

R.B. Hiatt aka Won Ton Desire

Trading the fast lane for a life of quiet satisfaction

R.B. Hiatt, the son of a fifth-generation Texan who used to take his four boys hunting for sage grouse, points to a photo in a crowded album. It's himself, in full drag as Won Ton Desire, black hair piled high as rising bread, blue shadow streaking his eyes.

That's only one of the contradictions that lives inside Hiatt's compact, wiry frame. For years he worked in restaurants, living a fast-paced, exhausting, lucrative life. He was never short of cash. He was often tired.

Then a good friend died of AIDS, and Hiatt began to think about the world—and the parties that didn't matter very much. Today he works with mentally ill adults, many of them men just coming out of Fairview. He lives in a Gladstone townhouse complex along with six of his clients. He gives them the basic tools of living—how to do laundry, shop for groceries, get a soda from a machine using two of the big coins with birds on them and one little one with a house on the back.

When Hiatt moves around his own tidy kitchen, he doesn't walk—he leaps. One moment his face is at repose, his light blond beard ringing a close-lipped smile. Then his expression springs open and his laugh emerges, goofy and loose.

He lets the garden go wild all winter and keeps roses in a vase until they crackle, because that's all part of nature's cycle. But he arranges his closet like a drill sergeant, with clothes sorted on different colored hangers.

Lank blondish-brown hair wisps over Hiatt's collar. On a gray winter morning, he sets a pan of water, dusted with cinnamon and other spices, simmering on the stove. His days are quieter, less high-strung than they were when he worked in restaurants. His work brings small, numerous satisfactions. Two neighborhood squirrels, Tommy and Flossie, come to visit.

And Won Ton Desire, his theatrical alter-ego, still makes an occasional appearance. Not for the shock value anymore, the way it was 20 years ago when a teenaged Hiatt strolled the Santa Cruz boardwalk in drag.

These days, the rewards are different, more subtle. He performs, or he does his work, and something good flows back from the audience, colleagues, clients. Respect. Appreciation. The knowledge that his actions matter.

I get letters from the World Wildlife Organization, Greenpeace, the Blackfeet Indian School. I'm on the sucker list. It's frustrating and scary. You see what the government wants you to believe on TV. And how do you fight back? You get in the community and you see something that needs to be done. I feel important because I know I'm doing something.

"I was raised in a fairly affluent community in Northern California on the coast. People said [about those in poverty], 'Oh, those poor people... they have to live in little tiny houses and work all the time.'

"I graduated from California State University at Humboldt in 1973, and I just started wandering around the west coast. I was in restaurant work for 18 years. I did management, bartending, cooking. I loved it. It was fast-paced and fun. When I worked in Beverly Hills, it was exhilarat-

ing. Self-centered, but exhilarating. I was making tons of money.

"My best friend died of AIDS [two years ago]. When I knew he was diagnosed, we were roommates. We were almost lovers, without being lovers. He said he'd been diagnosed with the virus. I thought, 'Well, that doesn't mean anything.' But he went really fast. He was gone in a year.

"He died on the fourth day of Chanukah. That was a really big year for me, a turning around spiritually. When I realized that he was really going to be sick, that this was serious, although there had been other friends who'd died, you know... the drug thing and the party thing just seemed pointless.

"You should not go into battle against what's wrong with the world unless you're armed. And you can't be armed if you're high.

"What brought about the change was the realization that I was going to have to restructure my life, to be better equipped. I'm 39 years old. It's very hard to change careers and stay afloat. My career started taking off, and I saw myself being successful at something I didn't know I could do.

"I'm different, and I'm proud to be different....There's a lot of value in being unique. Over the years I've realized that."

"I've always been community-oriented. But I've kind of sat back and said, 'If you need me, call me.' Last summer when I took my vacation, I thought, 'I'm not going to let other people do the work and call me if they need help.' I went out and picked bell peppers and green beans and corn. I cleaned the corn and husked it and bagged it. I cooked the tomatoes into a tomato sauce and froze that. I took all that down to the food bank.

"[I first did drag] in Santa Cruz in 1969. It was fun. We did it, and we had beards and moustaches. We'd go to the thrift stores. These little old ladies with blue hair downtown on the boardwalk would just freak out. Everybody freaked out. It was wonderful to be so shocking.

"It was daring. People would say, 'You can go to San Francisco and act like that, but you can't act like that in a small town.' I thought, 'Why not?' When you're 18, you should be able to do things like that and be forgiven.

"In San Diego, the year I was voted best bartender, in the '70s, we had a bartender show as a fundraiser. Everyone was going to do the moustaches-hairy-armpits-and-beards drag act. This guy and I decided to shave and do it all the way. That was fun. I didn't do real drag again until years later; that was here in Portland.

"Now I have an audience that really appreciates it and likes it. If it's for a gay crowd in Portland, most of them know me, and it's fun. I do it for fundraisers. It's an escape, like a lot of other things.

"I think a lot of guys would love to do drag but don't dare because they don't want to be drag queens. It doesn't bother me. I can shave and put on a dress; I'm acting. I think it's good to be able to act, to do different roles. But a lot of guys work so hard at being masculine that to take a step backwards would probably really destroy the image they've been trying to build up.

"I have three big brothers. We used to do hunting trips with my dad. I didn't get much fun out of shooting animals—deer or sage grouse or whatever they were looking for. I was looking at ferns and plants.

"I'm different, and I'm proud to be different. It's not just who I sleep with. It's the way my mind works. There's a lot of value in being unique. Over the years I've realized that.

"Now I create and implement lifestyle programs—residential and community programs—for people who are mentally handicapped. My clients, for the most part, are right out of Fairview. Deinstitutionalizing them is the first step.

"I have some people who can be taught to live in the community almost completely on their own. But most of my clients are mentally handicapped to the point where I don't think they would ever make it even in a semi-independent living situation.

"It's very challenging, and I love it. I'll be with this company [Edwards Center] two years in March. I sleep better at night, knowing that I'm making it a little bit better world.

"Most of the clients here where I live are pretty self-sufficient. I'm more like a neighbor who makes sure this person has meds, or that one has shaved. Then I go to the other [facility]. I do all the reports and paperwork. Then the guys get home. We usually have an after-work snack or we may have a meeting.

"Two of the guys are pretty good at cooking. They're all good at eating. In the summer we have a vegetable garden. Very few of the group homes are growing their own food. This has changed the guys' idea of where food comes from. It's not something a lady brings every Wednesday night; it's something they can go outside and grow.

"One day one of the clients wanted to go over to the neighbor's. He can't speak. He pointed to the neighbor's and pointed to himself. I said, 'If you want to visit the neighbor's, do it.' He went down the driveway and visited and shook hands. It was so great.

"Another time a client who ties his own shoes was taking them off and pulled the laces into a knot. He went into the kitchen and got a fork and used one of the tines of the fork to get the knot undone. On his own, using a tool to get the knot untied. That really tickled me.

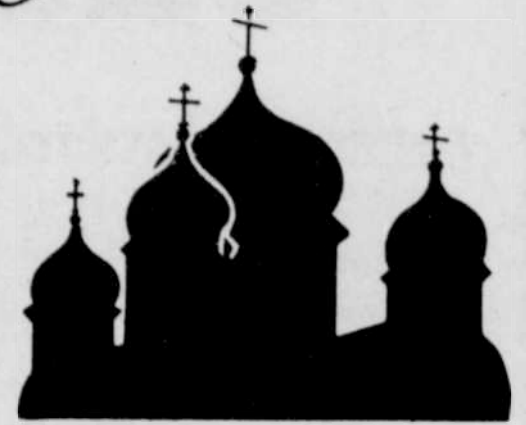
"That's the neatest thing—if a client does something that for a year-and-a-half I've been trying to teach him how to do. Whereas, two years ago, when they were in institutions, they probably sat there, medicated, staring at a TV until it was time for lunch.

"My life is full of a lot of rewards. It's much quieter. I'm breathing better. I'm around clean air.

"I went out and played in my pond today. I pulled leaves out. The water is a dark charcoal gray because the leaves are making maple-and-hawthorne-tea there in the pond. When I was in the restaurant business, I never would have found time to do stuff like that.

"I think a lot of my friends respect me more now. Not that anybody can work in a restaurant. I've always respected myself, but now I know that other people are respecting me."

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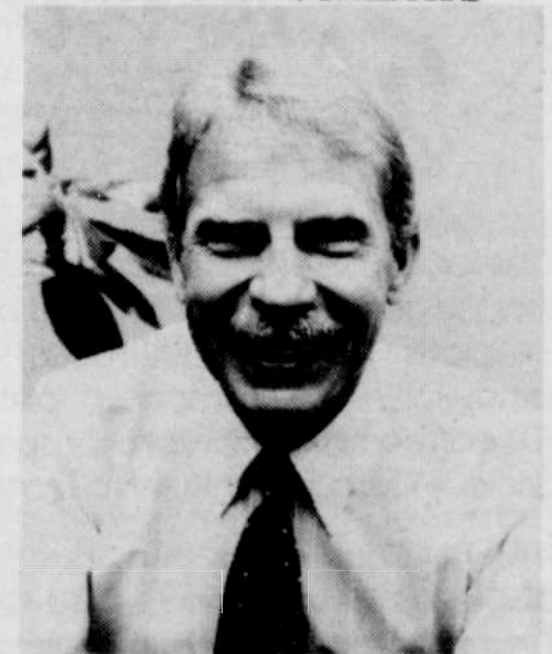
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