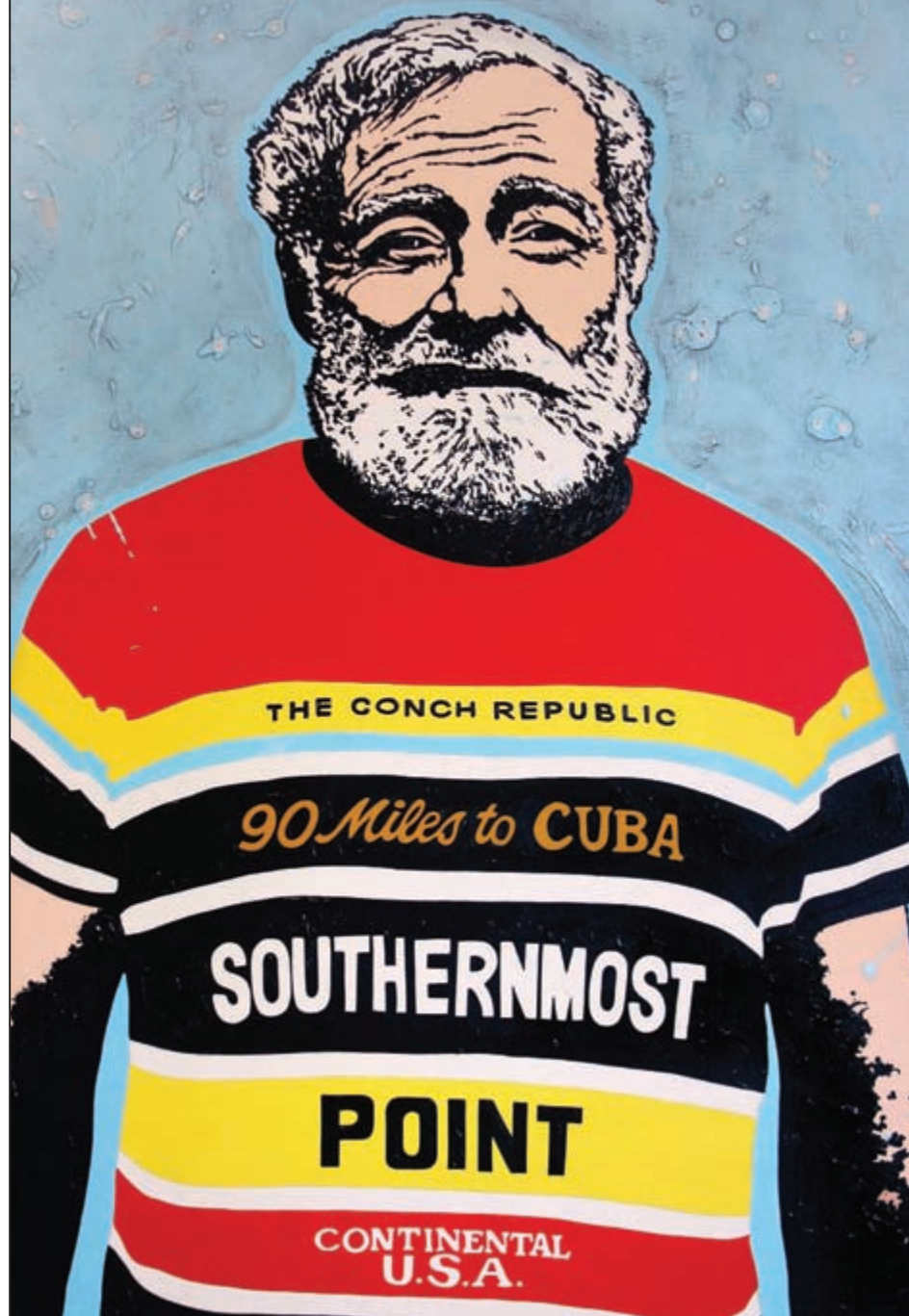


HAVANA

KEY WEST EXPRESS

THE STUDIOS OF KEY WEST



Reynerio Tamayo, one of Cuba's superstar visual artists, is featured at The Studios of Key West in April. No longer a stranger to Key West after three visits, Tamayo uses his art to embark on a "Ferry Express" from his home country, directing his trademark satire at a range of topics that unite and define us: from Ernest Hemingway to baseball and even Fantasy Fest.

PUBLIC RECEPTION:
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DRAG LIFE



COURTESY PHOTOS

Sushi primping for the night.

Sushi: the house queen of 801 Cabaret

BY EVAN WILLIAMS

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Spelled out on the wall behind the bar in huge letters lit with orange bulbs are the words DRAG ASYLUM. I'm at 801 Bourbon on Duval Street looking for an interview with Sushi, a drag queen who runs the upstairs Cabaret shows that have made it a Key West landmark. The bartender says Sushi will be here around 8 p.m. One of the queens glides through the side door and everyone stops talking and stares. She's spectacular: huge hair and 110 percent attitude.

I come back at 8.

"Are you Sushi?" I ask a queen hanging by the bar mingling.

"No, Sushi's Asian."

"Did you say you're... Sushi's agent?"

"No, Sushi's Asian," she says, enunciating clearly. Then without missing a beat: "I'm cauc-asian."

Sushi is upstairs in a narrow, well-loved dressing room packed with costumes and wigs transforming himself into a she. Sushi is, in fact, a man named Gary Marion who impersonates a woman at work, although everyone calls him Sushi.

Not strictly Asian, Sushi is half Japanese and the rest a mix of German, Irish and French. He started dressing in drag in high school in Oregon (even though he got sent home on Spirit Day), inspired by New Wave music, fashion and artists such as Annie Lennox and Boy George.

"I've been doing it for 30-some years," he says. "It takes me about an hour from shaved face to full drag."

Even after all these years he gets some nerves before a performance.

"It's right before you go onstage," Sushi says, "before the lights hit you. You always get this sort of nervous rush."

Sushi arrived in Key West give-or-take a few decades ago. He and his ex came from Keizer, Oregon, in a 1969 Mercedes Benz with a trailer attached. They took three months crossing the U.S.A.

"We pulled up in front of this bar (801 Bourbon) and I said, 'honey, do you know where a gay bar is?' And the bartender, Billy Buckles, he said, 'you're standing in one, darling.'"

He was home.

Sushi worked as a janitor at the bar across the street before opening the Cabaret. Since then he's become nationally known, especially as Key West's New Year's Eve



queen, seen throughout the country descending in a giant shoe at midnight. Sushi and his husband officially got married this New Year's after the Supreme Court made same-sex marriage legal, although they'd been together for more than a decade.

The University of Chicago Press also published an academic book about Sushi's club, "Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret," read by students in human studies classes.

It's mostly the younger queens who still put on drag just for fun, says Sushi, who is 48. For him it's show business. The queens work it hard, night after night, taking the audience for a rock 'n' roll walk on the wild side. He's also a clothes designer and seamstress who makes many of the outfits. In that respect, the performances are camp fashion shows and the stage a catwalk. Numerous costume changes are eye popping and dramatic, such as a huge feathery black shawl whipped off to reveal a skin-tight dress so colorful it could cause a seizure.

As I take notes, Sushi dabs at my forehead and upper lip with a napkin.

"You're shvitzing," he says.

I go back downstairs to the bar. A few minutes later Sushi appears along with some of the other queens, attracting passers-by to see a show. He is now a she, tall and pretty with legs that go all the way from Key West up to the Oregon town she came from.

The illusion is complete.

Later, during the show, a raucous crowd is encouraged to slip dollar bills in the outfits, high, low, wherever.

"Just a reminder that we are men," one of the queens says, "so if you knock something loose, it's your responsibility to put it back where you found it." ■