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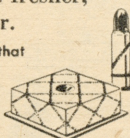


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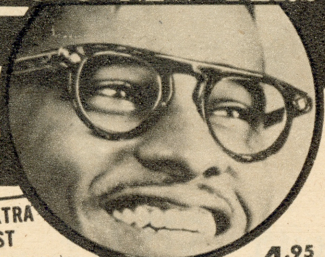
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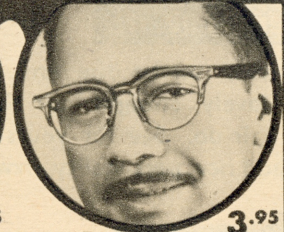
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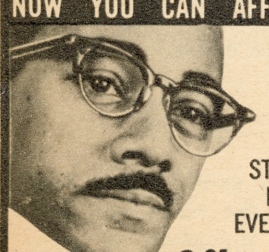
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Backstage of the Flame Club, in New York, Phil Black gets his shoes strapped by singer Myra Johnson, who has played many bills with him.

I LIVE IN

This top female impersonator

On the street, Phil says he never wears anything but men's clothes, and, in fact goes by unnoticed except to people who know him or his act personally.





Multiple portrait shot done by Our World's Chuck Stewart caught Phil Black in his fastidious preparation

before he goes on any stage. Expensive looking gowns are all made by him and hair-dos are always his idea.

TWO WORLDS

sets the public right about its idea of his profession.

by Phil Black

THIS August it was 29 years since I have been in show business. For almost 29 years people have come to me unashamedly asking one question: "Are you a man or a woman?" Once and for all, let me put it on the record, *I am a man*. There will still be many who won't believe it but that's the truth nevertheless. I have been a female impersonator since I was 21. And I found it necessary to wear women's clothes because of my act. Thus I have lived in two worlds most of my life—the world of the theatre as a woman, and my everyday life as a man. But that has not changed my sex.

I still remember, how, purely by chance, I became a female impersonator. It was in my hometown, Pittsburgh, Pa., and Olive Burgoine had got up an amateur show which featured a Hawaiian scene with dancing hula-hula girls. At the last minute one of the girls had to leave town and there was no one to take her place. At the time many people said I had a slim, girlish figure, and after a little persuasion I agreed to do the part, saying I'd burlesque it. I went out, bought me a wig and some women's jewelry and put on the costume. That night nobody suspected who I really was and I turned out to be the hit of the show. In the audience was

Johnny Jones, called then the "best cakewalker in Pittsburgh." He came backstage and asked me to join his show. I did. And working during the day, as a messenger at the University of Pittsburgh, I danced at night for eight months. Being a novelty in the area, I was an instant hit. When I won a contest at the "Little Paris" on Wylie Avenue I decided to be an entertainer. I stayed at the "Little Paris" for two years, in the meanwhile giving up my job as a messenger. Then I joined a road show with Shufflin' Along Sam from Alabama. In that show was Baby Hines, Earl (Fatha) Hines' first wife, and with her I did a specialty that became real hot stuff. Playing around Washington, we soon had a following, but I decided to go to Atlantic City. There I played clubs like the "Purple Derby" for years as the only Negro act in an all-white show and developed my singing and dancing style. At that time female impersonation was largely unknown as an act and mine became more of a novelty. Yet I had a fear of going to New York to hit the big time. It was not until 1933 that Johnny Dancer talked me into coming to New York and I started in Greenwich Village playing the speakeasies like the "Black Cat" and later Covan's "Morocco Club".

(Continued on next page)



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Long stems belong to impersonator Vicky Lynn. He shares dressing room with Phil.



Surprise ending to Lynn's act shows him to be a man.

"I played speakeasies for \$12.50 and tips."

● For some reason, many people think of female impersonators, not as just an act, but as homosexuals. Because they put on women's gowns so that they can best do their job, the public has libeled many of them. That's unfair. Perhaps a lot of people don't know the history of female impersonators in this country and what they have contributed to show business. At the beginning of the century, there was the great Julian Eltinge who, by himself, held down a complete production at the *Diamond Horseshoe*. He even had a New York theatre named after him. And what about Karyl Norman, the Creole Fashion Plate, a petite, talented guy who died recently. There haven't been many top Negroes in the business, but there was a terrific guy called "Thelma the Great" who played the colored circuit years ago. Back in the 1930's, female impersonation seems to have died out. Some states even passed laws against it. But in the last five years, it

has come back, with places like Joe's Club in Chicago and Club 181 in New York. Finnochio's in San Francisco has been going with those shows for the past 15 years without trouble, and with great popularity. This is no plea for the female impersonator. To me it's an act and people can take it or leave it as they like. But what strikes me funny is that nobody imputes any sexual abnormality to Judy Garland or any female star who does an act in men's clothes, so why impute it to us. It's true that, as in every profession, there are a few cheap acts that have hurt the business. But I don't think we should all be judged by them. At the same time if they want to be homos, that's their business. Who are we to pass judgment on people's sexual preferences?

I know for myself that I have always been open and above board in my work. I work to give my patrons satisfaction. And I let everybody know from the first that I am a man. That's why I



At his well-kept Harlem home, Phil plans and sews on machine he's had for years.



Phil's mother Cora, has made home with him 18 yrs.

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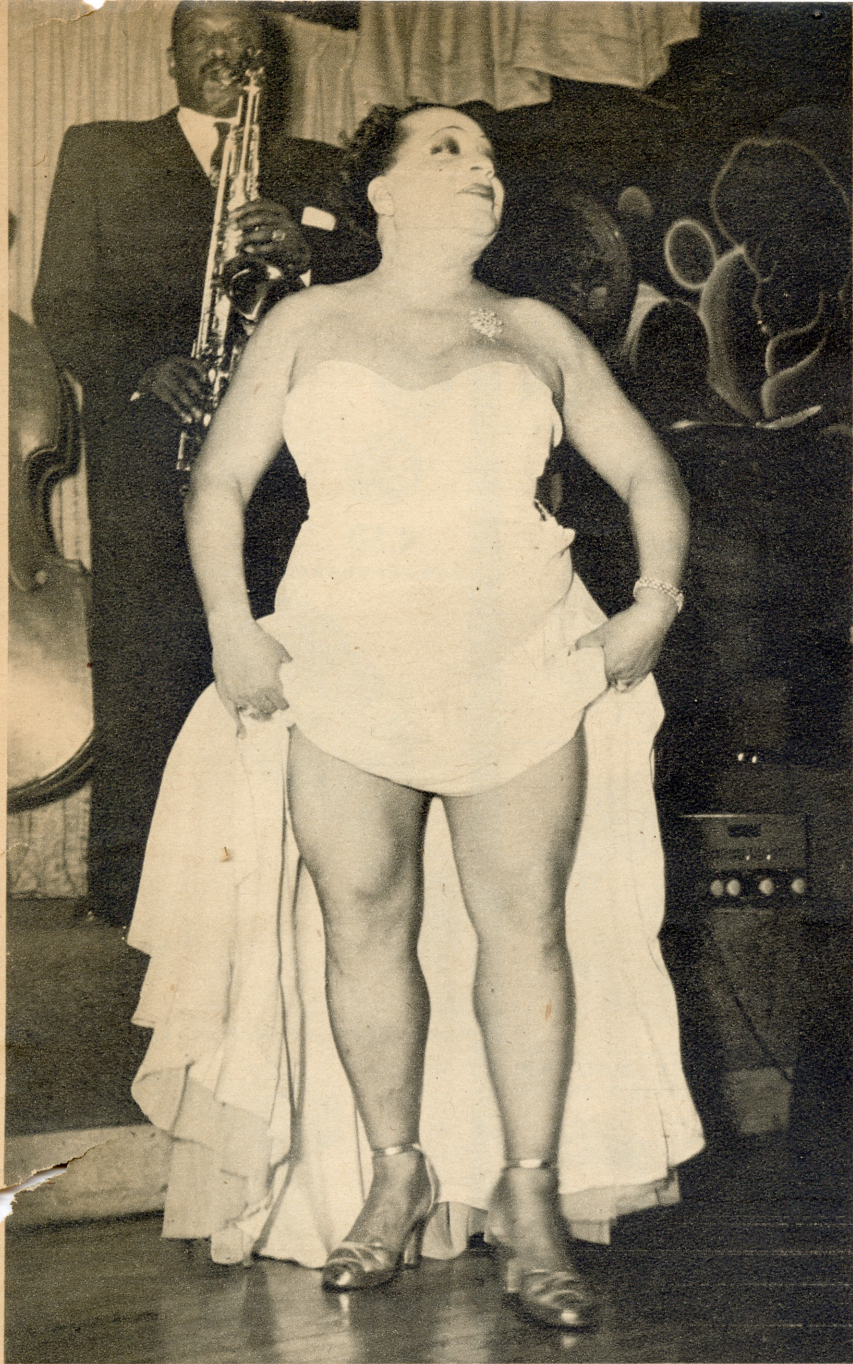
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In his flowing evening gowns, Phil looks just like a woman, has fooled many night-clubbers. In his act, he shows smooth legs that can easily be mistaken.

have always used my own name and I never wear women's clothes after I leave the stage. During my act, I have developed a routine with some dialog which I wrote. It goes: "Probably some of you are wondering if I'm so much of a man why do I wear women's clothes? This is my job. If I were a plumber, I would wear overalls. I wear women's clothes because I am a female impersonator. And, I get paid." That last line always gets them. I use this speech, which is much longer, especially when I am bothered by the drunks in the house. It never fails.

Living in two worlds may suggest all kinds of zig-zagging to some people. But it is no trouble to me. I keep my business straight. My private life is normal, and I am very careful about acquaintances. As a matter of fact I have few friends. I don't join the many parties that take place after clubs close and have very little use for alcohol. I have never been married, chiefly because of my mother. She has no other means of support and has been living with me for 18 years. I love her dearly and had to take

care of her. I was engaged to a little girl a long time ago but she went to college to become a teacher and I never saw her again. Since then I have never been able to find another girl friend.

Right now my real ambition is to go to Europe and get that *Continental stamp*. I have found out through letters that a lot of people in Europe already know about me through the "Funmakers Dance" for female impersonators (in fact for everybody) which we give every Thanksgiving. So I won't exactly be a stranger. I want to go to Paris, England and Scandinavia. Of course I want to get some new gowns and continental routines. That may make the difference in acceptance here as a female impersonator. Not that I haven't had my share of success in America. Every club I have played has held me on and on. At Covan's I stayed for five and a half years. I stayed at the Mayfair on 125th Street in Harlem for four. In fact many people think I own the clubs where I play. I stay so long. But the time is coming when I'll want my own club.

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