



Russell, Craig (1948-1990)

by Joe E. Jeffreys

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Craig Russell was one of the major female impersonators of the 1970s and 1980s. He was one of the last of the school that actually sang or spoke live in the voices of the ladies he impersonated. He was also an accomplished actor.

Born Russell Craig Eadie in Toronto on January 10, 1948, he began mimicking people at age five to amuse his family. His parents divorced when he was nine. As an adolescent, he suffered from skin problems and therefore wore makeup to school and was all too predictably picked on.

When he was a teenager he became president of the Mae West International Fan Club and soon moved to Los Angeles to work for West as her secretary-companion. He returned to Toronto to complete high school, but quickly dropped out. He worked as a typist and, from 1969 until 1971, as a hairdresser.

By 1971 he had adopted the name Craig Russell and began performing at gay clubs in Toronto. He soon became a popular attraction at drag venues across the continent, acclaimed especially for his impersonations of a remarkable range of characters. His ladies included Bette Davis, Carol Channing, Janis Joplin, Judy Garland, Marlene Dietrich, Peggy Lee, and Mae West.

Equally remarkable as the range of his characterizations was Russell's three octave vocal range that allowed him to impersonate Barbra Streisand in her own key. He could perform a duet between Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong. For his act's finale, he frequently performed a run-down of all the ladies who had performed in *Hello, Dolly!*

Another favorite impersonation sure to whip up the audience in the late 1970s was his Anita Bryant singing "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." Russell's satirical impersonation of the anti-gay crusader indicates a level of political awareness and commitment on his part.

As a female impersonator, Russell attempted genuine verisimilitude, but he also added a great deal of his own personality and comic sensibility. His approach lies somewhere between the sharp-witted performances of drag comedians such as Charles Pierce or Lynne Carter and the dead-on likenesses of impersonators such as Jim Bailey or Jimmy James.

Russell became famous as a result of his starring role in the Canadian feature film *Outrageous!* (1977), directed by Richard Benner. The film was one of the first North American films with a gay theme to receive widespread distribution. In it, Russell played Robin Turner, a gay hairdresser who wants to be a drag queen.

The film is based on Margaret Gibson's novel *Making It*, a chronicle of the author's life as Russell's roommate. Russell was awarded Best Actor by the 1978 Berlin Film Festival for his work in the film.

After Russell's success in *Outrageous*, he was able to play much larger and more prestigious venues than he had previously. He performed in Las Vegas, Hollywood, Berlin, London, and Paris. He even had a one-man,

off-Broadway show entitled *A Man and His Women* (1977).

But at the peak of his success, Russell became unable to cope with the pressures of fame. His substance abuse and psychological problems increasingly affected his performances and his career suffered.

In 1986, Russell returned to Toronto to film a sequel to *Outrageous*. Entitled *Too Outrageous!* and also directed by Benner, the sequel follows Russell's life as a female impersonator in New York City. It was released in 1987 to mixed reviews and failed to find an audience.

Although he never made a secret of his homosexuality, Russell married Lori Jenkins, one of his female fans, in 1982.

During the final years of his life, Russell battled AIDS. He died of an AIDS-related stroke on October 30, 1990.

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About the Author

Joe E. Jeffreys lives in New York City. His writing has appeared in publications from *The Village Voice* to *The Dallas Voice*, from *blue* to *Blueboy*, and from *Bay Windows* to *The Bay Area Reporter*.