

# From holy water to bottled water

"If you're a circuit singer, you have to have power and attitude"

by Elio Iannacci

It's an age-old tradition. Diva learns to sing, diva joins choir, diva sings in gay club. The move from singing church hymns to gay anthems is a common crossover shared by many performers on the gay club scene. Three of this year's hottest divas — Kim English, Suzanne Palmer and Celeda — have all taken the plunge from holy water to bottled water.

Kim English, the powerhouse behind the recent dance floor hits, "Jumpin' and Bumpin," "Unspeak-able Joy" and the gospel-tinged "Everyday," believes the move from church to club is a rite of passage every "blessed" dance act should go through.

"I grew up singing in churches before I could read," she says. "After training in gospel, I started meeting producers and singers like Byron Stingley and my music took off in the clubs."

Born and raised in Chicago's soulful south side, English insists that she did not leave the church behind her to enter the hedonistic heartland of gay club life but rather brings the church to the party.

"The circuit is very faithful," says English. "It is tight-knit because you have family-like groups coming back to you every week. For dance kids, it's a total spiritual situation."

"My make-up may be a lot less conservative in a club but I believe I am a messenger of truth. So is Martha Wash. God has sent me to deliver messages by song where they need to be delivered. If one person out of a hundred in a club realizes God is watching us while I am out there, I've done my job."

Another southside Chicago diva, Suzanne Palmer, moved from church choirs to club venues serving up a less-



(l to r) Kim English, Suzanne Palmer and Celeda

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than holy approach to her club appearances. Palmer's most enduring anthem, "Hide You," has been mixed by DJs ranging from Victor Calderone to Danny Tenaglia. "I'm more of a comedienne," Palmer admits. "My first gig was as a singing waitress for a Chicago diner so I like playing around on the stage and making it fun." Raised on the sounds of Billie Holiday and Chaka Khan, Palmer considers herself as more than just a club queen. She's also a jazz, cabaret and blues performer, which is most evident in the talented croons she uses on her latest release

"Show Me."

"If you're a circuit singer, you have to have power, versatility and attitude," Palmer clarifies. "Jazz singers such as Nina Simone and Billie Holiday would have done a great job [making the transition from jazz] to the circuit clubs if they were asked to."

Citing disco as one of his main "salvations," former ministry scholar Celeda turned to transvestitism and singing house music to help him through tough times. Combining the spirit of gospel with classic modern disco anthems such as "Messin' With My Mind" and "Let The Music Use You Up," Celeda realized, the shoe was on the other foot and some other queens were listening to him for the same support. "What I am doing is nothing new. I was raised in a church so naturally what I present is what I am," Celeda snaps.

"My upbringing, my sexuality and my attitudes also come into [play for my] performance but where I am from and my heritage is [also] a big part of my performance."

Sylvester did it, Kevin Aviance does it now. Celeda is just carrying the torch.

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