



She's just a Moscow baby!

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Katya Ludmilla Smirnoff-Skyy, San Francisco's newest drag phenom, has exploded into the cabaret scene with her own blend of operatic pop music.

In a city like **San Francisco** known for blazing new ground when it comes to drag and gender-bending, it's rare for a brand new drag performer to become the toast of the town with her maiden performance. But that's just what **Katya Ludmilla Smirnoff-Skyy** has done with her now almost-weekly appearances singing operatic renditions of everything from show tunes to pop music, Christmas carols to, yes, even opera.

"Katya, she fills a niche that's not so filled here in town," explained Conrad Frank, the man behind her face and voice. "There are lots of drag cabaret singers in town, but I think Katya fills a special niche that translates into more than musical theater and opera. It's high-class camp."

Technically it's *Countess* Katya, the widow of the late Count Smirnoff-Skyy. Before her marriage, she was just Katya Lubnilla Stolichnaya ("It is hard to find a vodka that is not in my name," she explained in her thick Russian accent), the daughter of a Soviet Russian ballerina and a roving gypsy minstrel. Katya was trained in the vocal arts before she was born ("Darling, in Russia they work you *hard*"), emerging from the womb singing. She grew up performing throughout Eastern Europe in her youth where she eventually met her half-sister Kielbasia, the Polish lunch lady who also performs in San Francisco's drag circles.



It was at the Paris Conservatory that she met the late Count Smirnoff-Skyy. The two married and spent many happy years in Petrograd before he passed away, leaving her penniless. "So Katya takes her jewels and her shoes and comes to *America* to fulfill her lifelong dream of beautifying the *masses*," she explained. "And she gets a job at the *Macy's* [pronounced the same] working behind the make-up counter, you know. So there at the make-up counter at *Macy's*, she starts to take in *American* culture." It was there that her repertoire expanded to cover other classic American artists -- like Christina Aguilera.

The elaborate back-story may be a fun conceit (her alter-ego, Conrad, was born and raised in the San Francisco Bay Area, not Russia -- Soviet or otherwise), but the voice is no trick or fake falsetto. After singing locally in both opera and a boys' choir in his youth, Conrad went to Oregon for college where he began studying architecture but ended up with a degree in vocal performance. He was trained first as a baritone and then as a counter-tenor, the male equivalent of the mezzo soprano, a vocal style first developed in the 16th and 17th centuries at the fall of the castrati. "It is a natural, highly-developed male

falsetto," Conrad explained. "So my range is comparable to that of a mezzo. I'm just a lot louder than a normal male's falsetto, and I have a lot more connection between my top and my bottom."

After returning to the Bay Area, he was cast in the late spring of 2005 in the Howard Crabtree play "Whoop-Dee-Doo" at the [New Conservatory Theatre](#). It was there that fellow cast-member Trauma Flintstone persuaded him to sing at her new monthly cabaret show at [Martuni's](#) called Bijou. Conrad had never really performed much in drag at that point, but Trauma persuaded him to put on a wig and a dress and sing "Habanera" from Bizet's opera *Carmen*, one of the most well-known arias in operatic history. In the car on the ride over, Conrad decided he didn't want to just get up and sing a song. A Russian accent emerged, a name was added (with an elaborate back-story soon to follow), and Katya was born.

Since then, Katya has been booked solid, appearing almost every week at either Martuni's (either in Trauma's monthly Bijou or Cookie Dough's monthly Cookie After Dark), or at Cookie Dough's other show at [Harvey's](#) in the Castro, The Monster Show. She's developed a relationship with Kielbasia, the accordion-wielding Polish lunch lady, and the two have developed their own periodic show at Martuni's where they sing songs with reworked lyrics (like "Moscow Baby" instead of "Broadway Baby"). And starting in January, Katya will have her own show at Martuni's.

From the emergence of drag performers in the City in the 1920s and 30s, [San Francisco](#) has rivaled [New York](#) for pushing drag to new heights. In 1961, Jose Sarria, better known as the Widow Norton, became the first openly-gay candidate for elected office in the United States at a time when police were still raiding gay bars and it was illegal for men to even just dance together in public. He later went on to found the Imperial Court, which now has chapters throughout the world. It is a City that has witnessed the emergence of drag kings, faux queens and, most recently, [faux kings](#). Many drag queens still lip synch, but they're in danger of becoming a minority in a town that increasingly emphasizes live singing among her drag talent. And it is a place that gave birth to the often controversial, always shocking [Trannyshack](#), now 10 years old.

But for all the shock value emphasized in many of the other shows, Katya continues to wow with just her voice. "I don't like shock," Conrad said. "Yes, there's some shock value in what I do in that I'll draw out a high B for no apparent reason. Yes, now that's shocking. But I think that the quality of performance is *quality*." Over the months since Katya's birth, Conrad has become extraordinarily protective of her image. "Katya's a special thing because unlike a lot of drag performers in town, when Katya goes out, *Katya* goes out," he said. "I'm not going to go out in a blonde wig. I'm not going to go out in a mini-skirt, because that's not what she would do. You know, I remain very loyal to my Katya."

"She's nuts!" he added. "She's a make-up lady at Macy's who sings opera and is from Russia. That can only go certain places."

And what's next for Katya? Eventually New York, perhaps. "It's a great scene," Conrad said, "and it's a scene that already has a really well-established drag cabaret, so we'd like to bring some of that here, and eventually bring some of us there. We'll see."

But in the meantime, there's still much more to accomplish in San Francisco. "Katya will keep performing strong, performing in better venues, bigger audiences," Conrad said. "I love intimate audiences, I love performing at Martuni's. It's so much fun. You get to really communicate with the people who are around you. I think that's really nice."

On December 17th, Katya and Kielbasia will produce their own [Christmas pageant](#) at Martuni's, where she'll perform traditional standards like "O Holy Night" as well as Soviet-inspired carols such as "I'm dreaming of a red Christmas."

And starting in January, she'll have her own regular showtune-emphasized show at Martuni's, alternating her Sunday slots with Trauma, Kielbasia and Cookie Dough. "There's so much talent in this town," she said. "We're trying to create a drag cabaret scene, basically. Not just for drag queens. We're open for everyone. A good group of people performing at our shows. But drag first."

*Katya Smirnoff-Skyy can be seen next at Martuni's on Sunday, December 17th in her special **Holiday Extravaganza** with Kielbasia, Trauma Flintstone and Nikki Star. And starting in January, catch her own monthly show at Martuni's, and keep an eye out for her forthcoming Web site and e-mail list.*