

X-Offenders

A Typical Day in the Life
of an NYC Proto-Punk

1976

BY LISA JANE PERSKY



WITH GARY VALENTINE. PHOTO BY JIMMY DESTRI

1966

Depending on where you're from, you might call this place squalid. There are roaches and sometimes a rat bouncing through last night's spaghetti sauce and eating your soap, but people sign up for it on purpose—and then they stuff steel wool in the rat holes to keep 'em out—because art is happening all the time. Art and crime. But that doesn't mean artists are criminals, does it? It's hard to tell.

I move into 87 Christopher Street, a prewar tenement building between Bleecker and Sheridan Square, in the middle of the night with my mother and stepfather, three dogs, and three semi-sibs, ages two, one, and none. I was eleven. We'd lived other places in Greenwich Village but this place was us dropping in after a high point, and on the downslide for what was the longest stay of all.

It's my urban bonanza, wild outpost on the edge of a new frontier. I am the girl with the records and the record player. I am the kid. My stepfather practices his violin every day, sometimes with the apartment door open with accompaniment by Yoko Ono herself shrieking at her husband (our super) until the police finally come. Maybe she's just tuning up, finding her sound. I see John Cage around Bank Street, Jimi Hendrix on Sixth Avenue. They remind me: I am the girl who listens.

Time and people move on and we take over three contiguous apartments in that building of only twenty. We take them over with the dream of connecting each by a spiral stair. The building also hosts actors, dancers, a playwright, an antiquarian book collector, old nesting-doll immigrant ladies who live together, an old man who jumped ship to avoid I don't know what, an even older man looking for the person who put a box in his throat that makes him scream "Motherfucking Yankee bastards!" in the hall. We are Puerto Rican, Costa Rican, Greek, black, Italian, southern, straight and homo-

sexual, Catholics, agnostics, atheists and Jews. There's political action, radical feminism, music, dance, judo, ecology and burlap. There was/is Fluxus, *The Vagina Painting*, *Morning Piece*, and *Let There Be Neon*. There are plays on the rooftop and fire escape, and, finally, the barely portable Sony Portapak to capture whatever might happen or be invented out of what happens. We feel advanced. Ubiquitous views of my magical teenage years include many transvestites in golden jewels and sequined dresses, buff asses in chaps and chains, musicians in Washington Square.

That thing with the spiral staircase never happens, but in June of '73, I rent one of the three apartments for myself. The monthly seventy-five bucks isn't easy to make but two days after my last one as a high school senior, I'm walking up our block when my favorite denizen of number 87—resident Greek Chorus leader and playwright H.M. Koutoukas—sidles up to me. He's swishing like (to quote himself about himself) a washing machine and he says, "Dar-LING, I've written a play for you! Rehearsal starts Sunday at La Mama. The pay is twenty-five dollars a week. I'm sending someone to pick you up." After his proclamation, he parks me in front of our building to watch him agitate westward toward the sun as it sinks into the Hudson, beyond the collapsing piers. Harry, as friends and fellows call him, is the author of a play titled *Awful People Are Coming Over So We Must Be Pretending to Be Hard at Work and Hope They Will Go Away*.



IN NEW YORK, 1976. PHOTO BY GARY VALENTINE

The title of the play supposedly written for me is *Grandmother Is in the Strawberry Patch* and my role is Cordelia Wells, the World's Most Perfect Teenager. Thus begins my relationship with East Fourth Street and the Bowery.

I make sweeps of CBGB's early on, beginning with poetry readings, where I perform a few times with bums, drunks, and a few other open-mic'ers. There are serious poets here but I do not include myself among them. This is the neighborhood venue so whoever's been in the neighborhood—even for a night—has just shown up for whatever they did or whatever there was, including an actual hobo's soliloquy, "Riding the Rails," which contained only one line repeated over and over for eight minutes: "Ridin' the rails pickin' peaches, pickin' peaches, pickin' peaches..." No one left the room. Plus, all the straight boys I know are in bands and since the collapse of the Mercer Arts Center they're all drifting this way.

January 1976

I start off the year rehearsing another play on East Fourth Street. This one is called *Women Behind Bars*. I'm dating a guy I met through my friend Lance Loud—of the first-ever reality teevee show, *An American Family*—and frontman for the band the Mumps. I'm looking for "the one" because everyone around here keeps asking me who my *real* boyfriend is. New Guy works for MainMan, has a Pollenex handheld showerhead, amenities I've never heard of, and gave me a test pressing of Bowie's *Station to Station* days before its release, but we have nothing else in common. I can't love him because he thinks it will be cute if we get matching pajamas, because he's a grown-up, and worse, he lives uptown.

Lance and I share a passion for guys. Last year he tried to fix me up with Robert Palmer but *no*. We did not even like each other a little. Lance may still be pissed at me because his childhood friend and Mumps drummer Jay Dee left the band last year to play with Patti Smith. According to Lance, Jay told him that I'd thought it was the best idea for everyone. What? Maybe he used me to take the heat off of himself or maybe Lance made this

up. I don't know. Jay made his own decision, the right thing for him—but it left the Mumps first in chaos and then in limbo.

But Lance can't stay mad at me for long. I'm the only person he knows that lives on Christopher Street. My place is the pit stop on the way to and from the boy Paradise. I'm also a real record-listening buddy. We zone to Odetta, Lewis Furey, Leadbelly, Sparks, and Jobriath together. We even share whaling songs, and I just wrote the first review of the Mumps for a new paper that's about to hit the streets and clubs called *New York Rocker*.

Alongside *Station to Station*, other records that suffer punishing groove wear at home are *The Modern Lovers*, *John Lennon/Plastic Ono Band*, John Cale's *Fear*, and Patti Smith's *Horses*—not just because of Patti, but because of what having a band and Cale have done for her, for us. "Tower bells chimed." Yes. We like *Birdland*, and not least of all, Blondie.

Blondie bassist and X-Offender songwriter Gary Valentine entered my life in the same way that acting did. Benton Quin, the "somebody" that H.M. Koutoukas had sent to pick me up for the play, the actor who had played Eunice, the Woman Next Door, had become the landlord of what's now known as "the Blondie Loft" at 266 Bowery. He'd invited Chris and Debbie to live there and along with them came their new bandmates: Clem, Gary, and then Jimmy.

In the spring of 1975, Benton called me and said, "I've got *someone* for you." I was skeptical but also optimistic, diligent. I went over. Gary and I hang out a lot, read comics together, talk about art, music, and books. He's part delinquent, part thinker, and so I like him right away but I'm recovering from a breakup, seeing other people. There's a photographer in another Bowery loft down the street, a guy from my acting class who works in a hospital as a flesh retainer, Rob duPrey, also of the Mumps, and it goes on like this. I'm a butterfly and I can't land. We're all pissed to have discovered the Love Generation to be a sham but we're still hopping around bed to bed like no one's going to get hurt, because we're so goddamn young. And there are so many cute boys and girls.

But it gets to be fall and all over piss-poor New York,



people are running out of money for oil for heat, for hot water. This fact forges relationships by necessity. Sometimes you have to bathe at someone else's place. In my apartment, the bathtub is in the kitchen and semiprivate, meaning no one can see you if no one is there. Eventually, Gary comes over for a bath. Benton is right. "One magical moment, such is the stuff from where dreams are woven." According to *Phonograph Record* magazine we are the downtown Lancelot and Guinevere.

Gary moves into 87 Christopher Street. And we are clean. Very clean. And we have arrived at our particular day:

December 23, 1976

We get up at 6:30 (having recently gone to bed), get dressed, and jump on the IRT at Sheridan Square. Today we're going to try a last-minute part-time temp job because we always need more money. This one's a staple for the unskilled: envelope stuffing. We assume

HOMEMADE
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we'll have a knack for it. The office is near the World Trade Center. The last time we were down here we came to see King Kong the robot monster ape on the day they filmed his terrible demise, because we love robots and monsters and apes. Turned out he was a very popular ape. Thirty thousand other people showed up, too. It was June and so warm.

We hike up the stairs of the building on lower Broadway, go down a long green hall, find and open the office door. It's a closet: an actual closet. No window. One table with ten other schmucks like us sitting at it. "All too damned grateful to get this job." Boxes and boxes of envelopes, stacks of papers to be folded and stuffed, and quiet as a grave. We stuff 'n' fold for two of the four hours under my nemesis, the fluorescent light. I feel clammy, run to find the bathroom, and have the most heartfelt dry heave of my life. When I come back, I only have to look at Gary to understand that we're both done here.

We apologize, backing out through the door of that joint "smiling and waving and looking so fine," running all the way to the loft, kicking over trash cans and karate-chopping air because we have to show even the invisible enemy that we are invincible. It's so—*punk*—which is a word we're refusing to associate ourselves or friends with. We just feel alive, connected, invulnerable.

We hang out in the main room of the loft, smoking butts from an ashtray, still wearing our coats, burning hand-screened Jimi Hendrix posters in the fireplace to get warm. These lovely gems were left by a former tenant but we don't save shit. We're on the move, living in closets. We have no money to buy anything and no place to keep it.



WITH GARY VALENTINE IN A PLAYLAND PHOTO BOOTH

We know we're lucky. We like being us.

Everyone else in the loft is still asleep, balled up like cats. Sometimes when Chris and Debbie get up, Debbie makes eggs for us. Chris tokes up and can occasionally boss us around. We call them Ike and Tina. They seem so married and a bit fuddy-duddy to us but they're also warm and parental, they share. Chris gets a steady check from the government that is referred to as "nut money" because he's nuts, supposedly. We admire his chops with the bureaucracy. Most everyone we know has some grift going. If you're a good enough guy you're running the scam that does the least damage to others; if you're a good enough girl, you run the scam that hurts only you.

Last night Benton and I stole a Christmas tree. We think it was meant to be taken but we didn't ask to find out, just snuck off with it. It has branches on one side only and it was on the very end of the row so we grabbed this little busted-up pine and took off around the corner—and I kept going until I got it to my apartment. Gary and I turned the bad side to the wall, tied it to the heat pipe so it would stand up straight, dressed it up like a rock star. Even though *Station to Station* stands as the "it" record at our place, we're still living *Hunky Dory*.

It's one P.M. and I run for the Chelsea Hotel, where my next job is. There's a Blondie gig at CB's tonight so Gary stays at the loft plucking the unamplified strings of his guitar until everyone wakes up or arrives for rehearsal. As much as we are happy, in love, and there is still the feeling that we could "float among the stars together, [he] and I," I never know if someone will take my place as soon as we're apart. There are girls in every nook and cranny looking to sweep up your cute boyfriend no mat-

ter who you are or who he is, even if they already have cute boyfriends of their own. And this is not even counting the groupies who have accumulated this year. Women's Lib might as well be short for Women's Libido. Many are vicious girls looking for a fight. Some even cut one another—not me, but when I have to, I look like I would.

I've worked at the Chelsea off and on since 1973—not for the hotel but for Charles James, a legendary couturier, a seventy-year-old genius that few remember. He's done himself in with his uncompromising perfectionism. It made him bitter and he's scraping by on the good graces of a few loyal and loaded patrons. I got this job by recommendation from Koutoukas again, my guardian angel. For the moment, he and Alan Betrock, editor and publisher of *New York Rocker*, seem to have answered the question of what it is that I do, but when Charles calls, I'm here. I'm walking Sputnik, his dog, I'm collating his archive for the Smithsonian Institute. I'm typing a tome of an angry letter to Halston, whom Charles accuses of ripping everyone off.

I love this job, in spite of Charles's manic tendencies. He takes time out from his work to teach me about the poetry of Rupert Brooke and Hart Crane and the music of Debussy and about perfumes and classic fit and line, the author/photographer Carl Van Vechten and Leopold and Loeb, and he tells me amazing stories about his life. He also pays me on time even when he's going to be late with his rent. Since it's hard for the hotel's famous bastard manager Stanley Bard to say no to a young girl—or maybe just me—I plead Charles's case on my way out. In spite of Bard's horrible reputation he can be sympathetic.

I can't love him because he thinks it will be cute if we get matching pajamas, because he's a grown-up, and worse, he lives uptown.

Claude Lelouche is in the hotel, and Peter Brook and I see Leonard Cohen come and go. People leave their doors open and you hear a lot of bad guitar and even saxophone in the hall and wild people are always bitching and trying to get away with something at the front desk. And if we're not yet already, we all *know* we're going to be *somebody*.

I earn my \$1.50 an hour but I always feel guilty taking money from Charles.

It's 5:30 and I'm walking down Seventh Avenue toward home, saving this money for cab fare for tonight. Art Pepper's always around, playing the Village Vanguard. Tonight he seems to give me a little nod (or was he nodding? I'm not sure).

When I get home, Gary's high school buddy and fellow Blondie, Clem Burke, is leaving our apartment. He sometimes comes by, fresh off the PATH train at Christopher Street, to bake his hair in our oven. He turns it on low, gets on his knees, and sticks his head in there,

turning gently side to side to get his proper Eric-of-Bay City Rollers height and volume.

We all have our quirks, for sure. Gary and I iron all of our clothes except T-shirts and underwear. We wear the same pegged pants and white button-down collared shirts from the Salvation Army in Hoboken and skinny ties like the Beatles circa 1966.

Tonight Blondie's playing CBGB's with the Mumps and debuting a song that Gary and I wrote together. It's called "Euphony"—wordplay meant to imply *You Phony*. The pop sensibility that most of the bands embrace—not unlike the tenor of *Women Behind Bars*—includes puns, tongue-in-cheek humor, and blatant references to old movies, music, and art.

Written by Tom Eyan (now of *Dreamgirls* renown), *Women Behind Bars* is a spoof of overwrought 1950s women's prison films. It's also a somewhat loving, camp homage to the old Women's House of Detention that was on Greenwich Avenue, halfway between 87



GARY VALENTINE IN THE BLONDIE LOFT. PHOTO BY LISA JANE PERSKY



BACKSTAGE AT *WOMEN BEHIND BARS*. PHOTO BY ELLIE SCHADT

Christopher and where Tom Eyen lives on West Tenth. They tore it down a couple of years ago and all that's left is an empty lot behind the Jefferson Market Library.

On the nights that Gary and I both work on the East Side, he walks me to the theater and then convenes at the loft with the rest of the band. We split from 87 and head across Bleecker Street at 6:30. This gives us time to down a hot slice at Amalfi Pizza and pick up a bag of bones from Ottamanelli's Meat Market on the other side of Seventh Avenue. These bones are stand-ins in the play. The Matron's assistant, Louise (played by Sweet William Edgar), tosses the black Hefty bag containing them onto the floor with a clunk and the Matron (played by Divine) says, "What *is it*, Louise?" and Louise says, "It's *the Harvey Girls*," to which Divine replies with a shudder, "Oh yeah, I forgot about them."

When the Harvey Girls work up a good stench, I'm responsible for a new load-a dem bones. You just can't fake that sound.

As we cross Sixth Avenue still along Bleecker Street headed east, the Hare Krishnas are carrying on with their hare hare rama rama Krishna, Krishna hare fuckin' hares, and we're so over it, just like we're over disco. We wear Death to Disco buttons now, not because we never liked it or never danced (I go to the Limelight and Gary and I go to Club 82) but because it's been years of this already.

In the play, I'm "the Innocent, Raped by the System." I'm also faux-raped in high camp style by Divine and the inmates. We're performing at the Truck and

Warehouse Theater, which is across the street from La Mama—where I did the Koutoukas play—and the aforementioned outré Club 82. We do eight shows a week and all of the bone-chilling hijinks occur at breakneck speed—an hour and ten minutes flat if it's going well. All the local bands have been to the play at least once. Craig Gholson of *New York Rocker* brought David Byrne a second time because, he says, David has a crush on me. I don't know if he's kidding but I'm sooo creeped out by it that I can't make eye contact with Byrne for years. People go to the shows to watch David spazz out on "Psycho Killer" and bawk like a chicken. He moves like an unrehearsed version of the skeletons in a Betty Boop cartoon. Bones again. It's not sexy.

Elton John comes to the play whenever he's in New York. He buys a whole row and brings his entourage. He and Divine become friends and he asks Divine to be in his upcoming Madison Square Garden Show. He gives the rest of the cast our own row of seats and we all go. It's "Don't Go Breakin' My Heart" time with Kiki Dee and then Divine comes out shakin' that thing and at once is exposed to more people than in all the screenings of *Pink Flamingos* put together. The crowd goes crazy. When Divine is sick or does another gig, one of her two understudies is Holly Woodlawn, the other is Monti Rock III (aka Disco Tex of Disco Tex and the Sexettes). Tom Waits shoots the album cover for *Small Change* in our dressing room.

After the play I *have* to see Suicide. It's 9:30 and I'm cabbieing it to Max's Kansas City for their first set. I'm obsessed, even though I'm not sure I "get" what it is they are. No one's ever there. Fifteen people at the most. They don't care. They're going to do the most amazing, earnest, in-your-face show whether you come or not. Suicide is not like anything else. Marty sets up his rig behind Alan. They perform in minimal light. Alan cuts himself at compelling moments in the music. He tells me it's no big deal. He knows how to do it so he'll heal fast. Marty's at his most dynamic in front of an audience and tells me that now when he's not onstage, he's just killing time until he gets there, that he wears the sunglasses for privacy. I ask him what he thinks of what Alan's doing up there. "I haven't seen Alan for years," he says. Alan and Marty forever. Nothing compares. Sure, everyone wants a contract, but not everyone will change to get one.

I cab it to CB's hoping to get there in time for the second sets so I can see Gary and Debbie sing "Euphony." Roberta lets me in. I never check anything at the door, though. My "Little Johnny Jewel" single got pinched from there. CBGB's isn't just for friends anymore; it's jammed with kids from the boroughs, Long Island, and New Jersey. Every band has their following and fanbase of strangers. Manager-slash-label guys are prowling the place. Unsigned groups are in the throes of second-guessing themselves in hopes of getting a contract. They're making changes or maybe mistakes.

The good times are over but it's still a great night for Blondie. When the last guitar is packed, we move on to the sidewalk, hang out in front for as long as Gary and I can stand the cold, then, bending our bodies against the freezing wind, we strike out for home and our Christmas tree. We talk about my show, his shows, various people and their bullshit, their drug habits, about our favorite bands: Television, Suicide, Heartbreakers, Ramones, Mumps, Miamis, the Fast, Marbles, Talking Heads. We know we're lucky. We like being us.

We can already sense that once the money flows and careers kick into gear, the magic that Koutoukas calls "the Ancient Laws of Glitter" will recede from our grasp, but this is our music now, the foot on the prewar stair, the unlocking of locks and slamming of doors, the banging and clanging of pipes, running water, the wail of babies, fights from the other side of the wall, the sirens and honking of horns, dishes clattering in the sink, people hollering back and forth from street to window, window to street, the rattle and squeal of the subway, the hiss of kettles and radios and of television sets at three A.M., the sounds of hoots and wolf whistles, of bongo players across the air shaft, trucks roaring over the cobblestones of Seventh Avenue, sounds of the ordinary, the damaged, the exalted, the insane. We'll have to listen more carefully now for our instincts, for our art, to connect again to the music that is this life. Today is Gary's birthday and we'd better fall asleep before the sun comes up. Later on we're going to see *King Kong* in Times Square. ✍

LISA JANE PERSKY is a founding staff member of the *New York Rocker* and *Los Angeles Review of Books*. Among others, she has contributed to *Mojo*, the *L.A. Times*, *Journal of Popular Music Studies*. She has appeared on, off, and off-off Broadway and in numerous television shows and films.