

Transphobic Radical Hate Didn't Start With Brennan: The Sandy Stone-Olivia Records Controversy

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Abstract

When Cathy Brennan recently published her transphobic missive to the UN at radfem Hub, it reminded me of a similar kind of radical feminist transphobic screeds from the past. In 1977 Sandy Stone was the focus of a controversy concerning her inclusion into the Olivia Records women's collective. The following letter, "Open Letter to Olivia" [...]

Article



Figure 1. hatesign

When Cathy Brennan recently published her transphobic missive to the UN at radfem Hub, it reminded me of a similar kind of radical feminist transphobic screeds from the past.

In 1977 Sandy Stone was the focus of a controversy concerning her inclusion into the Olivia Records women's collective. The following letter, "Open Letter to Olivia" and Olivia's response were posted in "Sister: West Coast Feminist Newspaper" in the June-July edition of 1977.

"Dear Olivia: We are writing concerning your decision to employ Sandy Stone (formerly Doc Storch) as your recording engineer and sound technician. We feel that it was and is irresponsible of you to have presented this person as a woman to the women's community when in fact he is a post-operative transsexual. The decision to work with a transsexual is one issue in itself; but the omission of this information from the public of women who support you was an unwise choice. We feel that it was deceptive not to share this process with the women's community. Many women give you their financial

support precisely because they trust you to work with women exclusively, and you are not being accountable to these women. As performers, sound technicians, radio women, producers and managers-women who put most of our energy and commitment into the field of our energy and commitment into the field of women's culture-we are particularly concerned because of the effect this has on us. We were told that Stone was going to be doing sound at an upcoming concert billed as a women-only event. This seemed an odd choice, since there are more than a few competent women sound technicians in the Bay Area. In this instance a transsexual was taking away work away from women who have to struggle to gain access to these skills and whose opportunities are extremely limited. Given the narrow options available to us, it is also likely that many of us would have to work with Stone. Some of us have already done so without the knowledge was not a woman. When we did discover the truth about Stone and tried to discuss this with you, we were told that you considered him very much a woman, a lesbian, and that you trusted him more than middle class, heterosexual women. This was very painful to hear and indicated a great lack of respect and love for women and our struggles. We do not believe that a man without a penis is a woman any more than we would accept a white woman with dyed skin as Black woman. Sandy Stone grew up as a white male in this culture, with all the privileges and attitudes that that insures. It was his white male privilege that gave him access to the recording studio and the opportunity to gain engineering practice in the first place. He has never had to suffer the discrimination, self-hatred or fear that a woman must endure and survive in her life. And he cannot possess the special courage, brilliance, sensitivity and compassion that derives from that experience. How can we share feelings of sisterhood and solidarity with someone who has not had a woman's experience? We are aware of the unfortunate necessity to call upon male knowledge or skills on occasion, because women have been so excluded from certain fields. But we would like to trust that it is only used as a last resort, when there are no women available to do the job, and that it is done honestly-not as a hushed up secret. It was not our intention to discredit or trash Olivia. we Request that you publish a statement on this issue, and hope that you are open to further discussion so that we might reach agreement on this difficult problem."

The response from the Olivia Records collective was nothing short of amazing:

Recently a leaflet has been circulated here concerning Olivia's relationship with Sandy Stone, who since spring of 1976 has worked with Olivia as a recording engineer. Sandy is a transsexual, and Olivia is being criticized for not making that fact widely known immediately on beginning to work with Sandy. It is further being said that we are ripping women off by calling ourselves a women's recording company while working with a transsexual engineer. In the following paragraphs we would like to explain, for those who may not know, what a transsexual is; to recount our process in hiring Sandy Stone; to clarify our politics around working with Sandy; and to answer specific criticisms that have been brought forward. A transsexual is a person, from an early age (perhaps from birth), identifies as the opposite gender from her or his genetic sex. In the case of Sandy Stone, this means a person who grew up outwardly as male, but who inwardly experienced being essentially female. In many cases this includes feminist identification, which, because of imposed stereotypes, as well as the intolerable position of being female inside a male body, results in an extremely painful life situation. For many women, evolving a consciousness of class and sex oppression involves uncertainty, anger, and the turmoil which accompanies any major life process. For transsexuals, who are simultaneously evolving through confronting their true sexual identity, these processes are doubly difficult. Medical technology has recently provided, for those with the means to afford it and the

guts to withstand it, a way to surgically transform the genitals from those of birth to those of the opposite gender. Persons like Sandy, who have undergone sex reassignment surgery, are technically known as male-to-female postoperative transsexuals and live lives no different from other women. However, although a great deal of attention is usually focused on the surgery itself, it is not generally understood that the process of sex reassignment is a long, grueling and painful one, requiring years of hard work prior to surgery, and this too-well publicized step is merely the confirmation of a process that has already gone to near completion by that time. The impression fostered by the media, that sex reassignment is effectuated by a single operation, simplifies and distorts an extremely complex and subtle process to which the preoperative transsexual must address most of her life for years prior to genital reassignment. Sandy Stone was referred to us as an excellent woman engineer, perhaps even the Goddess-sent engineering wizard we had so long sought. In our second meeting, when Sandy told us about her transsexuality, we had to reassess our commitment to her, and her for us. We did this, as we do everything at Olivia, collectively and from the point of view of our politics. In our first reaction to the situation, we had these reservations: Should we validate a process (sex reassignment) that, seemingly, only the privileged have access to? Should we hire someone who had male privilege? Could we accept and trust Sandy as a woman? We reasoned that while it requires some material means to undergo the sex reassignment process, a person does not gain privilege by doing it—quite the contrary (a very few well-publicized transsexuals aside.). 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. Because of our politics, and despite our initial feelings of strangeness around the situation (feelings which, alas, it seems many women must go through when confronted with a transsexual woman), we were able to begin working with Sandy. Our daily political and personal interactions with her have confirmed for each of us that she is a woman we can relate to with comfort and with trust. 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. Our judgment was that her transsexualism was a fact that might be a concern to any woman who would work closely with her (such as the women Olivia would record.) We felt fine about telling those women, because there was a context for it, and because we have a struggle relationship with them. Beyond that, we saw no way to communicate the situation to the greater women's community without Sandy being objectified. And if Sandy were to become the focus of controversy, we all felt we needed a period of time in which to develop a foundation of mutual trust and support and a solid working relationship, to help us withstand that turmoil. We see transsexualism as a state of transition and we feel that to continue to define a person primarily by that condition is to stigmatize her at the expense of her growth process as a woman. One unfortunate consequence of this decision has been that we did not demystify to the community at large how Sandy was able to acquire her skills, and we regret this. Our hopes for sharing skills and providing women access to work are much closer to

fulfillment because of, not in spite of, Sandy Stone. The women in our technical department are thrilled that Sandy has joined them. She has contributed to our group not only her many technical skills, but also a vision of ways to share them that goes beyond what we were able to imagine. For example, besides training women in sound engineering, she will actually be building our recording studio and will be apprenticing other women in the techniques of designing and building electronic equipment. She is also in the process of writing a book for women which will be a step-by-step explanation of the recording process. Almost a year has passed since we started working with Sandy, during which she has been our colleague in hard work, struggle, wonderful accomplishments and even finer plans. 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. -Women of Olivia Records

I interviewed Stone recently, which you can listen to [here](#). I took away some valuable lessons from Stone's words. I learned that the "deceptive transsexual" narrative is not new. It's been repackaged and re-sold, but it's not new. That while I appreciate and commend both Mercedes Allen and Cristin Williams for their iron clad rebuttals of Cathy Brennan's frontal assault, I have no desire to respond to Cathy Brennan personally. Some words that Stone said, really seem to apply to this.

"The difference today being that now we as transsies have a voice, and we can speak back from a position of power. That's the only thing that's changed, as far as I'm concerned. Hate is always with us and always will be. Ignorance will always be with us. People are always going to be afraid of things they don't know or understand."

"The difference is that we have more ways to speak back to that now. I think also we have more of an understanding of how hate works. I think more of us understand now that you can't engage hate with reason, even when hate presents itself in the guise of reason. If you try to reason back, you're wasting your time. What you need is to build your power base."

The problem in the community is that part of the "power base" in the LGBT community is infested with leaders who've supported or currently support radical feminist perspectives of people like Janice Raymond and Cathy Brennan. People in positions of power need to come out strong, in public and refute this harmful ideology (or publicly support it) that seeks to deny protections to people who need it most.

One voice that's been silent is Lisa Mottet. Mottet is the author of the language many people use today in anti-discrimination legislation. Her work is being attacked as an attack on women's safety. A rebuttal from Mottet would be a good first start. Other voices including Mara Keisling of NCTE, Denise Leclair of IFGE, and Rea Carry of NGLTF need to be heard on this issue too. This issue is taking hold in the Maryland legislature's halls as we speak. This isn't just a debate among different factions of the community, it's a fight for the lives of gender variant people who may die without these protections.

If we truly are an LGBT community, we must support one another. Public condemnation of this sort of hatred is a good start. This worked for Olivia Records; how about for LGBT leaders?

Suggested citation

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