

Dress (Salvatore  
Ferragamo), top  
(Area) and wig  
(Achaia Select)



CANADA'S DRAG RACE  
SUPERSTAR PRIYANKA  
WILL HAVE HER CAKE  
AND EAT IT TOO.

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# North Queen





A bunch of cardboard boxes are piled up against the wall behind Priyanka when I reach her over Zoom. The 30-year-old winner of the first season of *Canada's Drag Race* pokes fun at the mess. "My place looks like I'm constantly moving—because I am constantly moving and grooving and taking over the world," she laughs. Dressed as Mark, her alter ego, in a soft-grey hoodie, she explains that she's ordering so many wigs these days that the empty boxes just pile up and stare at her. "Pop stars don't take out their recycling, do they?" she asks, a glint of mischief in her eyes. "Maybe we should just get Robbie in PR to fly to Canada to do it for me."

"Coming off mute for that one," says Robbie, her publicist, and we all laugh.

I've only been speaking with Priyanka for a few minutes, but it already feels like she's an old friend. It was like that as I watched her compete on television

last summer too, when she beat out 11 other girls for the title of "Canada's First Drag Superstar." Priyanka gave some of the most compelling confessionals ever seen on the beloved franchise—they were full of energy, wit and emotion. She was also bawdy and self-deprecating, genuine and lovable. And then there were the looks: sparkling and playful creations that never ceased to draw attention to her razor-sharp shoulders and long legs. The camera ate her up like a piece of cake.

"Everyone wants their best friend to win," she says. "And I truly think of myself as the best friend of the world. People liked seeing someone like me win. They saw me fight for the crown. They saw that it wasn't handed to me. And that's how I get everything in my life—by falling down and getting back up. Because we saw! We saw how bad I was at Snatch Game!"

Priyanka's impersonation of TV psychic Miss Cleo might have indeed been a flop, but it was her overall ►



Shirt, bra, skirt, bag and charm bracelet worn on left wrist (Versace), bangles and belt (Carole Tanenbaum Vintage Collection) and wig (Amber Hilton)



Dress (Faith Connexion),  
earrings (Mejuri) and wig  
(Achaia Select)

Opposite: Blazer (Paul  
Smith, at Holt Renfrew).  
Below: Corset (Starkers  
Corsetry) and jeans  
(Levi's)



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performance on the show (her fashion choices, comedic chops and humility) that ultimately won over the judges. The first contestant to sashay into the *Drag Race* "Werk Room"—wearing a pair of shiny thigh-high boots and a large glittery question mark that obscured her face—Priyanka immediately let the world know who she is. "My name is Priyanka—what's my name?" she hollered, pulling away the punctuation mark. The phrase became a recurring motif over the 10 episodes. It also served as a bookend to the series when she, clad in a resplendent red-and-white Lehenga Choli dress, screamed it one final time while gripping her winner's sceptre. The repetition was intentional. "I named myself Priyanka so people would know that there is an Indo-queer West Indian queen coming onstage—so they know they're represented," she said in the final episode. "That's the reason I make you scream my name all the time: to make you remember a girl named Priyanka can be successful."

It's clear from Priyanka's resumé that she was destined for greatness. In order to appear on *Canada's Drag Race*, the Toronto resident had to leave behind an established career in children's television. As Mark Suknanan, Priyanka had almost a decade of experience in the industry, working her way up from getting coffee for MTV Canada's Daryn Jones to appearing onscreen as host of YTV's *The Zone*. Giving it all up to compete in a drag competition may have been a risk, but it was one she was willing to take. "I wanted to entertain people in a live format because there's nothing like feeling that audience," she says. "Talking to a camera about SpongeBob SquarePants wasn't doing it for me anymore."

Still, a career in drag wasn't something Priyanka had ever considered until Xtacy Love, a Toronto queen she had hired to perform for her birthday, suggested she try it. "I was like, 'What? How do you even do that?'" she says. At the time, young Mark had just moved to Toronto's gay village and would go to the clubs to watch the city's queens transform into pop stars. "They would make me feel the escape," she says. "I wanted to make people feel that way too." Love, her soon-to-be drag mother, encouraged Mark to go to Crews & Tangos on Church Street and compete in a drag contest. "Before I knew it, I was buying wigs and watching makeup tutorials and going to the M·A·C counter to figure out what looks good onstage," she says. Pretty soon, Priyanka was born—and the city took notice.

*Canada's Drag Race* premiered in July 2020, several months into the pandemic, so Priyanka has had few opportunities to perform in front of a crowd since winning her crown. "It's been a lot better than I thought it was going to be," she says, reflecting on her big break arriving at the same time as a global crisis. "The pandemic took away our happiness. But a show like *Canada's Drag Race* let us see the light at the end of the tunnel. It was like 'At least we have this. At least we're all in this together.'"

It's a sentiment I felt too, cheering the girls on week after week in a friend's backyard as we (socially distanced) watched on a tablet. Priyanka took a similar approach, hosting her own outdoor viewing parties as restrictions eased—and her mom came to most of them. "She was *obsessed*," says Priyanka. "She would want to know why I was so bad at a challenge or tell me that she didn't like an outfit. She still rewatches all the episodes." Viewers will remember Priyanka revealing on the show that her father had no idea his son was gay or did drag and that she struggled with coming out for the longest time. "Just be gay!" was the tearful message Priyanka had for her younger self in the penultimate episode. Being on the show allowed her to come out to her entire family in one fell swoop. "I was so scared, but I didn't have to be because they were all so proud that I had taken a leap of faith and won the show," she says. It was also helpful for Priyanka's dad to see all the love and support his son was receiving. "My dad is the coolest guy," she says. "My relationship with him is the same. Nothing has changed."

As bars began to open up last summer, Priyanka was finally able to perform in a few Canadian cities, even headlining a four-city *Canada's Drag Race* tour of local drive-ins. Still, it's not the same as watching your favourite queen shoulder to shoulder with other fans in a packed nightclub. But even as we all wait patiently for things to get back to normal, Priyanka refuses to sit still: She has been busy booking meetings and making things happen since her win. Last month, she launched *What's My Game?*, a new web series in which she pits queens against celebrities in trivia faceoffs, and the pop-culture podcast Famous This Week with *Canada's Drag Race* judge Brooke Lynn Hytes. She's also headlining Toronto Pride's digital parade this summer, and since corporations no longer fear associating their brands with flamboyance, she continues to land huge sponsorship gigs with companies like SodaStream, ►

Dress (Kenzo) and headpiece (Sorcha O'Raghallaigh)





Dress (Dolce & Gabbana), beret (Berman & Co.), gloves (Wynn by Lynne Weare, shoes (Aldo) and wig (Achaia Select)



Amazon, Fireball and Bank of Montreal. Her most recent is with Vizzy Hard Seltzer, which also hired her to be the spokesperson and community impact director for its #Vizybility Project, a new program that provides grants and mentorships to LGBTQ+ artists and creators.

Vizzy Hard Seltzer provided the funding for the videos for each of the songs on Priyanka's debut visual EP, *Taste Test*. Released in July, the five-song collection is pure pop—fun and catchy with big beats, a ton of heart and empowering lyrics about love, sex and body image. It's a thoughtful yet banging peek into the diva's personal life. Priyanka filmed the video for "Cake," the EP's lead single, at the majestic Casa Loma in Toronto. The video is kind of a *Hunger Games* meets *The Purge* franchise meets *Scream* mash-up where a fictional government forces a bunch of queens to play

the "Cake Games" and whoever wins gets fame and fortune for the year. She cast a number of her *Canada's Drag Race* sisters in the video and was thrilled to be able to showcase them this way.

"My intention with these videos is to show the world how awesome we are," says Priyanka. "We're so good, and we're nice about it too! I've performed all over the country, and every single bar I've walked into has made me feel welcome. And a show like *Canada's Drag Race* is turning out Canadian stars. It's on Crave, so it's got a mainstream audience. Getting that audience to come out and see you is so important because that's what being Canadian is all about. We're not a melting pot; we're a fruit salad! Our individuality is celebrated, and there's so much individuality in Canadian drag. There's something for everyone." ■

Dress (Gucci) and wig (Achaia Select)

For details, see Shopping Guide. Makeup, Olivier Vinet (Folio Montreal/Make Up For Ever); hair, David D'Amours (Folio Montreal/Kérastase); manicurist, Tamara Di Lullo (Folio Montreal/CND Shellac in Fuji Love and Gala Girl); editorial producer, Estelle Gervais; set coordinator, Laura Malisan; photographer's assistants, Aljosa Alijagic and Thibaut Ketterer; styling assistant, Manuela Bartolomeo

