

TERF hate and Sandy Stone

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Abstract

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Article



Sandy Stone was a problem that Janice Raymond, author of *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male*, decided to take care of. Raymond felt that Stone -- an out trans woman who was part of the radical feminist lesbian separatist music collective, Olivia Records -- didn't belong. Raymond engineered a smear campaign that nearly destroyed the Collective and put Stone's life in jeopardy, culminating in armed TERFs asserting their intention to murder Stone.

Olivia Records was a successful radical feminist lesbian separatist music collective located in California. The Collective was widely seen as the powerhouse behind the 1970s women's music movement. It was also a trans-inclusive space. Not only did this RadFem space welcome Stone as the woman she was, the Collective helped Stone access the trans medical care she needed.

What follows is a detailed account of what Stone - and this Radical Feminist women's community -

endured at the hands of the TERF movement.

Cristan Williams: Can you tell me how you first became aware of the TERF movement?

Sandy Stone: That would have been the Janice Raymond incident. That came in the context of my work with Olivia Records. When I was first approached by representatives of Olivia Records, which I think was in 1974, I immediately told them that I was trans and in fact, they had already heard that I was trans from Leslie Ann Jones, who was an assistant recording engineer in San Francisco. So, we were already in clear communication about the fact that I was trans and they were very open to working with me. They mostly wanted to know if our politics agreed and whether or not I could work with a lesbian separatist collective. They badly needed engineering skills.

The collective was very clear that they considered me to be a woman. We spent a long time - about a year, maybe more - in which we got to know each other and by the time that I actually joined the collective, we felt that we knew all that we needed to know about how we were going to get along together. And so, I joined the collective and went to live with them in Wilshire District of LA, where we had three houses: two next to each other and one across the street. There were 13 members of the collective after a while. I think that when I joined there were 11.

That's the background. I wanted to give you that background because what happened with Raymond was so betraying, so bizarre and so completely unexpected.

We received an 11 x 14 envelope containing parts of the chapter of her book that she would later title *Sappho by Surgery*. The copy we received to review didn't name me personally, but it was clearly pitched to out me. The Collective passed the piece around, with our usual comment sheet attached, and by the time it got to me there were maybe eight or nine comments on it already. The comments were, "This is garbage!" and "Holy cow, what's wrong with this person!" and "This bears no relation to reality." and "Where does she get this stuff?" As the only trans women in the Collective that I knew of, I felt it my obligation to take a moderate position on it and although I thought that it was disgusting and completely out of left field - I mean, none of us recognized that what we were dealing with was hate, it just looked like another weirdo writing a pseudoscientific paper -- so, my comment was, "The world really needs a book on this topic, but this is not that book." That was all I said and I passed it on to Judy and we sent it back to Raymond with the comment sheet attached and we thought that that was the end of it. We just didn't understand the depth of hate.

Then, we began to get hate mail. Before all of that, we'd been just working along - we had a lot of stuff on our plates - we had a distribution network, we were making albums, we were doing PR, but mainly, we were all concentrated on making women's music for women as a political act of love and hopefully, make enough money to keep the collective going.

All of a sudden came this thing from left field. We were being broadsided by hate mail. The hate mail initially took a form that was so recognizable that Ginny Berson diagrammed it out. We'd get a letter and the letter would attack one of our albums because of the way that it was engineered and mixed. There were very clear ideas of what constituted a "male" mix and a "female" mix, which nobody had ever heard of before. What it came down to was that "male" mixes had drums, which was linked back to "throbbing male energy."

Cristan: [Laughs] I'm sorry. That's just ridiculous!

[Figure] Sandy Stone at Olivia Records

Sandy: Believe me, I'm glad to have someone laugh along because it was funny to me at the time, but it was deadly serious to the people who were writing and it turned out to be catastrophic for us as a Collective, although we didn't realize it at the time. I was a process of being educated to the level of [anti-trans] hatred. At this time, within the Collective, I was planning on converting the living room of the house next door to be a school so that we could teach women to record, so that there would be a lot of women with engineering skills. In the meantime, we're getting hate mail about me. After a while the hate mail got so vicious that Sandy, who worked in the mail room, made a decision to not pass that mail along to me. This was vile stuff. A lot of it included death threats. They would let me know about the death threats after a while. The death threats were directed at me, but there were violent consequences proposed for the Collective if they didn't get rid of me.

The more hate mail that arrived, the more we could perceive that there was organizing going on, outside of the Collective, that had to do with transphobia and with isolating trans people wherever they popped up. I was not alone.

This pattern escalated. We were organizing what was for us, a major tour. We wanted to tour the country and provide women's music for women in major cities along our route. It was the first time anything like that had been attempted. We were very intent on it and it was extremely energy-absorbing. It took all our energy to get it going. We had an entire network of lesbian separatist producers, people who could organize local logistical support, people who could advertise tickets and handle the selling and we wanted it to be completely done by women.

Anyway, we had organized this tour and we had gotten a letter telling us that when we got to Seattle that there was a separatist paramilitary group called the Gorgons. The Gorgons was a group of women who wore camo gear, shaved their heads and carried live weapons. We were told that when we got to town, they were going to kill me.

Cristan: Wait, they said that they were going to KILL you if you came to Seattle?

Sandy: Yes, but we kind of laughed about it. We thought that was just talk, but then we heard it was actually true. So, we began checking this out and the women who had booked the hall for us said, "Yes! These people are real and you guys had better do something about this because they're serious!"

We did, in fact, go to Seattle, but we went as probably the only women's music tour that was ever done with serious muscle security. They were very alert for weapons and, in fact, Gorgons did come and they did have guns taken away from them.

I was pants-wetting scared at that event. I was terrified. During a break between a musical number someone shouted out "GORGONS!" and I made it from my seat at the console to under the table the console was on at something like superluminal speed. I stayed under there until it was clear that I wasn't about to be shot... Not that it would have done me any good to be under there.

Cristan: The sheer oppressive weight of this impending violence that was hanging over your head, that's ready to drop upon you and the people you work with and care about at any moment... That had to feel like

terrorism; it's terror-inducing. How did you deal with that kind of pressure, day in, day out, when it became clear that there were TERFs who were prepared to kill you for being trans?

[Figure] TERF letter published in Sister, 1977

Sandy: [Long pause] I dealt with it in stages. In the beginning, I felt really protected by the women of the Collective. I felt that we, as a collective unit, would stand in solidarity. In fact, the Collective sent a letter to... I'd have to go look for the name of the publication. I can't remember.

Cristan: Was it Sister?

Sandy: Yes!

Published in the June 1977 issue of Sister, what follows are excerpts from the Collective's response to TERF hate:

Because Sandy decided to give up completely and permanently her male identity and live as a woman and a lesbian, she is now faced with the same kinds of oppression that other women and lesbians face. She must also cope with the ostracism that all of society imposes on a transsexual. In evaluating whom we trust as a close ally, we take a person's history into consideration, but our focus as political lesbians is on what her actions are now. If she is a person who comes from privilege, has she renounced that which is oppressive in her privilege, and is she sharing with other women that which is useful? Is she aware of her own oppression? Is she open to struggle around class, race, and other aspects of lesbian feminist politics? These were our yardsticks in deciding whether to work with a woman who grew up with male privilege. We felt that Sandy met those same criteria that we apply to any woman with whom we plan to work closely.

As to why we did not immediately bring this issue to the attention of the national women's community, we have to say that to us, Sandy Stone is a person, not an issue.

All of us are looking forward to the day when work can begin on our studio and Sandy can start training other women. As we do of each other, we ask everything of Sandy, and she gives it. She has chosen to make her life with us and we expect to grow old together working and sharing.

Sandy: That was the way the Collective was responding to the public debate. Then we had a very foul debate in which, when we looked around, the people affiliated with the Collective, who lived in Oakland, immediately said that "Wait, these women are not from here. There's a group here from Chicago that is known to be head breakers!" I think she meant that they were there to stir up trouble.

We brought four or five women from the Collective, and me, and our idea was - very naively - that we would have a rational discussion about trans people and the women's community. It started off with a woman, I'd never met her and I have no idea who she was, standing up and delivering a long statement which consisted of bizarre misinformation about the psychological origin of being trans, that is was a twisted pathological state and that trans people posed a danger, because of our pathology, and how we were perverting the women's community and bringing pathological energy into it. While she was saying all of this, several women from the Collective were looking at me with their eyebrows up in shock and I was sitting there with my jaw dropping, and when she finished, the Collective women on either side of me said that I should respond to it. I was, just without words. I said the totally wrong thing. I think anything

that I said would probably have been seen as being wrong, but I think I picked the most wrong thing to say. All I could think of to say was - in a normal speaking tone - "But... But, this is bullshit."

The meeting immediately erupted in screaming. People were standing on tables, screaming about me and about the evils of me, and about how it was all true because here was the proof because I had not engaged in a "womanly" way. Nobody could stop it. Nobody could calm it down. The TERFs refused to stop disrupting the meeting unless I left the room. After a while, we did a little huddle and some of the Collective women said, "We can't have Sandy leave. That's just not acceptable." I said, "Look, I think I'd better leave because this is not going to go anywhere with me here." Eventually, we agreed on that and I left.

I went back to the Wilshire District in LA because all I wanted to do was to crawl into a hole, in a fetal position and try to shake it off. The rest of the group came back traumatized. They said that after I had left, that there was no rational discussion, that there was a lot of hate about me, and a lot of anger with the Collective for employing me - which I wasn't; I was a member, not an employee - and they began to realize for the first time that there wasn't going to be a rational debate. They really began to understand that something was going on that was quite loathsome and that we couldn't respond to in any reasonable way.

Cristan: So, coming to recognize that you and the Collective were facing real hate, how were you able to deal with such animosity?

Sandy: We realized that we just couldn't respond to that level of hate. We stopped responding to the hate mail. We used to respond to the hate mail even if it was to say, "Thank you letter, we appreciate your opinion." But even that just became impossible. Dealing with the hate was taking up too much time. We all dealt with it by focusing more on our work. However, that didn't mean that that much hate didn't affect me.

Cristan: It's not uncommon to hear from victims of TERF abuse talk about experiencing something akin to PTSD, after trying unsuccessfully to stop months of harassment. I mean, it's hard enough being trans, but add onto that the experience of having some extreme hate directed at you personally, it's not a benign thing. It really does affect the lives of their victims.

Sandy: I had begun to think that we potentially had a worse situation than I thought we'd had. The consequence for me was that it was an emotional roller coaster. As I had mentioned, there was the tour that we were trying to do. I was putting up a front of being okay and the consequence was that after the Seattle gig, I passed out while trying to work.

Cristan: So, wait... You had gone from really coming to understand the visceral hate you were facing from that meeting to having so much hate mail that the Collective just stopped dealing with it, to having this TERF group announce its intention to murder you...

Sandy: Well, there was more. We couldn't afford to buy touring equipment, like Pas, mic stands, the mixer board; I built all that stuff from scratch out of whatever parts I could find to support the tour. That was a hell of a lot there, adding to the strain too because it all had to be built well and work right because we couldn't stop to repair anything en route, and, fortunately, it actually all worked as it was supposed to. But all of that was going on too.

It would be reasonable to say that I was under a bit of pressure and that it wasn't easy and that it really affected me.

When we had the boycott threat, that was when I decided to leave the Collective.

Cristan: I've done several interviews around the trans caricatures Janice Raymond created for the TERF community to go after. I talked to Robin Tyler and she told me about how TERFs physically attacked her for standing between them and trans women they wanted to beat at the 1973 Lesbian Conference. These radical feminist institutions - the 73 Conference, Olivia Records - they were trans-inclusive. Each time TERFs turned to harassment and violence to insert themselves into feminist spaces. Thus far, TERFs like Raymond have gotten away with creating this false narrative about how their Radical Feminist spaces were being invaded by violent trans women and it's just not the case.

So, what happened after all of this? For years you had been living in this very public pressure cooker with visceral and tangible hate directed at you - being vulnerable in that way -- in the context of trying to cope with it all, and then it comes to an end, what happened then?

Sandy: I left still loving the Collective and the individual women in it. Every one of them. And I still do. Every single one of them. They have a very special place in my heart.

I went back to Santa Cruz, and I took up my life, and the Santa Cruz community was extremely supportive. Shortly after I returned, a TERF called a community meeting in which the question was raised, whether I was a woman and whether I would be allowed into "women's spaces."

Cristan: Wait. So this is AFTER you left Olivia? This was after you went home and even then, they wouldn't stop?

Sandy: After Olivia, I couldn't go anywhere without being a lightning rod. Now, at this point, the question was, "Are we going to let trans women - who are men - into our community?" Well, Janice Raymond said something like "trans people divide women." So, I "divided" my local women's community.

The community voted on whether I would be "allowed into women's spaces" and at that time at least 50 women came to the meeting. The vote was 49 to 1. There was one TERF at the meeting that refused to accept me. So, in fact I did divide the community. The TERF went off in a huff and I never heard from her again and that was the end of that. Since then, I've just been another member of the GLBT community in Santa Cruz, California. I consider this to be my heart's home.

Life went on except for the fact that I have this kind of parallel identity, this kind of Gollum named "Sandy Stone" that walks around and does things that I don't know anything about and shows up at places that I've never been.

Cristan: [Laughs]

Sandy: It's been more or less like that, to a diminishing extent, ever since. Occasionally, nice things will happen but then I'll get broadsided by stuff. But then I met Donna Haraway, who was doing research for her paper on cyborgs, and I became involved with a university through a completely random chance event and I found my home in academic life. As soon as I said that "the university felt like home," the whole universe -- the Goddess - really pushed me into academia and essentially, I've been in academia

ever since.

I don't know if that answers your question of what happened afterward, but what happened was that I fell into history in the sense that time began to pass in a way that it didn't when I was with the Collective and in the years immediately after. I got an academic career, I felt more grounded, I got married, I have a kid and a grandkid and a family of 15 people here in town; time began to pass. That's what I mean by, "I fell into history." Life began to go on. I got happy. I guess that's the best possible way to put that. I got happy and I'm still happy. I walk every day by the ocean, Cynbe comes home and we talk about geek stuff, I'll work on some project, my kid will come around with a grandkid, I'll have dinner for the rest of the family, they'll all come over... I'm living life. If there was anything that I never expected to have in my life, it was contentment.

And I'm as astonished by that as I can possibly be.

Sandy Stone is the Founding Director of the Advanced Communication Technologies Laboratory (ACTLab) and the Convergent Media program of the University of Texas at Austin; Senior Artist at the Banff Centre for the Arts; and Fellow of the Humanities Research Institute, University of California, Irvine. In various incarnations, she has been a filmmaker, rock 'n roll music engineer, neurologist, social scientist, cultural theorist, and performer. She is the author of numerous publications including "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto" and "The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age", both of which are available in a wide selection of translated editions. She lives in Austin, Texas and Santa Cruz, California with her husband Cynbe ru Taren (aka Jeffrey Prothero) and their cat, /dev/cat.

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