

Confessions of the Pope

JOY PARKS

Anti Diva

Carole Pope

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Reading Carole Pope's *Anti Diva* is like walking into a particularly sordid gay bar for the first time. It is dark, murky and mysterious; everyone looks a little odd, garish even, and somewhere off to the side, you glimpse the shadow of an aging drag queen. It is everything it was rumoured to be, perhaps too much so. But once your senses adjust to the dark and the noise, you find yourself being seduced by the rush and rhythm of the place, drawn down into the shivering spiral of raw sexuality and rebellion. You want to revel in its otherworldly badness. Besides, you can always return to the safety of the real world.

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There were times when I came close to tossing *Anti Diva* across the room. Take heed! Unprepared readers are at risk of being overcome by the constant barrage of unabashed name-dropping. All right Ms. Pope, you were famous, you slept with famous people. You knew them all. I get it. There were other irritants as well. I took offence at her disparaging comments about the Cameo Club, the butch-femme bar in Toronto's east end where I perfected my dance steps in the 1970s. The author needs a gentle reminder that tolerance to difference must be a two-way street. But since we are talking about intolerance, come to think of it, I have been looking for someone to blame for the wave of lesbian chic that diluted the politics of the lesbian feminist movement in the 1970s and '80s. Carole Pope is one of those kinds of lesbians, one of the "I don't want a woman who looks like a man" types who was part of the plot behind the stiletto-heeled, narcissistic, over-made-up, blood-red-lipsticked voyeuristic male fantasy of lesbianism that still

pervades. Thanks a bunch.

Politics aside for the time being, *Anti Diva* is a revealing biography of a unique woman who, many will argue, played a pivotal role in Canadian punk and, later, new wave music. But her story makes me much more interested in her than in her music. Thankfully, about a third of the way through the book, the veil drops and the Carole Pope who emerges between the lines, ready to relinquish her posturing and bravado, is the one who will reward the patient reader for having continued to turn the pages.

One of the classic tests for a realistic character in fiction is his or her ability to change. Through the course of *Anti Diva*, if we read carefully and rise above the confusion of names, dates and gigs, we are rewarded with a chance to watch this transformation take place. Bit by bit, we see the narrator solidify

before us, growing real. The woman who finishes writing this book is a far more interesting figure than the one who began it. At the close of the book, we find a woman who seems to be developing an understanding of how her times, her gender and even her sexual choices left her on the outside of the music industry looking in.

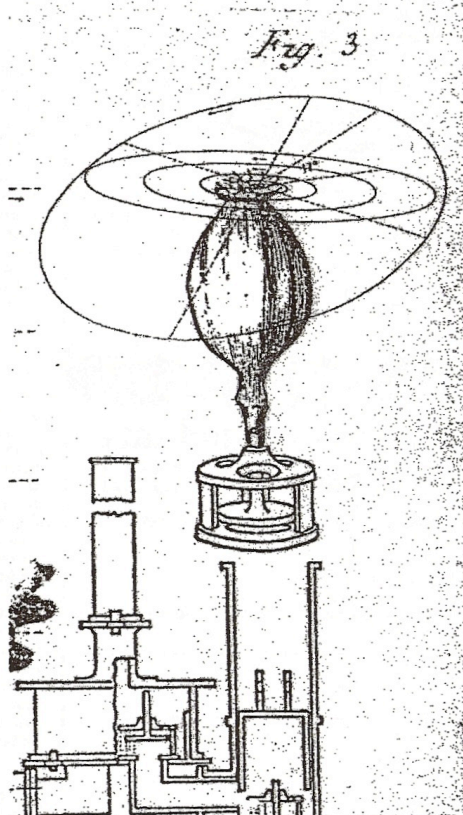
To her credit, in writing this book, Carole Pope could have chosen to hide behind a ghostwriter. But she did not. And while the prose falls flat at times and the pacing is sometimes uneven, there is an "across the barroom table," gossipy feel to her voice that makes the tales glide past. The reader becomes desensitized to the chaos; you eventually relax and let go of the need for order. That is when you start to enjoy the antics and characters who populate her life and these pages.

As a celebrity biography, *Anti Diva* has everything it needs: a circus performer father (no kidding), who just cannot seem to settle down, a beautiful but distant mother and a brood of siblings who

do their best to make a family from the fragments they are given. She is genuinely close to her brother and her sisters. There is her teenage flirtation with drugs, her hippie "pad" downtown (in a rooming house in the Annex), her early love affair with Rough Trade partner Kevan Staples and a rather uneventful coming-out story. As far as the story of her rise to fame goes, readers who are not familiar with the discography of Rough Trade had better brush up. The seesaw up and down description of the band's fate and fame is not easy to follow.

There is real pain here, too: her difficult mourning for her baby

brother, Howard, dead of AIDS far too young, and the loss of her mother just at the time when they are starting to heal their relationship. There is a wonderful pride to Pope's writing about her mother, who even while ill, often left her suburban safety to catch her daughter's performances. And surprisingly, there is a real love story behind the tabloid tales of her affair with real diva Dusty Springfield. In fact, the first time we see Pope fully exposed, with all her defences down, is in a tender passage in which she tells us how she would beg Dusty—her very own real diva—to sing to her while they



made love.

As her days with the band wind down, there is a sense that Carole feels that Rough Trade's success was significant, and that they got their fair share of attention and hype. But, too, there is a sense of regret that, musically, their achievements were modest compared to what could have been. It is that typical Canadian wistfulness, the feeling that one has never quite been allowed to follow the dream as far as was necessary. About the break up of Rough Trade, she writes:

I'm not sure we should have disbanded Rough Trade that soon. It was just so difficult for us. The lack

wants to get the details out of the way so she can move on. Perhaps she has grown tired of all those stories herself, but after all, this is an autobiography and they must be told. She is getting smarter, too, growing more self-aware. She confides to us that, in spite of all her posturing, her outfits, her looks and her "all for shock" performances, the music industry is still a "boys' club" and she has only a "visitor's pass." If, in the 1970s and early '80s, Carole Pope seemed to be a male drag queen in a female body, she must have spent the 1990s developing a female sensibility. And a feminist one at that.

Carole Pope reminds me a lot of

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of a Canadian star system is not just negative space, the Canadian media tend to denigrate artists after they achieve a certain level of success. On top of that, I was typecast by the Canadian media as the evil dominatrix/frunch queen ... Talk about low self-esteem. In the end, Kevan and I both felt like parodies of ourselves and that is not a healthy way to function as an artist. If we had it to do all over again, I think we should have taken time to regroup and reinvent ourselves. We needed a break not an ending. But from where we were standing, that view wasn't clear.

Oddly enough, Carole Pope often reveals herself to be stereotypically, almost frighteningly, Canadian. One of the prissy kind of Canadians. She confides to the reader that she does not really feel comfortable around people doing cocaine, because after all, it is illegal. Granted, and so was the LSD she dropped as a teen, but never mind. This kind of selected aside, the constant name-dropping, the tourist-like descriptions of Los Angeles and the self-denigration, particularly in the face of the impenetrable U.S. music industry, scream "made in Canada" at the reader.

The death of the band seems to make room for the birth of the woman who writes the last half of the book. Yet the events of her solo career, her broad achievements as a songwriter, her moves back and forth from Toronto to LA, and her inventory of semi-famous lovers remain a confusing jumble of facts. They are described but not analyzed in any significant way. It is as if she

gay and lesbian politics from those years — loud, proud and in your face. The Canadian gay rights movement was rife with brave men and women who combined personality and politics to call attention to important issues. "The personal is political" was more than a slogan; it was a survival tactic. Carole Pope/Rough Trade began to achieve professional recognition during the rise of a wave of gay activism in Canada, most of it occurring in Toronto. She sang about creaming her jeans, while the rest of us dealt with the backlash from (only recently possible) anti-discriminatory lawsuits, the Toronto Bath Raids, the endless court cases brought against The Body Politic, and a growing awareness of a mysterious "gay plague" that would change the world forever. The realities of this time and place play like an imaginary newsreel behind her performance. But in reality, she was an icon in a community in which she was an outsider. Try to imagine Carole Pope at a Lesbian Mothers' Defence Fund Dance. I cannot. But from this outsider position, she can observe. The solidification of gay pride in Canada is inseparable from her career — it opened a market for her music and, in turn, she helped create a soundtrack for the revolution. Is it possible that she has tricked us into believing she has written an autobiography, when in truth, she has written mini-essays about gay culture and the politics of the Canadian music industry, using her own life as a means of structuring the story?

The aging boomer Carole Pope

seems indeed to be wiser, at least regarding matters of self. Less self-indulgent and more willing or able to recognize the things that she needs and not what the world expects. It would appear she has even developed a wonderful, self-mocking sense of humour. But for my money, she is still the queen of the broken taboos. How does a former rock star who has already 'fessed forth her lurid tales of drugs, sex and drag find the means to shock? Why, she talks about her menopause! In the final chapter – with the tongue-in-cheek title "I Am Womyn" – while describing her breakup with comedienne Elvira Kurt (is there a famous lesbian

tent in her later career writing music, living a quieter life in west LA (what she once called the Stepford Wives city for gay boys). There is a sense that, while she has learned from who she was, she could not and would not want to be that woman again. It is as if when the latex came off, the part of her that could grow a feminist sensibility seemed to flourish, and there is a better-late-than-never appeal to her self-awareness. This is perhaps most striking in her recalling a conversation with k.d. lang, an important and highly revealing conversation about the banality and packaging of the Lilith Fair, the suburbanization of Sarah

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Pope has not been with?) Pope speaks candidly of her perimenopausal years:

I had also started going through what is the biggest nightmare a woman has to deal with – menopause – when I read this book. Say it with me, people: it is a word that strikes terror in every woman's heart. She is lying if she says it does not. Irregular bleeding means you are riding the red saddle, as John Belushi so succinctly put it, for three weeks at a time. You are so weak, you are crawling around drained of blood, but wait, there is more – you have psychotic mood swings; your skin breaks out. Did you think you would be using Clearasil in your forties? The topper is, it lasts for ten years ...

Think about it. The idea of Carole Pope experiencing a hot flash and choking back handfuls of ginseng and black cohosh is more than her beautiful bodied, youth worshipping (mostly gay male) audience could ever endure. But it is wonderfully revealing of her self-acceptance. She goes on to discuss the positive side of this condition. She is truly grateful for the fearlessness it gives her, her desire to flirt with death on mountain tops or, even braver still, to flirt with pretty young things and share her wisdom and her sexual learnedness. This fearlessness she speaks of feels real, not the kind that propelled her to shock audiences from the safety of the stage. It is the fearlessness to be, to be a woman, a lesbian, to be over 40, and to have grown wise. She seems to be con-

McLachlan and the industry's refusal to promote real women's sensibilities in music. With a final dig, she comments on how the supposed rise of women singers (Britney Spears, The Spice Girls, Dixie Chicks, etc.) is a not-so-thinly-veiled male exploitation of women's sexuality. You go, girl.

This, plus her honest-to-goodness nervousness at auditioning for the 1998 Lilith Fair and the wonderful stories she shares with readers about her positive experience playing at the now famous, women-only Michigan Women's Music Festival, demonstrates how her priorities to herself and to her music have changed. And the personal progress she has achieved makes grinding through the earlier name-dropping worth the effort.

I finished the book wanting to know more about the real Carole Pope. That is an odd way to feel at the end of an autobiography. I have the sense that writing the book may in itself have been an act of discovery. With the necessary rock star autobiography out of the way, I feel she still has a lot more to say. I hope so. And, luckily for readers, I get the feeling that she is not the kind of person who can pass up the request for an encore. ☺

