



Call me **V**

JUSTIN VIVIAN BOND has become one of the most celebrated cabaret performers in the world. Now v is creating his own new show, his own new gender and his own new pronouns. TIM TEEMAN meets a true visionary



This is the first interview I have ever written that needed its own glossary, but Justin Vivian Bond, the performer most famous for creating the deranged lounge singer Kiki in the stage act Kiki And Herb, recently published a list of personal 'key terms'. The 48-year-old transgender cabaret star (and friend of Debbie Harry, Siouxsie Sioux, Jake Shears, Emmylou Harris and Rufus Wainwright) had objected to being described as 'he', and as a 'cross-dresser' in a magazine article.

So, first things first: Bond is neither a Mr or a Ms, but 'Mx'; Bond is neither 'he' nor 'she' but 'v'; his gender is neither male nor female, but a 'transperson'. Some readers may think it precious, oversensitive and indulgent to dictate one's own lexicon, but *Attitude* aims to respect Bond's wishes.

The night before we meet I see Bond's wonderful one-person show at Joe's Pub in New York. Kiki, the valkyrie spread-eagled across the top of a piano screeching about the indignities of the world, is long gone. Bond now sings beautiful bluegrass and folk songs with a band and sets to music a verse by the radical American poet and activist Essex Hemphill, who died of AIDS-related complications in 1995. On stage, v is intriguing to look at: slim, womanly and glamorous with slinky dress and red bob (Bond reminds me of my current favourite soap diva, Phyllis from *The Young And The Restless*). If the singer's mission is to screw with our notions of gender, v can judge it a mission accomplished.

When Bond brings the show to London's Soho Theatre the mix will be 'poppier', v says, though (as in New York) v will also sing tracks from a debut album, *Dendrophile*. This word describes someone who gets an erotic charge from trees. Bond certainly feels blissful around them (v lost his virginity in a treehouse when v was 11) and shows me pictures of one tree in Tennessee that v found while camping with the hippyish Radical Faeries group, whose ritual and costume-heavy encampments Bond has

in their 20s, 'specifically female-to-male transgender people who have had top, but not bottom, surgery and are using bodies to express who they are without having it dictate their gender. It's wonderful to have that freedom based on modern science and an evolving consciousness that allows you to express yourself however you want.'

Bond laughs. When he lived in San Francisco in the early 90s, a woman told him v'd have 'to come down off the fence one day'. 'Well,' Bond says today, 'I'm actually still on the fence, I'm definitely owning the fence and making the fence my own and painting it the way I want it to look.'

Of growing up, Bond says. 'Everyone knew I was gay before I did. I was called "fag"

also embarrassed. I got very mixed signals. They weren't cruel, though. My mother is a very critical person, still is, but then at other times is very funny. You never know which you're going to get.'

'Rage' built within the young Bond, 'with everyone saying "This is what boys do and this is what girls do" and people trying to determine me based on their assumptions which they could never convince me of.' V was happiest with his best girlfriend listening to music. When an adult at church said, 'He can't go in there' to Bond joining the girls in the girls' loos, they would say, 'Yes he can'. V smiles. 'I was one of the girls, they knew that. I felt safe with them, but I didn't feel that safe at school or walking down the street.'

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before I knew what a fag was. I was very femme as a child and sexually precocious. I had a lover, a boy-neighbour, from when I was 11 to 16 but I didn't think of myself as gay. I didn't know what that was. I was raised in a conservative Christian environment where that wasn't cool.' A psychologist v was sent to see told Bond it was 'a phase', but also, more usefully, that when Bond went away to college, 'I would find people like me who I'd be comfortable with'.

Bond's parents didn't know 'how much they were supposed to do to allow me to be the person I was and how much to guide me towards the person they thought I should be. They enjoyed me doing the things I enjoyed: singing, dancing, being funny, being the sensitive, nurturing child I was, but those aren't traditional male things, so they were

At school Bond tried being as invisible as possible, while also being 'naturally gregarious and funny'. Was v physically bullied? 'Not much. Occasionally I'd get smacked on the back of my of head in the hallway and wouldn't know who it was because it was too crowded. I was fag-bashed in college during spring break in Florida. Some guy punched me through an open car window. That's the only time in my adult life, touch wood. But I have been called names constantly. I internalise it, that's part of my rage. I walk down the street and people scream "fag" out of their windows. Recently, within one city block, I got "fag" and "dyke" yelled at me by two different people. I was thrilled and delighted.'

Music has been a constant inspiration. As a young child Bond loved Judy Collins (whose music led him to Jacques Brel, Leonard Cohen and Joni Mitchell). For an early school music project v sang Karen Carpenter's *Superstar*, which v sings on stage as part of a fabulous mash-up. V loved Dionne Warwick, the "AM radio pop of the 70s", Phoebe Snow and Emmylou Harris. 'I knew I'd be a performer and that I would write a book.'

Bond's father read to him as a child. 'He's



V was in the film *Shortbus* (left) and is best known here for the act Kiki And Herb



a very sensitive person,' v says. 'When I came out as gay he froze and we didn't speak for six months. Later he said, "I knew you were that way and I felt like I should be upset, but I wasn't and that confused me, and I didn't know what to do, so I couldn't formulate anything".' The day Bond left for San

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Francisco, 'He shook my hand, said, "I hope you have a safe journey", walked out, then walked back in, started crying and we hugged each other, and we were OK after that.'

Bond's father 'got over' Bond being physically intimate with his once boyfriend, the DJ Sammy Jo (still a good friend), and worried for Bond's happiness when they broke up in 2005. When v met Nath Ann, whom Bond 'loves very much', Bond's father said that he 'seemed like a fine young man'. Bond's mother refers to Bond as her son. 'Some roles I have performed within the family - particularly caring for my ill grandmother - were more a daughter's role,' v says. 'I would prefer she call me her "child".' Bond hasn't discussed taking hormones, or the new glossary of self-definition with them 'because I'm still the same person'.

After his pre-teen relationship, Bond

decided not to have sex unless he loved the other person so 'didn't have much sex'. In San Francisco, after college, v fell in with a group of queer radicals and innovative performers, alighted on the films of the artist, director and activist Derek Jarman and discovered Joy Division and Diamanda Galás. In the days of 'sex panic' in the 90s, 'when there was such fear about having sex', Bond set up clubs where people had sex and celebrated it. Performing in a gender-crossing piece by the playwright, performance artist and gender theorist Kate Bornstein was key to realising who v really was. Bond was reticent about taking on the role; it would be an admission 'that people would get to know about my gender confusion. I was trying to be "gay boy". But I did it and that was it. The Pandora's box was open.'

Kiki And Herb (Herb was the pianist played by Kenny Mellman) were born in San Francisco, Kiki inspired by a friend's mother, a burlesque dancer-singer who had cancer. The character 'worked on many levels', says Bond. 'There were silly jokes if you wanted silly jokes, but she was my way of conveying my rage over the devastation of AIDS.'

I lost 16 friends. I couldn't have expressed that rage on stage as me.' Many times Bond wanted to leave the act, but more and more lucrative offers presented themselves: off-Broadway, Broadway, the Edinburgh Festival, Carnegie Hall in New York. The proceeds of the shows paid for Bond to do an MA in scenography at Central St Martins in 2005; the act even performed for Madonna (who didn't get it, apparently) at one of her birthday parties.

By their final show at Shepherd's Bush Empire in 2007 Bond was 'hating every minute' and he and Mellman had fallen out. 'He was so upset I stopped, he has never spoken to me since. I respect his artistry, I wish him the best and I'm sad we're not friends, but I don't miss him or it.' Does v hope for a reconciliation? 'Not at the moment, no. It's sad but it's probably for the best.' Since

then, Bond feels his career has 'blossomed', presiding over various 'Transfest' events and building his solo act. V knows celebrities, but as kindred artistic spirits, v insists. Bond is still 'tongue-tied' around Emmylou Harris, tells a very funny story about being on a plane with Siouxsie Sioux, who was aggressively demanding to know why a male passenger was denying he was gay. 'With Cher, I just went "Blerrggghhh", and with Tilda [Swinton] it was immediate sisterhood. She walked into my dressing room, our eyes met. We both started crying and hugging, we were best friends after that.'

Next, Bond and the comedian Sandra Bernhard are writing, and will star in, a musical called *Arts And Crafts*, about two cousins: one a born-again Christian from the Midwest who used to be a rock-and-roller; the other a cool art gallerist in New York. Jake Shears (of the Scissor Sisters) is helping compose the music, and the show will premiere in New York next spring. Following Swinton's example, Bond is also planning to launch his own fragrance with the Parisian scent creators Etat Libre d'Orange this autumn, which will be a 'trans scent for the sacred whore in you' inspired by the Galli, 'ancient gender-variant priests and priestesses of the goddess Cybele'.

Does approaching 50 mean anything? 'I don't know. Maybe. I'm sure I'll have a big party. I love getting older. I don't give a shit about dying. It's not something I worry about. I could die tomorrow. Every time I fly, I ask myself, "Am I OK dying if this thing fucks up?" Well, yeah.' Still, v is trying to give up smoking (by using electronic cigarettes) because v has heard that taking oestrogen increases the likelihood of blood clots.

After parting it strikes me that Bond is a compelling mix of charm and steeliness, a hippy never happier in the woods and also a tricky, defiant, singular performer. It hasn't been much of a hassle using the 'v' in this article, though please, Mx Justin Vivian Bond, figure out a variant for 'his' or 'her' and 'him' or 'hers'. Reinventing one's sexual identity may well turn out to be easier than reinventing language.

Justin Vivian Bond: Dendrophile is at Sobo Theatre, London W1, 28 June to 9 July (sobotheatre.com, 020 7478 0100)