

Drag Culture and the Music Stage in Bulgaria (1999–2021)

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The period of the 1990s in Bulgaria was a time when underground drag culture flourished: Caligula in Plovdiv, Alexander in Varna, variety programs such as Tamara Night Show; show programs in the mixe clubs Spartacus, which was not just a gay bar, but a place where the club scene of the 1990s developed and became a central place for the club scene in Sofia and Varna. Some drag queens like Ursula quickly gained popularity. These places remained active in the early 2000s. This is also the time when some of the artists and projects I will look at below appeared and became part of pop music culture. In what follows I will try to present some of the artists who use drag as part of their music - from the pop-folk diva Azis tvia the industrial gothic image of Shemale Zero to Ivo Dimchev and Stambini, it turns out that drag does remain permanently in the pop music and underground scenes.

Azis

In the late 1990s, Vasil Troyanov received his nickname Azis and signed a contract with Marathon Records.¹ After that he released his first album, but we are yet to see him in a dear queen image, which stirred indignation and dissatisfaction among Bulgarian conservatives. In 2001, we first saw him in drag as a belly dancer in the video for „Hvani me, de [Come on, Catch Me].“ In the same year, he developed his image even further in „Eto me [Here I Am].“

Subsequently, he will come to produce one of the most memorable and controversial images in contemporary Bulgarian pop music. An important role in this will be played by Miss Boni

¹ Kosta Karakashyan, *Positive Media Representation of the Bulgarian LGBTQ+ Community and Shifting National Attitudes Towards Homosexuality* (Master's Thesis, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, 2020).

<https://repository.gchumanrights.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11825/1822/Karakashyan%20Kosta.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

- one of the stars on the drag scene of the 1990s. Gorgeous dresses, high heels, corsets, leather jackets, kitsch - the image of Azis is a real queen. In his videos, as well as in those of some of the women in the pop-folk genre, he can be distinguished by the sexualization and objectification of male bodies, reversing the male gaze.² In some of his lives and videos („Hvani me, de“) we can find elements of the BDSM subculture. In addition to the conservative public discontent caused by Azis' appearance in drag, due to his sexual orientation and his Roma origin, which he does not hide, the performer became a constant object of racism and homophobia.³ The status of pop-folk music as low culture also contributes to this.⁴

Although after his album *Azis 2014* he put aside his drag image, his songs from recent years such as „Motel“ (2017), „Pozna li me [Did You Recognize Me]“ (2018), „Tsiganche [Little Gypsy]“ (2019) touch on socially significant topics such as racism, homophobia, and ableism.

Shemale Zero

While the mainstream scene is torn by homophobia, transphobia and racism over the image of Azis, the underground gothic scene in Bulgaria of the early 2000s saw the rise of Shemale Sero. The project is the work of Stefan Stoev - simultaneously responsible for all vocals, lyrics, and instrumentals – it is often produced electronically, although in some cases it is played on stage by different musicians. He has released two albums - *After the Funeral, It's*

2 Plamena Kourtova, "Imitation and Controversy: Performing (Trans)Sexuality in Post-Communist Bulgaria," in *Controversial Images: Media Representations on the Edge*, eds. Feona Attwood, Vincent Campbell, I. Q. Hunter, and Sharon Lockyer (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 52-66; the male gaze – a concept in gender studies coined by Laura Mulvey, referring to representing women and the female body in art from the perspective of the heterosexual man as merely the object of pleasure. See Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen*, Volume 16, Issue 3 (Autumn 1975), 6-18.

3 See again Kourtova, "Imitation" and Karakashyan, "Positive Media."

4 See again Kourtova, "Imitation."

After the Party! (2009) and *Play Hard* (2014). Queer, kink lyrics against the background of industrial, synthpop and punk sound and performance in drag - sometimes in garters and corset, sometimes in black leggings and black skirt - Shemale Zero queers the gothic and metal scene in Bulgaria.

Ivo Dimchev

Choreographer, performance artist, dancer, singer - in the last 20 years Ivo Dimchev has managed to position himself as one of the most important contemporary artists on the world stage. In his work he directs himself, and some of his images are associated with the constant crossing of the gender binary.⁵ In his works the body is gender fluid and this is facilitated by the specific use of his voice.⁶ Music is an important part of his performances, and in 2017 Dimchev released his first album *Sculptures*. In his music the topic of gender fluidity is kept - both through his specific voice and during his concerts, where we can often see him wearing makeup, lipstick and androgynous clothes. His videos are also filled with images that go beyond the er binary. Examples of this are the videos to „Korona kush kush“ (2020), „Banitsa“ (2020) and „Pushkin“ (2021). From classical singing to elements of folk and pop-folk music, which we notice in his last songs, Ivo Dimchev crosses the boundaries of styles and gender norms.

Angelica Summers

⁵ Boryana Rossa, „Zhensko, feministko, kuiar i izkustvo zanimavashto se s problemite na pola ot Bulgariya,“ [„Female, Feminist, Queer and Gender-Concerned Art in Bulgaria“], *Open Art Files* (2018). <https://openartfiles.bg/bg/topics/2184-beyond-gender-female-feminist-queer-and-gender-related-art-from-bulgaria>.

⁶ See again Rossa, „Zhensko,“ and Amy Bryzgel, „Izkustvoto na parformansa v Bulgariya,“ [„Performance Art in Bulgaria“], *Open Art Files* (2018). <https://openartfiles.bg/bg/topics/1396-performance-art-in-bulgaria>.

Angelica Summers is also known to fans of contemporary theater in Sofia. Since 2015, Angelica has been part of the experimental group Strawberry Finns, who do lives and performances. Their performance *GenderFluid* calls into question the gender binary. After the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, Angelica began doing political indie. Against the background of an acoustic ukulele, and in some cases with a guitar, Angelica touches on the most pressing social-political issues in our country - from the situation with COVID-19 through the lack of support for independent artists in the context of a global pandemic to critiquing the far right, the spread of fascism and the tolerance of racism, sexism and LGBTI-phobia in the Bulgarian political and social context. In „Don't Be a Homophobe“ and „O, kak bih se omazhil [Oh, How Would I Get Married]“ we find both opposition to discrimination against LGBTI people and raising the issue of missing civil rights, which puts the LGBTI community at a disadvantage, such as the impossibility of marrying one's same-sex partner. From Krassimir Karakachanov and Kristian Shkvarek through Maya Manolova to Boyko Borisov, no one is spared the sharp irony, the captivating voice and the ukulele of Angelica.

Stamena

Since 2016, Stamena has been gaining popularity on YouTube, where she often appears in drag. The musical styles she likes to sing are pop-folk, folklore and hip-hop. Her aesthetics are akin to a DIY-play with the modern pop-folk diva imagery and the aesthetics of pop-folk and hip-hop videos. Particularly distinctive are the videos in which she performs folk songs in videos wearing drag and folk costume.

Stambini

Stambini is one of the first vloggers in Bulgaria and has gained a lot of popularity in recent years. Some of his videos focus on the problems of the LGBTI community and his gay identity. Stambini often parodies various female characters. Among them is „Mastiya“ - his parody of Tita's song "Antelope". In view of this image we could ask the question to what extent it does reproduce and reinforce sexist clichés and stereotypes about the image of Tita and her music.

Hicken Shtiken

Hiken Shtiken is also one of the popular queer vloggers in Bulgaria. The topics on his channel are varied, and he also often makes videos addressing some of the issues facing the LGBTI community.

In 2018 he started making parodies of the videos and music of some of the famous divas of pop and pop-folk music of the time - Dara, Gery-Nikol and Andrea.

Elza Parini

Elsa Parini has been part of the drag scene in Bulgaria since the early 1990s. Part of the Tamara Night Show, of various drag and show programs, Elza is one of the recognizable drag queens. In 2020 she made a parody of „Tvoy sam [I'm Yours]“ by Papi Hans - „I'm Gay.“ The text is explicitly sexual, criticizing the „discrete“ men in the Grinder app. At the same time, both the text and the video objectify the male body, which we could read as subverting the cisheteronormative aesthetics. In the video we can see other drag queens who are part of the current drag scene.

Although most of these artists and projects are not so mainstream, do not receive enough publicity and we find them mainly on YouTube, drag culture is definitely present on the Bulgarian music scene. And artists such as Ivo Dimchev and Azis managed to turn drag and

crossing gender binaries and their limitations into a significant part of pop culture in Bulgaria.