**Interview with Johnny Ford**

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Rachael: So, the first one is, when did you first hear about drag and what was your initial reaction to it?

Johnny: When I first saw or heard about drag, I was a little apprehensive just because I didn’t fully understand, like why people wanted to do it or you know what the value was. And so I thought it was a little over the top, a little too crazy for me. But as I got closer to it, and I really started to understand the art form and started to really appreciate it and get more into it and then eventually get involved myself.

Rachael: Love it. Okay, for the next one, when did you start performing as a drag artist and why did you start performing?

Johnny: I started performing about two years ago, in the gay scene in Chicago. And so one of my first opportunities was actually a charity event where they were raising money for some local nonprofit and they had folks do drag to raise money.

Rachael: Oh, that’s cool. For the third one, how did your—

Johnny: I’m sorry.

Rachael: No, you’re good. How did your family, friends, and other loved ones receive you becoming a drag artist?

Johnny: Yeah, I had a lot of support from my friends and my family, as it relates to drag. There weren’t a whole lot of questions, I think it was like a very slow evolution. People like starting to see me play around with makeup and like do this charity event and then, you know, picking up from there so it was pretty natural and I’ve gotten like a ton of support from my friend group, who like would actively go out to my shows or share my posts and stuff like that.

Rachael: That’s awesome. For the next one, there are a lot of terms for types and styles of drag from drag queen and drag king to glamour queen, male impersonator, comedy queen, bearded queen, queer artist, bio-queen, camp queen, among with others. Are there any particular labels you would use to characterize your drag?

Johnny: Yeah. I just try not to label myself as it relates to my drag because I just really appreciate the flexibility for being creative, but if I had to describe my current drag aesthetic, it’s definitely more of like a look queen. So I really am drawn to the aesthetic, and putting an outfit together, and the cohesion with the makeup and so I guess that’s where I consider myself as an artist, more of a like a look—

Rachael: Yeah I gotcha.

Johnny: --or a fashion girl.

Rachael: For six—for the sixth one, who or what had influenced your drag?

Johnny: [inaudible]

Rachael: Who or what has influenced your drag?

Johnny: Who has influenced my drag? Um, lots of other drag queens. So lots of like, female artists. So I’m really inspired by artists like Brooke Candy, Rico Nasty, like Pabllo Vittar, really empowered by these artists that are out there, kind of sharing a new vision or being bold and doing something different, I absolutely love that.

Rachael: That’s awesome. Do you consider your drag political why, or why not?

Johnny: Drag is 100% always political. So there’s no- I don’t think there’s a way that you can do drag without it being political. It is a statement in itself. When you decide there to put it on. But I think there’s an advantage to that, and being able to command a presence and then share a position or platform and try and do good with it.

Rachael: Gotcha. Yeah. Can you talk about what your life is like as a drag artist, like, are you a part of a drag family or house or collective, like how often do you perform? What goes on getting ready for performance, and like what are your challenges?

Johnny: Yeah. The drag community is like, so energizing and incredibly diverse. Which I appreciate so much. I’m not in a drag family, but I have met so many really incredible artists through drag, that inspired me to do more. I love to collaborate with other artists. In general, I am not part of a family or collective necessarily, but I still consider myself pretty fresh in the scene. And so, I’m sure, you know as I grow and make more connections, you know, who knows. The sky is the limit.

Rachael: Right. How often do you perform and where do you perform?

Johnny: I performed a hell of a lot more often before covid.

Rachael: Oh yeah.

Johnny: But you know, and then before then, it was a lot of performing at the bars. In Chicago, we’re very lucky to have several queer spaces that include drag and pay for it. So I’ve performed at several clubs in Chicago like Splash, Berlin, Scarlet. So, I’m very lucky to have done that. In general, for performing, I would do it a couple times a month, and then you know if I were to enter a competition like I did a couple years ago, I was performing every week.

Rachael: Oh, that’s cool! What goes into getting ready for performance?

Johnny: What goes into getting ready? Oh my gosh, so much. Physically, obviously, you have to sit down and put yourself together. It involves a lot of listening to music and putting on your face and you know putting your outfit together, always running late, to the bar or the function. And then mentally. You know it’s a lot of you kind of just hyping yourself up to get you into that state of mind where you can step in front of the crowd, and feel confident and be able to, you know, really put on a show. So it’s a lot of that kind of hyping yourself up for a few hours to be your own hype man.

Rachael: What would you say are your biggest challenges to doing drag and being a drag artist?

Johnny: Biggest challenges… One of the biggest challenges I think is [inaudible]. You know it takes a lot of guts to stand up in front of a crowd of people, gays especially because we’re notoriously judgmental. We know you know in this day and age of Drag Race I feel like there is like an expectation of drag to be like high quality. And so, you kind of have to deal with that in your head: what are people thinking? What is the perception of the crowd? Are they enjoying this? Am I not living up to their expectations? And then there’s a whole other side of that in your personal life of, you know, how am I being considered by my friends, as a drag artist, you know. Am I romantically, does that hinder or help that you--when you reveal to somebody that you’re interested in that you do drag, you know what I mean? There are layers to it, not only in drag but it kind of touches other aspects of your life.

Rachael: Yeah, I gotcha. Okay how do you identify in terms of your sex, gender identity and gender expression, out of drag?

Johnny: I’m a pretty flexible person. I said this earlier but I don’t really feel the need to label myself a lot. In just—in the most basic terms, I still consider myself a cisgender, homosexual male. That being said, you know, I love to wear my drag clothes and boy clothes and just play with gender expression as much as I want to every day.

Rachael: I gotcha, yeah. How has drag impacted or changed you?

Johnny: Drag has made me 1000 times happier. And, I don’t know. It feels like you unlock something when you do drag. I’ve always encouraged people to try it at least once. I feel like you learn a little bit more about who you are when you step into it and the bravado that it gives you. I just, I think it opens up your world and your view, and your understanding of more like the like queer community when you do it.

Rachael: Right.

Johnny: I think it has just made me more mindful, more celebratory, more queer person which I absolutely love.

Rachael: Would you say that it’s like,impacted your confidence as a person when you’re out of drag?

Johnny: 100%. 100% I think it has impacted my confidence out of drag. Like being able to command a presence or-- like the people I don’t know, and, you know, I’ve never really been a shy person. I definitely think that drag has had an impact in my overall confidence as a whole.

Rachael: Yeah, I gotcha. Almost done. How do you define drag, like your own definition?

Johnny: My own definition of drag. My definition of drag is pretty wide. Drag can honestly be anything that pushes you out of your normal comfort zone. So it doesn’t necessarily have to do with [inaudible], like you could throw on like a piece of clothing and that could be drag for you. It just changes how you see yourself and how you present yourself to the world. So drag for me is just shifting their expression outwardly, and pushing yourself into a new element.

Rachael: I love that. Okay, next, what do you think is the purpose of drag?

Johnny: Oh my gosh. So, for me, the purpose of drag is--it changes for each person. Some people may want to do drag as an escape from their current situation.

Rachael: Right.

Johnny: They may want to step into a new personality or try something new. There may be more people that choose like to do drag because they love to entertain and be onstage. There might be people who do drag because they love fashion and creativity. And so for me, it’s—it’s completely based on the person, because there are so many different reasons that you could do drag and what I love as well, is drag is ever evolving. You might get into drag because you love doing clothes, or you love doing hair and makeup, and then you learn something new and directing thought into something even more fulfilling in the future.

Rachael: Okay, so do you think drag is sexual why or why not, if so, how in what way?

Johnny: Is drag sexual? Is that the question?

Rachael: Yes.

Johnny: Yes, absolutely. I think drag is sexual. I think there is power in being able to fit the narrative around sexuality and express like something new and something different. So I think you know there is kind of this expectation too that drag has to-- you have to be a sexy drag queen, you have to be beautiful.

Rachael: Right.

Johnny: And I don’t think that’s necessarily true.

Rachael: Right.

Johnny: And I think there’s always kind of an innate sexual nature to drag [inaudible]. You’re touching gender expression, and gender and sex are so, you know, infinitely linked.  I think there’s absolutely kind of an underlying tone of sexuality and whatever kind of drag you do.

Rachael: Yes, for sure. Okay, how do you feel about RuPaul’s Drag Race?

Johnny: Um very mixed emotions.

Rachael: I feel that.

Johnny: Drag Race has been really fantastic and just elevating drag into an art form that people recognize that across the world. So I’m very appreciative of drag race for being able to take what was against--considered cringe and maybe considered weird in the queer community and really taking it to this level that people are so invested in and it really feels like a competition or a sport and an art form. And gives this platform to all of these artists who are doing incredible work and deserve to be recognized. Obviously the other side of that is that Drag Race is not perfect. And, so there are tons of really incredible diverse performers who don’t fit into the mold that drag race has created and are not given the same attention and platform. And of course, there is a different level of polish that people tend to expect from drag because of Drag Race. And so we want to kind of deal with that too and like maybe the local artists and the artists that don’t have those resources or that attention are kind of looked over, because people are looking for Drag Race quality drag. So that is kind of the double-edged sword, I think, of Drag Race.

Rachael: Okay, we have three more. So, if you could change one thing about drag, the drag scene or the drag community, what would it be and why?

Johnny: If I could change one thing about the drag scene, I would try to get rid of as many barriers as possible for the drag artists that are overlooked, like the bio queens and more like gender nonconforming performers, and, of course, drag kings and queens of color. I feel like there are a lot of barriers that still exist for those performers; they obviously don’t get the same kind of attention, and aren’t cast on shows like Drag Race as often. I think that’s changing. And that’s something that if I could snap my fingers, that’s what I would do is make those same performers in the same spotlight and in the same positions with the same resources as the queens that you’re seeing cast on Drag Race.

Rachael: Yeah, totally. Okay, what do you think are misconceptions people have about drag, and where do you think it comes from?

Johnny: Yeah, I think, there are definitely several. People have a general misconception about drag in that, I think a lot of people think that to be a drag queen, you must want to be a woman, or you may be, like, overly feminine or there’s something going on in your psyche that you’re not like--You know, whatever your general gender expression is and you want to be somebody different. And for me that’s not the case. In general I think people have a misconception as to why you want to do drag. And I think people are starting to more recognize now and see it as like a sport and an art form that is separate from you know the struggle that someone may have related to their gender identity.

Rachael: Yeah. Okay, last one. If you choose one thing you want people to know about or learn about drag, what would it be?

Johnny: What I want people to learn about drag. That it is accessible and that everyone should do it. That it’s for everybody. Absolutely.

Rachael: Love that.

Johnny: It’s something that like everyone should touch. Everyone should see. Everyone should do. No matter who you are, you can learn something about yourself from it.

Rachael: Well, thank you. That was all of them.