

Phyllis Shapely

by Joey Delgado

In December of 2003, Daniel Arredondo succumbed to his years long battle with colon cancer. If the name is unfamiliar, you're not alone. He did not answer to the name Daniel Arredondo. For most of his life, from seventeen years old to the end, in fact, he went by the name of Phyllis Shapely, the drag persona he created as a young man while still living with his mother in the San Gabriel Valley, in a mid-sized suburban town about fifteen miles east of Los Angeles.

Phyllis's mother was a Mexican immigrant who married a first generation Mexican-American named Juan Carlos Arredondo, or Johnny to his friends and family. Johnny Arredondo was a U.S. Navy veteran who fought in the Pacific during World War II. When Phyllis was twelve years old, still known as Danny, their father died from liver failure. Mrs. Arredondo suddenly found herself having to work, applying and interviewing for jobs in an unfamiliar language. She was able to secure a position as a receptionist for an ear, nose, and throat specialist in Arcadia, California. Phyllis left school at sixteen to help her mother with the bills and found a job cleaning tables at an all night diner in Pasadena, right off Colorado Boulevard.

Not far from the diner was a nightspot, The Palms on Colorado, a club frequented by Pasadena's gay community. At closing time, Phyllis's diner was inundated with patrons and performers from the nearby club. Phyllis very quickly found her people, and eventually left the diner for an under the table bar back position at The Palms.

One Thursday evening, Broadway Night at the club, while Phyllis was removing empty martini glasses from a table of ass-grabbing clubgoers, the first strains of Rodgers and Hammerstein's 'Bali Hai' played from the cheap speakers flanking the main stage. The show's emcee got on the mic and introduced the performer. "Gentlemen, please give a big Palms welcome to the very lovely, the very curvy, horny on the outside, sweet and juicy on the inside, Pineapple Patti!"

The cherry-red velveteen curtains parted, and out walked the most beautiful woman Phyllis had ever seen. She wore a yellow dress, tight against the curves of her body, that flared out into a scalloped ruffle just below the knee. Her hair was teased to the heavens and black as ocean at midnight. Her voice was Juanita Hall, but to Phyllis it was Patti who was selling every phrase, sustaining every high note.

That was the night Daniel Arredondo died and Phyllis Shapely was born. In observance of the fifteenth anniversary of her death, the following is a portion of an interview I conducted in March of 2003.

Interviewer: Why did you pick the name Phyllis Shapely?

Phyllis: There was this awful woman in the news, Phyllis Schlafly, who was making headlines for her views on women's roles and, of course, us homosexuals. I had nothing in common with this woman. I was a Latino boy in California, she was a white monster from Missouri. I was obsessed with the news. So much was happening with gender and gay liberation. I was absolutely obsessed. Here was this woman, making a career out of saying women shouldn't have careers. All the Latin queens I knew, they based their stage names around our culture. Carmen Mirhandjob, shit like that. Not me, though. I was a Latin queen with something to say.

Interviewer: Did your audience get the reference?

Phyllis: At first, not many. The closeted guys did, you know? They watched Cronkite with their wives at six and came to the club at ten looking for a Mirhandjob of their own. The younger men, nah, they didn't get it. They came to the club to get laid. This is not a critique, you understand. In those days, most young gay men didn't have the luxury to be overtly involved in politics and protest, not unless they lived in San Francisco or New York City. These boys, all their energy went in to suppressing their feelings. That takes a lot of fucking energy. Who has time for the news? As years went on, though, that

all changed.

Interviewer: Some people claim you helped Mrs. Schlafly's cause because your persona was so likable.

Phyllis: Isn't that funny? I heard that, too. I don't know. Eventually, most people knew Phyllis Shapely and Phyllis Schlafly were two complete different animals. One was a beautiful mammalian goddess, one was a gila monster with dripping reptile teeth. (Pause) Me, I am the mammalian goddess.

Interviewer: How did you come up with Phyllis's style?

Phyllis: My style. At first, I'd just copy the other Phyllis as much as I could, only a little fuller in the tits and the hips. In the late seventies and early eighties, especially in those early Reagan years, women started dressing a lot more conservatively, like suffragettes. Skirts down to the ankles, lace collars up to the chin, hair piled on top of the head. I always did something like that, always, but once shows like Dynasty and Dallas and Falcon Crest came out, you can believe I was dressing like those bitches.

Interviewer: Were you ever able to meet Phyllis Schlafly?

Phyllis: She came to California to promote one of her horrific books, and I went to the venue in full regalia with a sign that had lyrics to one of my songs written in lipstick. 'I did what you said/I'm no sinner/I'm having sex with a sandwich/and I made my husband for dinner.' I saw her squint at the sign and she just shook her head. Security escorted me out of the room.

Interviewer: Tell me a little about your childhood.

Phyllis: My dad was an asshole. Half drunk in the day, full drunk at night. He never laid a hand on me or mom, though. Like a lot of

performers, I was pretty quiet. I loved to read books about white families, with all the emotions bubbling beneath the surface. So different from my own family. Demonstrative. I felt connected to those families, especially in books from the fifties and sixties. The moms tranqued out of their minds on Seconal, the dads barely there even when they were there. My mom never took pills. She took the body and blood of Christ. My dad, a lot of dads from that era, man he was cold. The men of the Greatest Generation were not called that for being good parents. But that's just it, they were not like that with everyone else, just me. My mom prayed for me, but she didn't really talk to me. I was invisible. (Laughs) Fucking Danny Arredondo was invisible. You can see Phyllis Shapley from space.

