

Laura Jane Grace and Coming Out as Trans in the Public Eye

By julia

Published June 4, 2012 | Updated March 31, 2026

https://www.transadvocate.com/laura-jane-grace-and-coming-out-as-trans-in-the-public-eye_n_6421.htm

Abstract

So about once every year or two, somebody comes out as trans in a rather high profile way. Two years ago it was Chaz Bono. Before that there was Christine Daniels, Susan Stanton, and others before them. When this happens, I usually experience a mix of emotions. Lots of trans folks celebrate the visibility that [...]

Article

So about once every year or two, somebody comes out as trans in a rather high profile way. Two years ago it was Chaz Bono. Before that there was Christine Daniels, Susan Stanton, and others before them. When this happens, I usually experience a mix of emotions.

Lots of trans folks celebrate the visibility that comes with these high profile coming outs, and how it can humanize us in the eyes of the world. In my case, when I came out to my family as a trans woman in 2002, they took it really hard. But a year later, when Jenny Boylan appeared on Oprah, my Mom rushed out to buy her book. While my Mom had come to accept who I was before then, the fact that another trans woman was on Oprah (a show she watched every day) really normalized the whole experience for her. Rather than me being the only trans person she knew, my Mom got to see that there were others like me out there in the world.

While visibility is important, these high profile coming outs sometimes do have their downsides. Sometimes the coverage can be overly sensationalistic. But even worse, the media's fascination with coming outs and physical transitions tend to create a situation where folks who have not been involved with the trans community very long suddenly become our spokespeople, whereas activists who are very knowledgeable about trans issues, and who have been fighting for trans rights for years, couldn't get five minutes with the media no matter how hard they might try. Sometimes, these high profile trans folks do a pretty good job of representing the community, but other times it can lead to disastrous politics.

The third emotion I feel is empathy/sympathy. It's hard to come out as trans, no matter who you are. It's hard to do all that explaining, and reacting to the various reactions (which for me, ranged from friends congratulating me, to friends never speaking to me again, as well as every imaginable response between those two extremes). But to do all that in the public eye, with even more people watching you, judging you, that must be especially hard.

So a couple weeks ago, when I heard that the lead singer/guitarist/songwriter for the band Against Me! recently came out as a trans woman, and is now going by the name Laura Jane Grace, I felt this

usual mix of emotions. I hadn't heard of her or her band before (no offense meant by that, it's just that the last six years I've been listening to jazz more so than rock/pop music). So I had a rather generic reaction - in my mind, I wished her the best, and hoped that her high profile coming out would be one more small step toward public understanding and acceptance of trans people.

But then @eastsidekate on Twitter informed me that the Rolling Stone article in which Laura Jane Grace comes out mentions that Grace read my book *Whipping Girl*. (Funny, I always used to dream of being mentioned in Rolling Stone magazine. But as a musician, not as a trans author. Life is strange...)

So of course, like any person who hears such news, I went out to my local newsstand to buy Rolling Stone. And I read the article. It was typical mainstream fare: Lots of talk about medical/transitioning procedures, and language choices that bothered me. I wish they referred to Grace with female pronouns rather than male ones (although that could have been Grace's choice, as she was not yet presenting female at the time of the interview). And seriously Rolling Stone, in 2012, do you still need to trot out a "transgender expert" from the Kinsey Institute to tell us that "one in 30,000 men is clinically diagnosed as being transgender." Really. Are we still using those ancient statistics? According to that statistic, there are only 5,000 trans women living in the US right now. I personally have probably met well over 1,000 trans women in my life simply by being an activist and attending trans conferences over the years. Seriously, there is no chance that I've met over 20% of all trans women in the US!!!

Having said all that, the article could have been far worse. At least Rolling Stone handled this better than their article about Lana Wachowski (which I refuse to link to because it was *so* bad). Interestingly, the Wachowski article was called "The Mystery of Larry Wachowski" and Grace's article is called "The Secret Life of Tom Gabel." Apparently, we transsexuals are an enigma, wrapped in a riddle, and surrounded by Rolling Stone editors who are fond of mystifying us.

Aside from annoyances about how it was written, the article brought up a lot for me personally. I have heard a countless trans people's stories before, and I find myself identifying with some elements of their lives, but not other parts. But Grace's story really brought a lot of memories racing back to me, mostly because, like Grace, I was a lead singer/guitarist/songwriter for an indie rock band at the time that I transitioned.

My band was called Bitesize. We were not nearly as big as Against Me! mind you. But we were a fixture in the local SF Bay Area music scene from 1998-2005, and we toured up and down the West coast quite a few times. KEXP in Seattle used to play songs from our second album "Sophomore Slump" quite a bit, so we had a number of fans up there too. And we received some college radio airplay elsewhere. But that's about it, we never made it to the next level of touring nationally or getting much recognition beyond the West coast.

The Rolling Stone article discusses a number of Against Me! lyrics that strongly hinted that Grace might be transgender, even though most people did not pick up on it. That very much resonated with me. Music was my main creative outlet back then, and one of the ways that I expressed my trans-ness was through songwriting. One of the first Bitesize songs was called "I Forgot My Mantra," and it was basically about being a crossdresser (how I saw myself at the time). The chorus was a single line: "I'm a hermaphrodite, but that's beside the point." (For the record, I was not trying to claim an intersex identity with that line - I didn't even know what intersex was back then. I was just trying to express

that I saw myself as both female and male at the time.)

Another Bitesize song, called “Switch Hitter,” was an embellished sort-of-true-ish story about how I first decided to change my sex at my little league’s All-Star game. The chorus of the song was: “A year from now I’ll be the center of attention/After I have had my sex change operation.” It was so empowering for me to get up on stage and belt out those lines. And as Grace mentions about some of her lyrics in the article, I thought I was completely outing myself as trans with that line, but nobody else seemed to connect the dots.

The first two songs on our second album were also trans-themed: “Surprise Ending” was about a trans woman who accidentally runs into the bully who picked on her as a child. And “Understudy” (which is my favorite Bitesize song) is about a transgender teenage thespian who gets to play the role of Ophelia in a Catholic boy’s school rendition of Hamlet.

Anyway, when I did eventually come out as trans (btw, in writing this, I found that my original coming out letter is still up on the Bitesize website), it was a fairly public coming out, as our band was very well known in the local music scene. There wasn’t really a precedent for it at the time. Back then, there were a few trans-fronted bands scattered across the country, but they were all (as far as I could gather) bands where the front person was out as trans from the get-go, rather than one where the person transitioned mid-stream. So I really didn’t know how people would react.

It turns out that things went mostly well. Part of it was probably because we were a part of an indie-pop scene that was the farthest thing from macho imaginable - most of the bands we played with were mixed genders, and many bands had openly queer (albeit not trans) members. We were punk-pop-ish enough that sometimes we would play on more punk rock bills. I know that some folks from that scene were somewhat less accepting of my transition. Our drummer Steve used to be more involved in that scene, and he said that people would occasionally come up to him and say something like “Dude, what the fuck is up with your guitarist?” in a really negative way. And then they’d seem taken aback when Steve would reply “Well Julie’s really happy now and we all love and support her.” That apparently neutralized them. In any case, I’m sure that people who were bothered by me being trans usually talked shit behind my back, not to my face.

Another thing that Grace’s article reminded me about was coming out to my bandmates. From the start pretty much, my bandmates knew that I was trans. Well, initially they knew that I considered myself to be a crossdresser. Then as I began learning more, I started calling myself transgender. I personally made the decision to transition about 2 weeks before we began recording our second album “Sophomore Slump.” Recording a record is super stressful, and I didn’t want to add any unforeseen tension to the mix, so I decided not to tell them until recording was complete. The first band practice that we had after finishing the record, Leslie and Steve came in talking about recording and the potential song order of the album. And I said, “Hey guys, I have something serious that I want to talk about.” They paused, and Steve kind of jokingly said, “What is it? Are you going to have a sex change?” And I just said, “Um...yeah.” Leslie and Steve were both super supportive, and that made the public aspects of my transition far easier knowing that they both had my back.

Anyway, I hope things go similarly well for Grace. It is ten years later, and there is certainly way more trans awareness in the mainstream now than when I transitioned, so that bodes well for her. But I also

know that her transition is *way* more high profile than mine ever was - mine was largely confined to Bay Area music and artist circles, and hers is taking place in the pages of Rolling Stone magazine. In any case, I personally found that coming out as trans was very much an exercise in learning how not to give a fuck about what anybody else thinks about me. Obviously, none of us is capable of completely letting go of other people's opinions about us. But learning how to be generally unconcerned with other people's thoughts, assumptions and negative comments regarding me being trans was a huge life lesson for me, one that has allowed me to be more self-confident and remain true to myself in countless areas outside of my gender. I would like to think that this same life lesson (which many trans folks eventually learn) might be helpful no matter how public one's transition is.

cross-posted from Whipping Girl

Suggested citation

julia. "Laura Jane Grace and Coming Out as Trans in the Public Eye." TransAdvocate, June 4, 2012.
https://www.transadvocate.com/laura-jane-grace-and-coming-out-as-trans-in-the-public-eye_n_6421.htm