

King Lotus Boy



King Lotus Boy (He/Xe/They) is a Chinese-American disabled drag king based in Oakland, CA. Xe grew up in Southern California and has lived in the Bay Area since 2015. Not only is he an educator but also a poet, musician, and educator.
Instagram: @kinglotusboy

Transcript: Filmed in Oakland on 3/26/23

0:00

Alex:

Okay. So the first thing I want to ask you is just, tell the audience what's your name and where you do for a living.

Lotus Boy:

Sure, my name is King Lotus Boy. I am a drag king and also an anti disciplinary artist. And I like to say anti disciplinary because I think that art doesn't even need to be disciplined. And I don't want to limit myself to one discipline. I do many things besides drag. I do poetry, I make original music, I make videos. So drag king, anti disciplinary, anti disciplinary artist. And I also am a youth educator. I teach speech and debate to high school students and also anyone who wants to learn public speaking skills.

0:42

Alex:

That's awesome. And then, since this documentary is about people in the Bay Area, I just want to know about location. So where did you grow up?

Lotus Boy:

Sure. So I actually did not originally grow up in the Bay Area. I grew up in Southern California in a suburb a little bit, 30 minutes south of L.A., so kind of L.A. area. And I moved to the Bay Area in 2015 for school. I went to UC Berkeley and I've been here ever since, and I fell in love with the Bay Area, especially the queer and trans scene and the queer trans people of color scene and the community here has been so integral to my identity and my art and just figuring out who I am and who I want to be. So I really love the Bay Area here and I currently live in Oakland. I've lived in Oakland for almost four years now. I've lived in Berkeley, Oakland, San Jose, and Oakland again. So I love Oakland so much. It's one of my favorite cities in the Bay Area.

1:41

Alex:

Cool. Do you think Oakland, or just the Bay area is different than southern California as a trans person like, how people look at you and everything.

Lotus Boy:

Absolutely. I think that the Bay Area overall is a lot more welcoming or maybe not necessarily welcoming, but accepting of people whose expression and energy doesn't fit the dominant norm. I feel like when I go back home, it's, you know, I don't necessarily feel comfortable presenting my full self. I've never experienced any blatant harassment or anything, but I also don't go back home very often.

2:23

However, in Los Angeles, like the city of L.A., is very huge and diverse. I would say that it's a bit more accepting, but still not the not the energy and vibe you get here in Oakland and in Berkeley and in the Bay Area, because I think that, you know, the history of activism and queer activism and disability rights activism here, there's just a lot of really passionate and amazing activists who live here currently or were born and raised here.

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You know, the Black Panthers started here in Oakland, which is obviously just like such a important history moment for civil rights and liberation for all. So I would say, yeah, the Bay Area is a little bit a little bit more progressive, but, you know, there's still there's still hatred here, There's still violence and there's still people who don't want to see queer and trans people and drag artists survive and thrive.

3:15

Alex:

[...] So do you think that- so would you say that, you know, growing up in Southern California, the culture there is like, influenced how you thought about your own gender?

3:38

Lotus Boy:

Yeah, I would say that it definitely restricted me. I didn't come out as trans, nonbinary, gender fluid (I use all those labels) until I moved here and actually starting drag was what gave me the... It solidified my identity, gave me the confidence and the empowerment and the support from my drag family to feel like I could come out and that it would be a safe place and it would be a place that was welcoming. But in Southern California, you know, in my high school back in 2019, 2013 is when I went to high school, Nonbinary had not yet been really in the general lexicon, and I didn't know any out trans people at my school. I don't think I knew a trans person. Yeah. Until I got to college. I personally, although later on a lot of my friends ended up coming out as trans too right. I'm like, we're all gay and trans here.

4:31

So I didn't know I knew them, right? They were there, right? Because like, I believe that we are always, you know, it's not like, oh, I wasn't trans before I transitioned, right? It's like, no, we're always who we are. Right. And transitioning is for you to decide what that looks like. But you're still, in my opinion, like we're still the same person, right? We're just continuously evolving and getting closer to our most authentic selves. Right. So, yeah, not seeing a lot of non-normative gender expression in high school. I remember my high school theater teacher refused to let me and my best friend do "Take Me Or Leave Me" from Rent, which is a lesbian love song. It's like, you know, iconic.

5:15

It's one of my favorite musical theater songs. I was a theater kid in high school. Go figure. And we basically there was like the senior showcase and it's like every senior gets to pick one solo song, right? My best friend and I, and we had to audition it. So we understand it from the whole class. Everyone loved it. My best friend's an amazing singer.

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I'm okay and not the best. And the teacher was like, I don't think the audiences are ready for that. I don't think our parents are ready. I'm like, We're doing seasons of love. Like seasons of Love From Rent was like the opening number for the whole class. And I'm like, You can't do seasons of love and like, divorce it from the fact that it was like a queer and trans story, right?

5:56

So that really, you know, upset me, I didn't, like, do anything about it. But yeah, that's a clear example of the fact that, you know, queerness and I didn't have many out friends. I mean, a lot of my best friends were gay men, and I just ended up, like, some of them, I, you know, was already friends with them, and then some ended up coming out as gay, but there weren't many out like lesbians at my school or, you know, queer people that weren't like cis gay men. So for me personally, I was closeted and I just didn't feel comfortable. I was like, I don't know anyone else, you know, who could who could talk to me about this.

6:29

And also, I had this best friend and we were like together all the time. And people when I was like, "Are you lesbians? Woooahhh." like, "Oh, you're hanging out so much." And then she would

be like, Oh yeah, we are like as a joke. And then me, deep down, I'm like, but maybe?? And I definitely, like, had a big crush on her, but, you know, I never told her. She was also a little bit homophobic. So, you know, go figure. So unfortunately, I know I'm talking about this in a very nonchalant way because obviously I have, you know, evolved since then. But it is an unfortunate experience, right? Because for me, it really stifled me for a very long time. And I think it also contributed to why it took me so long to figure out my gender identity.

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Because, like I, only when I got the call, it was like, okay, now I can explore being gay and blah, blah, blah. But it was really when I moved to Berkeley because my first year of college, I went to Syracuse, New York, so really far away and I was involved with the LGBT Resource Center. I worked there, I wrote for a queer magazine. I was like doing a lot of gay things, but still wasn't like, fully out yet. And I didn't date any non cis men until I got to Berkeley right before I moved and yeah, I just like immediately I moved into this co-op, the Oscar Wilde Co-op, which is one of the oldest LGBTQ co-op houses in the nation.

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And it was LGBTQ themed and I applied to be the theme coordinator, which meant I like planned workshops. I sent newsletters which is basically a lot of gay things and meeting a lot of friends there who were so diverse in their gender expressions, their identities, their backgrounds. That was where I was like, okay, wow. I can, I can be me, I can be who I want to be. I can still figure it out. And then you want to hear the story of how I started drag?

8:21

Alex:

Yeah, I was going to ask you how your drag style, how it developed and how it connects to different parts of your identity, like your culture or just your gender.

Lotus Boy:

Sure. So my drag style, I would say when I first started Drag in 2018, so my drag, my five year drag-iversary is almost here. It's April 4th. So April 4th, 2018. And when I first started drag, I did not look like this. I had barely any makeup. I was more going for a hyper masculine look. Like really trying to emulate, like this cisheteronormative masculinity, which for me, I wanted to like, make fun of it, right? Because like, this type of masculinity, I felt oppressed me my whole life, but yet I still wanted to engage with it because growing up I didn't relate to femininity at all.

9:11

And I was always a tomboy and I actually thought I was a boy for a very long time until my teacher told me I wasn't. She did this thing where I was like, it was literally like kindergarten. I have this very vivid memory where for some reason she's like, All right, we're going to split up the class boys versus girls, you know? And I went on to the boys side and she was just like, What are you doing? And I'm like, What? And it was just this moment. I was like, okay, I guess I'm not the way I see myself is not the way other people see myself. So that also contributed to

why it took me so long to come out. And then starting with drag, I really kind of emulated also this like hyper masculinity...

[...] Interview is interrupted from 9:47 to 11:23

11:23

Alex:

Okay, So I was just mainly curious to know how your style, like, developed and how it connects to different parts of your identity.

[...]

11:50

Lotus Boy:

I realized that the masculinity and the gender expression that I was trying to emulate was also like white dominant masculinity. And my sibling, my drag sibling, Hennessy Williams also had the same realization, kind of at the same time that, you know, our makeup styles weren't actually what we wanted to be. It was more just what we saw, right? So we kept like trying to do that and then as I started to develop really in 2020, when the pandemic first began, is when I had more time to really devote to my makeup, because before I was just rushing to shows, I was working this really stressful, full time job and I just didn't have the time and energy to invest in my art and myself.

12:24

So the pandemic gave me more free time to actually sit down with myself and play with makeup. And we did a bunch of different digital shows where there were so many creative themes, and I had to make prerecorded videos instead of live performance and that really gave me the freedom to express myself. And before the pandemic, I never wore wigs because I had this internalized misogyny transphobia thing where I was like, Well, if I wear a wig, people are going to think I'm a woman or people are going to call me a queen. They still do that, unfortunately, and they do that even when I'm out of drag, right? So for me, finally I was like, I really want to wear wigs, but I don't want people to invalidate my gender and my expression. And finally I was like, Who cares? Right? This art is first and foremost for me, right?

13:17

And then for other people. And I want you to see this expression like, why am I changing what I want to do for other people's comfort, Right? So once I allowed myself to, like, buy my first wig and I was like, Oh my gosh, I love this, right? And I love for me, my gender is a blend of like, everything I see right?

13:36

Femininity, masculinity, whatever is in between and outside of that, right. So and I also in terms of contouring and like the face makeup style, I started looking at Chinese opera faces because

they have really bold reds and yellows and black and like ancient, like Chinese opera masks as well are really fun and like, the shapes are really sharpened for me to like looking at pictures of like East Asian men, like cis men who have also really chiseled features, really help me with contouring and figuring out how I want my face to look.

14:11

And I also just love colors. I love orange, orange is my favorite color, if you could not tell. So I do a lot of makeup looks with orange or orange hair or orange makeup. And yeah, I like confusing people because I think it makes people stop and think even if they're upset by it or even if they still don't gender me correctly.

14:31

Maybe that's a moment for them to be like, Huh, let me think about gender for a second. Like what? Why does that person look like-? You know, like for people who are cis, hetero, and maybe have never thought about their own gender? I like presenting in a way that is different and that gets people to stop and think or maybe relate, hopefully.

14:52

Alex:

Yeah, that's yeah, it's a great answer.

Lotus Boy:

Yeah, of course.

Alex:

And then I want to talk about, next, your trans and drag community. And why community is so important to trans people.

Lotus Boy:

Oh my gosh. Well, I didn't have a trans community when I was younger, right? So I didn't have a trans community until I was probably 23. And I'm only 27 now. And it's so important because when you're figuring out your identity, any part of your identity, not just gender identity, but I think that gender is so emotionally fraught because of the way our society puts such an emphasis on gender, right? Like everything has to be gendered, clothes, makeup, you know, you have to get it legal on your ID and it's just so frustrating and limiting, right. So when you don't have anyone to talk to, if you're like, hey, I don't actually fit into this, I don't relate to this, but you don't know anyone else who also thinks that way, it can feel very isolating, right? And it can make you make it feel like you're not going to come out and you don't want to because it's like, well, who's going to be there for me, right?

15:58

Who's going to understand me? And of course, I always promote therapy. I'm a big mental health proponent and I've had years and years of therapy that truly helped me with a lot of stuff and a lot of trauma. And I think it's so important, especially for trans youth right now, because

there's almost 400 bills in the legislation. Some of them have passed, some of them haven't, that are attacking trans youth, specifically attacking trans people, attacking drag artists just trying to make a living.

16:25

So it's so important right now that we all support each other. And, you know, community can be not just other trans people, right? Like I've had a really great support with my friends who are not trans, but understand and learn and educate themselves or people who you know, were figuring it out. And then eventually are like, Oh, I'm going to come out.

16:44

And you helped me come out and like, That's so beautiful, right? Because that happened to me. Like, I had to see people like my drag dad, Vera. I had to see other drag kings and other trans people living their life and just being unapologetic about it to finally feel like, actually, I want to do that too. And yes, there's risks.

17:02

Yes, there's danger, There's, you know, isolation, there's uncomfortability. But for me, it's worth it, because what I feel in my soul and my spirit, it was hurting, right, to not express myself in the way I want to.

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Alex:

Yeah. And you mentioned the trans legislation. It's very, very frustrating for me that people don't talk about it, especially cis people. And I just want you to let everyone know what impact this will have, especially on, like, closeted people, young trans people. And I just want to make sure everyone's aware of it. Can you talk about that?

Lotus Boy:

Sure. So I don't know every single piece of legislation, but I know that in Tennessee had already passed, there's a drag ban where basically they're saying, you know, it's like it's a drag ban, but it's also a transgender ban, essentially. Because they're going back to back in history. We used to have laws that outlawed people wearing clothing of the opposite gender. And the rule was if you're wearing three, I think it was three or more pieces of clothing of the opposite gender, you could be arrested on the street. And so it's like, okay, you're demonizing drag people.

18:08

Obviously, if I walk down the street, you know, it's clear that I'm a drag artist and I'm not trying to blend in with the cis people. But it's like if you're a trans person, right, just wearing your clothing and people are either clocking you or invalidating your gender, it's like, well, what is this? This bill is so vague that it could basically target any person who's gender non-conforming or out of the norm.

18:31

So it's really terrifying. And we need cis people and allies now more than ever to be being vocal, to be talking to their parents, their grandparents, their friends and family and just advocating for us. Right. Because it's a lot, it's a lot to survive in this world and have to advocate for yourself and your communities and be thinking about how to protect yourself and to think about how to protect your youth and your family and friends.

18:54

So absolutely, we need more people who are just supporting us, right? Like coming to drag shows, supporting local artists, and then also checking in with their trans friends. Right. Like, but a check in does wonders saying like, Hey, how are you doing? How can I support you around this? Right? Having those genuine interactions of care and love and solidarity is what we really need right now.

19:15

Alex:

Yeah, I mean, I agree. It's not just an attack on drag. It's literally specifically targeting trans people, But try not to make it obvious.

Lotus Boy:

I think I have time for one more question, if that's okay. Or two maybe.

Alex:

If we're wrapping up, then I just want to ask you one last question. So what do you want everyone to know about what it's like being trans in the Bay Area?

Lotus Boy:

Oh, well, there's good and bad. Oh, what is it like being trans in the Bay Area? Hm. I would say I'm very privileged to be trans in the Bay Area. Right. Because as I mentioned before, it is generally a more welcoming and open place. I do get misgendered pretty often, but usually when I correct people it's not a big deal. Like even strangers.

20:18

And community is really strong here, right in San Francisco, just next door we have the transgender district, which is the very first transgender district in the nation. So it's a historic few blocks in San Francisco and the transgender district is an amazing Black trans women led organization that focuses just on trans people, getting them housing, getting them support, getting them mental health care, putting on events where we bring other trans activists and leaders from around the nation to speak and advocate for us and just connect.

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So, you know, knowing that we have such a rich history, both in San Francisco and Oakland of queer and trans activism and liberation efforts, it's amazing, right? But it's not to say that I don't experience, you know, unfortunate things because transphobia, racism, ableism, all that, it

exists everywhere, right? Even in the most liberal of places. So, you know, I am very blessed to be here.

21:18

There's a reason why I stayed here after I moved here in 2015. And it's because the love and the care and support and just unconditional solidarity that I've seen from my drag family, my friends, my community, like strangers, has been just mind blowing and something that I never experienced growing up. And I just really hope that more people are like that, right?

21:42

That we are just working to free us all. Because these bans affect everyone, right? Not just drag people. It's like any performer, right? Any performer who is wearing clothing that's the opposite gender, which could be a play, right? Could be like a live cabaret that's not even drag. So we all need to be really looking at ourselves and advocating and, you know, continuing to stand up for what's right.

Alex:

Yeah. Thank you.

Lotus Boy:

Thank you so much.