

Hackney is one of the most diverse places in the UK. In this regular feature, we profile the borough's great & good or just plain interesting

# hackneypeople

By Harriet Worsley

**W**HEN I was a kid, I wanted to be a rock star," says Adam All. "Then I wanted to be a comedian. Then, for a bit, a boy. I thought about it recently and it struck me that I've accidentally realised all those childhood dreams!"

It's true. Adam All is currently the UK's most successful drag king. BOiBOX, the night he runs with his partner Apple Derrieres, regularly packs out The Glory on Kingsland Road. He and Derrieres live together in Hackney and are getting married in August. But things haven't always been this rosy for him.

Growing up as a girl called Jen in early 90s Winchester was, says Adam: "Hard. It was hard to find a place I fitted in. I wasn't allowed to play football at school, or even wear trousers. I had to grow my hair long, which I hated. It was just expected that I'd want to feel pretty, that I'd find that somehow empowering. But it didn't feel like that to me. Instead, it was deeply confusing."

Not fitting the narrow definition of femininity that young girls were expected to fall into was difficult. "For a while I thought I might be trans," explains Adam, "but then, at 19, I was introduced to the idea of non-binary, or gender neutrality, and it just clicked."

That, Adam realised for the first time, was who he was. It was the space in which he could belong. "I started thinking really deeply about the narrow definitions and distinctions we subconsciously absorb," he



says. "How tiny signals, like bigger eyebrows or a slightly wider jaw trigger responses in us about things as particular as should that person hold the door open for me, or vice versa? I found it fascinating."

Having come out at the age of 14, Adam had begun going to gay clubs for years and encountered a thriving drag queen scene where people were flirting with these distinctions. Adam begun experimenting with drag at 17, wearing a suit and drawing on a moustache. Yet, there were few drag kings to be found in the clubs.

In fact, it wasn't until 2008 that, as Adam puts it: "I finally worked up the balls to

**“ The drag king scene it exploding right now... It's just as empowering and political as the drag queens ”**

perform because I had real confidence issues."

The idea of being under the spotlight would bring him out in a panic attack, perhaps, he says, because of that sense, absorbed so early, that he didn't fit in.

In the end, Adam was given no choice. He says: "A friend booked me in for a showcase night and said, 'that's it. You've got six weeks to sort it out. Stop

talking about it, and do it'.

"It was one of the most terrifying nights of my life. But also one of the most fulfilling. I had half an hour, which is a long time for your first show.

"I prepared six songs and tested some banter on my friend. I was so nervous, I don't really remember anything about the night itself. But the next morning I realised I'd pulled all the

muscles in my face because I'd grinned so hard."

Soon, performing became a regular gig. He says: "My parents were worried at first because it's not a very financially stable path to pursue and they could see that it was starting to take over my life. But when they realised how passionate I was about it, they let me get on with it."

Then they came to a show: "They really didn't expect to enjoy it," says Adam, "but they went wild. At the end, my mum was trying on my glasses and posing for pictures and shouting: 'I'm Adam's mum!'"

Eight years ago, Adam found another champion in Apple Derrieres. Together they created BOiBOX and built it into the successful, inclusive night it is today. Last year, they started Open Box, an open mic night billed as BOiBOX's baby brother. And eventually,

others were inspired to take to the stage.

"The drag king scene it exploding right now," says Adam. "It's really going from strength to strength with people proving it's a totally valid art form. It's just as empowering and political as the drag queens."

Adam's diary is testament to this: filled with bookings across London and the UK. Throughout March and April he will be presenting Man Up, the annual drag king competition held at The Glory.

Yet, Adam's mission remains unchanged from those early days. He says: "I just want to encourage others to find the freedom to express who they truly are."

## MORE INFO

For more information on Adam All, visit: [www.adamall.co.uk](http://www.adamall.co.uk)



Photos: Emma Bailey Photography

Above: Drag king Adam All with on and off stage partner Apple Derrieres performing at BOiBOX at The Glory, in Dalston; Adam dressed to impress (inset)

## Curriculum Vitae: Adam All

- 1984** Born in Winchester
- 2006** Graduates from Manchester Metropolitan
- 2008** First Performs as Adam All
- 2013** Launches BOiBOX at The Glory
- 2018** Launches Open Box at The Glory
- 2019** Presents Man Up at The Glory