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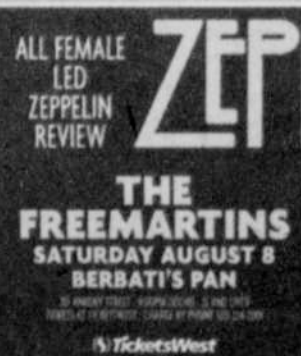
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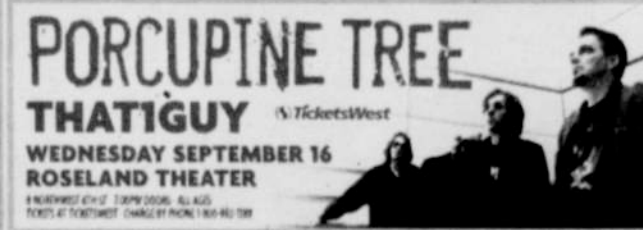
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PERSONALITIES ||||

All Hail the Queen Bebe

Life is anything but a drag for the *RuPaul's Drag Race* Winner

by Amanda Schurr

Bebe is busy.

Poised and fluid in speech, the inaugural winner of LOGO and VH1's hit reality program *RuPaul's Drag Race* has about ten minutes to chat before her flight to New York takes off. It's been nearly a year since the series taped, months since it first aired, and her life's been a whirlwind ever since. She's cherishing every moment.

"It's been crazy. But you know what? It's been amazing," says Bebe Zahara Benet — whose legal name is Nea Marshall Kudi — between pre-departure announcements. "We were in New Orleans last week, and we had people who flew all the way from Dallas and a whole bunch of different places to come and catch the show. And that has been happening in so many places."

Benet, who will appear during the June 11 finale of *RuPaul's Drag Race* Portland Edition and help kick-off Pride weekend, shot to superstardom as the crowned successor to Ru's drag queen throne. A genuine, gracious presence, she — along with her eight "sistahs" — bathed in the gauziest soft-focus camerawork and most flattering lighting this side of a Liz Taylor perfume ad, competing in challenges that were part *America's Next Top Supermodel*, part *Project Runway*.

But *Drag Race* did something more than entertain. It eclipsed the camp, didn't pander, largely bucked the bitchy clichés. For the show's innate illusion — the lip-synching for your life, the wigs, all that candy-hiding — it was sincere, classy even. Benet and her colleagues revealed a level of artistry, performance and pageantry that struck a chord with drag enthusiasts and novices alike.

The revelation isn't lost on Benet. "You'd be amazed, actually, how many straight

women got a chance to watch the show and how much impact this has had on them," she says. Born in West Africa's Republic of Cameroon, her offstage alter ego stepped into the professional drag spotlight six years ago. The impetus for the transformation occurred during Kudi's days as a male model on the runways of France: When some female models failed to appear, Kudi was asked to step in — as a woman.

Fast-forward to 2008, and a whole lotta face. With each episode, African queen Benet's lioness mane, sinewy curves and shrewd understanding of how to work it advanced her to the final lap. Asked why she believes she emerged victorious, Benet cites her everyday diva persona.

She's loyal to her roots at Minneapolis' La Femme Show Lounge — even if, these days, her hectic schedule only permits her to work there a few times a month. "I'm very real, I'm very down-to-earth," she states matter-of-factly.

For Benet, such newfound fame is less about the title of "America's Next Drag Superstar" than it is the opportunity to be the voice of a community — from "all drag queens" to "all the teens in Africa who are suffering from HIV." The latter remains a priority as she builds the Bebe cottage industry; Plans include her own music (forthcoming EP *Beautiful Day: Prelude to the Dance*), a subsequent tour and a charitable foundation to benefit underprivileged youth, both overseas and in America.

"I've lived in a society where they tell you, 'A man has to be this, a woman has to be this,'" Benet says. "Being able to use all that negative energy that has surrounded me and make it more of a positive thing for me, I think a lot of people can identify with that, and it doesn't only have to do with drag, but it just has to do with when you go through a lot of issues... You have to decide how you want to use them."

Benet keeps in touch with "the girls," each of whom she says was depicted accurately



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