

Justin Vivian Bond on politics and performance



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Justin Vivian Bond is a celebrated singer/songwriter, author, painter, performance artist and occasional actor. As a kind of luminary of downtown NYC for the past twenty years, Bond is best known for breathing fiery life into the role of boozed-up chanteuse Kiki DuRane—one half of beloved fictional lounge act Kiki & Herb. It's a role that seemed to demand increasingly bigger stages, eventually taking Bond from playing the bars and backrooms of lower Manhattan to treading to boards of the Broadway stage (via 2006's *Kiki & Herb: Alive on Broadway*), garnering a slew of theater awards, a cult-like fan base, and a Tony nomination along the way.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 1829 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Culture](#), [Comedy](#), [Politics](#).

When you and Kenny Mellman first started doing Kiki & Herb in 1989, so much of the vitriol in the show was a direct reaction to AIDS. Us queer folks of a certain age can remember what it was like to live through that. AIDS became a defining thing about our culture, particularly as we are/were represented in the arts. For today's young LGBTQ artists, the perspective on our culture is vastly different. They didn't have to experience that reality firsthand.

It's really interesting. My impression is that they just assume that everything is always going to get better on a certain level. Not that they're in any way optimistic or looking at life through rose-colored glasses. As for this awful election, I worry that there's not actually going to be any good reactionary art coming out of this unless Trump gets elected and things go to shit... not that I want that to happen. I don't. But if it does happen then the kids would be fired up, because they're young. Which, if nothing else, would be great. If Hillary gets elected it will almost be like when Eisenhower got elected. Everything will just sort of go on, and maybe things will even out, but it's unlikely that you'll see any sort of big, revolutionary moment.

If there were to be any silver lining about what could happen if Trump wins, it might only be what happens in the arts.

But was there really a great artistic reaction against Reagan? That moment was really about AIDS, and it was about gay people dying. People in the '80s didn't make great art simply because Reagan was a dick. The great art came because it was a matter of life or death. An entire population was being wiped out and, for a lot of people, making art was the only thing you could do, the only thing to ward off feeling totally helpless.

It's like everything is being said by everyone everywhere all the time. It's non-stop wall-to-wall coverage. What else is there to add to all of that noise?

Maybe great art will start coming out of white men when cars start driving themselves. I saw some statistic that 33% of working-class white men earn their living either driving trucks or driving cabs or driving Ubers. When self-driving cars come along, they're not going to have jobs. If you think the misogyny is bad now, just wait and see how men behave if the self-driving cars take over while we have a female president.

As a performer, you're in a really interesting position. As Kiki, you're allowed to say all of this really outrageous stuff and get away with it in the guise of a character. In your solo shows, it doesn't have to be about that. You are free to just be an entertainer, to provide people with a moment of escape.

I'm lucky in that way because I basically just do what I want, for better or for worse. My whole theme now in regards to doing shows is Justin Vivian Bond shows up. I'll pick some songs and I'll give people a title for their marketing thing, and then when I get there I just start talking. And singing. I don't like knowing what I'm going to do, really, too much before I arrive. Then everything feels stilted, or packaged or whatever.

Another one of the great things about doing the Kiki and Herb show was that, while we really planned it—we had the set we rehearsed and I made up the background stories, like Kiki and Herb going to the Middle East or Kiki going to Syria—it still allowed for some freedom. It sort of evolved over time. Because it was five nights a week, or twenty-two shows a month or whatever, it just got tighter and tighter and tighter as it went on. That being said, it wasn't like I had to stick to the script if I didn't want to... and often I didn't. I don't like having a script.

I know you are teaching at Bard right now. Do the kids ask you for advice? Do they ask you how to go about becoming a successful performer?

I don't know if they even have any clue who I am, really. They are smart but they don't really know anything. They're excited to find out what to look at, some of them. I give them tips sometimes. Mostly I wanted to teach this course, Live Art Installation, so that these performance students, acting majors, would hopefully discover that they have a voice as an artist. I wanted them to know that they don't have to rely on being cast in roles that fit them. I wanted them to understand that they can have a certain level of security and confidence in their own ability to self-generate work. That's my goal in this class. It's not always about waiting for someone to discover you or waiting for the perfect part to come along. Sometimes the most ideal part is the one you create for yourself.

Did you always know that you would be a performer?

I always knew I was going to be a performer or an artist. I always knew I was going to write. I thought all those things were really glamorous, you know? When I was a kid I was like "Oh I want to be a writer." I liked writers. I read biographies of writers. I was into that and visual art. Both of my parents were working-class people, but my mom would take classes and she painted. Art was something I think they enjoyed and appreciated.

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Eventually I decided I was going to be a TV actor, or a movie actor, or a Broadway actor, which eventually I did become. Still, all of those things were sort of unfulfilling because of the time I was growing up in. I didn't want to have to be in the closet. All of the stuff that happened in the '90s—the rise of gay art and gay indie films—wasn't what I was being educated to take advantage of. Things like *Will & Grace*, there was no place for me on things like that. Now there's a place for me in that world, and I'm like, "Okay, maybe I'll do a little bit of that kind of acting now" but mostly I really love doing my own thing, so it's hard to commit. However, I recently had a great time doing *High Maintenance*, that was really fun. I did a little part in this Baz Luhrmann show, *The Get Down*, the season finale for next year. That was really fun.

Anyway, I wasn't sure exactly what I was gonna do when I was younger. I just went to California after acting school to hang out in San Francisco thinking I was going to become an art history professor or something. I didn't want to be an actor. Then I met Kate Bornstein and I found out about queer performance art and I was like "Oh, THIS is what I'm doing."

When you happen to be this amazing kind of self-made creature—or someone with a really strong personality that kind of defines you—it's hard for mainstream Hollywood to know what to do with you. Being really distinctive can work against you.

Exactly, that's why I don't often do it, because I usually get cast in these boring things. That's why I liked playing the psychic named Pam on *High Maintenance*. She is just this nice lady who helps a guy who trips and falls down. I did it because it was fun and it was probably closer to me than the parts most people would want me to play.

Justin Vivian Bond recommends:

Eternal Inspirations:

Play it as it Lays by Joan Didion

Joni Mitchell

Billy Baldwin the great 20th Century Interior Decorator

Eartha Kitt

My grandmother Idella Mose

Trees

Recently moved by:

Christadora by Tim Murphy

"I Want A President" by Zoe Leonard

My students at Bard College

Here by Alicia Keys

PWR BTTW

Someone wrote on Twitter today, "It was nice to see Justin Vivian Bond play the the ultimate nice New Yorker." I thought it was funny because what I did on the show is something that I've actually done before in real life. One Sunday I was on my way to church and I saw this older gay guy fall down on the street and he really hit his head hard. So I ran over and cupped his head in my hand and I was like, "Are you okay?" And you could tell he was really embarrassed because he'd fallen and I helped him up, and you know, once I knew he was okay, I continued going to church. Once I got there I just started bawling. I don't know what happened. It just triggered me in a way and I started crying. That really happened. But I guess maybe people wouldn't think of me in that way normally. First of all I don't go to church every Sunday, but on that particular Sunday I did. It's just funny... if you are a performer for long enough, your persona really does become something.

I wanted them to know that they don't have to rely on being cast in roles that fit them. I wanted them to understand that they can have a certain level of security and confidence in their own ability to self-generate work.

That was a thing with playing Kiki, too. The reason I was Kiki was because I was fascinated with people like her—people who were loud and crazy and, you know, just wholly inappropriate without realizing it. Doing that show on and off for so many years, people expect you to actually be that character. For Kenny, he would always get these people that wanted to date him because they wanted to be the Kiki in the relationship. Whereas, he's more, I don't think he's like Kiki, you know, but the dynamic is very different between us in real life. In many ways he's much more outgoing than I am. I'm a social butterfly, which actually minimizes contact and engagement. It's not that I'm shy, but I prefer serious one-on-one conversations where I feel comfortable. I get overwhelmed in social situations. I like being on stage because you're alone.

Alone and in control.

Yes! I've always been fascinated by eccentric, crazy people, but I certainly don't think I'm as eccentric and crazy as some of the people I'm fascinated by. I can be, but then when people expect you to be that, it's like, Jesus Christ. You always feeling like you're letting people down unless you're screaming in their face.

Name

Justin Vivian Bond

Vocation

Singer, Actor, Writer, Artist

Fact

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