

Remembering the Fabulous Mr. Kenny Kerr

By Sandy Mesics © 2026 www.sandymesics.org

A LOT has been written about Kenny Kerr.

When I was writing and photographing for *image* magazine and Neptune Productions, I covered a lot of drag shows. Some were awful, and some were astounding. One of the astounding performers was Kenny Kerr: in my opinion there were few professional female impersonators as talented, or as funny, as Kenny Kerr. Most of the time, I didn't particularly form close relationships with these folks, but Kenny was an exception. While we were never close, he and I kept up contact until he moved from New Jersey to Las Vegas. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

One of the things we had in common was that Kenny and I were about the same age. He was born Nov. 24, 1952, which made him about 8 months younger than me. Both of us had some issues surrounding our gender. In the case of Kenny, as he put it, "Well, when I was born, my mother wanted a girl, and my father wanted a boy. Now I know that sounds terribly trite, but it happens to be the truth. My parents carried on this bit about who wanted what for years and years. Finally, I just said the heck with it. I decided the only way to please them both was to become a female impersonator."¹ Like me, Kenny was raised by his mother: in my case, after my father's death and in Kenny's, after his parents separated. He had two sisters.



Kenny as I remember him.

<https://www.dignitymemorial.com/obituaries/las-vegas-nv/kenny-kerr-5528710>

Young Kenny was drawn to the theater. As a high schooler, Kerr was a "songster" who performed at Local Talent Shows.² It was when he was about 15 or 16 when he was discovered. As reported, "Growing up in Blue Anchor, N.J., he was 16 when a couple who saw him shopping at a mall noted his resemblance to Streisand. They soon had him riding the bus into Philadelphia to perform at night while he was still attending high school. 'These people had a show of the sort I do now and asked me if I wanted to work in it,' he recalled in 1982. 'They talked a lot of money. ... Most of my contemporaries had jobs for minimum wage or less.'"³ With the approval of his mother, Kenny learned makeup and dance and was soon performing in Philadelphia at the Forrest Lounge on Quince Street, one of Philadelphia's premier gay bars. As Kenny recalled in a 1975 newspaper article, "I was attending Edgewood Regional High School during the day and was starring in the Gay Illusions in Philadelphia at night. ... I'll tell you something, it was really rough. I would get home just in time to go to school. Then I'd hurry home from school, study and catch around three hours of sleep. As soon as I woke up, it was back to the show again."⁴

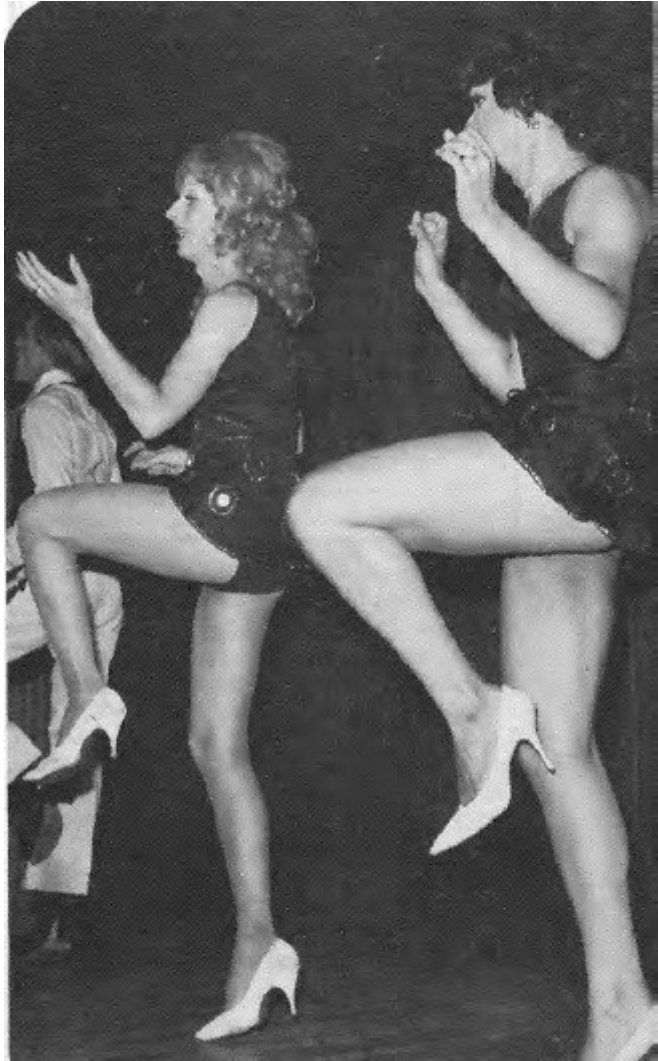


While performing at the Forrest Lounge, Kenny honed his craft, creating hilarious impressions of female celebrities of the day: Barbra Streisand (who would become a fan), Cher, Liza Minelli, Phillis Diller, and Joan Rivers. Soon Kenny was performing with a troupe called “The Doll Factory.” In addition to nights at the Forrest Lounge, Kenny soon began working summers in Atlantic City, which had quite a few gay bars and clubs, particularly on New York Avenue. In fact, in the 1970s, before casinos, most of Atlantic City’s nightlife was the gay crowd, and the beaches were mostly deserted except for the gay beach in front of the Claridge Hotel. It was here that I met Kenny, and shot photos of his new show, “This is Boylesque.” Kenny’s show was outstanding: fast-paced, funny, and unusual in that Kenny did not lip-synch. He used his own voice when singing. And he was a decent dancer. Offstage, he was just as funny, and very soft-spoken and self-effacing. This is what I wrote to accompany my photo spread in *Female Impersonator* number 10: “If Atlantic City ever gives out keys to the city, Kenny Kerr would certainly rate one. For the past six years, he has done a lot to promote female impersonation there and has helped to make the

Atlantic City night scene happen. This past summer, Kenny appeared in Atlantic City with his very talented troupe, ‘This is Boylesque.’ His was the only drag act in a city that had a deluge of so-called female impersonation acts several years ago. There is a saying that only the strong and the best survive, and this is certainly applicable in the case of Mr. Kenny Kerr. Although still in his twenties, Kenny is no newcomer to the art of female impersonation. He has a lot of veteran savvy when it comes to performing, choreography, picking a cast, or even repairing a torn gown. He is an expert at virtually every aspect of the field.”⁵

One of the things that attracted me to Kenny was his wicked sense of humor, both onstage and off. And I wasn’t the only one. Franny Price, who was the light and sound person at the Forrest Lounge, remembered Kenny’s sense of humor, “He would give me names and they became my nicknames. I had a car that was all denim inside and I dressed like a cowboy, so he called me John Wayne,” she said. “He would always kid around. If I would tell him that what I thought they were doing was wrong, Kenny would look at me and say I was being a WFWG, a Wonderful Flawless Woman Goddess. He was one of the best.” Price said Kenny and his troupe would often compete with each other, which made for a really exciting show. “Being the light and sound person, it was exciting to me because you got to enjoy the last 20 minutes of the show, where he would compete.”⁶

This was a busy time. Kenny performed in “This is Boy-Lesque” six nights a week. In 1975 he took the show on the road to places as diverse as New York City, Montreal, Boston, Atlanta, Miami Beach, and even Scranton, PA. He even performed at a benefit for the Ancora Psychiatric Hospital in 1975. Kenny was voted the most beautiful impersonator of the year. The judges included Sonny and Cher, Liza Minelli, Milton Berle, Harry Belafonte, and other Vegas personalities.^{7,8,9,10}



Some photos I took at Kenny's Show in Atlantic City.

The Doll Factory, one of the hottest TV smashes in years, is now playing to enthusiastic crowds in Las Vegas. Kenny Kerr, one of the star attractions of the Doll Factory,

shows you why -- and shows you how in these backstage photos showing the step-by-step methods of his marvelous transformation. Kenny believes that the knowledgeable use

of make-up is one of the most important ingredients in successful impersonation.



7. Eye line is used to shape your eyes to the desired size or just to define.



10. Carefully retouch your eye liner,



12. Try small changes on your hair, a few strands moved to one side or the other will make a big difference.



8. Apply lashes with as little glue as possible.



11. Hair is just as important as your makeup, choose a style to suit your face.



13. And now you have the other you!



9. Use a small stick to press the edges firmly.



Kenny did this makeup tutorial for us at Neptune Productions.

I have delightful memories of walking through Central Park with Kenny and visiting his apartment in Fort Lee, New Jersey, overlooking the Hudson River, where Kenny lived with his boyfriend. We lost touch when, after nine years of honing his craft, Kenny went to Las Vegas in 1977 to perform in the Sahara Talent Showcase, a cabaret act frequented by many of the casino's entertainment directors. After a bidding war for his act, he was signed by the Silver Slipper for a two-week contract that lasted 11 years, when the Silver Slipper closed.¹¹ Now in Las Vegas, Kenny wasn't playing to mostly gay crowds: his show went mainstream, and in many cases, he was the first contact many straight folks had with out gay entertainers. "Kenny always knew his work was subversively political because there was no other choice back then. Being who you were when you are what Kenny was, was a death-defying act of heroism and bravery. ...For untold thousands, Kenny was the first out person they laughed with as well as at. When he showed audiences photos of his adopted son, he revealed a touching, relatable familial side. Even if the yokels came for the freak show, they left with their worlds a little broader. Vegas was, in its best sense, a safe place to push boundaries and demystify taboos."¹²

Kenny shined in Las Vegas, displaying his penchant for good natured naughtiness. "While appearing in Vegas, Kenny, decked out in his Barbra Streisand costume and facial makeup, went to see Peggy Lee and Alan King who were headlining at Cesar's Palace. 'I was in my Streisand get-up as a publicity stunt for our show,' Kerr remembers. ... Mistaken for the genuine Streisand, Kerr was patronizingly ushered to a front row table and spent most of the night signing 'Love, Barbra' on napkins, scraps of paper and even the handle of a hairbrush, for Streisand autograph seekers. "Instead of promoting my show, I promoted Barbra Streisand. You see, I didn't want to disappoint anybody who was kind enough to come up to me, er, rather, Barbra."¹³

After the Silver Slipper closed, he went on to headline at the Sahara for six years. By 1990, there were fifteen people in his cast. Kenny then moved to the Stardust Resort and Casino for six months. At the time, a reviewer said, "...The show's wise-cracking, husky-voiced star, Kenny Kerr is a redeeming force. Kerr pulls his material out of a deep old steamer trunk, but it all still wears well on him. 'If God had wanted me to be a woman,' he fires back during an audience Q and A period, 'he'd have given me the \$6,000 for the operation.' Rim shot, quickly followed by a stream of non sequiturs. 'I hate group sex. You never know who to thank.' With a mix of fussy girlishness and horsey conviviality, Kerr makes this stuff play."¹⁴

From there, Kenny took his show, now called "The Kenny Kerr Show," to the Debbie Reynolds Theater in 1996. In 1998 he was at the Plaza and resumed the Boy-Lesque name. Kenny would perform at the Plaza for five years. At the New Frontier, in 2001, he premiered a new show called "Kenny Kerr & Friends." This show had a new format: more of a concert with Kerr as the only impersonator on stage with a five-piece band and three backup singers, who take turns doing a song or routine.¹⁵ Kerr said in an interview: "The look of the show is totally different. There is never a break in the action. It doesn't ever stop. For an hour and 15 minutes there is constant movement. We cut a couple of pieces out of the band and added two dancers – now we have a male dancer and two females. There is more production value. I still do my stand-up comedy and my question-and-answer (session). There is the five-piece band and two backup singers, one male and one female. Everything is live. ... I'm the only one [female impersonator]." Unfortunately, the show closed after a couple of months.^{16,17}



The end of the 1990s and early 2000s were tough for Kenny. A 2001 newspaper article revealed that, "The past couple of years have been tough for the showman. He filed for bankruptcy in 1999. A year ago his father died of a heart attack, and a week later a sister died of cancer. In September another sister (one of show's producers) had an aneurysm but survived and is back at work. And of course, there was the highly publicized lawsuit he filed in September against the Plaza, in which he alleged the hotel reneged on a contract that Kerr said would have allowed him to rent the showroom until March 31."¹⁸

Kenny ended his Las Vegas Strip run in 2002, an uninterrupted streak of twenty-five years, longer than Siegfried & Roy's. Also in that year, Kenny released his CD entitled *Songs From the Heart*, which featured his live vocals. Because of the release of his CD and one-man show "An Evening with Kenny Kerr," he toured in the cabaret circuit and on cruise ships until 2006, appearing in several cities across the United States, including Fort Lauderdale, Tampa, Philadelphia, Minneapolis, Seattle, San Diego, Palm Springs, and Honolulu. He would occasionally return to the Plaza or Onyx Theatres in Las Vegas as well.¹⁹

Kenny moved to Palm Springs in 2006 and shortly after settling there, he lost his partner Richie, reportedly from end stage AIDS. Kenny appeared at CopyKatz Showroom in Palm Springs in 2007, his show being entitled "Make BOYlieve." He moved back to Las Vegas in 2012 to be closer to family and friends, and his last appearance there was at the Onyx Theater.

Aside from his live show, Kenny had a major presence in television media, appearing in numerous shows, including E! Entertainment, the Sally Jesse Raphael Show, Lifestyles of the Rich & Famous, The Mike Douglas Show, The Tonight Show with Jay Leno, Hard Copy, the Jenny Jones Show, Phil Donahue, Montel Williams, Tom Snyder, and the Suzanne Sommers Show.²⁰ He occasionally appeared in films, including a cameo in the 1987 film "Jocks" about an intercollegiate team of tennis players who go to Las Vegas for the final showdown match. In 1988 Kenny appeared in "Fists of Steel," a straight-to-video film, and in 1996, he appeared in a Whoopi Goldberg film, "The Associate." But Kenny had his share of failure, too. There was a talk show venture called "Vegas Nights," and a failed bar called "Kenny Kerr's Fantasy." Kenny suffered from embezzling employees. "Kenny was a wonderful person and he was generous and he was in fact, too generous for his own good. And he was a terrible businessman. He would get into fights with people, people would steal his money, he would have gigs that he wouldn't get paid for. He didn't know how to keep his finances in order in a way that would sustain him as a person or as a performer."²¹

Without a doubt, Kenny had a big heart. In the larger community he supported charities such as Child Haven, the Cancer Society, and the Injured Policeman's Fund. In the gay community, Kenny was on the Honorary Committee of "Night of a Thousand Gowns," a fundraiser for various gay groups. Held at the Waldorf Astoria Ballroom in New York in 1987. In Las Vegas, he became the gay community's most dependable supporters, raising funds for groups such as Aid for AIDS of Nevada [AFAN], Golden Rainbow, Lighthouse Compassionate Care, and the Gay and Lesbian Community Center. His \$1,000 donation to Nevadans for Constitutional Equality toward the repeal of Nevada's sodomy law in 1993 was the single largest contribution, and Kerr was always available to perform, emcee, or judge at a variety of gay community events, no matter how small. In 1997 Kerr received the Las Vegas gay community's Lifetime Achievement Award at the Gay and Lesbian Community Center's Honorary.²²

Despite his generosity, not everyone treated Kenny kindly or fairly. "Kenny faded into obscurity and poverty largely because of terrible choices, damage he did to his own legacy. But that doesn't erase his other truth, that he was a fearless leader who carried a torch when it was far too hot for Ellen or Rosie or Kelvin or Jason. He single-handedly raised hundreds of thousands for charity, and yet only AFAN even posted condolences on Facebook."²³ "I've been fucked over by people I never thought would fuck me over," Kerr says. "I'm a survivor. I'm the best in the business at what I do. There's no more Charles Pierce. There's no more Lynne Carter. Jim Bailey's burnt out. My career can go forever because I create my own character and I'd rather be a first-rate me than a second-rate someone else. I think I've done a lot for the community, gay and straight. I believe the respect you get while you're on stage, you can demand, but I think the respect you get off stage, you must earn. And I feel I've earned it."²⁴

Kenny died on April 28, 2013, at the age of 60. He was predeceased by his mother, Sunny, and a sister. He was survived by his older sister, Marlana Vidal; nieces, Lorrie Vidal and Nickie Serrato; nephew, Joe Vidal; son, Kris Vidal; grandson, Alexander Jamison Vidal.²⁵ A friend wrote, "... out of costume, Kenny was mild mannered and a loving family man; who was later blessed, and became a loving father to his son Kristen and ... his grandson Alexander."²⁶

I am blessed that during my time on this planet I crossed paths with Kenny. I am forever grateful that at least for a short time, Kenny was a part of my life. The inscription on Kenny's gravestone sums it up beautifully:

"It doesn't matter who you love or how you love. It only matters that you love."



"Kenny Kerr Headshot." Photograph. Digital Transgender Archive, <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/wm117p17w> (accessed May 05, 2026).

References

- ¹ Sonny Schwartz, "Sonny Side Up: See, She Be He," *Press of Atlantic City*, July 18, 1975, p. 2.
- ² "Students List Talent Show at Overbrook" *Courier-Post*, Camden, NJ, May 19, 1967, p. 28.
- ³ Mike Weatherford, "Kerr, a Drag Queen Star in Las Vegas, Dies." *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, April 29, 2013.
- ⁴ Schwartz, "Sonny Side Up: See, She Be He," *Press of Atlantic City*, July 18, 1975, p. 2.
- ⁵ Sandy Mesics, *Female Impersonator*, no. 10, p. 18-23.
- ⁶ Philadelphia Gay News, *Obituary: Kenny Kerr, Iconic Drag Performer, 60*.
<https://epgn.com/2013/05/09/22521558-obituary-kenny-kerr-iconic-drag-performer-60/>
- ⁷ Sonny Schwartz, "Sonny Side Up: See, She Be He," *Press of Atlantic City*, July 18, 1975, p. 2.
- ⁸ "Boylesk" ad, *The Scranton Times*, September 23, 1976, p. 26.
- ⁹ "May Festival," *Press of Atlantic City*, May 21, 1975, p. 6.
- ¹⁰ Schwartz, "Sonny Side Up: See, She Be He," *Press of Atlantic City*, July 18, 1975, p. 2.
- ¹¹ "She's A Man, Baby," *Las Vegas Sun*, March 2, 2001. <https://lasvegassun.com/news/2001/mar/02/shes-a-man-baby/>

-
- ¹² Steve Friess, "Remembering Kenny Kerr—gay pioneer". *Las Vegas Weekly*. May 1, 2013.
- ¹³ Schwartz, "Sonny Side Up: See, She Be He," *Press of Atlantic City*, July 18, 1975, p. 2.
- ¹⁴ Steven Winn, "Vegas: All the Glitz That Fits A Buffet of Bountiful Delights," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, April 14, 1991, p. 40.
- ¹⁵ *Ventura County Star*, May 11, 2001, p. J2.
- ¹⁶ "She's A Man, Baby," *Las Vegas Sun*, March 2, 2001. <https://lasvegassun.com/news/2001/mar/02/shes-a-man-baby/>
- ¹⁷ Jackie Brett, "Brett's Vegas View," *The San Francisco Examiner*, June 3, 2001, p. 35.
- ¹⁸ "She's A Man, Baby," *Las Vegas Sun*, March 2, 2001. <https://lasvegassun.com/news/2001/mar/02/shes-a-man-baby/>
- ¹⁹ "In Loving Memory of Kenny Kerr," *Our Community Roots*, <https://ourcommunityroots.com/?p=13784>
- ²⁰ "In Loving Memory of Kenny Kerr," *Our Community Roots*, <https://ourcommunityroots.com/?p=13784>
- ²¹ Friess, "Remembering Kenny Kerr—gay pioneer," *Las Vegas Weekly*, May 1, 2013.
- ²² Dennis McBride, Crystal Van Dee, and Paul Ershler, "Boylesque," *Gay History in Nevada and Las Vegas, 1969-2009*. OutHistory, 2009. <https://outhistory.org/exhibits/show/las-vegas/articles/boylesque>
- ²³ Friess, "Remembering Kenny Kerr—gay pioneer," *Las Vegas Weekly*, May 1, 2013.
- ²⁴ Dennis McBride, Crystal Van Dee, and Paul Ershler, "Boylesque," *Gay History in Nevada and Las Vegas, 1969-2009*. OutHistory, 2009. <https://outhistory.org/exhibits/show/las-vegas/articles/boylesque>
- ²⁵ "In Loving Memory of Kenny Kerr," *Our Community Roots*, <https://ourcommunityroots.com/?p=13784>
- ²⁶ Dignity Memorial, Obituary, Kenny Kerr, <https://www.dignitymemorial.com/obituaries/las-vegas-nv/kenny-kerr-5528710>