

Passion Flower

An Exclusive Express Interview with Latin Pop Star Jade Esteban Estrada

By Ian Drew

Jade Esteban Estrada is hardly one to rest on his artistic laurels. He is a multifaceted artist with deep roots in his own messages and branches that grow in every direction.

Touted by *Genre Magazine* as the "most exciting Latin pop artist ever to emerge on to the music scene," Estrada is more than just a regular, run-of-the-mill pop singer. He continues to defy convention by pushing down both artistic and industry boundaries while humbly asserting his self-imbibed credence to just be himself.

Born in San, Antonio Texas to an army officer father and stage actress mother, Estrada grew up trying his hand at just about everything until an acting scholarship to the American Musical and Dramatic Academy brought him to New York City.

Actress Zoe Caldwell once gave Estrada some advice that he took to heart. "In order to prepare for your career as an actor, you must do everything," Caldwell said. Estrada tried his hand as a stand-up comic, choreographer, actor, dancer, writer, drag queen and go-go boy before building a career in musical theater and eventually stumbling into the pop music arena.

While dividing his time between performing, hosting beauty pageants and interviewing other entertainers for *QV Magazine*, Estrada is now following in the steps of Ani DiFranco by running his own record label, releasing his own albums and signing other artists.

And, to allude to another of his heroes, Frank Sinatra, he does it all his way.

Currently single and living in New York's Chelsea neighborhood, Estrada will bring his unique musical flavor south on March 24 as the headlining performer of Palm Beach County's Pridefest 2002. Titled "Partners in Pride," it promises to be one of the year's largest and most important gay pride events.

Ian Drew: Are you excited to be headlining Palm Beach County's Pridefest 2002?

Jade Esteban Estrada: Most definitely. This is my third time performing in Palm Beach, and I am so excited. I will be doing

gay pride events in other cities, but this one should be very special. I don't often go to South Florida, but I love the vibe down there. The weather is beautiful and there is a huge Latin music scene.

ID: Can we expect to see anything special in your performance?

JEE: I will be debuting new tracks from my upcoming album, *Passions*. It will be very different work and much more dance-oriented. I have grown as a result of my experiences in public life, and there is such a connection that I have made that I needed to express it in my music. The performance will also be more theatrical than what I have done before. It will just be me without backup singers and dancers.

ID: Did you ever envision yourself playing such large and important events when you started out as an entertainer?

JEE: I didn't really concentrate on that. My first inclination to perform was to be an opera singer. I got into choirs and found out I that I had a gift. When I got to New York, however, acting and dancing first propelled my career. I have done a lot of things, but everything I have done in the past has come back and

influenced what I do.

ID: How did you make the leap into pop music?

JEE: It was really a winding road. I started out in a group called the Model Citizens. It was a hip-hop group in the mid-nineties, and I was the singer. I know what the Supremes went through on a smaller level as a result of that experience. Everybody in it wanted to be the star. I got to a point that it just was not for me anymore and I into musical theater.

ID: And how did you become a solo singing act?

JEE: It fell into my lap. I was doing a

show in Chicago and met a girl named Jennifer Houston who was part of a group called Nanapeg. Her record company was interested in cutting a Spanish single. After I recorded

Reggae Twist, it ended up becoming a huge radio hit. I wasn't ready for it because I was so concentrated on my career as a performance artist, but I was forced to drop everything to promote it and tour. Through those experiences and my popularity, I was forced to really handle a lot of my own marketing because the label didn't really know how to market Latin artists. I got more savvy in business and hired my own team. I ended up starting Vicarious Records to market my own music and released my first album, *Angel*.

ID: Would you ever want to sign with a major label?

JEE: As far as distribution, yes. But otherwise I don't want to be told what to do. I really enjoy where I am going and what I am doing. I have plans that I don't want to deter as a result of other people's agendas. I never want to be at the mercy of money. The greatest works in history that have been produced were from people who put

that aside. A very weak man caves into the 'ching, ching.' There are five major record labels that run the whole show right now, but we have done a tremendous deal on our own. We have a strong arm that is growing more muscular each day.

ID: Do you think it would be harder being open as a gay Latino singer with a major label?

JEE: I chose to be open with who I am right from the beginning, and I am not sure I could have done that otherwise. Sure I have had experiences where the fact that I am gay has stood in the way, but I made the decision to represent my people as a homosexual and a Latino. I expected to have experiences where doors were shut because of my sexuality when I started out. The world still has changing to do, but I don't feel it has hindered my success.

ID: How has it made your experience different than if you had just been one or the other?

JEE: What I find most interesting is that I wandered into a world where the product I put out appeals equally to mainstream, Latin and gay audiences. It is like having three different careers, and neither group is generally interested in the other. It is really a great lesson in social studies. The gays sometimes think I'm not gay enough, the mainstream audience would rather I sing all in English and my Latin audience only wants me to sing in Spanish. These differences play themselves out when I am working with the press. When I am interviewed by mainstream press, they know about my sexuality and don't bring it up. Meanwhile, gay papers often concentrate on my sexuality but don't care about anything else. Then the Latinos care only about Latin stuff that I am doing. It is really right down the

line with all three and they are not always open to real crossover.

ID: Has it been difficult being both Latino and gay in a world where the lines are not always willing to be blurred?

JEE: First of all, it is hard coming out as a Latino period. Whereas as Americans we are taught to be ourselves and voice our opinions, as Latinos we are taught to be traditional and not rock the boat. Anyone who has tried to come out as a gay Latino goes through a lot. Within the gay community, everybody stereotypes Latinos as being exciting and great in bed. Of course, it's true! [Laughs] Latinos are passionate people and our emotions are always put out in front of us. When we get angry, we don't mess around. When we love, we love very hard.

ID: Has that influenced your music?

JEE: Love in general has influenced my music the most. A lot of the work I do is a result of the passions I experienced living the life of a bohemian artist while touring in Japan and Europe. That was when I really started writing songs and poetry based on the love I was experiencing. It was in my early twenties, and the height of emotion was fleeting while at the same time I was getting wiser. As an artist, I think that when you think with your heart you are never wrong.

ID: And how has your music affected your own love life?

JEE: I am single right now, but I have recently experienced the concept that someone will date me because I am singer. That never occurred to me before. I never

thought people would be after me for that. I have had boyfriends that didn't care what I did and I like that more, though. It keeps your ego grounded. The mix of experiences in love that I have had is the most magical part of living in New York. I have always loved the fact that in New York you can date real starving artists. I have woken up to people who were painting me or photographing me or writing about me. You throw a rock here and hit the most beautiful and talented artists in the world.

ID: What do you have planned next?

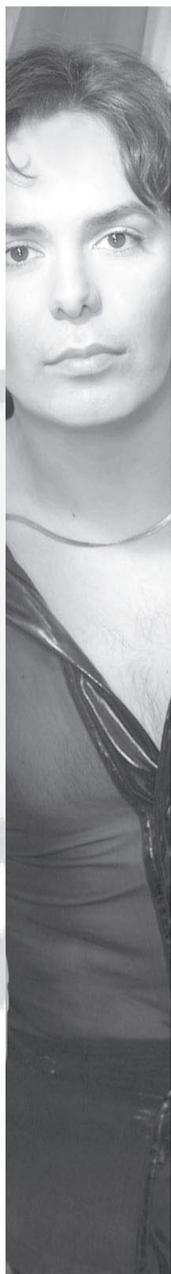
JEE: Well, *Passions* will come out in April and will first be released in Germany.

Because I am a singer, I will never stop singing. But I can act and dance, and those are two parts of my art that I can't negate, either. So, I will be doing a one-man show that debuts in New York in July called *Sexual Tortillas*. It will include all parts of me—singing, dancing, acting and writing. It is a portrayal of twentieth century experiences of gay and Latino life.

I also have autobiography coming out at the end of the year called *Chorus Boy: The Life and Times of Jade Esteban Estrada* and a Christmas album. My book is in the style of *Behind the Music*. It is very telling. The title means that I was truly meant to be the chorus boy and something else happened.

ID: Do all of these projects further your mission as an artist?

JEE: My goal as an artist has always been to enlighten. I would like to push forward with that plan to continue to bring works that trigger something in the minds of society. I want to hold a hand mirror to the audience that lets them see who they are in the year 2002. That is my job.



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