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Nothing's Shocking: An Interview With Lydia Lunch

[18 July 2008]

by Drew Fortune

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Who is Lydia Lunch?

As an author, musician, poet, photographer, artist, and provocateur of the highest order, Lunch has spent her whirlwind career screaming in the face of conformity and challenging conventional morality. As she writes in her caustic, tell-all diary *Paradoxia: A Predator's Diary*, Lunch has been labeled "a lunatic, deranged, demented, heartless, manic-schizophrenic bitch." Ask Sonic Youth's Thurston Moore, and he'll profess that "Lydia is the nicest girl I know. She's so fucked up she can glean goodness from chaos." As any key figure in the No Wave movement of the late '70s—a short lived but highly influential period of rebellious, anarchic experimentation in music and film—and they'll say that Lunch was the "It" girl, a Nico without a Warhol.

As Lydia Lunch -- No Wave pioneer, Teenage Jesus frontwoman, and life-long provocateur -- sees her landmark tell-all book Paradoxia get re-published for the first time in over a decade, she sits down to talk to PopMatters about breaking taboos, rocking out, and knowing just how to push everybody's buttons.

The music of her seminal band Teenage Jesus and the Jerks inspired the aforementioned Sonic Youth and a generation of post punk bands through her willful abandonment of melody and song structure. In the films of No Wave director Richard Kern, Lunch stripped her clothes and inhibitions in grainy, eight millimeter shock fests *Fingered* and *Right Side of my Brain*. She revealed in 1997's *Paradoxia* (which was just recently re-released) that during the years of rampant drug use and assaults on the male psyche, Lunch has always been in control of her destiny. If there is a theme to her life's work, it is finding beauty in society's gutters as she dances joyfully around the edge of the volcano.

"I've always been inspired by Genet, Henry Miller and Hubert Selby Jr., who taught me that you've got to tell a bigger truth in whatever you're doing, but the truth is not popular," says Lunch. "People have always asked me 'Haven't you wanted to sell out?', and it's like who am I going to sell to?"

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Look at my fucking face man ... that's a disadvantage! Honesty works against you in the entertainment field. I try to be a journalist and a documentarian but that doesn't mean that people are going to embrace it at the moment. The point is I'm leaving the mark of my hysteria and the political hysteria and that's it ... I can only do what I do."



After leaving an unhappy life in upstate New York, Lunch blazed a trail to downtown Manhattan, where she bounced around the boroughs, sleeping wherever she could and forming Teenage Jesus in 1976 at age 16. As lead screamer and guitarist for the band, Lunch found an outlet to channel her outrage and unquenchable lust for life. "The term spoken word didn't really exist at that point. This was after Lenny Bruce and before Henry Rollins, and there really wasn't a spoken word genre in existence," says Lunch. "I would run around screaming my poems in the faces of anyone who would listen but the only one listening was Lenny Kaye of the Patti Smith Band. Everyone else would run away in terror."

Teenage Jesus, founded with saxophonist James Chance, quickly imploded due to internal squabbling over artistic direction, and Lunch transferred her artistic vision to a succession of other bands, most notably Eight Eyed Spy and Beirut

Shrimp. Throughout the '80s and '90s, Lunch has collaborated with Wilco's Nels Cline, Nick Cave and Mars Volta's Omar Rodriguez-Lopez, lending her vocals and unique sensibilities to each project. "I think what was most important about the No Wave movement was how different everything sounded," says Lunch. "It was only a collective by its dissonance and break from traditionalism and that's really what brought it together. If someone says grunge or punk, you know what the sound is but if you say No Wave, it's kind of mysterious. That was the most interesting part and should have been the most inspirational thing about it ... here's this collective sonic insanity and none of it sounds anything alike. However, I feel that the legacy failed, because post No Wave there were genres that were so fucking predictable. Post punk or grunge ... you know what the sound is and you know what clothes to wear."

The '90s found Lunch devoting more time to writing and travel, in which she performed spoken word events and lectured at the San Francisco Art Institute. In 1997 came the release of *Paradoxia*, Lunch's loosely-based autobiography and crowning literary achievement. In the lineage of Selby, Bukowski, and Jerry Stahl, Lunch joined the boys club of documented bad behavior, as she flaunted and candidly documented her bisexual dalliances, substance abuse and flirtation with insanity. "You gotta straighten out eventually or you're going to fucking die," says Lunch. "But to write, you have to be able to tap into the universal vein of frustration, anger, pain and love. I consider myself a juggler first and foremost, because I've danced around the abyss but never been sucked in. I've been surrounded by many creative people who have been. The perverse thing about me is that I do have this incredible optimism and hope ... I never give up and I won't give up."

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In Lydia's world, nothing is taboo, and in *Paradoxia*, she makes no apologies for abusing herself and her body, all in the quest for satisfaction, carnal gratification and life's truths. "The Kern films and *Paradoxia* represent a book-ending chapter in my life, where I was addressing certain feminine issues that hadn't been dealt with adequately," says Lunch. "I'm not sure if they'll ever be dealt with enough. Of course I'm a different person, and what's interesting about *Paradoxia* is that I wrote the last chapter first because I was already onto another phase of my life and my journey."

With the upcoming release of *Video Hysterie*, a career spanning retrospective of Lunch's musical collaborations, globe-trotting spoken word appearances in the US and abroad, and the recent re-issue of *Paradoxia* by Akashic Books, Lunch continues to push people's buttons and challenge contemporary views of female sexuality. "I'm aware of these celebrity airheads and this whole culture of public disintegration," says Lunch. "Throughout all of my work, films, music and spoken word I'm trying to create and articulate a vision, to propose a better understanding and dig deeper into my own insanity, into feminine obsessions and sexual psycho insanity and get into the root emotion of what drives us as a culture. You're never going to see me fucked up and sloppy on the street, and you're never going to see me acting like Courtney Love, and for some strange reason it comes down to a feeling of dignity. I call it the Madonna theory: It shows us everything and tells us nothing. It's pathetic but it's the paparazzi that make it pathetic and they divert us to the point that we'd rather see Britney's pussy than listen to somebody that might have something urgent to say about politics or the world in general. It's just a distraction from everything that's so fucking awful in the world. I find real passion shocking and I think that way because there's so little of it that's real. Maybe passion is the only shock factor I have left."

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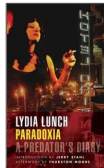


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