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Vocal Ease

An Interview with Lydia Lunch

by Shelton Hull

Three decades in, and Lydia Lunch (born 1959, and presumably indestructible) remains one of the most dynamic figures in all of showbiz. She is, at once, utterly accessible and very much not. A career that began in 1973, when the teenaged Lunch took the train into NYC from her native Rochester with nothing but "a small red suitcase, a winter coat, and a big fucking attitude," has expanded to nearly every major city in the world, most of the smaller ones, and come to run the gamut of multimedia: fiction and nonfiction, poetry, music, spoken word, film. She's probably done some dancing, too.



Even as Lunch, a highly disciplined and exacting performer, is always looking ahead, the year 2008 has seen much cause for looking back. Her first recordings with Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, "Orphans" and "Less of Me," were released in May, 1978; the occasion was commemorated by a reunion of the band at a sold-out Knitting Factory on June 13, also with two new releases from her longtime label Atavistic. *Shut Up and Bleed* contains 29 songs recorded by

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Teenage Jesus and her side project, Beirut Slump, between 1977 and '79, making for the fullest documentation of her earliest years yet.

Whereas that project is intended to be definitive, *Video Hysterie: 1978-2006* is more a collection of odds and ends, 24 videos covering 95 minutes. Besides stuff from Teenage Jesus, the DVD features Lunch in a dozen other collaborations with artists like Joseph Budenholzer, Mark Cunningham, Terry Edwards, Roland S. Howard and Pepe Sarto, including material from her groups 8 Eyed Spy and Shotgun Wedding. Her earliest works, while compelling, offer only hints at the protean force she would become. Hers is one of those singular voices, the kind that can never be mistaken for another's. There may be no better pure polemicist of her generation; her voice is as much a weapon as an instrument, and she applies it in service of an articulated feminist vision encompassing social justice and sexual freedom that deserves to be considered, for lack of a better word, a seminal influence on the two generations of men and women who have consumed her work since the 1980s.

She has been characterized as the female answer to Henry Rollins, her longtime friend and collaborator (she has the Black Flag bars tattooed on her neck), and there is some logic in that, since they work through similar themes and run in many of the same creative circles, but there is a crucial difference: whereas Rollins has deservedly gained a considerable amount of mainstream attention in recent years, from major-label book and music deals to Hollywood films and cable TV time, Lydia Lunch has been effectively frozen out of American media like few artists of her stature. This was commonly blamed on the sexually explicit nature of her film work with R. Kern (notwithstanding the fact that Rollins was involved in that stuff, too), but the nature of modern celebrity obliterates that fact. From *The Brown Bunny* to *One Night in Paris*, any prohibitions that once existed on such graphic depictions have clearly been lifted, and Lunch could certainly be considered an influence on that trend, even if she's not yet a beneficiary.

What music have you been drawn to lately?

Carla Bozulich's *Evangelista*, Baba Zula from Istanbul, the new Firewater, Pearlene, Budos Band, Strings of Consciousness from Marseille, JG Thirlwell always, Tricky's latest, Barry Adamson, and a hot 2-piece improv

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group from Barcelona, Les Aus. Oxbow's *The Narcotic Story* is my favorite thing from the past year.

Whose idea was it to prepare the DVD retrospective?

It was an idea whose time had come. I'd been working on getting it out for a few years, worried that if something wasn't done with the original low-fi VHS copies of the early performances the tapes would just disintegrate.

How does it feel to watch video of yourself from 30 years ago?

Since I create on intuition and gut instinct it's interesting to see the teenage terror already so set in her ways. Amusing. It's like watching my own daughter. Which is why I never had children. One of me is enough.



How did you select the pieces for the DVD?

I wanted to present something as representational of my musical schizophrenia as possible, but was also limited to what actually existed as a document.

What drew you to Barcelona, after having lived in so many other places?

The architecture, its perverse, outrageous history, its respect of art and artists, the pace of daily life, which is relaxed yet extremely stimulating. The fact that Spain is 30 years out from under the fist of Fascism as AmeriKKKa has entered into it. I left before the last fraudulent election. I knew what was coming. I had to get the hell out.

Was the Teenage Jesus reunion a one-off, or is there more to come?

It would have never happened if Thurston didn't suggest it to accompany the launch of his *NO WAVE* book. My sadistic nature was thrilled to take to the stage and abuse

the audience with such a horribly ungodly din. Fun. We'll do All Tomorrow's Parties under The Melvins' invite in December in the UK. But at most, perhaps three more gigs in Europe after that and then it's buried for another 30 years.

What was it like to walk some of those same NYC streets where you began, after you and the city have changed so much?

Heartbreaking. I despise what NY has become.

What is the nature of those changes? The common perception among those of us who merely visit is that NYC today is much cleaner, safer, and prosperous than it was in the 1970s and '80s. Who are the malefactors?

It's been made unaffordable by a 25-year plan, by the banks, and real estate brokers who were responsible for the ghettoization of the Bronx and Lower East Side in the 1970s. Who strategically burned out these areas encouraging wide spread urban blight, forcing people from low rent or rent-controlled buildings by stopping public service to them, letting whole neighborhoods rot until they could be bulldozed and rebuilt as condos or overpriced shoebox apartments, thereby stripping NYC of its unique character and gentrifying the whole city. Read *Dead Cities* by Mike Davis.

What do you consider to be your finest work?

Stinkfist with Thirlwell, *Crimes Against Nature*, *Shotgun Wedding* with Rowland S. Howard, and *Smoke in the Shadows*.

Is there any single project you could point to as being what you're "all about"?

No, which is why I need so many vehicles in which to drive the point home.

Is there any piece of your own work that you return to more than others?

More so in spoken word, because most of the God-bashing, End Times, Global predictions, and political accusations I was spewing under Reagan and Bush, the father, are even more terrifying when we realize exactly what has happened to AmeriKKKa under the son of the son of a bitch's evil manipulations.

Having lived overseas for much of the decade, and given your own special expertise in human psychology, how would you characterize the Bush 43 era?

The gang raping and slave trading of the planet by an evil cabal whose twisted roots go back for generations, whose motto of GOD GUNS AND OIL have done more devastation to more people, countries, and land mass than I have the time to detail here. History will speak for itself. Start with *Confessions of an Economic Hitman* by John Perkins.

What does Lydia Lunch do when she's not being Lydia Lunch?

Do you mean when I'm teaching the cat to box or scouring the 10,000 books I still need to read or bawling my eyes out over the devastating effect architecture has on me when its murdered ghosts leak into my bloodstream as I stalk abandoned villages in search of kindred spirits, or sitting quietly in a room contemplating regicide? Whatever I fucking feel like doing.

What do you like to eat/drink?

Any food spicy enough to make the person next to me faint with fever. I don't drink recreationally, but I do like a fat Hennessy before I hit the stage. Just to warm the throat.

Why have you not been afforded the same level of mainstream attention as some of your friends and collaborators?

Because as an aggressive woman I'm still too much of a threat to the status quo. Fine by me.

You probably couldn't care less, but as a technical matter, are there aspects of your methodology that have alienated some common outlets, namely MTV?

Inability to kiss ass, smile pretty, and hold my tongue. On the other end of the spectrum, I'm not a train wreck crashing into a bank like Amy Winehouse, Courtney Love, Britney Spears or a dozen other celebrities who can't handle their drugs and whose every hideous mishap is vomited across the tabloids by paparazzi bottom feeders who make a killing over documenting other people's self destruction. Sick, stupid schoolyard bullshit. Sells papers. Count me out.

Who was the last person who hit you, and why?

I haven't been struck in rage since I was slap boxing in high school. Pretty amazing when you think about it.

When was the last time you felt in imminent danger?

1984. A roadtrip out to the Death Valley with a maniacal

ex lover with a Manson fetish. Obviously I'm a bit craftier than Charlie or his many followers. Haha. Use your imagination to fill in the blanks.



Violence against women and children (aka "soft targets") is an epidemic all over America and around the world. What is the basis of such violence, and what can be done now to mitigate it?

People who feel frustrated and powerless and who have probably been victimized themselves will often look for the nearest available target to rage against. I think we need to teach school children from a very early age to recognize when they are being abused in the home and to report it immediately. We need to deal with this issue in a child's early development by empowering them to feel strong and safe enough to have a place to not only report what's going on in the home, but then have agencies step in and remove the offending party. And offer therapy and anger management to the whole family. Abuse is so often trans-generational, so society must find a way to deal with it in the home in an effort to stop the cycle from continuing. A battered child often ends up battling back or turning the blade inward and self destructing. Starting here would certainly help address the issue.

Who was the last person you hit, and why?

A Russian soundman two years ago in Moscow. He got so drunk during my show he literally fell face first on the soundboard, causing a vomit inducing feedback of even more annoying noise than what I was already creating. I had warned him to watch his intake before the show. He had to be carted away. The next day he sheepishly showed up ridden with guilt, seeking benediction. I backhanded him twice in the face, for which he bowed and thanked me.

Are you trained in any style(s) of martial arts?

No, but I enjoy boxing, especially with my own shadow.

Have you ever owned any weapons? If so, what's your preference for self-defense?

An acid tongue, quick wit, a brutal left hook and a Smith and Wesson .357. Living in The Murder Capital of New Orleans at a time when 17 cops were arrested in the early '90s made it imperative that I could defend myself in a city that still endorsed "The John Wayne Law," which meant you could carry a gun on the street as long as it was in plain sight. If you're going to own a gun, it should be mandatory that you are trained to do so. I was. Since we won't be able to keep guns out of criminal hands and with America remaining the world's largest arms dealer with sales to foreign countries this year alone topping 32 billion dollars, there seems no way to curtail the proliferation of guns or heavy artillery. I think every American has not only a right, but in most cities a need to own a gun, kept in the house, to protect yourself from outside invasion.

Who do you support (if any) for President in 2008?

Certainly NOT John MCCON and his Stepford wife Cindy who were involved in one of the biggest financial disasters this country has ever faced (besides the one it's in now), THE SAVINGS AND LOAN SCANDAL -- WHICH BANKRUPTED MORE BANKS AND PEOPLE THAN WE WILL EVER KNOW. The bank that MCCON'S son runs was just bankrupted -- start there for who I do not want.



What do you think of McCain's running mate, Gov. Sarah Palin?

One look at Sarah Palin and you see the rapture of religious delusions and the self-righteous bullshit and hypocrisy which it fosters emanating from her very soul.

She is one sick twist.

Have there ever been political candidates that you fully supported?

Jesse Ventura. A true outsider that calls it as it is.

Have your political views changed significantly over the years?

Not one bit.

What would a candidate have to say/do to draw your vote?

Talk is fucking cheap. Obama went into his community, CARED ENOUGH ABOUT THE PEOPLE THERE TO TRY AND MAKE A CHANGE. A real human being, not a hot-headed, ill-tempered, old man who has sucked enough corporate dick to give him a rictus grin and his rifle-toting gun moll who thoroughly believes she has a hotline to God's pipeline and AmeriKKKa's superiority complex must be advanced at all cause. Because IT'S GOD'S WILL!

Where is the balance between the state's support/promotion of art and its need to "regulate" that support? Is an agency like the NEA entitled to pick and choose which projects it puts money into?

I personally try not to deal with any type of "agency." It's tricky. I have never directly applied for any grants and wouldn't even bother in the USA, but many of the venues that have put me on, especially in Europe, have been funded -- museums, galleries, theaters -- which I think helps democratize the system because these spaces need to present many performances a year, so the chance of being able to actually perform or create something is greater as a whole if you target the venues themselves than attempting to apply for one or two grants which might be available and for which hundreds of artists might also be applying. Many grants charge a fee for you to even submit a proposal, which is ridiculous.

Grant writing is its own art, or a very specific craft, really. Formulaic. Unless you master the language, in other words, sweet talk enough politically correct bullshit to sway whoever the jury is, or have friends on the committee, or they've seen your submissions enough times, it's basically a big waste of time or a crap shoot.

Any artist that can actually get a grant has mastered a mechanical talent which probably has nothing to do with the art itself. Good for them. I don't have the time to spend or the energy to waste trying to manipulate the

English language in a way that makes what I do palatable to a select committee of appointees who might fear being held responsible for my words or actions.

You have less to answer to as an artist doing a single performance in a venue which garners long term support from the city council, but is administered by open-minded curators who understand the need for expansive discourse. Too many strings attached to most grants to make even the concept of applying interesting to me.

What is the most outrageous thing that someone has ever asked you to do?

Date a poisoner who practiced his craft on our first date.

Regarding porn, and the sex industry in general: how does one reconcile the more salutary aspects (if any) of the industry with the environment of extreme exploitation that it exists in? What is (or should be) the government's role in all of this?

We need to address the American puritanical double standard of sex itself. Where violence is encouraged and exploited, and sex is allowed only as a tool to sell products. The government needs to stay out of our bedrooms, the only exception being when it involves the welfare of children.

Pornography's goal is twofold: to satisfy urges that might not be met in real life, and to make money. Sure a lot of porn sucks, is ridiculous, outdated, exploitative, stupid, crude, ignorant, demeaning. But so are sports and most rock music. In the last 20 years the face of pornography has changed radically in that there are so many alternatives that exist within the genre. And it needs to be diverse. Who the hell can sum up what turns us on? For me at least, my libido is extremely moody. Sometimes I want to see the most ridiculous low-brow porno bullshit to get some weird part of my psyche off. Other times, I don't care who it is or what they're doing, I don't want to see these naked supposedly horny freaks frolicking at the foot of my bed.

Have you ever done anything, in work or in life, that you regret?

Not yet... but I'm open to suggestions.

Are you conscious of being an influence? If so, does that affect your approach?

If I was truly an influence there would be more confrontational, trouble-talking, noise-making hardcore

cunts creating an awful ruckus. As I see it, my style and attitude may have been co-opted, but the substance of what I represent has not. I feel more like a footnote in other people's careers than a cultural influence. But give it time. I ain't going nowhere.

Have you ever considered taking up a spot in academia?

I taught a semester at the San Francisco Art Institute. I've done a lot of workshops, lectures, and speeches at universities, but to enter into it full time does not interest me. I quit school in the 10th grade because it could not provide me with the tools I needed to begin doing what I did, shortly after I left. Which was move to NYC and start Teenage Jesus.

Word association:

Amy Winehouse: "Great last record mainly due to The Dap Kings. I prefer Sharon Jones, whom they originally played with."

CocoRosie: "All weirdos welcome but I prefer Jill Tracy. Dark poisonous cabaret. *Her Diabolical Steak* and *Bittersweet Constrain* are classics."

Regina Spektor: "Ridiculous."

Sasha Grey: "Any woman that can get Rocco Siffreidi to say no to something must be doing something right."

Meredith Monk: "It's always inspirational when someone so unique continues to create. Diamanda Galas. Karen Finley. Wanda Coleman. All important."

The Parkins sisters (Zeena and Andrea): "Fantastic musicians."

Who's on your current list of collaborators/projects?

Working on a few tracks with Sir Alice from Paris, Philippe Petite of Strings of Consciousness on a CD that's almost finished of word-based psycho-ambient material, and a track with Eugene Robinson of Oxbow, some songs with Baba Zula; continuing to tour my multimedia performance *Ghosts of Spain* in Europe with James Johnston (Gallon Drunk, Bad Seeds) and Ian White. My anthology *Will Work for Drugs* will come out on Akashic next spring.



Do you have any plans for your birthday?

Celebrate another 50.

If you could go back and speak to yourself in 1978, what would you say?

I wouldn't need to tell her anything, she knew exactly what needed to be done.

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