

Elwood Johnson, a.k.a. Lady Elaine Peacock

*"I love the audience response. My attitude is,
I don't do it for myself. It isn't just taking all the time.
It's sort of like giving back."*

BY ANNDEE HOCHMAN

So you are meeting Lady Elaine Peacock for coffee. You are thinking about Peacock's performance at the rally after Gay and Lesbian Pride — her trademark dress, awash in skintight purple sequins, a shelf of cheekbone, an ocean of hair, legs long enough to cross the state line. You are thinking about all of this when Elwood "Woody" Johnson walks in — a slim 29-year-old with a light moss of beard. He looks like a graphic artist (he majored in commercial art at Benson High School) or maybe the owner of a small business (he runs a floral delivery service). He's not nearly as tall as you might imagine. Let's say the overall effect is a little bit jarring.

Profile

But Johnson's not fazed in the least. His offstage persona — friendly, gregarious, with a giddy staccato laugh — fits him as easily as, say, a floor-length glittering gown with feathers and a tiara.

After almost 10 years of lip-synching to the likes of Eartha Kitt and Lena Horne, Elwood Johnson is Lady Elaine Peacock.

Johnson talks about Peacock in a tone that is partly mocking, partly worshipful — as if she were an elegant but strange old friend rather than his alter ego. But the more he talks, the more evident it becomes that life looks different from Peacock's eyes.

Johnson may feel the burn of racism; to Peacock, people are simply jealous. And her confidence seems contagious. While Johnson could easily pass, if he wanted to, for an art student or a businessman, he writes in the "hobbies" line on job applications that he is a female impersonator. If the boss doesn't like it, he doesn't want to work there.

In a recent book, *After the Ball*, two Harvard-educated gay men argued that the gay movement would get further if it downplayed its more flamboyant members, including butch lesbians and flaming drag queens. Lady Peacock could tell them how they missed the point.

Peacock and her colleagues achieve a measure of freedom allotted specifically to the fringe, but one that spills over to the rest of us. By being themselves — both of them — they smash society's sacred gender barrier. They're so far out, the rules can't touch them. And in the meantime, they're singing and dancing like nobody's business.

"It was Halloween, 1980 or '81. Often that's how drags start out, on Halloween. It's easier to dress up then; all the straight people are doing it, too. So...we can disguise ourselves.

"I ran in a contest [at the Metropolis]. I started lip-synching in this contest called Rosebud and Thorn. And I won. And I've been doing it ever since.

"My oldest sister makes most of my clothes. I used to have her do my face, because we were similar to each other; she's light-complected.

"The name of her business is Peacock Clothiers. That's where I got my name from. She's had that tag ever since high school, 'cause she's a very colorful person. There's six kids in my family; she's the oldest and I'm the youngest. So I said, 'I'll be Lady



Peacock.

"Then I had a lover whose sister's name was Elaine, and I liked the name. I thought, 'I can't find anything that's feminine that will tie in with Elwood.' Lots of performers go from 'Robert' to 'Rosie' or 'Roberta.' But 'Elwood' — there's nothing you can do with it. I thought, 'Oh, Elaine. There's the first two initials. I'll be Lady Elaine Peacock.' And I've used it ever since, for seven or eight years.

"I love the audience response. My attitude is, I don't do it for myself. I get a lot of notoriety from it, but if the audience is enjoying what I'm doing, then I'm doing something for somebody. It isn't just taking all the time. It's sort of like giving back. I really enjoy it.

"It's a pain sometimes, a hassle. I hate shaving. Most people don't know that. Most people, when they look at me in drag, would never think I would even worry about shaving. When I was younger, I really looked good, 'cause I didn't have to worry about ingrown hairs. But now I've had electrolysis under here, under my chin. Not cosmetic surgery. I haven't needed that, thank God.

"The best part about it is traveling. You meet friends everywhere. It's amazing. There's 50-some Imperial Sovereign Rose Courts across the United States now, which happens to be too many, in my estimation. You can't possibly get to all of them. I'd rather have it like it used to be, so that when you went to a ball out of state, it was a lot larger.

"Ever since Stonewall, female impersonation has gotten more popular. There was a time when you would never, ever think of a drag queen going out in the daytime or running around town in drag. Because of the way the world is, I suppose. It has come a long way. And it's across the country, not just in one place. You can't just throw something like that on any group of people and expect them to accept it wholeheartedly, because everybody thinks differently.

"At Darcelle's, where I work now, the audience is mostly straight. But gay people still go there because that's how it started out. It got successful to the point where it's become a stop for business people and people from out of town.

"Of all the places I've been to, Portland has the best impersonators. Here, most of the queens help each other out. If somebody wants to know how to do a certain something to their eyes, or to their face, there's always somebody to say, 'Okay, this is how you should do it,' instead of saying, 'Oh, no, I've got it down. I'm not going to give my secrets

away.'

"[To become Lady Elaine Peacock] I like to take two hours. That's from shaving and picking hairs out of my face to the finished product. I hate rushing. I'm one of those perfectionist-type people. I do my own makeup. My sister still makes my costumes — my more elaborate costumes, things that I don't go out and buy off the rack.

"After I became Empress, I had so many gowns made, so that I could look regal and everything. I hardly go anywhere without a gown, a nice formal-looking gown. I mean, I have a lot of run-around things, short skirts. Not short-short skirts. Below the knees. That's my reputation. I have to look nice. I try not to let myself fail the public.

"A lot of people have never seen me out of drag. Sometimes I go up to people and say, 'Hi, how are you?' and they look at me so funny, like 'Who are you? I don't even know any black people.' And then I tell them, 'I'm Lady Elaine Peacock.' And they're all embarrassed. They never think of me this way. They always think 'Peacock.' Because that's what they see. For some people, I'm their idol, sort of like the movie stars.

"This is a hobby, more or less. An expensive hobby. We make ends meet where we can. But I have a floral delivery service, and that's where I make my living. We have 20-some accounts, including some of the Safeway stores. Everything in our business is under Peacock Services, which includes floral delivery, graphic arts, entertainment. We rent lighting equipment. We have property management on there, but we haven't gotten any property yet, other than one house. We've had the business for three-and-a-half, almost four years.

"I pick up new things now and then. I still do my old favorites. My act has become more refined, probably. People have suggested that I do certain songs, but I won't do them unless, on stage, it looks like it's me doing it. I will try not to do a voice that does not look like this body could put that voice out. Eartha Kitt is her own voice; you don't even have to see her, she's just exotic automatically. And that's the look I portray on stage. I won't do something that doesn't go with my whole façade. People do songs that just don't fit. I try not to do that.

"I've encountered some racism, but I think the people I've experienced that from are the people who'd like to be where I am, or the people who want to know the people that I know. I've experienced that a lot, but I think it's more jealousy than racism. Well, it's a mixture.

"In the business, I used to go to the individual banks and cash the checks. Well, that was prejudice. The looks I got said: 'Well, you're black, you're too young to have a business in your name. Are you really this person?' I had to stand in lines for up to an hour because they wouldn't cash my check. That's the kind of prejudice I got.

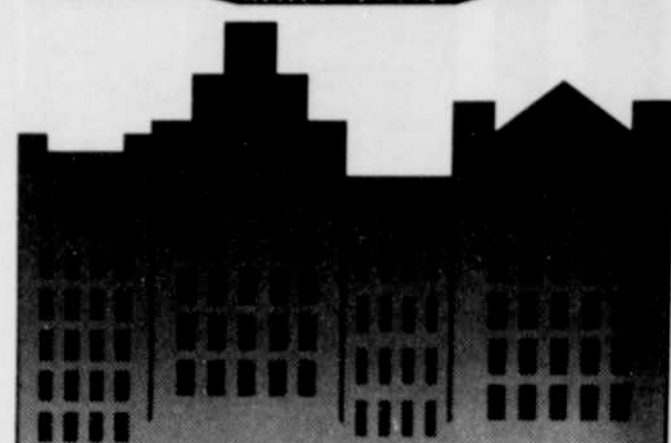
"As Peacock, I ignore it totally. Because, first of all, I don't think we can afford to be prejudiced one way or another. We're all in the same boat; we're all gay. That's the way I look at it; if you don't like me, there's something wrong with you.

"I educate people every chance I get. When I was in college — I went to PCC on Killingsworth — there was a church group there. They were something else. This one woman, in particular, she was in love with me. She had a crush on me. Well, first she thought she could change me after she found out I was gay. Then when she found out I was wearin' dresses, I think she sort of gave up. She realized she wasn't going to change me, because I was going to be me, and I wanted the world to know who and what I was, and I didn't care what they thought. I think you get along better in life that way.

"As far as one adult saying to another, 'You shouldn't be that way; you'll get along better,' well, the world has a lot of people in it. And it ain't gonna change like that. I don't care what you say or do."

DOWNEY

INSURANCE AGENCY, INC.



Bridget I. Downey

P.O. Box 40626
Portland, OR 97240
610 S.W. Broadway, #408
(503) 228-8327



Formerly The Open Door New Age Center

**New Age Music
(Demos for Listening)
Books • Crystals
Jewelry • Cards**

Open Daily 10 am to 6 pm

Meditation and Chat with

ISHVARA

Sunday 10 a.m.

Wednesday & Friday
7:30 p.m.

1644 N.E. Highway 101
Lincoln City, OR 97367
(503) 994-2488

Lodging -
Where Mountain
Meets Sea

The See Vue

9590 Highway 101
6.2 Miles South Of
Yachats, Oregon 97498
(503) 547-3227
Reservations Recommended