2009, so they were in their third season or something. But it was still early on enough in the show's run that it hadn’t, kind of, taken off. Um, and so, I started... I thought... I think... I would classify, kind of, at the end of the old school age of drag, where it was still a really much of a bar life-type thing and a bar scene and a club scene.

And I think that was a great time for me to start because I, I, I feel I benefited from that. I didn't get caught up in the whole Drag Race phenomenon. And Drag Race has been great, again, when it comes to bringing the style of drag and, and... how do I want to say this? It's been great in bringing... teaching the world and teaching more mainstream audiences about what drag is. It's been great for that. It's been gr-- that type of exposure has been great. But at the same time, it also has hindered what, what people's perceptions of drag can be [inaudible].

And now, a lot of... again, a lot of kids think, "Oh, I've seen it on Drag Race, how hard can it be? I can go and..." And you have your In-- what I call Instagram drag performers that have never stepped foot on a stage in their life, but they have watched half a dozen YouTube makeup tutorials and can put on a clean... and fun filter on Instagram and think, “Oooh, [click] I'm amazing. I'm the [unclear]. I'm a legend.” I feel like, sometimes, the word legend gets thrown around way too easily. Like, it takes a little bit more to become a legend, uh, and a star and then... and all that. So, uh, it's a double-edged sword. I say Drag Race is a double-edged sword. It is... has a lot of positivity on bringing the art form into the forefront of mainstream, but it does have its disadvantages.

**Carson:** What are some other misconceptions you think people have about drag?

**Holly:** Um, I'd say the... again, the... one of the most common that I, I encountered when I first started, like I said before, was, um, “Oh, you do drag. You wanna be a woman, right?” Oh. That just is the common assumption. "Oh, you dress up in women's clothes. That means you want to be a woman, right?" And no, I had no... when I started, I had no interest in transitioning. I was very secure in my gender identity and sexuality, and I was, uh... it was... [inaudible] from a theatre background, it was a character. And that's, that's what I saw it as.

Um, another common misconception is that drag is an inherent, like, deviant and sexual thing. Um, sure there are some, some queens that do more risqué music, but that's no different than turning on the radio and hearing Cardi B singing WAP or whatever [laughs], It's, it’s really just what you make of it. There's nothing inherently sexual about drag. It’s, it’s what performer is performing. And, and plenty of...I've done family-friendly shows, I've, I've performed for audiences that had toddlers in it, and I've had little prince-- little girls dressed as princesses come up to me and hand me a dollar and just beaming, beaming, going... because at the end of the day, it is, it’s a character, it's a fun show, and you can... it's how you perceive it. And there's nothing inherent—

But I've also... I mean, I've performed in more R-rated facilities before too, and... 'cause again, it's a balance. But drag itself I don't think should be ever seen as inherently, like, [inaudible] or, or, "Oh god, they're coming to convert you, or they're coming to, to corrupt our children," type of thing. So, the notion of Drag Queen Story Hour that was, kind of, in the news in a couple different communities a while back about, “So, we can't expose our children to, to drag performers and drag queens 'cause that... oh, the thought of it.” And, and it's the same way of... I feel... I look at it as the same as teaching LGBTQ history in schools, like, that was recently passed. Um, it’s an educa-- it should be approached from an educational standpoint, um, and teaching our history and the community's history is just as important as American history or African American history or anything else like that, to that nature.

**Carson:** If you could change one thing about drag, the drag scene or the drag community, what would it be and why?

**Holly:** Um, I would... part of me would say the drama, but sometimes the drama is the most fun too [laughs]. So, um... But yeah, there's a co--- it is an inherent competitive nature, even if you're not even competing in a pageant, just in the community there's always an inherent dramatic and competitive nature to it. And so, that can be stressful at some times. But it's, again, a double-edged sword, when there's competitiveness but there's also family and camaraderie, and there's the idea of a chosen family.

And, and when you work with... especially a smaller community that Southern Illinois has when it comes to the drag world, these performers you're performing with the same on a semi-regular basis. So, you develop this bond with them. And I think that's really special, versus some of the bigger cities. Like, you look at Chicago or St. Louis, and you have 100 plus different queens all vying for one, on or two spots a week at a couple different nightclubs, and that competition can get intense and it can keep you on your heels of trying to scrape and scrounge for bookings and trying to get yourself known and out there. And while there's still some of that in our area, I think we're lucky enough to have that nice knit community here of us. We're, we're small but, but mighty, I'd say.

**Carson:** I agree. If you could choose one thing you want people to know about or learn about drag, what would it be?

**Holly:** Um, that at the end of the day, it's, it's a show, it's a performance, it's no one trying to push their agenda or anything on you, per se. Um, it's, it's fun. We're here to have, um... to entertain. It's a form of entertainment, and it shouldn't be seen as anything more than that, I, I think. It's an art form, it's an art form, it's a form of entertainment at the end of the day. And that if we can all come together and just enjoy a show the way you would a concert or going to the movies or a theatre production on Broad... or on Broadway or wherever, it's, it's... we're here for a few hours to have a good time.

**Carson:** Is there anything else that you want to share about your experiences?

**Holly:** Um, I guess, I'll... I can go back and talk again about, again, how I got started and just... but I would like to acknowledge the legends that I... that did help me out, uh, Blanche duBois and Jodie Santana, Rochelle Delight, Aida Headley, Veronica J Belle and Kara Belle, all of them... I didn't... again, I didn't have one specific drag mother or, or mentor, I had a slew of them. And they all contributed to shaping me and my persona in some way or for, and I thank them all for that, so...

**Carson:** Where do you live now? I need to include that in my biography.

**Holly:** Um, I'm currently in Herrin, Illinois, so...

**Carson:** Alright. Thank you for talking to me. I really did enjoy it.

**Holly:** Yeah, good. I hope I was of some help.

**Carson:** [Laughs]

**Holly:** Didn’t just ramble on incoherently for too long.

**Carson:** No, it’s fine. But can you send me a couple pictures of you in drag that you like, so I can add it, as like... so I can add it to my project?

**Holly:** Yeah, of course.

**Carson:** I don't wanna just [unclear] you like them

**Holly:** Yeah, sure, of course. Right. No, that's fine. Yeah, I’ll send you a couple. That's fine.

**Carson:** All right. Cool. Uh, I'm gonna turn it on Friday, I think.

**Holly:** Yeah. I'll, I'll go through tomorrow in, in the morning when I'm at work.

**Carson:** It wasnice talking to you.

**Holly:** Yeah, it's good to see you.

**Carson:** Hopefully [unclear] soon.

**Holly:** Okay. Have a good night.