

Arts & Entertainment

The god of gossip: Michael Musto

Village Voice columnist and gossip virtuoso **Michael Musto** is on the phone long-distance and he sounds like he just woke up. "Are you sure this is Musto?" I want to say. But I don't want to sound like the naive Nebraska college boy he thinks he's talking to, so I refrain.

I'm still perplexed. This can't be the same person who writes "La Dolce Musto," a weekly name-dropping chronicle who's hyping who in New York's endlessly star-studded, enviable clubland netherworld known to the locals as simply "Downtown."



Harrah's
Hollywood

by Scott
Harrah

I have many reasons to be skeptical. Can this be the same man who purportedly runs around New York wearing hoop skirts, tablecloths and Statue of Liberty get-ups while he participates in the scene he loves to send up and glorify simultaneously every week? Can this be the same man who claims he majored in English instead of journalism in college because he wanted to avoid mock conferences and instead "do real journalism" and get to meet **Donna Mills**?

Yes, it can.

On the phone, Musto comes off so, well, earthy. He has a rough, trashed-out Brooklyn accent and sounds like the kind of guy who serves fat housewives pastrami sandwiches at the corner deli. I wanted glitz and glam, but it's obvious that he saves that for sundown, which occurs in New York about 1 a.m. In Lincoln, the bars close at 1, but in Manhattan many of the hot spots don't even start hopping till at least 1:30 a.m. That's dusk for Musto.

Now it's 2:30 in the afternoon on the East coast and way past the crack of noon. For Musto, this time of day is well, breakfast time, I guess.

Once I'm convinced I'm talking to New York's leading gossip guru, I pose the inevitable question: "Are you surprised that people read you in Nebraska?" A sarcastic retort ensues. Yep, I tell my shivering, nervous self, this is Michael Musto.

Suddenly, the benevolent king of New York quirkdom feels sorry for the poor little fan and gives a serious response.

"I'm surprised people ready me anywhere," he says.

Next, he tells me about the subject of his next column, **Yma Sumac**, whom he recently interviewed.

"She's still alive?" I say, remembering the campy caterwauling mambo queen from South America known to many as the poor man's **Charo**.

"They passed Yma off as an Inca princess from Peru, but she's really from Brooklyn," he insists.

Now I know I'm talking to Michael Musto.

For over two years, Musto has been writing about the young, outrageous, artsy cretins who slink through lower Manhattan trying to promote themselves while having a hell of a time doing it. These rejects from American suburbia, known as "celebutantes," wear everything (including the kitchen

sink, if they think it looks fashionable) and cruise through nightclubs hoping someone will notice them. Some actually make it. **Madonna** is a former club rat, as is **Bruce Willis**, who used to be a bartender at the once-trendy Kamikaze club. And many simply stroll through the scene for creativity's sake — like **James St. James**, a teenage boy who became a club star by donning feather boas and carrying around a lunchbox filled with wooden dolls. Many of these people are artists, writers and actors who were made fun of as children, but grew up, moved to New York and became well-known for the qualities that were just too *faux pas* in their hometowns.

Being 'faabulous'

And Musto is at the top of the lot. He goes out several times a week and rubs sequined shoulders with **Cher**, **Vanna White** and **Grace Jones**. But he says he doesn't go out with the idea of digging up dirt; such a tactic would be a definite way to be expelled from what he calls "the 'faabulous' crowd," the scene makers who set the trends and the sensibilities for the rest of the country. He merely records the events he observes and participates in.

"The whole thing is based on elitism," he says.

Sometimes, he explains, the scene snubs even established stars. Case one, **Nell's**, the hottest club in town, managed by **Little Nell** of "Rocky Horror" fame. "Nell's is simply the best club in town and, boy, does she have style," **Calvin Klein** told *Vanity Fair* magazine.

Not according to Musto. "They keep saying Nell brings warmth to the club, and it's quite the opposite," he says, adding that they once turned away **Cher** because someone didn't feel she was hip enough to enter the club's golden gates.

But things aren't always that uppity, he explains. Those who grow tired of the snobbery and the attitudes create their own scene and wait for the mainstream press to come along much later and say, "What do we have here? Trends! Subversion! Call *People* magazine, quick!"

A perfect example is porno lounge lizard **John Sex**, who has a monolith of spiked hair held up with egg whites and semen. He recently released a song called "Hustle With My Muscle."

It's freaks like these who keep the scene suffused with enough satire and self-parody to shock their uptown counterparts, celebrities with money and respect.

Downtown's everywhere

Downtown is more than a geographic region south of 14th Street. It is a sensibility that defines all the notions of bohemia and can be found virtually anywhere, like in Omaha's Old Market district, where victims of suburban hell go to glorify their idiosyncrasies, buy **Joan Crawford** T-shirts at **Drastic** and meet living characters from **Jean Genet** novels. Athens, Ga., Austin, Texas, and other cities in the middle of the Bible and cornbelts have scenes similar to the one Musto idolizes, but he thinks New York's young and reckless crowd will always be in the vanguard simply because there are more people there to act subversive.

Musto, who wrote a book on the scene last year called "Downtown," has



Photo courtesy of Kevin Higgins

Columnist and author Michael Musto

parlayed his own insights and experiences into fame, well, OK, *infamy*. Sometimes, he says, the public is hardly kind to him. One magazine lashed in a review of his book that he merely glorifies absurdity and it's hard to take anything serious that's written by a man who "runs around New York wearing a shower cap."

Even some of his colleagues at the notoriously left-wing, politically conscious *Village Voice* find his column and obsession with celebrities ridiculous.

"I really feel the vibes when I go into the *Voice* office," he explains. "Half of the people there think my column's a breath of fresh air, and the other half think it's just a joke."

But he can't help it — celebrity worship is his life.

"I basically have a fan mentality," he deadpans.

Who makes Musto's column

And his fans, the "celebutantes" and those wishing to be a part of the scene, will often do anything to make his column. Like the guy he saw on Valentine's Day, running around with a sign on his chest that said, "Thank you for hating me." Most often, it's the real celebs who are the most annoying.

"My main problem with celebrities is that they're so afraid of bad press that they'll only say acceptable things, but the Downtown people are always saying appalling things just so they can get in print," he says.

One of the greatest benefits of his job is being able to write virtually anything he wants, as long as it's approved by the *Voice's* libel lawyer.

His most recent victim of vitriol was **Dustin Hoffman**, who was "mouthing off about how show business sucks." Musto says he printed the four-

letter-word-laden slam verbatim.

"It gives you a real rush to print what you want," he muses earnestly.

And Musto, who is often his own best PR man and Greek chorus, is *always* looking for a reason to print what he wants to say. When he asked the late **Andy Warhol** to write a blurb for "Downtown," the pop-art king replied, "Michael, I loved the book, say whatever you want me to say about it," so Musto wrote a glowing plaudit and stuck it on the tome's cover.

I immediately wonder why Musto's telling me such secrets. The pope of pop-cultural lowbrow, touted as a phony by some, a flake by others, has just told some kid in Nebraska that he came up with a fake Warhol blurb for his book. Suddenly, the truth hits me. Musto, beneath all his pretensions and self-promotional tactics, isn't afraid to admit that he satirizes himself. He knows he's a marketable eccentric, shocking the gray-flannel crowd Downtowners live to revile, but he is surprisingly sincere about it.

Dressing up like the entire showroom of Frederick's of Hollywood is merely part of his job. And when he feels that he's become too self-indulgent about being a celebrity and living for the ridiculous and the *outré*, he's happy to admit it.

"It's lonely being the only one who knows that **Molly Ringwald** is dating the Beastie Boys' **Adam Horowitz**," he wrote in a recent column. "It's even lonelier being the only one who cares."

Celebs or friends?

What sets him apart from the gossipy prattlers of the past are his phenomenal ability to be witty without being vicious and the admirations he has for his subjects.

Unlike most celebrity chroniclers, he thinks of the people he writes about as more than stars. They're also friends.

At a "Drag Aid" AIDS benefit at the Palladium club recently, a drag queen walked off the stage in tears. "Why are you crying?" he asked. The dragster wiped the tears from his/her false eyelashes and replied, "Let me think of something to say for your column."

But he didn't want a witty quote for his column. He just wanted to know why he/she was crying.

It's at times like that when he's no longer Musto the columnist and becomes a weird little kid from Brooklyn again, going to the high school immortalized in "Welcome Back Kotter" and feeling out of place. But there's always a new club, star or green-haired Downtown bimbo trying to become the next **Joey Heatherton** to bring him back to his world, his kingdom. Downtown. And gossip.

"I think gossip is an art in itself and it's quite underestimated," he says of his favorite pastime and vocation.

He knows he'll probably never reach the realm of fame and fortune so many of the names he drops in boldface type do, but that's not important to him. Exploring his own idiosyncrasies and being "faabulous" are. Unlike the "Uptown" mainstream columnists like **Liz Smith** and **Suzy**, Musto lives the life those media magnates read about in press releases. To him, it's worth a lot more than their hefty salaries.

"I know I'm never going to make a lot of money doing this job and I'm just too weird," he proclaims, his voice dripping with satisfaction.

And that's a statement Musto obviously believes. It's a philosophy that, yes, skeptics, you *can* take seriously... even from a man who runs around New York in a shower cap.

Entertaining study breathes new life into Arthurian quest

By Chris McCubbin
Diversions Editor

"The Discovery of King Arthur," **Geoffrey Ashe** (Henry Holt)

No one embodies the highest aspirations of our Anglo-American culture as much as King Arthur. This has been true throughout our history. It does not matter if the political atmosphere of the moment

is imperial, royalist, colonial or democratic, Arthur still stands as the clearest symbol of whatever is best in the spirit of our culture.

Yet central though this figure is, we know so little about him. Some have called him a diminished god of the Celts or Gaels, Christianized and placed in a modern context.

Although Arthur is without a doubt a mythic paragon, the details of the myth — the firm historical

context, Arthur's striking and detailed character — have all the earmarks of a myth based on fact.

Book Review

Most scholars today lean to the other direction, that the historical Arthur was a minor figure whose biography has snowballed into a

myth. Many have said that Arthur was a chief of Welsh barbarians who fought the invading Roman Empire.

The lovers of the myth reject this out of hand. In the words of T. H. White, Arthur could not have been merely "distressed Briton hopping about in a suit of wood in the fifth century."

Arthurian scholar Geoffrey Ashe, in "The Discovery of King Arthur,"

has rejected both these extremes and put forward a new alternative, one so obvious as to border on the incredible. Ashe suggests that Arthur was an irrefutably documented historical character who lived at the time that the medieval historians placed him in and who actually accomplished most or all of the remarkable deeds attributed to him.

See ARTHUR on 11