



RuPaul (RuPaul Andre Charles) (b. 1960)

by Tina Gianoulis

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A portrait of RuPaul by Mathu Andersen.
Courtesy RuCo, Inc.

A six-foot five-inch tall African-American drag queen who usually performs in a blonde wig, RuPaul has given drag a new visibility by infusing it with gentleness and warmth.

RuPaul is credited with the statement "We're born naked, and the rest is drag." As one of the most famous drag queens in mainstream media history, RuPaul has been responsible for giving drag a new visibility in American popular culture.

By making drag less threatening to mainstream audiences, he has not only had a successful recording career as a disco diva, but has also had a wide variety of film roles, both in and out of drag, and hosted a popular VH1 talk show.

Perhaps his most appropriate gender-bending career has been as the "Face of M.A.C. Cosmetics," spokesmodel for the Canadian cosmetics company and chairperson of the M.A.C. AIDS charity fund.

The concept of drag is all about manipulating surface images, and RuPaul's life has given him an intimate understanding of the ways in which the surface can be deceptive.

Born into a working class family in San Diego on November 17, 1960, RuPaul Andre Charles had an early fascination with things feminine. By the age of four, he was already an effeminate boy, imitating Diana Ross and Jane Fonda and beginning to be labeled a sissy.

His parents divorced when he was seven, and RuPaul was raised from then on in a household of strong women, consisting of his adored twin sisters, seven years older than he, and his mother, whom he describes in his autobiography as "the fiercest drag queen I've ever known."

By the time he was fifteen, RuPaul was ready to come out as a gay man, and he chafed under his mother's iron rule. He moved into his sister's house, then moved with her to Atlanta.

There, free from parental constraints, he threw himself into the gay life, performing in drag clubs, and, briefly, with his own band, RuPaul and the U-Hauls.

In 1987 he relocated to New York and began the move into the big time. He landed roles in such films as Spike Lee's *Crooklyn* (1993), Betty Thomas's *The Brady Bunch Movie* (1995), Barry Shils' *Wigstock: The Movie* (1995), Wayne Wang's *Blue In The Face* (1995), Beeban Kidron's *To Wong Foo, Thanks For Everything, Julie Newmar* (1996), and, most recently, Jamie Babbit's *But I'm a Cheerleader* (2000) in which he plays the part of an ex-gay camp counselor in "male drag."

His albums, such as *Supermodel of the World* (1993) and *Foxy Lady* (1996), have received respectable reviews; and, from 1996 until September 1998, *The RuPaul Show* aired six days a week on VHI, featuring such guests as Cher, k. d. lang, Eartha Kitt, and Dennis Rodman.

In 2000 he narrated the acclaimed documentary, *The Eyes of Tammy Faye*, about evangelist Tammy Faye Bakker, a poignant irony for those who recognize the clownishly made-up right-wing Christian Bakker as an unintentional drag icon herself.

After an extended sabbatical from performing, RuPaul returned to active schedule of public appearances in 2004. He signed a deal to co-host the morning show at adult-contemporary formatted radio WNEW in New York City and released a new album, *RuPaul: Red Hot*. A single from the album, "Looking Good, Feeling Gorgeous," enjoyed a brief stay at the top of the dance charts.

RuPaul enjoys playing with the contradictions of drag. As a Black man, he is very conscious that most white people are much less threatened by him when he is dressed as a woman, even a six-foot-five woman.

However, though he cheerfully bends gender and challenges assumptions wherever possible, he is clear and irrepressible about his identity as a gay man. As he said to Maria Speidel in the September 23, 1996 issue of *People Weekly*, "I never feel that I dress as a woman. I dress as a drag queen because, you know, women don't dress the way I dress. It's too uncomfortable."

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About the Author

Tina Gianoulis is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.