**Interview with Tiki Vonté**

To cite this interview please use the following:

Dant, Emily. 2020. Interview with Tiki Vonté. *Sociology of Drag, SIUE,* April 29, 2019.

*Audio available at* <http://www.ezratemko.com/drag/tiki-vonte/>

Interviewer: Alright, hi T.K., T.K. right?

Tiki Vonté: Yes.

Interviewer: Alright, so, first question I have is, When did you first hear about drag and what was your initial reaction to it?

Tiki Vonté: I think it was 10th or 11th grade when I first learned what drag was and, I really don't like it, but my initial thought was like "Oh that's gross? I had a very toxic idea of what trans identities were and what drag was. So, for me it was like "I don't like that, that's weird, it's not for me, I don't want to get into that."

Interviewer: Yeah, and then when did that perspective change? When did you start performing as an artist or realized you wanted to start performing?

Tiki Vonté: Honestly a couple months later I remember it was New Year’s Eve and I was at my best friend’s house and she and I were just hanging out and RuPaul's Drag Race was having a marathon. We were both like eh let's give it a try and after like two or three episodes I was like, " Ok this is really cool, like, drag artists are like actual people and are just putting their artistic outlet into drag. It was so interesting and like so cool seeing them create things. I was like " Okay, I like this now, I want to do this, let's get into it.

Interviewer: [Laughter] Yeah! I find RuPaul's drag race is a great way to get people interested and into the world of drag.

Tiki Vonté: It makes it accessible for everyday people and for people who have the same mindset that I did, like, “Oh, that’s bad.” It kind of humanizes it.

Interviewer: And then how did your family, friends, or other loved ones receive you being a drag artist?

Tiki Vonté: That, honestly, is really funny to me. My entire family are really cool with it and I didn't expect that at all. I didn't think that they would be upset that I was doing drag, I just didn't know how it was going to go over. But I’m friends with my grandma and some other family members on Facebook and in Feb I entered a drag competition so as I was posting about that and how I was doing with it. My grandma started telling my other family members and then one day I was saying alright let me sit down and call everybody one by one. They were all just like "Yeah your granny already told us, good for you and are you having fun?” “Yeah!”

Interviewer: Well that great that they are really supportive of you. It’s really funny that it all started with grandma!

Tiki Vonté: Thanks Granny! My friends were very supportive when I first started going to drag shows about three years ago when I first moved to St. Louis. I didn't have a car so all of my friends would take me to shows and when I started doing the amateur nights they would be the ones to give me makeup or wigs and what not. It's been a lot of positive reinforcement. Sorry, I talk with my hands.

Interviewer: Oh, you’re fine! And where does your drag name come from?

Tiki Vonté: So, my drag name is Tiki Vonté and Tiki comes from Nicki Minaj. When I first started getting into drag, I was like alright I want to be Nicki Minaj Jr. Everything that she does I want to do. So take Tiki Minaj...no... Tiki a Trois, you know play with the ménage a trois thing or Tiki Lewinsky was my name when I first started because Nicki has her alter egos. I was like, “These are cute but I'm not as big of a Nicki fan as I used to be” so these doesn’t really fit anymore. Tiki Vonté is a pun of my own name. My first initial is T and my middle name is Kivante so it’s like that’s perfect, Tiki Vonté

Interviewer: It works really well! This is kind of a long one, but there are a lot of terms for types and styles and drag. You know there is the glamour queens, comedy queens, bearded queens, is there any particular label you have for your drag?

Tiki Vonté: I thought about this one, I would say that my drag is banjee, so it’s like hip-hop, street style, and urban aesthetic, but also, I like to be on either end of the spectrum like really cool or pretty, or really weird. I'm also like fantasy androgynous...I can't think of the words for it.

Interviewer: That's okay, there's a lot of different queens that seem to have more than one style.

Tiki Vonté: I think it keeps everyone on their toes and it lets you have more fun with it.

Interviewer: It is less, I guess, predictable, or you never know what they are going to come out as next on the stage.

Tiki Vonté: I love doing a clown look so that's in there too. Like, oh pretty cool street girl, or a clown, or a mermaid, who knows?

Interviewer: It's all over the place but I'm sure you make it work really well. Does this type of drag style affect your life as a drag artist at all?

Tiki Vonté: Yeah, I feel like everybody's style or what they bring affects where they will get booked or what type of shows they’ll be able to be in, or even what venues they can be in. With me doing all these different, weird types of drag, I'm a little bit more accessible to being booked at different places. But I also don't draw eyebrows, and I don't do pretty girl face. My face is very pretty, but it’s plainer. I don't want to look like an average female presenting person. I am a drag queen and I want to look like one. There are certain bars I know I won’t get booked at unless I start drawing eyebrows or start painting a bit differently. And that's fine I'm not upset about it, It's kind of what comes with the job.

Interviewer: Yeah, and I know that some of the places that you have booked at have certain theme nights, does that affect it at all?

Tiki Vonté: With the themes certain performers are more likely to get picked if that is their go to style, but with doing the multiple facets, it's a little bit more easy to jump into. I was talking to a show director recently and he was like “Yeah, I was trying to book so many people for shows and there is always someone who I know can do it, but I don't want it to just be them.” So, I always think “Oh, I think this person does something that will work really well for this theme.” So, it’s a lot of trying to mix it up, but I honestly love theme nights because it’s like “You all know what I can do on my own, thank you for giving me a theme, let's be weird.”

Interviewer: Yeah you can definitely take something and make it to your own style or change it around

Tiki Vonté: That’s what makes it fun!

Interviewer: For both the artist and the audience. I know you talked about Nicki Minaj being a bit part of your drag but who or what has influenced your drag if anything?

Tiki Vonté: I get a lot of my influence from anime, magical girl anime specifically. [embarrassed laughter]

Interviewer: Its ok I’m a big fan of that too, no need to be embarrassed!

Tiki Vonté: That's why my drag is so weird, well not weird. I’m not a weird artist, but I am. It makes it so, like, polarizing because half of it is inspired by rap music or music videos or just the stuff I grew up with. And then also magical girls, mermaids, and fantasy. So, it’s the mixture of those two. I always say would what I am wearing be in a video? Would it be a backup dancer’s outfit for a singer, like a big-name singer, because that always throws it into it. Beyoncé and Nicki and other artists always have very intricate costumes, not only for themselves but for their backup dancers. So, the artist, the dancer, or the magical girl? I have to hit one of them.

Interviewer: Have you ever tried all three?

Tiki Vonté: Oh, it's coming

Interviewer: That will be a theme night! And then do you, at all, consider your drag political?

Tiki Vonté: I feel like all drag is political, because what we are doing is so loudly expressing our gender and our art and everything that we’re oppressed for and making it an event. Drag artists are the pillars of the queer community. We are like the mascots so every time we go out in full makeup or whatever else we are wearing, it is a statement. It’s like no matter what all is going on in the world or whatever is all going on politically, we are still here and having a good time for ourselves and we’re uplifting everyone else that you are pushing down. So yes!

Interviewer: So yes, but not really, it kind of comes with the job.

Tiki Vonté: I’m not one of the performers who will go out in drag and protest and all of that. And I would love to, and I feel like that's really cool, like thank you. That’s just not the route I go with it. Last night I did a benefit show for Metro Trans Umbrella group and that in itself was so powerful, it was in an old refurbished prison. Having all these queer artists and all of these drag performers and everyone coming into this place that's rooted in so much darkness and uncomfortableness and making it such a powerful and uplifting event. It was impactful.

Interviewer: That’s great. This is kind of the next category ,but can you talk about what your life is like as a drag artist? Are you part of a drag family or house?

Tiki Vonté: Yes! I am in House of Effort, we're trying. Our drag mom is Duchess and she is a bearded queen here in St. Louis. Duchess is one of my favorite performers and I know I have to say that because she is my mom, but she is really cool. Duchess she is a bearded queen and for as long as I have been in St. Louis and as long as I have known her, she has always had such a long and full beard. She flat irons it which is really cool, but Duchess is a theater costumer, so all of her looks and outfits have always been extravagant or very well crafted. That's kind of what drew me in and then my sister Moxie, we were suite mates our freshman year in college and roommates our sophomore year. So, we started doing drag together. Their first night in drag was my second so we have been in this together. Duchess and Moxie both do video game production so that's how they got linked together and how I got pulled in. Our older drag sister Helena Handbag also went to college with us but way before we got there. She declared Duchess as her mother. it wasn't like “Oh come here you are my child”, it was like “You're my mom, do my makeup, we’re cool.” All of us here are just having a good time

Interviewer: How often do you perform and where do you perform at?

Tiki Vonté: How often is a hard question right now. I just recently got into steady performing, so this month I have a show every Saturday and then I have a show this upcoming Wednesday. This is the most I have done back to back, but before this month it was at least two or three times a month. I perform a lot at Attitudes, that's my home bar. I performed at Grey Fox couple of times and The Crack Fox for bigger shows. So, a couple of places around St. Louis. I want to start traveling more. In February I got to go down to Louisiana to perform. I'm from Memphis so I’m really trying to get a gig there. Chicago is really close, and they have a really good drag scene, so I am trying to make connections to go up there as well.

Interviewer: And with your performances what goes into getting ready for a performance? Obviously, all of the makeup and picking out your outfit.

Tiki Vonté: Yeah, uhh. A lot of stress

Interviewer: Do you have to do warm ups and have to warm up the limbs?

Tiki Vonté: I should stretch honestly. For me, it's a lot of anxiety. I am a very anxious person, it's not that I'm ever like oh I don't think I'm going to do well, but it’s like I don't want this to be worse than my last performance. I always want to do better so whenever I am doing my makeup or picking out my outfits, I say “Eh I wore this” or “Eh I have already done these colors,” or “Eh I don't like how my makeup looks right now because it looked better last time.” So, it's a lot of planning to make sure that doesn't happen. The day of a performance, I don't really eat, and that's probably not the healthiest or safest thing. When I am in full body I am being really constrained and my stomach is being held close by like several pairs of dance tights and a corset, so I don't want to feel sick. I will listen to my songs first thing in the morning then, if I go to work, I will listen to them on my way home. Then I can't listen to them anymore because I will psych myself out. And, as unhealthy as it is a lot of cigarettes go into getting ready to calm my nerves and then take a break from doing drag before I have to be in it for a while.

Interviewer: What is the biggest challenge to doing drag and being a drag artist for you?

Tiki Vonté: Money? One of the first things that I was told back before I started doing drag is that it is a lot more expensive than you think it is. Even if you make all of your own outfits or make all of your wigs, you still have to purchase the materials. Makeup isn't cheap, you can buy cheap makeup, but you have to buy a lot of it if you are using it steadily. You go through it a lot quicker than you think you will. I always like to look really good because I feel like everyone is expecting you to look better each time they see you. Even if they are not, I really want them to because that is just how I am as an artist. I always want to be grander. I always say as a drag artist I am a mermaid princess, so I have to look like a princess. There is just a lot you have to have. For the competition that I just did, and it lasted two months, in one month I spent like $400 alone just to have enough stuff. There is never a pay off with drag, like even if you get tipped really well one night and you get paid for the gig that is paying for one thing you purchased for the show. So, it's a lot of passion and wanting to do it. You are putting a lot of money out there. But it works out because you still have that thing. Like I bought a wedding dress for one night and I used to the wedding dress to cut it open and cover it in blood. The wedding dress was like $70 but now I have a wedding dress. So, it balances out, it’s just a lot.

Interviewer: Is there anything unique to the St. Louis drag scene, where you live, compared to other places in the country?

Tiki Vonté: Yes! For some reason St. Louis is full of gender queer creatures of drag. Everyone here is either a demon or a goblin or a mermaid or an alien or something. Everyone here is so against the gender binary and I love it. When I went down to Louisiana for my show, they are a very pageant driven community, so all the performers there are title holders who are working up towards a pageant. And even while I was there they were like, “Oh, we would love for me to come back and do a pageant here.” That's great, thank you, but that's not my thing. Everyone here [in St. Louis] has a pair of prosthetic ears, that's our thing. I have some dragon mermaid ears, Moxie is the party goblin of St. Louis. There is one drag house and all of them are a different creature. I think that's really cool so we’re just all pop punk emo drag creatures.

Interviewer: Nothing wrong with that. This one, I suppose this one is a little more personal, but how do you identify in terms of your gender identity and gender expression outside of drag? Your pronouns inside and out of drag?

Tiki Vonté: I am genderfluid non binary. So, I describe my gender as a constant flowing infinity sign with either binary on either end. So, whenever you ask me what's your gender? It's just wherever I stopped when you asked me that.

Interviewer: Freeze-Frame!

Tiki Vonté: Right?! I use they/them pronouns outside of drag. Before I started doing drag steadily, as far as presentation goes, some days I’d go “Oh, I want to wear makeup and dress more femme” or “Oh, I want to look more nonbinary,” or “I want to look more masculine today.” But since doing drag, steadily, outside of drag I just want to wear jeans and a t-shirt. I don't really care about makeup or accessorizing. I have to do that a lot now.

Interviewer: Yeah, when you spend all of your time doing that it’s nice to get in to comfy clothes.

Tiki Vonté: Still not at sweatpants and a hoody yet, but I’m really working on it. But, in drag I prefer she/her pronouns just because that's me at my most feminine peak. I'm not out at work or everywhere when I’m out of drag, so I let people use he/him pronouns. I don't like it, but I don't care enough to correct you on it. So, I like having that difference. It makes me feel more comfortable.

Interviewer: Has drag influenced your sex or gender identities? Has it helped you explore them?

Tiki Vonté: Not so much, like I said I started doing drag three years ago, so by that point I was already pretty set, or I figured out who I was attracted to and how I wanted to present myself. It did help me translate it. With the being more feminine and more masculine in and out of drag. It, kind of gave me that outlet. I don't feel as dysphoric anymore and that was something that was starting to get really harsh for me before I started doing drag. I would be just sitting here every day and think “I don't feel feminine, I don't have the feminine body that I want.” I'm always masculine and no matter how much I try to change it with my clothes or a little eye shadow that I’d put on, I still felt masculine. So being able to be in drag and have the body I want, have the face I want, it makes me less anxious about it.

Interviewer: Yeah, drag is a really good way for people to find how to express themselves. How has drag impacted or changed you? Does it boost your confidence as a person when you are in or out of drag?

Tiki Vonté: Yes. Me being an introvert, I'm one of those extroverted-introverts so everyone assumes that I'm a really social person and confident, but I'm really shy. I do not like talking to people, large crowds make me feel uncomfortable. So, going to shows is a lot of forcing myself to go into that environment, but I still wasn't ok with talking to people. Even like when buying a drink, I would always ask a friend to do it because I don't like being loud. But, being in drag more, and a lot of people forget that drag queens are working. Our job is to increase drink sales, make sure everyone there is having a good time, and to make sure everyone is feeling invited. So, having to put myself in that mindset when I'm in drag, makes it easier for me to go up to people and like “Oh, are you having a good time tonight?” or “Oh what are you drinking?” or “Oh I like your shirt.” Doing that so much in makeup makes it a little bit easier when I'm not. I go to a lot of shows just to support friends and I'll see someone across the bar or on the patio and I'm like they're cool and I will go talk to them. It's making me more comfortable around people most definitely.

Interviewer: That's good. Let see...If you could go back in time as Tiki Vonté, what advice would Tiki give to your younger self?

Tiki Vonté: Oh...be more yourself. I feel like for so long I was so afraid to express myself or be as feminine as I wanted to be or even to try things I wanted. Just because of where I grew up and the people that I went to school with. I went to a performing arts middle school and high school, so it wasn't like I was the only queer person, I was just so afraid of being the only queer person. I refused to accept that there are other people like, “Oh, they’re queer, they’re bi, they’re trans,” but in my head it was like “No, it's just you, don't let them know.” So that would be the first thing that I would say. Also start working with makeup.

Interviewer: You gotta start young! I'm curious if, and how your social identities have impacted your experiences of drag. Can you share about how about one or more of your social identities such as gender, race, class, age, have impacted your experience?

Tiki Vonté: The only thing...oh words...people of color in drag across the board, no matter where you are, they have that extra obstacle. As much as we want to deny it, the queer community is still just as racist as the outside community. But with drag it is a little more complicated. I wouldn't go as far to say that because I'm black I'm not booked at all of these shows, or I don't make as many tips. There have been multiple times where it has been very apparent to me that my race is why this certain thing happened. Back when I was still doing amateur nights it would always seem like the one queen of color in the entire show who did different drag, and I don't want to say better, but I just felt like I should have placed higher than I did in the competition, or little things like that. It's fine there is no harsh feelings on my end for the other performers, it's just I wish that wouldn’t have happened or I wish that would have happened a little bit differently. For the longest I felt like I wasn't getting enough credit that I thought I deserved. It was partly me being really cocky and thinking I'm like hot shit, but it was also based in a little bit of truth, like, I wasn't getting all of the recognition that I should have been getting at a certain point, you know? That's about it, since I've started working more, doing more things, it's kind of shifted. One thing that I talk about with close friends a lot was how palatable I am. When I'm performing, or the song choices I do, for the longest they were pop music and I kept playing up the princess side of my aesthetic, as opposed to giving them the full rap girl banjeeness. I always pull it back a little bit to make the white audiences feel more comfortable around me, or not doing certain songs because of the words in it. But now that they know who I am, I'm starting to shift it. Like no this is Tiki, but so is this, it's a little more calculated.

Interviewer: This more about your ideas about drag, how do you define drag itself?

Tiki Vonté: I think drag is artistically and strategically playing gender. Anyone can do drag and honestly all of us are doing drag. We are all performing what we feel like is gender. Wearing makeup or not wearing makeup, what shoes you wear, how you style your hair, it's all drag. It's not being artistic with it that makes you a drag performer, it's about how far do you want to push it how much of the binary do you want to use or how far away do you want to stray from it. How extreme do you want to go? How small do you want to go? I feel like that is what drag is at its core, and everything else is just what you do with it.

Interviewer: And then what do you think the purpose of drag is?

Tiki Vonté: It's an outlet for...well not an outlet. It is to have fun with gender. Drag is so gender based, it is just for us to take our little sliver of gender that we all have and run with it. Where do you want to take it, how much fun do you want to have with it and uplift the queer community with it. Just like I said a couple questions ago, we are the pillars and mascots of the queer community. So, we are here to uplift each other and to force everyone else to look at us.

Interviewer: Do you think drag is sexual?

Tiki Vonté: Not inherently. It can be if that's what you want to do with it, like if you want to be a burlesque performer with it, yeah that can be sexual. If you want to do certain songs for certain performances that are overtly sexual, yeah. At its core it's not, there are so many drag performers who go and read to children, or there is this one group who is called Deafies in Drag and they are all hearing impaired and they do drag shows in sign language to connect to that community and that's not sexual. I feel like everyone assuming that it is, is something that was it put on us by the straight community who don't accept it. Like, “Oh these men are dressing up as women and they're being sexual so I don't want them around me or around my children.” That not what it is in the slightest.

Interviewer: They probably lump it all together with deviance and everything. How do you feel about RuPaul's Drag Race? I know some queens love it, some queens hate it.

Tiki Vonté: I, because of how crucial it was to my development, I love it. I'm one of the people who watch it faithfully every Thursday or Friday, I'm on the Reddit channel, I have a Tumblr blog dedicated to it, so I'm invested. But also, I completely understand where everyone is coming from with how problematic it can be, or how problematic RuPaul is, or even how divisive it is for drag. Because it does only showcase one specific style, and yes, they let on people who do different types of drag, but it pushes them all into one keyhole. Everyone make something for this, and it is all based on what RuPaul feels like is the best so it’s not completely true. But it does so much for the community like it makes it more accessible to people, its making drag more mainstream so across the board we are all getting more accepted, more people are coming out to shows, more people are experimenting with drag, because it is showcasing it. I feel like we wouldn't be as far as we are without it and that is one thing that a lot of people forget.

Interviewer: Yeah it is definitely been a very big advocate for the drag community and getting a lot of straight people into drag. Do you have anything you would change about drag or the drag scene/community?

Tiki Vonté: I would like for our drag scene here in St Louis to be a little more diverse. So many shows are mainly white performers. There aren't that many up and coming performers of color. I still like to go out to the amateur nights that are once a month and see who's new or who's progressing and see what's happening. In this new wave of entertainers, I can only think of two other black performers, and that is just so discouraging. Partly because how St. Louis as a city is when it comes to racial issues, but it's also because there are not that many of us who know how to connect with our drag here. Like I said we are a bunch of pop punk emo gender queer creatures so there is only so many ways you could answer that. The only shows that I can think of here that are mainly people of color or mainly black performers are on nights or at venues that aren't highlighted or advertised as much for. They also do a lot of pageant drag and acting woman drag. So, it’s either you’re a pageant queen or you're a weird queen but you don't really know which way to go because there isn't that many people to connect with. That is something I feel like St. Louis has to work on its own. Across the board I just want drag to be more accepting. Like everyone does their own style of drag, everyone does their own idea of it and there are so many people who feel because of RuPaul's Drag Race that it has to be pretty, it has to be this, it has to look like a woman. It’s like no, everyone does what they want. Drag Kings deserve more recognition, performers who don't shave their beards deserve more recognition, just accept everybody's drag for what it is and have fun.

Interviewer: Kind of stemming from that, I know you mentioned a few things but what do you think are misconceptions that people have about drag?

Tiki Vonté: One of them I feel like a lot of people assume is that if you do drag then you are trans, and that's not true in the slightest. I have known straight cis-het people who have done drag and have had a blast with it. I just feel like everybody assumes drag is only for certain people and that it's gross, it’s sexual and all these different things but it's not. Enough people don't watch drag or see drag enough to really get it, so they make up their own thoughts about it. Whatever it may be either positive or negative. Enough people aren't actually paying attention to it to have their own understanding.

Interviewer: And last question, if you could choose one thing that you want people to know about or learn about drag what would it be?

Tiki Vonté: It's a lot of work with not a lot of payoff, but everyone who does it loves it. They want you to love it and we are all just here to have a good time. That's all I want people to know just have a good time, accept it, try it! I feel like everybody should try drag at least once just to get it.

Interviewer: Alright that is all the questions I have for you today Thank you so much.