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Jayne County, Laura Jane Grace, and the HerStory of Transgender Punks in America

Karen Fournier

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– Part II (Authenticity, Sexuality, and Sexism) –
Chapter 5, "Jayne County, Laura Jane Grace, and
the HerStory of Transgender Punks in America"
by Karen Fournier.

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While Bowie and Defries might have obstructed County's access to the music industry and appropriated facets of her identity for their own theatrical use, County's experience of exclusion was often more overt and, at times, violent in the punk subculture. During one of her early performances at CBGBs, in March 1976, she was heckled and spat on by "Handsome" Dick Manitoba, the lead singer of the Dictators, who had allegedly been drinking heavily. As Manitoba charged the stage, County struck him with the microphone stand in defense, inadvertently breaking his collarbone. A brawl ensued and Manitoba was taken away in an ambulance while County returned to close her set, covered in blood, with a song appropriately entitled "Rock & Roll Resurrection." In an interview with *Creem* magazine in June 1976, Manitoba was given the opportunity to tell his side of the story. He portrayed himself as the innocent and defenseless victim when he claimed, in a statement that revealed both his cis-male privilege and his bias against the gay and trans communities, that "all I did was say 'Fuck you, you homo. Fuck you, you queer.' The next thing I remember—I wasn't facing him and I wasn't ready for it—I got smashed with the microphone stand."²⁰ The *New Musical Express* also sided with Manitoba when it suggested that "Dick met with less luck . . . at a CBGB's concert featuring that unpleasant, off-the-wall pervert Wayne County. . . . Manitoba got some satisfaction later when at a CBGB's benefit someone spiked County with an unhealthy dosage of demon blotter acid."²¹ Detained on assault charges, County went into hiding by dressing as a man: "I cut my hair short, dyed it black, went up to the wig store and bought a glue-on beard, put on an army jacket and dark glasses."²² The implication that County felt safer to default to the masculine identity during a time when she felt under scrutiny in the punk community reveals the power of the dominant gender to instill respect. The exchange caused a sharp rift in the budding punk scene between those who organized a benefit concert for County's mounting legal bills as she faced charges laid by Manitoba and those who believed that Manitoba was justified in his attack, like Legs McNeil, who was inspired by the event to write his "punk manifesto." Ervin (2019) states that

²⁰ Sarah Whittall, "Wayne County and Handsome Dick Manitoba: War of the Gargantuas," *Creem*, June 1976, retrieved March 30, 2022, <http://www.rocksbackpages.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/Library/Article/wayne-county-and-handsome-dick-manitoba-war-of-the-gargantuas>. Manitoba, quoted in Whittall.

²¹ Max Bell, "The Dictators: The Handsomest Man in Rock and Roll," *New Musical Express*, October 16, 1976, retrieved March 30, 2022, <http://www.rocksbackpages.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/Library/Article/the-dictators-the-handsomest-man-in-rock-and-roll>.

²² County, *Man Enough*, 109.

“the brawl played out a tension that was formative, not just in New York in the 1970s, but in 40 years of punk history since. Simply put, punk has perennially been defined by a fraught relationship to queerness. On the one hand, punk appears substantially queer. . . . On the other hand, punk resists queerness.”²³ County and Manitoba were merely the embodiment of a tension that was brewing, and that continues to brew, in punk. In the end, Manitoba refused to appear at court and County was exonerated, but at a pivotal moment when queerness might have found advocates among punks who might have lobbied for a more inclusive environment for a transsexual artist like County, lack of critical engagement with this event in the punk subculture suggests that the incident was not seen to be important enough to trigger systemic change in punk: punk’s patriarchy and heteronormativity remained intact, while histories of the subculture have relegated this moment to a footnote. In County’s memoir, by contrast, the event is pivotal for a very different reason, since it merely confirmed the sense of exclusion that she felt within the punk subculture.

²³ Jarek Paul Ervine, “The Sound of Subterranean Scuzz-Holes: New York Queer Punk in the 1970s,” *Popular Music and Society* 42, no. 4 (2019): 485.