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## Blakk Power

San Francisco drag queen Joan Jett-Blakk aims for the presidency

By Joe Brown

**S**o you've come to San Francisco, and you're a drag queen. In any other town, that's enough at least to get you noticed. But here? As if we need another drag queen? To make a mark in this seen-it, done-it city, a girl's gotta have a gimmick, and then bump it with a trumpet.

Ladies and gentlemen: I give you Joan Jett-Blakk, the next president of the United States. A black drag queen. From San Francisco.

Electing me would save the country a whole lot of money, because I'm the president and the first lady," she says. "You won't have to pay two salaries."

Ba-dum-bum.

"And I am the purest presidential candidate, because you can't pin anything on me. I mean, you can't have a scandal with a black, gay drag queen. There's nothing, OK? I'd be like, 'Yeah, I did that.'"

You get the feeling this is all well-practiced shtick. But then, this isn't the first time Jett-Blakk has committed herself to being a political non sequitur. She tossed her (Gucci) hat into the ring in the last presidential election, running under the slogan "Lick Bush in '92." And before that, she ran for mayor of Chicago in 1990, challenging Richard Daley to a debate.

"And I actually got a couple thousand votes," Jett-Blakk says, unleashing her earthy, gravelly chortle. "So I'm not just an upstart here — I'm a seasoned politician."

Imagine Jett-Blakk — a vision in "rich black lady drag": Nina Simone African-patterned headwrap, 3/4-inch eyelashes, gold hoop earrings, spiked black "adventure boots," surrounded by a phalanx of glowering Can't-Keep-a-Secret Service agents — striding into Sportmart in Chicago on a Sunday afternoon, campaigning for president and pressing the flesh of the unsuspecting public.

"I wear Chanel suits," she says. "Well, copies," she admits when pressed. "From the Salvation Armani. But I do have an Adolfo. In fact, I toned my look down over the years. I used to look really, really wild, patterned myself after Divine. You show up in a Chanel suit and suddenly you don't look like a drag queen. You look like somebody's mom."

Which makes campaigning even more fun.

"When I go out into the public, straight people don't realize what's going on until it's too late, and I'm right in their face. And they're already talking to me. And then their face changes two or three times as they realize, 'Oh my god, this is a guy! Oh my god, it's really running for president!'"

By the time you read this, Jett-Blakk's campaign to paint the White House pink and black will be on the Web (<http://www.catch22.com/JettBlakk>). And her campaign posters should start going up any day now. The image is a knockoff of the famous Black Panther photo of Huey Newton on his wicker throne. But Jett-Blakk looks more like Angela Davis. "Joan Jett-Blakk for President," the poster reads. "By Any Means Necessary."

"They're gonna be doing double takes on their way to work on Geary Boulevard, let me

tell you," she cackles. "We're going to put them up all over the country."

Jett-Blakk's platform:

- "I would switch the education budget with the military budget. ... That way the military would have to have bake sales."

- "I've been thinking about balancing the budget. ... I would go about it by firing everybody who works there now, and hiring all my friends, because that's what all [the politicians] do. And since I don't have that many friends, the government would be running a much tighter ship."

- "Say bye-bye to all that old, crusty white marble dedicated to these old white men that did nothing but slaughter Indians and own slaves. I would put up monuments to everybody that's ever fought against all of the people they have monuments up to now. And I'd put some color in there."

- "When I'm elected president, we're gonna use stadiums for what they should be used for: lions and Christians. No more baseball, no more football, no more basketball. Lions and Christians. And then we're getting front-row seats and season tickets, OK?"

- "I would be a president who rides a skateboard. Because those are the kind of boys I like."

Jett-Blakk has been doing drag for 20 years, ever since lip-syncing opera arias and Kiki Dee tunes as a Detroit high-schooler. Of

at Josie's Cabaret and Juice Joint since 1993, and is soon to go monthly. The show patterns itself after that of Oprah (crossed with Letterman), and guests have included performance artists, sexual anarchists, and mayoral candidate Willie Brown. Now Jett-Blakk is angling for an invitation to Brown's inaugural ball.

"Hey, I helped get him elected," she growls. "He better remember me."

No political neophyte, Jett-Blakk first ran for office in Chicago after Queer Nation decided to put someone up against Mayor Daley. And who better to do it than a black drag queen?

"And since I was the only one sitting in the room, they asked me to do it, and I said, 'Sure!'" Jett-Blakk says. "Having remembered that Jello Biafra ran for mayor here, I thought, 'If Jello can do it, I can do it.'" Like Biafra, she lost.

"The whole idea behind the presidency of the U.S. is that it's attainable by absolutely anyone. And if I'm elected, I'll prove that. So far, none of the other people who were elected have proven that it's open to anyone," she laughs.

During her last run for the White House, Jett-Blakk met perennial presidential candidate Pat Paulsen on the *Faith Daniels* talk show. "When we were introduced, Faith says, 'And Joan Jett-Blakk is also running for president.' And Pat Paulsen just covered his eyes and said, 'Oh, no!' And I said, 'Uh-uh-uh, you started this, buddy!'"

Jett-Blakk is aiming for another visit to the Democratic National Convention, and is counting on major media attention. "Because with Dole and Clinton being the front-runners, that's pretty boring. So they're out there looking for anything. I want to get as close to [the candidates] as possible. I'd love to be a nuisance, to be able to have them be, 'Oh, oh, no: Here she comes!'"

That's a fantasy, of course, because the big boys don't let you get that close. But that's where being a drag queen comes in handy.

"It's an armor," Jett-Blakk says. "I never get scared before I do a show or a performance or speak somewhere, because once I'm in drag, I have my armor on, and it's not that I'm not me, but I'm protected in some way. In an odd sort of way, a black drag queen is the ultimate take-no-shit person."

But it's been done, Joan. Why are you still at it in jaded, faded 1996?

"People hear 'Joan Jett-Blakk, black drag queen,' and they immediately think, 'Oh, yeah — RuPaul, we're going to be dazzled, we're going to be entertained.' But I like to think that I'm carrying on a tradition started by Dick Gregory and Lenny Bruce," Jett-Blakk says. "These are huge names to call in, I realize. But there isn't much political satire now. And it's certainly not coming from the gay community, unless it's in the guise of stand-up. I can say things as a presidential candidate that none of the other ones can say."

But Jett-Blakk is losing patience. "If I don't win the presidency by votes, I'm just going to take it. I'm just going to declare myself president, because I'm tired of waiting," she says. "We need a president who can really get things done, who's not going to pussyfoot around, who knows how to wear high heels." SF



Politics and Pose: Presidential hopeful Joan Jett-Blakk.

late from Chicago, the recently hyphenated Jett-Blakk (nee Terence Smith) has lived here for two years, and currently works at A Different Light Bookstore in the Castro. A compact, powerfully built man, with a Letterman-esque inverted V-shaped gap between his teeth, Smith is nearing 40, but even without makeup he looks to be in his late 20s. Only his nails, painted a chipping red-bronze, and his leather jacket with a rhinestone flower brooch might indicate that the girl can't help it.

Jett-Blakk conducts this pre-campaign interview at her "think tank" and unofficial campaign headquarters, the Orbit Room Cafe on Market, where approximately a third of the people walking by wave or stop to chat. Some know her from the campaign, others from her live talk show, "Late Night With Joan Jett-Blakk," which has been an occasional feature