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ENTERTAINMENTTELEVISION

Alex Newell Talks New Music & Future Husband Material



Returning this week as Unique on *Glee*, the actor and musician says he has a soft spot for Sam Smith and would love to be on the set of *Empire*

BY RAE VOTTA
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Alex Newell at the Trevor Project Live event in Los Angeles in Dec. 2014 / Credit: Getty

Before Shannon (now Sheldon) Beiste came out on *Glee*'s sixth season, Alex Newell played the show's first trans-identifying character, Unique. After making waves with a powerhouse voice on the show's feeder reality series *The Glee Project*, Newell won a two-episode arc on *Glee* that he transitioned into a recurring role in the series' fourth season. While he was part of the jettisoned newbies moving into the final season, Newell has kept busy working on his own album and bringing the house down at countless live events across the country. But he couldn't stay away from *Glee* forever.

Newell makes his return to McKinley in Friday's episode and let us know what's up with his original music, and talks whom of his fellow 100 Eligible Bachelor nominees could be his future husband, and why.

Unique's back on *Glee*! What's going on in her world?

She's coming back and shedding the light and being the backbone she's always been. She's the, "It's OK to be who you are" kind of person. I think this role has taught me it's fine to be myself regardless of what I wear or how I speak. The role has always been so vulnerable, and I found that vulnerability is actually more strengthening than anything, honestly. The more true you are to being yourself and knowing your truth, it doesn't get any better than that.

You've performed the song "I Know Where I've Been" from *Hairspray* at charity events in the past. Did you have a hand on getting this song on *Glee*?

No, nothing like that! I think all credit goes to Ryan Murphy himself and the person who wrote the song, Marc Shaiman. Marc saw me do it with the Gay Men's Chorus in Boston over the summer, so he emailed Ryan and told him to put it in there. So it's something that came to be.

You perform your big number with an amazing trans choir of 200 performers backing you up, what was that day on set like?

I woke up that morning and I knew it was a giant day. It was a number of a choir that we've never had on the show ever, the biggest choir that they've had. Just to be there was an overwhelming kind of thing, only in the sense that there was a lot to do in this one day in the limited amount of hours that we all had. It was nice to be there and have them welcome me with open arms. To be there and understand we're all going to be doing something that's bigger than all of us at the same time. [WATCH IT HERE]



Alex Newell (right) performs in the "Transitioning" episode of Glee airing Feb. 13
Have you noticed a difference in how media has reacted over time in terms of trans visibility and trans storytelling?

I feel like it's not shed in a negative light anymore, if that makes any sense. I remember watching things with trans people on it, and it was always negative. They were strung out on drugs, or a prostitute, on television. Now it's more of a positive light, more of an education.

As the show is ending, do you have a vision for Unique's future?

I think her happy ending is her being herself and transitioning into being the full, beautiful women that she's always been. It's so funny that you said *Glee* is going to be over. My anniversary of being in the *Glee* world was four years on the 8th of

February. My mother's birthday. I found out I was going to be on *The Glee Project* that day. It's so funny to think about that journey coming to an end.

You're working on your own music now, what can fans expect coming up?

I'm working on my debut album. It's so strange thinking that I'm making my own music. I mean, I am singing songs that other people write, but it's my voice there. I've done covers for the last three years, and I've sung gospel my whole entire life. But now to sit in the studio and sing stuff and go, "No, I don't like that, let me do it again," and having a say in everything I sing all the time is surreal. It's gratifying at the end of the day. All my hard work, all those classes of being pushed in the stomach or all those classes of singing, dancing and acting are starting to pay off. The music is dancey, pop-dance, with a disco feel to it all. I got to work with some really cool people. I got to work with DJ Cassidy, I got to work with Diane Warren, I got to work with Nile Rodgers.

When can fans hear the music?

I have a song — I don't know if I can say this — I have a song ["All Cried Out"] coming out with a band in the U.K. called Blonde. It's going to be on the radio out there. It'll be over the pond, and I've never been there. I've never been off of this continent. Hawaii doesn't count. But it's fine, my voice will be there. By the time I'll get there, people will know my voice.

You'll be famous before you get there.

[Laughs] I want to be like Sam Smith was over here. Just show up and go, "Hey, I'm here."

Do you take influence from other artists right now?

My influences are always Donna Summer, Diana Ross, Aretha Franklin, and Chaka Khan. Those throwbacks. Because there isn't music like that music anymore. Like, I want to stand on the stage and rip this song to every sort of shred that there is. I miss that. I'd love my music to pay homage to that. I don't want to be just like that, it's hard to aspire to greatness. I want to come close, I want to touch it. I want to have a ballad, just one, that people would sing or cover. And my queen Beyoncé, everything I do is for her. [Laughs]

How did you feel about the Grammys?

I was expecting something else, but she was flawless regardless. I didn't know who Beck was. When they said, "And the Grammy goes to Beck," I literally said, "Who is Beck?"

Well that proves how young you are!

I was like, “Did someone make him up so Beyoncé couldn't win the Grammy. I'm lost.” But it's fine, she'll win next year. She's just like Meryl [Streep], even when she doesn't win, she still wins.

Congrats on your spot on the *Out's 100 Most Eligible Bachelors* list.

I'll be single until I die, let's be honest.

Don't say that, you're about to be a superstar in London.

So true. [Laughs] I actually look at that list as who's my future husband.

Who are you eyeing this year?

I would totes go for Sam Smith, only because I just want him to serenade me all of the time. But also, up and coming, Jussie Smollett. I have a soft spot only because I would just want to sit on set of *Empire* all the time. To see Taraji P. Henson actually be Cookie Lyons is the ultimate.

The "Transitioning" episode of *Glee* airs Feb. 13 on FOX. Watch a clip below:

***Glee* airs Fridays on Fox at 9/8c.**