



# Minister of Leather & Feathers, Felipe Rose of The Village People Performs Weddings

By Lisa Suhay

Photography by James E. Alexander

The fact that Bill Whitefield and Chris Verdi of New Jersey were married twice in the same year is not as unusual as the minister who officiated over both ceremonies—the Indian from the Village People, Felipe Rose, “Minister of Leather and Feathers.”

The Village People, that '70s disco sensation that brought hits like "Y.M.C.A.," "Macho Man," and "In the Navy," to the world, is still touring. In fact, they were recently the surprise element at an Imagine Dragons performance.

However, at age 61, Felipe opts out of the celebrity lifestyle and throws himself instead into his second calling as a minister, performing weddings for couples of any denomination or sexual orientation.

The “Minister of Leather and Feathers” Felipe explains, isn’t just a fun tweak to the title issued by the Universal Life Church.

“It comes from my own deeply-held belief in The Great Spirit as a Native American,” he says.

Felipe’s mother is Puerto Rican and his father is Lakota Sioux.

In addition to performing wedding ceremonies, Felipe says he is often called upon by couples to dispense Native American spiritual wisdom and occasionally, after much wheedling, he even provides the secret to his red velvet cupcakes for the reception.

While Felipe has quietly performed weddings for the general public over the past

four years since being ordained, Bill, 48, and Chris, 46, had the inside track for getting the icon to perform their vows. Bill, an actor and founder of Core Restore fitness, replaced David Hodo as the construction worker character in the Village People a decade ago. Felipe is a founding member.

The moment the law allowing same-sex marriage was passed in New Jersey, the couple decided not to take any chances that Governor Chris Christie might manage to make good on his threat to overturn it. Instead, they called Felipe to come to their home and perform the ceremony the moment their marriage license was in hand, Nov. 19, 2013.

The ceremony took place in their home with two of Felipe’s dinner companions hurriedly corralled as witnesses.

“Then we actually had a ceremony for the family July 26, 2014, at the Algonquin Theater where I do some work on the side,” Bill says. “Well, it was more of a show because, you know, it has to be a show.”

The couple says that the significance of having a gay icon officiating at the wedding adds gravitas and significance to the event.



"I think a lot of people look up to him because he was someone who was out there when I was a kid and trying to figure everything out for myself," Bill says. "It was a time when a lot of people were in the closet, hiding who they are. He wasn't. He was out there being who he really was."

Bill adds that having Felipe there to perform the vows "was pretty momentous for myself and a lot of my family. Off the top of my head I can't even think of anyone who is a gay icon on his level."

"I think for a lot of people it was pretty surreal to have him up there because he really is a gay icon," Chris recalls. "I remember as a kid my dad had two eight-tracks, Johnny Cash and The Village People, and I just always remember Felipe."

Felipe explains that it all started in November of 2011 in Las Vegas, Nevada when a straight couple, Frank and Alberta Stoakes, both ministers in the Universal Life Church, came to The Village People asking if any members of the group would like to become ordained by them in order to perform their vows on stage.

"Four guys stepped back," Felipe laughs. "Eric Anzelone, The Biker, and I took them up on it. For me it was life-changing."

"Before that, the last wedding we were a part of was when Ozzy and Sharon Osbourne renewed their vows in 2003 and we were the party band," he adds.

Other celebrity ULC ordained ministers include Sir Ian McKellen, Richard Branson, and the late Joan Rivers.

Being the entertainment at a wedding is one thing, Felipe says, but actually being responsible for joining two people is a very different commitment.

Becoming ordained was an experience that altered the course of Felipe's life. He took this easily obtained ministry title and uniquely legitimized it with the infusion of his deep Native American spiritual belief system and a big wow-factor personality.

He wears the ministerial stole and alternates between a more casual Native American dress and traditional black robe, always with a small Lakota Sioux headdress and traditional jewelry he handcrafts himself.

"I spend a lot of time with each couple learning their backstory," Felipe says. "I'm also here to counsel."

"I'm a big cry-baby," he admits with a sigh. "I get through the ceremonies and then I'm in tears for them afterwards. I'm working on that. But you know, uniting two people for the rest of their lives is something I don't take lightly."

"Look, I'm a bachelor," he adds. "I never found 'the one,' but seeing people who have, and being a part of that joy, is a gift."

Felipe explains that the euphoria of uniting couples, particularly those like Bill and Chris who had to wait more than a decade for the opportunity to legally marry, made him decide to transition from performing a few weddings for friends to taking his stole and headdress on the road performing ceremonies anywhere in the world.

The stress of waiting 14 years to have two legal weddings in the same year proved to be a blessing for Bill and Chris.

"I think it made us closer; the hard work and the long wait made it much more meaningful than I expected really," says Chris. "Having Felipe there both times made it perfect."

