



Queen Moxie Is Ready for Her Close-Up

The drag performer spotlights living with HIV today.

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Although drag performer Queen Moxie has been living with HIV for eight years, speaking publicly about having the virus is, like a garment fresh out of a sewing machine, something she is trying on for the first time.

During LGBTQ Pride Month this year, she was invited to speak about AIDS activism and the queer community on a panel at the El Capitan Theatre, a historic renovated theater in Hollywood. By the time the crowd turned its attention to Moxie, the final panelist, the queen took a long pause and spoke her truth to the dozens of people gathered there: that she is HIV positive. Afterward, she felt lighter and breathed a sigh of relief. Moxie's real name is Kevin Soto, and he is 28 years old. Soto is gay and uses he/him pronouns, but as Moxie, Soto uses she/her pronouns, as is common among queens.

"It was a beautiful moment," Moxie tells POZ. "You don't know if someone in the room has a family member that is going through your same situation and having that conversation about it can help them in some way." After she shared, people approached her in tears, calling her brave and shaking her hand. In a way, it was not unlike the work that she and many other drag queens do onstage. When a queen, especially in the current political climate, straps on her heels, dons her wig and shimmies for a few minutes while channeling the passion of music, she can transmute pain, grief or sadness into something beautiful.

It's something Moxie, a self-described "Guatemalan Goddess" on her Instagram, has been doing since she was diagnosed in 2015. The news came as a shock. When the health care worker told her the test result, she couldn't hear a word being spoken. She described what sounded like a long beep that was muting the words coming out of the person's mouth. After going home and crying all night, then waking up and crying again, she started looking for places to perform.

"I just wanted to get in drag," Moxie says. "I just wanted to get up there and perform." She began asking around about places where she could perform for audience tips. The more such jobs she could book, the less she had to think about her diagnosis. Instead, she could just get lost in the music, making herself happy and radiating joy to others in the room who'd come to escape their own lives for a moment, just as she had—a beautiful cycle.

Born into a Christian household, with two pastors for parents, Moxie first learned about drag in 2009. While channel surfing one night, she discovered Rupaul's Drag Race on TV. Her first episode featured one of the reality competition's first iconic moments: Shannel, a contestant on the show's first season, loses her tentacle-laden headpiece while lip syncing to Whitney Houston's "The Greatest Love of All." Moxie then told her two brothers about the show, and they began to watch together; one of her brothers is her twin, and the other is older. They are both gay.

She watched Drag Race alone until she was old enough to perform herself. On September 26, 2014, she stepped into drag for the first time at a small queer Latinx festival promoting safer sex and HIV testing. She asked her brother, Daniel, who was already inhabiting his drag persona, Sister Bam Bam, as part of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, for help crafting a costume. She ended up performing a medley emphasizing opulence that included Fergie's "Glamorous" and Nicki Minaj's "Muny." And it was all inspired by the outfit, a leotard with a graphic print featuring cash money and dollar signs.

That a look can inform a performance is the driving philosophy behind her drag. Sometimes, when a drag performer is called a "look queen," it can mean she is serving fierce visuals at the expense of a captivating performance. But for Moxie, a fierce show begins with a stunning look. She sketches an outfit, consults with Sister Bam Bam, who now serves as her costume designer, and then builds a performance around the look, allowing the patterns to dictate the vibe she wants to convey.

Her performance style is inspired by her favorite queen, Raven, the runner-up of both season 2 of Drag Race and All Stars season 1. "She captivates you in the performance, and she doesn't have to do a dip or a split," Queen Moxie says. "I love to look my best, and I score my 10s like that. I may do a little shimmy here and there."

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Rather than rely on acrobatics in her performances, Moxie emotes to connect with her audience. "It's all about the audience," she says. "I give them a wink or a little nudge." She often performs slowed-down covers of songs that allow her to move with sensual grace and emphasize her body, rather than requiring her to fly high into a cartwheel. One of her favorites is a cover of the Spice Girls' "Say You'll Be There" by Danish singer MØ, whose down-tempo version allows the singer to

emote and drive home the song's lyrics.

Daniel says that to watch Moxie is to witness a celebration of womanhood, including many of the strong women they saw in their own lives while growing up. "She does that flick of the wrist, the turn of the neck," he says, noting that every movement in his brother's show is timed to the words and beats of the songs. In crafting a show, Moxie is meticulous. "There's an intention behind every move."

Her emotional performances and looks, Moxie hopes, can someday help her nab a coveted spot on Drag Race. Moxie has auditioned to be on the program three times. Based on the number of times her tapes have been viewed, she believes that her audition reels have gotten better and better. To get cast, a queen uploads her audition tape to Vimeo, where producers watch it. Her first audition tape, she says, was terrible, and her second was viewed only six times. But, she says, when she auditioned about three years ago, producers viewed her video a couple of dozen times, a sign that they were interested.

"I was so proud of that," she says. "I thought I was going to get one of the phone interviews, but no, not yet."

Moxie says that if she were cast, she would be open about living with HIV. “You don’t know what other people are going through,” she says. “You should share your thoughts and experiences with how you’ve been dealing with it because you can save a life.” And beyond simply wanting to be inspirational, Moxie also wants to be real about the ways that living with HIV and being a queen intersect, even when it comes to the mundane reality of taking her daily medication.

At first, she took her medications at night to avoid a day’s worth of side effects, but she eventually switched to taking her meds in the morning, as mixing her meds with alcohol while out at night wasn’t great for her. Now, she takes one pill once per day with a swig of water the moment she wakes up.

Drag Race is no stranger to HIV. Indeed, HIV has been a part of Drag Race since its earliest days. The show’s very first front runner, Ongina, came out as HIV positive after winning a challenge that involved taking a screen test for a MAC Viva Glam commercial. But no queen living with HIV has made it to the final episode of the show. The closest was Trinity K. Bonet, who came in seventh place on season 6 and in fifth place on All Stars 6.

Both Bonet and Ongina have become beloved for their willingness to talk about a topic that is still too often stigmatized in queer circles. Of course, speaking out is often what a drag performer must do. One doesn’t need to look far to find examples of drag artists who have been at the forefront of LGBTQ activism. One of the mothers of the queer rights movement, Marsha P. Johnson, was a trans woman and drag queen, who performed as part of the drag troupe Hot Peaches. And, of course, there are the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, of which Bam Bam is a member, who were some of the first people to respond to the AIDS crisis.

While drag queens push for societal change, they can also have a profound effect on us individually. In their performances of exaggerated gender norms, they subvert patriarchy, a system that not only oppresses women and LGBTQ people but is also recognized by the United Nations as a significant factor worsening the global AIDS epidemic. “The world will not be able to defeat AIDS while reinforcing patriarchy,” UNAIDS executive director Winnie Byanyima said in 2022.

Moxie’s drag has helped her wrestle not only with her HIV diagnosis but also with her own feelings about masculinity and machismo, a specific kind of aggressive masculinity emphasized in Latinx communities. “My dad had never really been macho, but I always felt like I had to be for him,” she says. “Putting on drag is like putting on a superhero cape.”

Having that much power and visibility has unfortunately, made drag queens a target of America’s right-wing movement, which is often deeply invested in holding up ideas of masculinity and patriarchy.

Currently, drag queens are experiencing a major backlash from Republicans, many of whom liken drag performers to groomers (people who manipulate and desensitize children in order to sexually

exploit them).

The backlash is part of a larger push against LGBTQ people, especially trans people, and has resulted in the passage of anti-drag performance laws in Tennessee and Florida (though both laws have been blocked by federal judges).

“I love performing, and I cannot imagine being out in Tennessee and being told, ‘Oh, we’re banning what you love to do,’” she says. “We’re not here to make them queer. We’re here to just put on a good show and make people smile.”

Moxie maintains that Republicans are attempting to ban drag shows and gender-affirming health care to distract from the issues that they fail to act on. “Kids are being killed, and that gets overlooked,” she says. “They’re trying to deflect the biggest situation, which is gun control.”

Queen MoxieAri Michelson

Despite the pushback against her chosen art form, Moxie sees hope and resilience in her community and says she’ll continue to perform and bring much-needed energy to those who watch her. And, no matter what happens in the future, it’s clear that she’s already had a major impact on those around her. Daniel calls Moxie his “muse” and says his brotherly love has led him to push and improve his own craft and artistry as a queen. Beyond creating her outfits, Daniel was there to help nurture her as a baby queen, including driving her to early gigs. “I was really honored to be able to be that person for my brother and just support him,” he says. “I’m like her biggest fan. I really, truly am.”

Nearly a decade since she launched her career, Moxie is ready to take the next step to an even larger platform, that is, Drag Race. Winning Drag Race, after the show helped her come out as queer and become a queen herself, would be an incredible achievement, she says.

“It would be a stamp of approval for all the work and the dedication I put into this art form that is drag,” she says. “The crown and scepter would represent this whole community of people living with HIV and let them know the fight is not over. If I could achieve this goal, then you can too.”

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