Jackie Beat on being more than people want

October 14, 2016 - Jackie Beat—the take no prisoners drag persona of Kent Fuher—has been delighting and terrifying audiences all over the world for over twenty-five years. Jackie is something of a triple threat in the drag world—a queen who sings live, writes her own material, and doesn't dance. She has served as muse (and a writer) for the likes of Roseanne Barr, Ross Matthews, and the late, great Joan Rivers, who said of Beat, "Jackie Beat is a true artist. If you don't get her, that's *your* problem!"

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 1477 words.

Tags: Comedy, Writing, Inspiration, Beginnings, Success.

How did Jackie Beat become your preferred vehicle for expressing yourself?

I really just came up with Jackie as a joke, which I find is often the first step to a lot of things that end up taking off and/or being important. I was a somewhat serious poet and artist when I first moved to Los Angeles in the mid-1980s. Back then they had open mic nights and I would go one in particular week after week and sign up, but they never seemed to get to me. They always had time for Ally Sheedy or Robert Downey Jr., but never for me. So I got pissed off and showed up one week in full "beatnik drag": Black bob wig, black beret, black smudgy eyeliner, black turtleneck, black skirt, black leggings, black boots. Did I mention I was wearing black?

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Anyway, not only would they not let me read my poetry once again, but they they wouldn't even let me in! I had written a hilarious poem about my landlord—essentially a standup comedy routine—and I really felt like it was too good to go unread. So I went to the gay bar Rage and entered their talent contest. When the guy with the clipboard asked my name I quickly came up with "Jackie Beat" because I thought it was a very 1960s sounding name: A little Jack Kerouac, a little Jackie Kennedy, a little Beat poet. Well, I won the contest and the rest is history.

What did years of performing live in gloriously sleazy places like the Cock in New York City teach you about being a performer?

First, it gave me a very thick skin. If I can belt out a song in a crowded firetrap while everyone in the room is ignoring me and watching some guy get a blow job in the backroom just behind me ("*Shut that fucking curtain!*") then I can certainly handle drunk bridesmaids and/or annoying millennials on their smart phones. The Cock was pretty much Drag Queen Boot Camp. Second, it just strengthens your performance muscles to do it night after night after night. It taught me to give 110% no matter where you are. If you accepted the job, do it with a smile on your face.

What do you think being Jackie Beat allows you to say or do creatively that you couldn't otherwise?

Well, I often say that being dressed as a character that is simultaneously both genders but ultimately neither allows me to say just about anything. It's kind of a Trojan Horse situation. A harmless clown can get away with some pretty controversial material that would be career suicide for any other performer. You sneak it in. Today's oh-so-touchy audiences can find just about anything to be offended by, but I still stick to my guns. I'm sorry if you have irony-poor blood. Not my problem!

What did you learn from writing for the likes of Roseanne, Ross Mathews, and Joan Rivers?

The first thing you learn is to write in their specific voice. I was writing for Joan and Ross at the same time so all my horrible vagina jokes went to Joan and the not-too-threatening pop culture stuff went to Ross.

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My way of writing comedy is just throwing stuff out there and seeing what sticks. I am shameless that way. I never hold back and I will even pitch jokes I know aren't fully-formed yet or maybe even go nowhere, because it may inspire someone in the room to come up with something brilliant. This is not to say I am lazy—I do know how to craft a joke. Joan once said something about it almost being mathematical and I agree. But then it's also magic. Part math, part magic.

What's the hardest thing about what you do?

The hardest thing is having faith that you still have amazing creativity and brilliant ideas and hilarious jokes inside you. It is not a well that can be drained. Sometimes, after over 25 years, I just feel like I've said and done it all. But something always comes to me.

It's also very liberating to realize that "it's all been done" so don't obsess about being unique or coming up with something revolutionary and/or new every single time. There are only so many colors, but artists can take them and make their own art. There are only so many musical notes on the scale, but musicians can take them and make their own music.

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It also helps if you don't feel like the magic or creativity is "yours." You are merely the "channel" for the magic to come through. And I keep using the word "magic" because I honestly can't think of anything more magical—or important—than making people laugh.

As a performer, what can you learn from failure?

If you are really meant to do something, you can't let a little failure stop you. Or even a lot of failure! When I first started doing drag, my makeup was *horrible*! We're talking Sharpie eyebrows (I'm not kidding—permanent marker!), no blending, lips that looked like a big bow-tie. And now there are people on YouTube doing tutorials of Jackie Beat makeup and an entire generation of queens have been inspired by my face paint.

Sometimes I am more than what people want.

I do the kind of show I want to see. I always say that if you are really smart then you will get all the sophisticated layers, but if you're not-too-bright (or maybe drunk) you'll hear the word "poop" and laugh. You can't please everyone, but you can try to satisfy all types that may happen to be in the audience.

Sometimes I am more than what people want. They just want a drag queen to lip sync Nicki Minaj and do death drops, but I demand a certain amount of attention—even concentration—and some people just want a fucking clown show and they're not into it. It doesn't mean I'm not great at what I do. But like I often tell my struggling performer friends, most people prefer McDonald's hamburgers. They're cheap, convenient, familiar. But just because they are the most popular doesn't mean they're the best.

In appreciation of Jackie Beat:

Some of the most fascinating and genuinely sweet scenes in *Wigstock*—the 1995 documentary focusing on NYC's iconic drag festival—feature Jackie Beat getting into drag alongside the late Alexis Arquette. Not only is the film a testament to the storied history of drag, it remains a joyful document of a particularly vibrant time for gay culture in downtown New York City.

Jackie Beat—aka Kent Fuher—reads his contribution to the "Born This Way Blog," which later became a popular book, live at Homo-Centric in Los Angeles.

Known for having one of the most iconic and most widely-copied faces in drag, Jackie Beat stopped by James St. James' hugely popular web series "Transformations" to give a tutorial on how to properly "Beat" one's face in order to achieve her signature look.

Though she loves nothing more than a good poop joke, Jackie Beat's song parodies are often just as culturally incisive as they are profoundly scatalogical. Her take on Mary J. Blige's "No More Drama" is a glorious deflation of right-wing attitudes regarding art and sexual orientation, all told the the deeply tragic lens of high school drama class.

One of the most widely-watched bits of Jackie Beat-penned ephemera are these series of spoofs inspired by the high-fructose corn syrup propaganda commercials created by The Corn Refiners Association.

What is something you wish you had known—or that you wish someone had told you—when you first started performing?

That not everyone can do this—or should. And success comes in many forms. I may not be a millionaire or have an Oscar, but I make a living as a performer. And in the grand scheme of things, that is amazing!

What do you want for the future?

I want a really great part on Broadway. The only problem is that I get bored very easily *and* I really don't want to live in New York City again.

Name
Jackie Beat

Vocation
Drag Queen, Comedian, Writer

Fact

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Austin Young