

# HARRIS GLENN MILSTEAD “DIVINE”

## ACTOR

b. October 19, 1945

d. March 7, 1988

**He was a trailblazing  
drag actor best  
known as Divine.**

*“They can call me whatever they want ...  
I don't care. You always change your  
name when you're in the show business.”*

Harris Glenn Milstead was an American actor and musical performer best known as Divine. A muse of the gay independent filmmaker John Waters, Milstead, as Divine, played female characters in the director's often shocking comedies, including the cult classics “Pink Flamingos” (1972), “Female Trouble” (1974) and “Polyester” (1981).

Milstead was born in Baltimore, Maryland, the only child of a middle-class, conservative Baptist couple. His parents met at the diner where his mother worked.

A high school outcast, Milstead was severely bullied by his classmates. Troubled by their son's attraction to both women and men, Milstead's parents sent him to a psychiatrist when he was 17. At 18, Milstead enrolled at Marinella Beauty School, then worked for a time as a hairdresser. He threw extravagant parties and began performing in drag.

Milstead and John Waters, a fellow high school outsider, began a lifelong friendship and professional collaboration as teenagers. Waters helped launch Milstead's career, dubbing him “Divine,” and designating him “the most beautiful woman in the world, almost.”

Milstead appeared in roughly 20 films, most of which were made by Waters. In the majority of his roles, Milstead starred as bawdy, outrageous women. Between films, he performed live drag shows. He had a successful cabaret career in Europe and recorded several disco singles in the 1980s that hit the Billboard U.S. Dance Club charts.

A few weeks before he died, Milstead reached the apex of his career with the release of Waters's first PG-rated movie, “Hairspray” (1988). In the beloved comedy-drama, Milstead played a more sympathetic and realistic female character, Edna Turnblad, opposite Ricki Lake as Turnblad's daughter. In 2002 “Hairspray” was adapted into a Tony-winning musical. A 2007 remake of the film starred John Travolta in the role Milstead originated.

Both lauded and reviled as a “drag queen,” Milstead saw his career differently. As early as 1976, he told The New York Times, “I'm not a female impersonator; I'm an actor.” Later in life, he landed a few male roles, including a gangster in “Trouble in Mind” (1985), starring Kris Kristofferson. In addition to his part as Edna Turnblad, he also played a man in “Hairspray.”

Milstead died at 42 of an enlarged heart. The New York Times published his obituary. A 12-foot statue of Divine, created by acclaimed sculptor Andrew Logan, stands on permanent display in Baltimore's American Visionary Art Museum. “I Am Divine” (2013), a documentary about Milstead, received widespread critical acclaim.



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