

That 'Guy Who Sings' Makes His Mark On the Downtown Club Scene

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Xavier Othello Smith, CC '99, is naked. Shaving his legs. In front of a reporter.

His sparsely decorated River single reeks of Nair. A Barnard sweat-shirt hangs in the closet above a box of dresses. MAC cake makeup lies on the dresser, open and ready.

You know him as "that guy who sings around campus," a sociology major who graces those in close proximity with startling renditions of the latest R&B hits.

But New York knows him as Cunta Kinte, a fiercely original drag queen who in the past 18 months has risen steadily in the ranks of cross-dressing superstardom.

Tonight he is getting ready for a performance

at The Cock, a new East Village bar, and an oft-shut down den of debauchery. Smith is to compete as the only drag queen on the ticket of a contest in which drunken bar-hopping exhibitionists will try to raise the threshold of disgusting public behavior in hopes of a \$100 prize. Past winners have performed unprintable feats involving such things as corn, a bottle of salad dressing, cereal, milk, and unsanitary orifices.

The son of an ex-model and colonel in the United States Army, Smith got his start at Barracuda, a popular Chelsea bar where Mona Foot, one of the city's most crass queens, sponsors a "Star Search" contest for drag hopefuls.

"I went in there, and I was scared. I'd never done anything like that before," he says of his first time.

Smith wowed the audience with "Saving All My Stuff For You," sung to the tune of "Saving All My Love For You," by Whitney Houston. And he won, hands down. Then he won the next week, and the next, and the next, reigning for seven weeks.

"It was a joke at first, but two grand later, it wasn't that funny," Smith says of his beginnings, pulling on a slinky, skin-tight, blood red velvet, strapless dress over his slender 6'6" frame.

He is an atypical drag queen. Whereas almost all others lip synch their numbers, Smith not only sings live, but also pens his own spoofs of



CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER—HEN RYAN

Before and After: Columbia knows him as Xavier Othello Smith, but to the rest of New York he is Cunta Kinte.

popular tunes, readjusted to the nasty, sex-crazed, Cunta persona. And as a result of his originality and crowd pleasing antics, he has, to date, amassed 22 victories at the bar.

Smith went on to host his own evening last summer at Phab, a short-lived gay hip-hop party in Chelsea.

The name, Cunta Kinte (CUNT-uh Kin-TAY), was a gift from Smith's old boyfriend and derives from Kunte Kinte, a slave character in Alex Haley's *Roots* who gets his foot chopped off.

"It's a very dangerous name to have," Smith admits. "I guess it's somewhat provocative. That's how I am."

He describes Cunta's persona as "a runaway slave girl trapped in a gay time warp ... without shoes."

As Cunta, Smith dresses in "whatever's readily available," with little

more than simple base and lipstick to adorn his face. He always sports a mousy black wig—a cross between Cleopatra and Ramona Quimby. And "Cunta doesn't wear shoes."

Rationalizing Cunta's low-glam style, Smith says, "I'm broke—that's number one. Number two, I'm broke ... I'm not that great of a make-up artist, as you can see. I'm struggling.

My friend is a hairdresser. He says 'you're a mess.'"

"I look like Diana Ross," he laments, giving himself a once over in the mirror.

Smith's performance roots are somewhat more traditional. From the age of 10 to 18 he sang with the prestigious Boy's Choir of Harlem. He was in an elite group of 35 star players who, out of the more than 200 members, were the only ones selected to perform regularly.

With the choir, Smith got a chance to sing with Stevie Wonder and for Nelson Mandela. His voice can be heard in Spike Lee's *Jungle Fever*, and his name appears in the credits for his work in *Malcolm X*.

Now fully dressed, Smith heads for the cab, his evening wear only partially covered by a brown plaid, wool jacket.

"I have a hormone problem," he quips at passers-by.

Heading downtown, he is nervous and gripes to no one in particular, "I got titties to take care of. Shave this. Clip that."

The Cock is something of a hole in the wall. A typical East Village bar, its dark-and-dank atmosphere encases sardine-stuffed, late-night, gay revelers, who, as the evening presses towards dawn, become both increasingly drunk and excessively forward.

Smith sweeps past the bouncer and immediately begins flirting with the crowd. Singing for your supper begins long before the mike is on, and Smith is determined to win.

The contest is hosted by a Rubenesque woman named BOB, whose Wonder Woman bikini top barely encapsulates her DDD breasts, along with Lady Bird Blankenship, who is dressed as Elton John, circa 1982, and by Mona Foot herself, who gushes that Smith is "the hottest thing to come along in the drag scene in years. He inspires me, and he tickles me to death."

Smith does not bother with dance routines or overly dramatic facial expressions. Rather, he relies on the power of his own voice, his sleazy humor, and his oozing, "don't-mess-with-Cunta" attitude. He pulls the las-

The crowd roars with approval, all the while making sure not to disobey the overbearingly large Big Brother sign on the wall—"NO DANCING, by order of New York City Dept. of Consumer Affairs."

"He elicited passions I never knew I had," gushes alumnus Nick Syreh, CC '97, who is among the large contingency of CU-affiliated supporters.

Soon, the crowd merrily sings along, and even Mona Foot cracks a smile and mouths the words.

Speeding back uptown, \$100 richer, Smith hardly seems the glorious victor.

"My dream is not drag," he wants to make clear. "I want to be an entertainer, singer, songwriter, actor. Music comes first ... That's the only reason I'm alive. I've wanted to [sing professionally] since I was three or five years old. I saw Michael Jackson and I said,

That's what I want to do."

He hopes to land an R&B recording contract one day and admits that bonafide show biz people have been whispering in his ears, albeit quietly as of yet.

"Things are very happening. Positively," he says. "Yes, some very nice, very well to do people have expressed interest."

In the mean time, he has half a term of grind-stone. University work to complete until graduation. Why did he pick sociology? "Cause it's easy ... You want to know the truth?"

"I want to get my college degree. That's why I came here," he says. And then somewhat facetiously, "I'm happy to have the opportunity to study at a fine institution like Columbia."

"Singing is like breathing to me," he says of his casual public song-bird career around campus. "I'm not doing it for attention. I can't really help it ... No I'm not always happy. It's just a way I feel I can express myself fully. Besides sex."