

Photos by Jordan Reznick.

## TRANS LEGENDS

By Zackary Drucker

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### Felicia Elizondo's Wild Memories of Trans Life in 60s San Francisco

In the 60s, activist and entertainer Felicia Elizondo was a regular at San Francisco's Compton's Cafeteria, the site of a historic 1966 riot for trans rights, and the only place she felt free as a transgender woman.

#### TWEET

Read more from our Trans Legends oral history project, a growing archive of interviews with transgender icons and pioneers.

Coming of age as a Mexican-American “sissy” in 1950s Texas, a “hair fairy” in 1960s San Francisco, and finally as a transsexual woman in the 1970s, Felicia Elizondo’s memories are a vivid and spectacular rendering of trans life in the latter half of the 20th century. And as an activist, historian, entertainer, and long-term survivor of HIV/AIDS, her work in the decades-long movement for trans rights is a testament to our adaptability, fortitude, and industrious ability to build community in the margins.

Felicia was a regular patron of San Francisco’s Compton’s Cafeteria, a refuge for queens and transgender people in the 60s, and the site of the historic 1966 Compton’s Cafeteria Riot, when patrons of the diner fought back against discrimination by police. She is also featured in *Screaming Queens: The Riot at Compton's Cafeteria*, a 2005 documentary about the uprising co-directed and produced by Susan Stryker and Victor Silverman. Her stories of time spent there reveal a particular moment and place, where trans people were able to create chosen family and thrive in each other’s care, that is still not widely recognized—even as part of LGBTQ history.

Punctuated by moments of presenting as male in the first act of her life—to avoid arrest for cross-dressing, to satisfy a male benefactor, or to prove her manhood to her mother by joining the army and serving in the Vietnam War—the interludes of Felicia’s survival are well traversed terrain for trans folks. Her memories amount to a wild and explosive ride that proves the accuracy of her nickname, Felicia “Flames.”

Photo by Jordan Reznick.

Interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

**ZACKARY DRUCKER:** Tell me about when you first came to San Francisco.

**FELICIA ELIZONDO:** Let me tell you a little bit about my past life, okay? I was born Felipe Alvarado Alessandro in San Angelo, Texas. I'm Mexican American. My birth certificate says that I'm white. In those days, anything that was not “colored” was white, and Black people were colored.

Those days, everybody had their own community. Whites had their own community, Blacks had their community, and Latinos had their own community.

I was raised a little sissy boy. Everybody called me "joto," "queer," "sissy," and all that stuff. I was wondering, how come they're calling [that]? I don't even know the meaning of all these words, and they're calling me all these names just because I'm feminine. We were raised in a place where queers, sissies, and jotos were in the closet—they were pushed back somewhere. But I was very flamboyant. I had these little hot pants on before hot pants was even in style. When I was around maybe seven or eight, I was wearing hot pants, girl.

In those times, boys discovered each other with each other. We weren't told about sex at all from our parents. We had to use trial and error. Most of the little boys, when I grew up, we used to play with each other. I loved that, because I was one of those girls, but we didn't know that—didn't know anything. I fell in love with my best friend. I used to have a love affair on him for years and years. Even until now, I still have a love affair for him, but he's gone.

Then a lot of things happened through the years. One of my friend's older brothers, we were playing with each other. He was just about four or five years older than me, letting me do things to him that I thought were normal because we used to always play with each other, so it wasn't a big deal.

"I had these little hot pants on before hot pants was even in style. When I was around maybe seven or eight, I was wearing hot pants, girl."

Anyway, growing up, I knew sissies, but we didn't know that we were sissies. We were just feminine boys. You know what I mean? We didn't know the meaning of "queer," "sissy," none of that stuff because we were just growing up being little boys but very feminine.

This was in the 1950s, right? You were born in 1946.

Right, 1950s.

My father died. My mother moved us to San Ysidro, California. We moved in with my sister. We lived in a mobile home, and this older man—I was around 12, I think—got me in his trailer. That was the first time that I ever experienced a climax. I thought I was going to die.

[Later], we moved to Stockton, California where I met my first gay man.

What was that like?

Big, tall, handsome, very feminine boy that everybody made fun of him and stuff like that. We were going to have an affair, but we were two girls, so we just said, "Oh no. It's not going to work out for us." That was my first gay [friend]. Then I thought, "Oh my God. I'm not the only one." I mean, we were feminine boys, but we didn't know what "gay" or "queer"—none of that—meant until I was at least 12 or 13, maybe 14.

Then, we moved to San Jose, California. I was around 14 or 15. You know how, in the early 60s, the sissy boys used to wear their coats off their shoulders to make them look feminine? I was walking down Santa Clara Street in San Jose, and this guy picked me up—beautiful Irish redhead. Red hair, red hair everywhere. I could be in love with that boy. It was just a quickie, you know? Then he told me, "Well, there's a whole bunch of you guys over there on Saint James Park." I thought, "Oh really?"

There was a park right downtown in San Jose called St. James Park. I met my best friends there, the gay sissies of San Jose. We started hanging out at Saint James Park. We couldn't go to the bar because we were too young, so we hung around A Round the Clock cafeteria or restaurant. We used to go to the park and get our tricks and make money and then go eat or something.

"When I was a hustler, I was a boy. When I was in a relationship, I was a girl."

When I was a hustler, I was a boy. When I was in a relationship, I was a girl. I had to have a man with me. I may go down on him and stuff like that, but as far as me playing a man's part on my love of my life or my boyfriend? Never. I would drop him right there and then, because I didn't want another girl with me. I wanted a man.

I met this guy. He was an older man. He was married, but he used to like to play with young boys, so he picked me up, and became my sugar daddy. I played the man part because he was older and he liked young boys. I go, "Hey, it's money. Money that I don't have, and I'm too young to work." He would take me to Santa Cruz. He would take me all over the state. One day, he took me to San Francisco. I was around 15 or 16.

Photo by Jordan Reznick.

It was like 1961 or 1962?

Yeah, around that. He took me to the Tenderloin in San Francisco. Then I noticed that there was a lot of people like me. Not only in San Jose, but in San Francisco. My God, it was the Mecca of gayness. Me and my best friend, Bernie, used to play hooky from school and come into the Tenderloin on a Greyhound from San Jose to San Francisco. Greyhound [station] on 7th Street. We would walk to about two or three block away from Compton's Cafeteria. We'd just stand there, and we'd just admire, because we were scared of what could happen to us.

Then, one day, we were standing out there, and this guy came up to us, and says, "You scared to go in there?" I said, "Yeah, we're just from San Jose, and we're just brand new at this stuff, and we don't know what to expect." His name was Siro. He took us to his hotel room—because most of the queens and the sissies and the hustlers were living in hotels. That was the only place that we could find a place, because if you [were a] sissy or a joto or whatever, they wouldn't rent to you outside the Tenderloin. The Tenderloin was the gay Mecca of San Francisco in the 60s.

That was when being a queer, dressing up like a women, or any position of being feminine was against the law, period. They would take you to jail. The only people that were allowed to dress like women were female impersonators [at] Pinocchio's or other gay bars that had drag. You walked in as a man, and you walked out as a man.

What happened is that Siro was putting on his little eyebrows and hair, but still was against the law. All of this was against the law. White, skintight pants, tennis shoes, angora sweater, and a white jacket, that's as feminine as we could go in the 60s before they would take us to jail. [People like Siro] were called "hair fairies."

There was the Embarcadero right next to the YMCA where all the servicemen used to come and party. When you walked up Market Street, you would walk into the Tenderloin, and it was like la la land. I mean, we could be who we were and not worry. There was like Woolworths on Market and where the trolley car goes around. That was where the girls used to wear the makeup, the hair, whatever they needed to get. Then we would come back to the Tenderloin. I just was there at a very young age, and [eventually] my girlfriends from San Jose came to San Francisco and started being hair fairies.

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"Compton's Cafeteria was the center of the universe for us."

The only way that they could make money is by selling drugs or selling themselves, because they wouldn't hire us because we were too feminine. You couldn't work in San Francisco because a lot of people would be jealous and out you. You know what I mean?

Compton's Cafeteria was the center of the universe for us. It was a place where we could make sure that we had lived through the night. It was like a society club—it was a cheap food, cheap coffee, cheap breakfast. Windows on both sides on one corner of Taylor Street and the other corner of Turk Street was nothing but windows. You could see who was coming in, who was coming out, and who was there and who wasn't. A lot of times, Compton's was a revolving door.

People came in, did what they did; if they liked it, they stayed, if not, they went about their business to another state or back home or wherever, because a lot of the kids that came into the Tenderloin at the time was kids who were thrown out. And a lot of the kids came from broken homes. The kids came to start a new identity and a new life and forget about the past. A lot of times we didn't know where they came from or their real names, because as soon as they came into the Tenderloin, they would change their names. Like Gypsy or Greta, or Vicky, or Alexis.

So then I went back to San Jose, and I had just broken up with my lover and I told my mother I was gonna run away and she would never see me again. And then I just said, "Well, you know something? I'm going to join the military."

I joined the US Navy in 1964. I lowered my voice, I played the role of an Academy Award winner, okay? I decided if the military doesn't make me a man, nothing will. And it didn't. I went into the boot camp in San Diego, then I was stationed at Coronado, and then they were asking for volunteers to go to Vietnam. Then I said, "Oh, there's more money." And I was [a] scared little sissy, but I volunteered to go to Vietnam. Not only because of that; because this is the only way that I could prove to my family that I was a man.

And another thought behind my head: If I got killed, I would become a hero to my family. And it was important to make my mother proud, because I hadn't made her proud before, because she knew what I was. She never said anything; she never turned against me or anything. But I still wanted to make my mother proud.

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So, one day, I was in Da Nang, Vietnam, and I was working unloading cargo from freezer ships where they had all the freezers in the bottom of the boat, and you would come up. And then one day I thought, "Oh my God. I've had enough. I am not going to do this. I've put myself through hell, and I will not put myself through hell anymore." I went to my priest and told him that I was gay. I went to my commander and told him I was gay. They put me in the "brick," whatever they call it. And they interrogated me, then they sent me back home. I came to Treasure Island here in San Francisco. There was a gay barrack.

I was discharged from the military January of 1967. I tried to do the straight thing like work for Goodwill, work for a hospital as a receptionist and all that stuff, but it didn't work. So what happened is, five queens from San Jose, we were living together in this house and the cops busted us. And it's either you go to jail or get out of town. Well, there's five queens on the Greyhound bus depot in 1967 headed to the Tenderloin.

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Felicia Elizondo speaking at the 50th anniversary of the Compton's Cafeteria riot. Photo by Pax Ahimsa Gethen, via Wikimedia Commons.

We moved back into the El Rosa Hotel. That's how we became female impersonator prostitutes. Cause nobody would hire us because we wanted to be who we were meant to be and be free, and the Tenderloin was the only place that we could do that. We had a whole bunch of people who were doing it with us.

Compton's was a place where you could go and you could see whether some girls had stayed, some girls had left, some people had been killed, raped, put in jail.

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It was against the law to wear long hair. It was against the law to dress like a woman. If the police [saw] you on the sidewalk walking, they would take you to jail for obstructing the sidewalk.

We were in danger all the time, because we didn't know if the pigs were going to target us, find out about us.

"Compton's was a place where you could go and you could see whether some girls had stayed, some girls had left, some people had been killed, raped, put in jail."

So, I moved in with Larry, he was one of my girlfriend's boyfriend. He was a martial artist, and we moved to Chicago. He didn't want me to stay there, all that time at home by myself. So later on that year, we went to the movies to see that Christine Jorgensen movie. And I thought that, Oh my god, that's who I am! How the hell am I gonna get there? Being in my twenties and whatnot, I had no money, no future, no nothing.

So I came back home to the Tenderloin, got another boyfriend, and his name was Joe. He was a longshoreman. He took me to North Beach here, to a nice, high society apartment. But one day he got a flashback from Vietnam and started beating me with an iron over my head. So I went to the hospital and they told me, "Are you guys queer?" I says, "No!"

"If you are you're gonna go to jail," [they said].

I says, "Oh no, we are not queer! We are not queer!"

So, when I went back to the Tenderloin, [but] it wasn't the same anymore. So, I started working in the early 70s; they were hiring minority people for the telephone company. I got hired as [a] male long distance operator. But they wanted me to lower my voice because it was so feminine. So I went through all that stuff, and then I heard about a gender dysphoria clinic in San Mateo, California. And there was a doctor that was doing surgery there. So I went to there and they gave me a letter. I saw a psychiatrist, and I gave it to my supervisor. And they read it, they accepted it, they told all my coworkers what I was gonna be doing. And I transitioned in 1973. From male to female, at work with the Pacific Telephone at the time.

When I came to the first day at work, I still had my male ID, so I showed it to the security guard and he told me, "Hey you know something? You look better than some of these real girls." And that made my day!

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The telephone company and their employees and their management were the best thing that ever happened to me, because they made sure that when I went to the restroom, there was a girl standing outside to protect me from anybody complaining that I was a man and stuff like that.

"My community who started the gay movement in San Jose and started the gay movement here in the Tenderloin will never be forgotten."

I applied for [the company insurance to cover] my surgery, and about four months later they approved me and three other kids that worked at the telephone company to do the surgery.

The company gave me all of the time that I needed to recuperate. They paid my wages. Years later, after I'd been married, my boyfriend David, I married him. I stayed in San Jose working for the telephone company from 1972 or '73 when I first got hired, 'til 1992 or '93.

Wow! So that was a really stable job for you.

Yeah. Because I was a girl now. And I was happy. And nobody could tell me anything, you know what I mean? So in 1987, I became HIV positive. And I joined the ARIS Project and volunteered. I wanted to make sure that the trans community was involved because we needed a community.

So I started volunteering, and I made the first AIDS memorial quilt for Michael Burnay, a mother that had just lost her son. And we all gathered together, and they organized it, and I sewed every little piece by hand; that was my first one. I've made eighty something quilts by now.

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I moved to San Francisco in 1993, because the best possibility of surviving AIDS was the mecca of the medical center of everything. I worked for The Shanti Project for years. I worked for Project Open Hand for years. I worked for the LGBT community center for years.

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Via Wikimedia commons.

Although you weren't present for the Compton's Cafeteria riot, you appeared in Susan Stryker's documentary about the riot, *Screaming Queens*, and you were very much part of the broader movement at that time...

My community who started the gay movement in San Jose and started the gay movement here in the Tenderloin will never be forgotten. I'll be damned if Stonewall, which was the primary struggle in our community, is the only uprising remembered. Compton's had been forgotten for 40 years until Susan Stryker came out with the movie. [After that,] I said, "Okay. I am going to take the torch and going to make sure [the world knows] the transgender community started the gay movement, no matter where."

But when you have no money, you can't do nothing.

What happened to the seniors that made this happen that were killed, raped, thrown in jail, murdered? What happened to them? What happened to those people that made it happen? If it wasn't for us, a lot of the kids today wouldn't be who they are today. We had the balls to go out there and be who we were meant to be, because that was who we were. We couldn't be nothing else—no matter how many times I tried to. I even tried to get married and stuff like that. It was not the place. You know what I mean?

What's really good about [the younger generation] is that we had no family when we were young. But you guys do. You guys have family. You've got your families backing up a lot of you guys, where we were thrown out like trash. It just makes me think that the kids of today don't understand what we went through to be who we are today, and it's just upsetting that I'm 72 years old but the kids today don't want to hear about us. They've got their own lives, their own destiny, their own goals. They don't have to worry about the seniors that made it happen.

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What would you like those young people to know out there?

Don't forget the people who made it happen. Don't forget that all those people that died.

Another thing that I'm against is the "queer" word. The "queer" word, in our generation, was being murdered by that name. The "queer" word was just horrible for us because if we were queer we were killed, thrown out, or disposed like trash. Now that the new generation is restoring "queer," you have to be proud. You have to know the history of what "queer" was to us. To be proud of that word—it's not in my vocabulary at all.

"I am your history. You can never change that no matter what you do to me."

All of my friends passed—died. All the people that, years before us, came and they were killed and murdered and thrown in jail because they were queers.

"Gay" was the word that we used in the diction for all of us. We weren't lesbian, gay, queer, whatever, transgender, whatever. We were gay. We were a community. We weren't silent. We were together. Now that they have it in little boxes, we can't get in here. We're not allowed to go into the little boxes. Do you know what I mean?

One more thing, too, I think that the "transgender" umbrella is a joke.

Why?

How can we ever unite when everybody's got their own little piece of the puzzle, you know what I mean?

Transgender is before surgery. Transsexual is after surgery. That should be it. You can do whatever you want to with whatever sexual you are, but don't name it because that destroys the unity of our whole existence.

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What were some of the things that helped you survive those difficult times?

I don't know how I survived at Tenderloin. I really don't. Because it was bad, but Compton's was the center of the universe for us.

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That's why I tell the kids: I am your history. You can never change that no matter what you do to me. I was the number one person putting Gene Compton's Cafeteria historical plaque on the 100 block of Taylor Street.

This year, we had our 52nd anniversary of [the] Compton's Cafeteria [riot] and the person that runs that building actually walked into Compton's Cafeteria. I mean, it's not "Cafeteria" anymore—it's transitional housing for criminals. We walked into that door and I cried. I cried because the people that walked in through those doors, whatever became of them, or whatever their future, they came through here. They came through those revolving doors of Compton's, where it was the center of the universe because we had nowhere else to go. The end.

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By Zackary Drucker

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Sandy Stone on Living Among Lesbian Separatists as a Trans Woman in the 70s

Before pioneering transgender studies in academia, Sandy Stone was a member of the legendary lesbian music collective Olivia Records—and the target of vitriol from early trans exclusive radical feminists.

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Read more from our Trans Legends oral history project, a growing archive of interviews with transgender icons and pioneers.

Deeply esoteric and decades ahead of her time, Allucquère Rosanne “Sandy” Stone, referred to more widely as Sandy Stone, has a unique tale of survival situated at the heart of 1970s radical lesbian feminism.

Throughout the 70s, Stone was part of the famous radical feminist music collective, Olivia Records. But her presence did not go unchallenged. She describes attending a community meeting only to be met with an angry swarm of trans exclusive radical feminists (TERFs) assembled for the sole purpose of expelling her from her own collective simply because she was assigned male at birth. TERFs posit that biological sex characteristics are immutable, that gender is determined by genitals at birth, and that trans women are gynephiliac fetishists invading women’s spaces with male privilege. Some women had travelled from across the country to participate in Stone’s public shaming and intended expulsion.

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Not long before, in 1979, lesbian writer Janice Raymond had published *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male*, which included an ad hominem attack on Stone, and which led to the town hall meeting on that red-letter day. As a response, in 1987, Stone effectively birthed the academic discipline of transgender studies by publishing her enduringly influential essay, *The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto*.

Sandy Stone is the original trans girl computer hacker. After building a computer in the early 1980s and teaching herself to code, she parlayed her years of experience as a music engineer into technology development and academia. Stone’s work as a writer, thinker, artist, and performer helped establish the genre of New Media art. And, over decades, she has inspired generations of irreverent trans women to fight transmisogyny unapologetically and bring new, unafraid forms of thinking and making into the world.

At 82 years old, Stone is the senior-most trans woman in this series. I was introduced to her by my (chosen) aunt, Kate Bornstein. Bornstein and Stone are kindred spirits, both trans pioneers unafraid of claiming outsider identities as freaks and heretics; both people who center dissension and nonconformity as sacred values.

1545247958569-sandy

Photo by Jordan Reznick.

Interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

ZACKARY DRUCKER: Maybe you can first tell me about your path to trans identity. Where were you in your life? When was it? What was the breadcrumb trail that you followed?

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SANDY STONE: I was one of those very classic literature trans people. I realized there was something wrong when I was five years old, but at that time, which was the 1940s, there were little boys and there were little girls. There was no trans information out there whatsoever. The funny thing was, I thought of myself as a little girl. But I didn't think of myself the way, apparently, other little girls that I knew thought of themselves as little girls. I'm binarizing this, because it was binarized at the time. The girls that I was hanging out with as a girl, in my fantasies, were climbing mountains and swimming rivers and hunting critters in the woods and meeting big animals and learning to get along with them. Strange adventure fantasies, which boys think of happening with boys, I thought of them as happening with girls.

Later, after I did transition, I discovered that in fact, there were women like that and I wound up hanging out with them. I hung mainly with a group that called itself the Amazon 9, all of whom were lesbians and liked hiking, hanging out in the woods, swimming; at one point we were dropped by airplane above the Arctic Circle and kayaked down the Kobuk River for 13 days to get back to civilization. Entirely a group of women, before this was kind of a thing. So, what I mean by all this, is my introduction was weird. I thought of myself as a woman, but at the time when thinking of oneself as a stereotypical woman probably involved homemaking. It didn't involve anything like that, and it never has.

Eventually, when I got something that could kind of vaguely be called a role model, it was Christine Jorgensen, because she was the only thing around, and Christine Jorgensen was tall, willowy, blonde, and liked to wear high heels and makeup. That was absolutely as far away from me as you can get. Once I did transition, I didn't wear makeup, I wore T-shirts—pretty much what anyone else of any gender was wearing at the time. The only role model around being Christine Jorgensen, I couldn't use it. Everything else that was going on at the time was hostile.

Eventually, when I did find an organization that might help, it was the Transsexual Counseling Unit, which was a part of the police department in San Francisco. A woman there tried very, very hard to discourage me from transitioning by walking me around the Tenderloin [neighborhood of San Francisco] and showing me every possible horrible thing about [being] transgender that she possibly could. I took it differently. It didn't discourage me, it just made me angry that the transgender people I saw were being neglected and abused in the ways that they were. The woman made a point to show me a lot of people who got stuck in the middle of transitioning; who had gone halfway through electrolysis, say, if they were male-to-female—I'm using terms [of] the time—then ran out of money, so their faces looked like the surface of the moon. It was really a bunch of the sorriest-ass characters that she could find. She had either collected them or they were living—I think they were actually living in basements in the Tenderloin. Some of them had red light bulbs in the ceiling, so those visits were like Dante-esque descents into hell.

.The woman looked at me and said, "So, you still want to do it?" She was trying to frighten me off and it was just making me angrier and angrier.

How did you find your way to her?

That was the first time that I managed to get far enough away from my parents that I felt I had enough space to pursue anything. I made it to San Francisco, I got into mainstream recording, and I did that for as long as I wanted to, and then in the middle of it, I suddenly realized I couldn't go on with that particular form of deception, and I had to do something about it.

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Who were you working with as a recording engineer at the time?

Well this was the West Coast. When I was on the East Coast, I had been working with Jimi Hendrix primarily, but a bunch of other people whose names might not mean anything. Karen Dalton, that sort of thing. When I got to the West Coast, I worked with Crosby, Stills, & Nash, Grateful Dead, Marty Bound, with the Airplane, a bunch of other—did I say Van Morrison? Anyway, that era of people, all of whom at one time or another I got to work with. I was having a good time, and it was very stressful, and if you threw your heart into it, which I did, it could be really exhausting. At some point, I said, I've got to do something about becoming who I am.

I started calling around in San Francisco. Of course, there was nothing. There were no transgender support people, no health focus groups; none of that. There was the Mattachine Society.

What year is this approximately?

This would've been the mid or late 60s, I think—something like that. Then there was the Daughters of Bilitis, which it turned out, also were reachable by phone. No internet, no cell phones, none of that. I had a dial-up phone and a phone book. At that time, the phone book was Google, and I was trying to find help for a word that didn't exist. Somebody told me it could be the Mattachine Society.

So I called them. It was a bunch of middle-aged gay guys and they were not at all interested in trans, and they more or less turned up their polite noses at me, and went, "hmm, well we don't do anything like that, why don't you call Daughters of Bilitis?" Daughters of Bilitis was basically the same thing, with the gender swapped. So I don't remember how I got in touch with them, but somebody over there mentioned that the best way for me to get help, you poor thing, was to call the police. And I thought, What!?

Well, actually, the police were the closest thing to a support organization that you could get. They had a project called the Transsexual Counseling Unit, and they did outreach to the trans people in the Tenderloin who were sex workers.

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What was the word they were using at the time? You're saying trans people, but at the time were they saying "female impersonators," were they saying "cross-dressers," were they saying "transvestites"?

Well, in my conversations, I was saying "transsexual," because it was the only word I knew, and they were saying "transsexual." Maybe they said it first and then I picked it up. But the word "transsexual" was definitely the word of choice. Mattachine mostly said "people like you," or something like that. But once I got in touch with the TCU, the transsexual counseling unit, we began using the word "transsexual." It seems to be that the bounds were very porous between whatever we were calling "transsexual," what we were calling "crossdressing" ... the distinctions were not quite as clear as they are now.

Generally, it seems to me that everyone they were working with had surgery as a goal. It might be a distant goal, it might be totally impractical, it might be a thousand light-years away, but there was some sort of goal out there, and it was surgery as a magic solution to problems that were clearly insuperable by any human means. There were people who, by the standards at the time, were not passable in any

sense of the word—and remember, I’m talking about a particular time. I’m not sure I would use “passing” in the same way now. They couldn’t pass so they were stuck in a half-world. By the TCU standards, they were still transsexuals. The term was “transies,” which we used all the time. So anyone I saw there was a transy. And everyone I saw at the TCU was a failed sex worker, or occasionally a cocktail waitress in the Tenderloin. So that was my kind of growing-up. I didn’t really grow up there, I looked at it and said, “This is not me, this is crazy, it’s nice to see that the police department is trying to do some kind of outreach. That’s great. But I don’t belong here, what do I do now?”

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Eventually, I found a doctor in Boulder Creek who was very positively disposed towards the trans issue. He would get me estrogen by the quart bottle of .75mg purple pills. Eventually, I switched to yellow pills and stayed on them until three years ago. Those are 2.5 mg estrogen, which is several hundred times the dose you’re supposed to be on, and I didn’t know it because it never came up with anybody. Occasionally, I would have a doctor find out I was doing that, he’d say “What are you doing?! You fool! You’re going to get breast cancer, or strokes!” I’d say, “When I get my first stroke, I’ll quit.”

I got my first stroke three years ago. It was very minor, and my wonderful doctor sat on the foot of my bed and folded her arms and looked at me and said, “What the hell are you doing?” I explained: “I take Premarin 2.5.” No one else would dream of doing that. And she said, “Well, you took your last one. Here’s this patch.” Same system.

There I was for thirty-whatever years on these pills I originally got from a very interesting sympathetic doctor in Boulder Creek, California, and I spent a year or two trying to figure out how to transition. I found an electrologist who was quite wonderful. We worked out a deal: I was going to be there a lot so I got a bit of a discount. I went every day of the week I could go, plus weekends, and I spent like half my life at that point on her table.

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She and I talked about almost everything in the world, and I picked up an education about an entirely different universe I knew nothing about. I ran out of money about, I think, three months out from being done. All this time, I’ve been passing as male, and we’ve been working at it from the bottom up, which I guess is what everybody does these days. She said, “We can get rid of a tremendous amount of hair without anybody noticing. It just looks like you’re shaving differently.” I ran out of money and she said, “Look, we’ve come this far, I’ll continue without charge. I’m intending to retire when we’re done anyway.” We hugged each other, and she did. She did that. And she retired and gave me a china set as she was closing out her home. I went back to Stanford and started on that road with them.

This is in the early 1970s at this point?

Yeah, I actually transitioned publicly in 1974.

And the Amazon 9, were they trans women, were they cis lesbians?

As far as I know, they were all cis, they were all lesbians, and they were all adventurers. I just became one of the tribe! I wouldn't say that I was adopted as much as I was absorbed. We did a lot of interesting stuff together. That happened in a number of different ways. As I began to explore further in a community of women, I ran into women circles and all-women groups who did other things. That was just as interesting. I discovered—of course as everybody knows now, but it was such a revelation then—that you could be a woman without stereotyping anything, without encountering traditional cis female culture at all. Particularly, when I got to Olivia [Records] and discovered that there were lesbian safe houses across the United States, and that you could travel from coast to coast and never encounter someone presenting as male, like a wonderful parallel subculture—or superculture. Everywhere. A rhizome all over the country. For a while, I inhabited that rhizome.

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Encountering the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis, it sounds like you were conscious of how entrenched the binary was. How were you perceived by the lesbian separatists? It was before Janice Raymond's attack in the late 70's. It was a less formed time.

I spent most of my time, at that point, in Santa Cruz. Because of what Santa Cruz is, there weren't many separatists around. It wasn't until after [The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male] came out, really, that I encountered any. I encountered one or two in Santa Cruz. When that came about, I immediately thought of what Janice Raymond said about the way transsexuals divide the women's community. My way of dividing the Santa Cruz women's community was that the very few separatists—trans-exclusionary separatists, because not all separatists were trans-exclusionary—but the few who were, called a meeting of the women's community in Santa Cruz. Which, at the time, was possible, because we all knew each other; it was like the days of ancient Greece when the polis consisted of everybody you could see from atop the Agora. You could get all the women in the women's community in Santa Cruz in one room. You could see who they were. So we did that, and this was not a meeting caused specifically for this purpose, we were there for several agenda items; one of them was, "Will Sandy Stone be accepted as a woman in Santa Cruz?" This was put forward by the transphobic separatists. It being Santa Cruz, there was reasonable discussion from the accepting side. The transphobes said what they always say: Men divide community and so-forth. Then we took a vote on it and it was all of the rest of the community in favor, and the two radical separatists against. So, the two transphobes against. I want to be really clear about that: it wasn't separatists, it was radical (i.e.,

transphobic) separatists. So, as Janice Raymond predicted, I did, in fact, divide the Santa Cruz women's community. I divided it into the transphobes and the non-transphobes. It being Santa Cruz, everybody left the meeting and life went on. The transphobes went off and grumbled about it and that was pretty much the end of that. Since that time, I have not encountered any transphobes in Santa Cruz. As you know, we have a huge gay pride event every year. You'd think they'd show up there.

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How did you make your way to Olivia Records?

Olivia headhunted me. A little bit of backstory: My choice of leaving the recording world was just to get out, close that door, and not look back. Later, after I transitioned, obviously I did look back, because I went with Olivia.

At first, I didn't, and I had to find work in Santa Cruz. So I took the easiest thing I could do, which was get a job repairing stereos for some kind of chain of audio stores in the Best Buy mold. They had a store in the mall in Santa Cruz. Worked at that, then I transitioned, carefully explained to them what I was doing, and they fired me.

I essentially ran across the street and I rented a storefront and I opened up a stereo repair shop, which was, again, the default, lowest denominator thing I could do. I called it the Wizard of Aud, and it became a little collective of women. The deal was: I taught them to repair stereos and we hung out there and we fixed stuff and sold used equipment. We became something of a meeting point for parts of the community. The whole thing was run in a ridiculous manner. We set our prices arbitrarily, so we could make our rent by fixing five stereo units in a month. You could do that at that time. Pretty soon, we were just inundated with business. We became extremely popular and we became more, perhaps, of a center for women than I had ever expected. I mean, we were a store with a couch in it; people would sit and schmooze and drop off things to be repaired, and, eventually, I put [the stereo store across the street] out of business. They had multiple factors going against them, but one of them was that no one went to them to have anything repaired anymore.

I was doing that one day, and I looked up from whatever the hell I was doing, and there were two women in the front of the store looking at me, and I said, "Can I help you?" and they said, "We're from Olivia Records, and we hear that you're a recording engineer. We're looking for a woman to engineer some music for us. Would you like to try doing that?" I said, "Yeah, but I think I should tell you before we go any further that I'm a transsexual." And they said, "Yeah, we know." I said, "Oh, how's that?" They said, "We talked to Leslie Ann Jones in San Francisco and she mentioned you were down here."

Apparently, they asked Leslie if she'd like to do it and she didn't. So I said, "Okay, let's talk a little more about what you do."

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They told me about Women's Music, and I didn't quite get it. I drove down to LA, and I did a project with them—actually I didn't do it in LA, we did it at Different Fur in the East Bay. The band was called BeBe K'Roche. Afterward the Olivia women asked me if I would come do work with them. They looked like a younger version of the Amazon 9, but making music. At that point, they were renting two houses next to each other and one across the street [in Los Angeles]. The main one had some rooms where some of the women stayed, kitchen and dining facilities, and the meeting room, and a mailroom. The other house was a dorm for other women, where we eventually tried to build our first recording studio; and the one across the street was the graphics department, with literature, and flyers, and album covers and inserts. I hung out with them, and they looked like a very interesting and friendly group.

They had tremendous group spirit, as you could imagine, and a huge amount of positive energy. It looked to me like they were doing really good stuff—valuable political work for women—and they were doing it in ways that they probably shouldn't have been, but extending more credit than what was advisable to their network of women distributors. I became enthralled by this idea, and I hung out with them, and they invited me to hang and stay for a few days, which I did. One thing led to another, and I wound up being invited to join the collective, which was what you did instead of getting hired. So I did that. The fact that they were all separatists didn't bother me at all. Apparently, it frightened away a lot of other people, but I had been hanging out with the Amazon 9, so it was just another group of women. We worked very well that way for quite a while, until Janice Raymond came along.

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So Janice Raymond came out of thin air, as it were. What was it like when you realized she had mentioned you and the collective in her book?

I don't remember how we first found out that it was out there, but eventually somebody showed it to me and said "What do you think of this?" and I looked at it and read it and said, "Well that's disgusting! But what the hell. My life is not covered with rose petals. It's another thing."

And then an interesting thing happened. In addition to our usual volume of mail, we began to get 20 pieces a day, could be as high as 50, and they all had about the same thing in them. There was a paragraph that said "Hello Olivia, I'm a loyal fan of yours," then there was a paragraph about how bad our last album was. Leading into how terrible the mix was! And how the instruments just sounded awful, and then they would compare to an album that had been done a few years ago, and then the last paragraph would be something like, "I hear that there's a transsexual person working with you in

engineering, and maybe you should think about getting a real woman to do your engineering, your records might sound better!" It was as if people were out there passing around a form letter.

That went on for a while, and then the letters began getting wilder. They began getting nastier and more threatening and then after a while, I found out there were letters coming in that they were not showing me. I asked why and [my collective member] Sandy Ramsey said, "because they contained personal attacks on you, we didn't want to alarm you with." It went up and up like that; that was the beginning. We ended up getting attacked in the press, then we had a tour.

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Photo by Jordan Reznick.

Was it press within the ecosystem of lesbian feminism, or was it local press? What was the impact it was having inside your own life or the community?

Well, I don't know personally, because I wasn't spending that much time in the local community, which was the LA Wilshire district community. But some of the women, it turned out, were quite transphobic. On Black Thursday or Black Friday, we had a meeting, which you probably know about, that was called by the community in Oakland, where we were planning on moving, and we heard rumors that the meeting was being packed by people from out of town who were there to disrupt it. We didn't pay much attention to that. Shame on us. We really didn't understand the level of what was going on. The thing was: It wasn't simply directed at me. Partly, I was the point of it. But partly, also, I was an excuse for people who didn't like Olivia Records. It took us a while to get that sorted out, and it was a very sad thing that there were women who hated Olivia Records.

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It's irrational hatred within the community. In small, marginalized groups, there's just this vitriol and you know, I do believe that all anger is self-anger.

Well, it makes a lot of sense to me. Do you have an acronym for that yet?

No, I'm just thinking out loud.

Well, that event blew the lid off everything for us. We went home shellshocked. That was the turning point, because we had just assumed we were going to go in there and have rational dialogue. When we