



Aucoin, Kevyn (1962-2002)

by Linda Rapp

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Make-up artist Kevyn Aucoin has been called a genius in his field. He worked with many of the most prominent stars in the fashion and entertainment industries and authored three books about make-up. He believed that beauty was empowering, as it raised women's self-esteem. A victim of homophobia in his youth, Aucoin also became a vigorous activist for gay rights.

Aucoin was the oldest of the four adopted children of Isidore Aucoin, a telephone-company manager, and Thelma Melancon Aucoin, a homemaker. He was born February 14, 1962, in Shreveport, Louisiana, and became a member of the Aucoins' Lafayette, Louisiana, household about a month later.

Aucoin recalled that his mother encouraged his creativity when he was a child. By the age of eleven he developed a fascination with make-up. His first subject was his younger sister, Carla, whom he made up to look like models in fashion magazines. He continued experimenting with the techniques of make-up on both of his sisters and other friends. Aucoin never had any formal training in make-up, which he considered an advantage because it allowed him to explore and take chances.

At an early age, Aucoin became aware that he was gay. The realization made him feel like an outsider in his conservative town, but he never attempted to hide his orientation. His family came to accept his sexuality. His parents eventually founded the first chapter of P-FLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) in Lafayette, served as the group's southern regional directors for seven years, actively lobbied for gay rights, and counseled gay and lesbian teens.

As a youth Aucoin faced prejudice and abuse. At school other students threw rocks and bottles at him and left notes with death threats in his locker, while teachers were indifferent to his plight. At fifteen he dropped out of school after two classmates tried to run him over with a truck.

At the age of twenty Aucoin moved to Baton Rouge, where he continued to encounter homophobia. While shopping in the make-up section of a department store, he and two friends were detained by security guards who stripped and beat them, but police refused to pursue the case.

Shortly thereafter, Aucoin and his then partner and future manager Jed Root moved to New York. At first their existence was hand-to-mouth. Aucoin often made up models for free so that his work could become known.

An important break for Aucoin came in late 1983 when he was hired by photographer Steven Meisel to do Meg Tilly's make-up for a fashion piece in *Vogue* magazine. From that point on, his career and reputation continued to grow. He did the first of his many *Vogue* covers in 1986. His work appeared in numerous other fashion magazines as well.

In addition to his magazine jobs, Aucoin did make-up for cosmetics and fashion ads, music videos, album covers, and designer fashion shows. He was much in demand by actresses appearing in awards shows. In

2000, when Hilary Swank's studio could not afford his fee to do her make-up for the Academy Awards, he waived it because he considered her film, *Boys Don't Cry* (1999, directed by Kimberly Peirce), so politically important.

In 1995 Aucoin won the Council of Fashion Designers of America award, the only make-up artist so honored.

Aucoin wrote three books about make-up, *The Art of Makeup* (1994), *Making Faces* (1997), and *Face Forward* (2000). Featured in them were many of his celebrity clients such as Audrey Hepburn, Cher, Janet Jackson, Cindy Crawford, and Naomi Campbell.

A favorite subject was Barbra Streisand. Ever since childhood, Aucoin and his cousin Jay Theall, who was also gay and eventually became a hair-dresser, had considered her their "beauty ideal" as much for her individuality and sense of self as for her appearance. The cousins, who were also best friends, dreamed of working together with Streisand but never had the chance. Theall died of AIDS shortly before Aucoin's first meeting with her.

In Aucoin's books one finds not only his famous clients but also his sisters, Kim Trahan and Carla Adkisson, and mother, Thelma Aucoin. He featured other non-celebrities such as Verna Eggleston of the Hetrick-Martin Institute and several men, including his lover, Jeremy Autunes, a writer.

Aucoin believed that "beauty has a lot to do with character." Although he has been described as an alchemist with make-up--able to transform both Liza Minnelli and Lisa Marie Presley into Marilyn Monroe, and Gwyneth Paltrow into James Dean--his aim was to "empower a woman by revealing her natural beauty" and to "celebrat[e]... individual attractiveness and the quirks and imperfections that make people different." He rejected the idea of a single standard of beauty and decried the lack of racial and ethnic diversity in the fashion industry.

Aucoin also wrote a column in *Allure* magazine. Not one to shrink from public expression of his views, he used this forum to state that he would never do make-up on a right-wing Republican and that he considered members of the National Rifle Association "morons." As a result of the latter remark, he received several death threats.

Aucoin was a crusader for gay rights and a supporter of the Hetrick-Martin Institute, a service organization founded in 1979 to assist and advocate for gay, lesbian, and transgender youth.

Aucoin died of a metabolic disorder, after having been diagnosed and treated for a pituitary brain tumor, on May 7, 2002. He was survived by his partner Jeremy Autunes and his parents.

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