

**JUSTIN VIVIAN BOND  
T O T A L  
ECLIPSE OF  
THE HEART**

The multi-layered allure of singer, songwriter, actor, New York legend, and all-around performance great Justin Vivian Bond.  
By JANET MERCEL Photographed by LIA MILLER





CHANTEUSE. DIVA. ICON. Iconoclast. Activist. The greatest cabaret artist of their generation. (That last one courtesy of *The New Yorker*). These are all words that have been used to describe Justin Vivian Bond, but none of them entirely capture the precise magic that has sustained a four-decades long performance career. As a highly visible transgender person since the early 1990s, Mx Bond has weathered a moody media landscape for nearly their entire adult life, using their platform as a public person to entertain, educate and adapt with humor and, at times, with superhuman patience.

It's difficult to cover the breadth of work and life Bond has produced, though lord knows people continue to try. There's an Obie award (Off-Broadway), a Bessie (NY Dance & Performance), a Tony nomination (Broadway), and numerous lauded arts and entertainment awards and grants. There's a decades long residency at the infamous Joe's Pub at The Public Theater in New York City. There are films, television and albums, (often sold-out) stage performances from San Francisco supper clubs to Carnegie Hall, London's West End, and the Sydney Opera House, both as Mx Bond, and in their role as the burnt-out, washed up, lounge singing Kiki of the acclaimed stage duo, Kiki and Herb.

Devoted fans around the world count on Bond to make the world a little brighter, and maybe bring some illumination and levity to a world-view utterly unlike their own. Bond is a person who coined their own pronoun (V), helped popularize the gender neutral prefix, Mx, and has long trailblazed the meaning of public fluidity for the queer and trans community.

Safety—physically and emotionally—is a priority, and their early 19th century house outside Hudson is a sanctuary of the highest order. "It was built in 1830," they explain. "I figured it's been standing that long, it's not going to fall down." Bond found the Hudson Valley more than ten years ago, when a "witchy aunt" held a winter solstice ritual. The house came later, in 2017. It was from here that Bond's happy hour pandemic broadcast earned the number one spot on *The New York Times's* "The Best of The Year's At-

Home Divas" list in 2020. "You know how some people have altars in their house. Well, to me, the house is the altar. It's my responsibility to maintain what I consider a treasure; everything here has a tremendous amount of meaning."

The Spiegeltent at Bard College is a marvelously eclectic performance venue, one of the last original Belgian carved wood and stained glass rotundas where cabaret flourished in turn of the 20th century Europe, igniting the careers of Marlene Dietrich and Josephine Baker. It first arrived at Bard during my own coming of age in the early aughts. Popped into the middle of the grass on campus, it was unlike anything we'd ever seen here—our own Moulin Rouge come to town. It was a perfect home for Mx Bond, whose residency at the SpiegelPaleis lasted from 2014 to 2018. "When I was at Spiegeltent, my god, people were thirsting for it," they said. "They were dehydrated for something fun to do. Going out here is like Choose Your Own Adventure, but you have to find it. A lot of people I know moved here from the city, it's created a connective tissue and everyone makes their own fun now."

When I ask Caleb Hammons, who directs the entertainment programming, about Mx Bond's time at Bard, his deep, longtime affection is palpable. "Oooo, I'm always happy to talk about Viv! We asked them to curate and host and invite everyone they wanted to perform. These fantastic, weird, wild people would come up because Viv asked them to. We built a very special ragtag community. Sometimes they'd stay at Viv's house, hanging out, going to swimming holes, having dance parties. That was a rough period and it took us through some pretty dark, depressing political times. Now on the nights when Viv comes back to perform, it's always electric, always a celebration. Those are some glamorous shoes to fill."

Mx Bond has made a career of treading with dancing steps where others fear to go, using their stage presence since the 1980s to juxtapose Julie Andrews and Carol Burnett numbers with conversations on everything









# “GLAMOUR IS RESISTANCE”

from the collective trauma of the AIDS epidemic, to “the patriarchal assault on femininity,” and modern political and cultural attacks on human rights. “There has been such sadness and grieving, with the hatred ramping up against trans, queer, and women’s rights. Not to lump us all together like they do,” they explain. “I put my body where it needs to be, sometimes in harm’s way. I was arrested protesting the Supreme Court’s discrimination against trans rights. You’re a shell after experiences like that. When I’m onstage, that’s when I heal.”

When we first spoke, Bond was about to celebrate their sixtieth birthday. It can’t have been easy growing up as a trans child in smalltown Maryland in the 1960s and 70s, even if the awareness of being a trans child was not yet present. Cabaret is an instinctive creative outlet for Bond because at its core, it’s about giving the performers (and spectators) license to shout to the rooftops about things that didn’t always make for polite dinner conversation. “I moved to New York because I wanted to be an actor, or at the time I thought I did,” they explain. “But what I really wanted to be able to do was act like myself, which I wasn’t allowed to do where I grew up. Once my career matured and flowered, as did I, I was able to be myself. I enjoy the interaction with a live audience, I like being myself. I don’t get a particular thrill out of people seeing me in a film or listening to my CD because I’m not there to enjoy the response!” Viv gives me their infectious, rumbling laugh. “That’s why I do cabaret, because it’s intimate, it’s in the moment, and it’s real.”

Labels, the clarification or avoidance of, are always a big part of the conversation surrounding Bond’s career, and I, albeit unexpectedly, stick my foot in my mouth halfway through our first conversation. I explain that the original theme of this issue was GLAM, which we changed to BOLD to

broaden the scope of talent, and because I don’t really like the word glam, anyway. (This was the exact wrong thing to say.) Mx Bond audibly gasped, scandalized. “That’s why I agreed to do this story! Auntie GLAM is my alter-ego!”

Now, I know this. I have a familiarity with their career, and I’ve done my homework, but in my head didn’t specifically connect the word, and I rush to absolve myself. It isn’t glam I dislike, nor, most especially, the meaning behind it. I dislike that its purity has been cheapened by a connotation of plasticized Tik Tok girlies and a filtered modernity I don’t fully subscribe to. Mx Bond, on the other hand, epitomizes the grace and wit I associate with real glamour, in its most idealized form—usually in a clinging gown and lush hair. (I hope that helps clear things up.) As Bond says, “If your belief in non-violence prevents you from beating your enemies, the better option is to outshine and outlive them. Glamour is resistance.”

I’ve been aware of them for at least a decade, thanks to my sister, who long ago introduced me to a diehard, often queer culture of cult NYC theater, art and performance people, among whom Bond is a compassionate, boundary busting role model. There are infinite subfandoms and singer-songwriter collaborations, duets and stage appearances with other legends, like Sandra Bernhard, Rufus and Martha Wainwright, Jake Shears (Scissor Sisters), and Alan Cumming, some of whom have followed Bond upstate to the Spiegelent. When I told my sister about this story, she immediately forwarded her first ever Instagram post from 2015, a picture of herself in front of a Justin Vivian Bond show poster, captioned, “You are amazing and I love you @mxviv.” (Eight years later, she remains elated that Bond themselves “liked” that post.) My sister is drawn to the same warmth, comfort and kinship that compels anyone into Mx Bond’s orbit. It makes people

feel like they know them, or wish they did, every time they finish a sentence with their scorched-out laugh that is at once silly and sexy. When venues began to reopen post-pandemic, Mx Bond and their band were the first to perform at the Basilica in Hudson, then Joe’s Pub in NYC, while Kiki and Herb reopened BAM (Brooklyn Academy of Music). They were there the first opening night at St. Ann’s Warehouse in Brooklyn, to debut *Only An Octave Apart*, the operatic, variety-pop mashup that Bond hybridized with the classical countertenor, Anthony Roth Costanzo. “It was a big honor to reopen all those places, and trippy to all be together after a year away. In dress rehearsal, [at St. Ann’s] we couldn’t tell if people liked it or not. The laughter was too muted, in masks and six feet apart, so we put microphones over the audience. Comic timing doesn’t work if you can’t hear.”

I’m aware while we’re talking that Bond has stepped out of a cloud of grief in order to make time for me, because their mother has recently died. Once again they’ve taken it upon themselves to keep the energy high, even at a cost. But when the performance at St. Ann’s comes up, which their mother was especially excited about, there’s an unexpected lift. “The after party was at Brooklyn Bridge Park, and my mother came with us. Now, I love carousels, and she loved them.” The carousel in question, on the waterfront, happens to be particularly special, restored from its 1922 build and encased in a glass pavilion, where, say, a cabaret show would be entirely at home.

“We all got on because I didn’t want to talk to all these fundraiser people. My best friend, the DJ Sammy Jo, was playing all my favorite songs—it was one of the greatest nights of my life. I still remember the sound and the smell.” The way they describe it, I can, too, and I leave the conversation there in order to take with me just a little of that Justin Vivian Bond magic, trailed behind them wherever they go.



