





# Indigenous Queen

## STEPS INTO THE LIGHT

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Renowned basketry artist George Neptune (Passamaquoddy) takes us on a Two Spirit journey just in time for June's national LGBT Pride Month as he introduces the world to his drag-queen alter ego Lyzz Bien in an effort to create safe, more accepting spaces for Two Spirits across Indian Country.

**BY TATÉ WALKER (MNICONJOU LAKOTA)**

**I**t starts with a toss of hair.

Doesn't matter what style: curly and blonde, straight and black, or layered short with bangs. Lyzz Bien, the drag-queen alter ego of George Neptune (Passamaquoddy), comes alive as soon as she tosses one of her many wigs into place.

"Lyzz is when that male spirit totally just gives up control. My whole persona changes—my body language, mannerisms, talk. It's a complete and total transition," says Neptune, 27. "She's her own person. She loves the spotlight."

As the nation prepares to celebrate LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans\* and the rest of the gender spectrum) Pride Month in June, Neptune hopes to bring more awareness to Two Spirit gender identities by stepping Lyzz fully into that spotlight with the help of big names in Indigenous fashion and design, including B.Yellowtail by Bethany Yellowtail (Crow/Northern Cheyenne), Patricia Michaels (Taos Pueblo), and Decontie & Brown by Jason and Donna Brown (both Penobscot), among many others.

The term "Two Spirit" was coined in 1990 as a catch-all to describe various, old-as-the-Earth Indigenous concepts of gender and sexuality outside the Western scope of the heteronormative gender binary (heterosexual man/heterosexual woman). Pre-colonialism, many tribes recognized, accepted and even honored a wide range of gender identities. As genocidal assimilation policies swept westward across what is now North America, many tribes lost or repressed their Two Spirit values and knowledge.

Now, advocates like Neptune are reclaiming spaces for Two Spirit and/or drag identities. San Francisco-based gay comedian Charlie Ballard

(Sac and Fox/Anishinaabe) recently emceed Stage 49, the entertainment venue at the Gathering of Nations Pow Wow, which he has hosted dressed in drag in the past. Additionally, celebrated Canadian artist Kent Monkman (Cree)—who has a few exhibits this year, including one at the Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery in Ontario in December—uses his drag queen alter ego Miss Chief Eagle Testickle to espouse the powerful spirit of Indigenous resilience, he told *Hyperallergic* in a recent interview.

Neptune identifies as both gay and Two Spirit who enjoys performing in drag. Performing as a drag queen does not mean someone is gay; nor does every gay man want to dress as a drag queen. Additionally, the term Two Spirit is meant to be claimed by the Indigenous people of Turtle Island exclusively, though many LGBT+ Native people do not identify as Two Spirit.

Neptune admits gender identities can be confusing concepts for some to grasp, which is why the education and visibility he's trying to promote are key. Neptune was recently featured as one of the visionaries at the second annual Maine Live event where he was able to share his experiences as Lyzz Bien.

Fashion, he says, is an essential element to his outreach, and he's working to create an Indigenous drag queen (and king) fashion show either where he lives in Bar Harbor, Maine, or at one of the many Indian art markets he attends annually.

"The connection between fashion and Two Spirits is two-fold. One, it brings Indigenous identity into a contemporary context, because contemporary Native fashion is such an amazing way we—as Indigenous

# Get Lyzz's Look

Some of Lyzz's favorite designers who helped her dress and accessorize for the photos featured in in this story include:

**B.Yellowtail** is a fashion line created by designer Bethany Yellowtail (Crow/Northern Cheyenne). A celebration of ancestral tradition, beauty and culture, B.Yellowtail embraces authentic, Indigenous design through wearable art. More at [www.byellowtail.com](http://www.byellowtail.com).

**Decontie & Brown** is the jewelry studio of Jason and Donna Brown (both Penobscot), who have been creating jewelry the past 20 years. This husband-and-wife team from Maine draws inspiration from their tribal heritage and their experience in the luxury jewelry industry to create beautiful trendsetting designs. More at [www.decontiebrown.com](http://www.decontiebrown.com).

**Sierra Henries** (Nipmuc) is a Maine-based birchbark artist and designer. More at [www.sierrahenries.com](http://www.sierrahenries.com).

**Tammy Beauvais** (Mohawk) opened her fashion-design company in 1999, producing contemporary clothing carrying all Native symbolism. Each handmade item carries with it culture, heritage and strength. More at <http://tammybeauvais.com/>.

**Indigenous Princess** is an Alaska Native family business by mother-daughter design duo Shaaxsaani and Mercedes Jack (Tlingit), who specialize in original, hand-crafted, contemporary skin sewing. More at [www.indigenousprincess.com](http://www.indigenousprincess.com).

**Patricia Michaels** (Taos Pueblo) is a style-maker at the forefront of modern fashion design and aesthetics. She creates boldly hip designs with a quality of timeless elegance. More at [www.patriciamichaelsfashion.com](http://www.patriciamichaelsfashion.com).

**Jonathan Perry** (Aquinnah Wampanoag) considers designs by examining the raw materials closely, and draws his images from the grain, hues and patina of wood, stone and copper. More at [www.jonathanjamesperry.com](http://www.jonathanjamesperry.com).



Lyzz wears a beadwork-inspired dress by Tammy Beauvais (Mohawk); beaded bag, gloves and necklace by Hollis Chitto (Choctaw/Laguna Pueblo); ermine earrings by Indigenous Princess.

people—are breaking free of stereotypical depictions of what it is to be Indigenous,” says Neptune, a renowned basket weaver and an educator at the Abbe Museum in Maine.

“And two, now more than ever it’s important that as Two Spirits we reclaim that identity and important to feel support from our community and other communities,” he continues. “And from other artists, too, because that’s what we’re all doing as contemporary artists—breaking all the rules.”

Tammy Beauvais (Mohawk) is one of Lyzz Bien’s favorite designers. Known for bright florals and symbols reminiscent of the Eastern Woodland tribes, Beauvais’ handmade, contemporary fashions are meant to make the wearer feel strong, she says.

“One of the first things that makes people feel good about themselves and helps them with self-acceptance is clothing and adornment,” Beauvais says. “Clothes are about outer beauty reflecting what’s on the inside.”

Acknowledging and accepting Two Spirits is becoming more important to industries like art, fashion and design, Beauvais says, and that makes her happy. Her clothes are made to fit anyone, regardless of gender or size.



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PHOTOS BY TATE WALKER

“In Canada, we don’t have many art shows, so we bring our work to powwows where there are a lot of Two Spirits ...,” says Beauvais, who lives in Kahnawake, Montreal. “We [artists] have to honor that. It’s good to see it becoming more and more common.”

Neptune agrees and has experienced a shift toward greater acceptance of Two Spirits in Indian Country. Coming out to his family at age 15 was relatively drama-free, he says, especially when one considers his grandmother and mentor—master basket maker Molly Neptune Parker (Passamaquoddy)—hoped he’d become a Catholic priest one day.

“He was a calm child and listened really good,” says Parker, 77. She describes how at 4 years old, Neptune asked her to teach him to make baskets. She said no, thinking he was too young and not dexterous enough to handle the weaving technique. So he sat at her feet, practiced with her scraps, and that same year enrolled himself in a basketry class meant for much older kids. “He came home from that class and didn’t say a word, just handed me the basket he made. Showed me he could do it and that he was ready for me to teach him.

“He was always like that,” Parker recalls. “He listened and could make people listen to him. Make people feel good about themselves. ... That’s why I thought he’d make a good priest.”

While priesthood wasn’t his calling, Parker’s recognition of her grandson’s natural way with people falls in line with the traditional roles Two Spirits often occupied in tribal societies as healers, counselors and spiritual leaders.

“Basketry is a big part of [Wabanaki] culture. In our creation story, it says that we were created from the brown ash tree, which we use to make baskets,” Neptune says. “So it’s a sacred art form, because we’re using the same material we were created from and creating other things from it. As basket makers we are creators ourselves.”

So Neptune weaves strips of sacred brown ash and other materials to create vessels that help preserve and promote his Passamaquoddy culture. It should come as no surprise, then, that weaving together Indigenous fashion and gender identity does the exact same thing.

“My grandmother always said—and I believe—that whatever you make, you take a small piece of your spirit and give it to creation and make it a part of yourself,” Neptune says. “So here’s me.”