

The politicisation of Jana and Rosemary, and how Ova began

Ours was a particularly abrupt and violent 'coming out.' This is my story of how Jana and I became OVA.

In 1975, I was living in a squat in Camden Town, London, where I had ended up after two years spent circumnavigating the globe. Almost as soon as I arrived I had a nervous breakdown, for which I received excellent radical psychiatric treatment courtesy of the London Borough of Camden. During that time I lived in a licensed short-life terraced house in Prince of Wales Crescent. Camden decided to demolish the Crescent so I needed to find somewhere else to live. This was not hard to do during the squatting heyday. I knew a woman from my travels, Roz, who was now living in a squat in Kentish Town. She was in a 'women's house,' which meant absolutely nothing to me then. A room became available and I needed somewhere, so I moved in. I would not have called myself a feminist. This was simply a place to live while I tried to restart my life. I had formed a country-folk-rock band called 'Rockwood'.

One breakthrough from my treatment was that I was finally able to admit to myself that I 'might be bisexual.' I set about trying to find out where I might meet lesbians. There were virtually no clubs then. I had an instinctive wariness of The Gateway club. In December 1975 I looked in the Time Out listings and saw a club for bisexuals called 'Louise's'. I plucked up the courage to call, but was thwarted: it was closed for the Christmas and New Year period.

At the same time, a few streets away, near South End Green, lived a kind of commune comprising a row of squatted terraced houses. These were populated by, mainly, middle class and educated young people. This type of squatter always new how to work the system, and they eventually ended up owning all the houses. I knew someone living there, Sue, whom I'd met in Australia. In that December Sue told me there was a woman from Paris visiting whom I might like to meet because she was another singer/songwriter. This turned out to be Jane (later to become Jana). Jane had come with another woman from Paris with whom she was having an affair. Jane was only the second real-life lesbian I had ever knowingly met. Her affair ended, and at the beginning of 1976 we became lovers.

Jane went back to Paris, and I visited her a few times over the next two or three months. She decided to come back to live in London. She had been a successful street singer there, and had had two different recording contracts. However, by the time she came to London in 1976, she was already disillusioned and fed up with the music industry.

My squat in Kentish Town and the whole row of terraced houses were being demolished. All the other people in my squat had moved on, and other residents in the street had been rehoused. Camden Council had promised to rehouse me, and based on this promise they subsequently created the Camden Women's Centre, a phoenix rising from the ruins of this 'women's house'. However, before this happened I ended up being the only resident of the row still living in the middle of daily demolition, and Camden could not give me a date for a new home. The commune nearby had an end of terrace squat which was not fully occupied. Feeling desperate I decided to move there in order to have a roof over our heads when Jane arrived from Paris.

The house comprised three floors. On the top floor lived a gay man, Mike, an American, who was part of the commune. It was he who knew Jane from Paris. He spent most of his time in the other houses. On the ground floor lived a heavy drinking Irishman.

This was the time when the hard Left's hobby horse was Ireland. Everything English was bad, and everything Irish was good. As a way of assuaging the guilt felt by this middle class educated group of young people, they offered a room in their street to a working class Irish hard drinking dopehead. So, Danny lived on the ground floor. Jane and I lived on the first floor.

For three months we lived there with no trouble. Jane and I never visited the other floors in the house and played a lot of music together, mostly our own songs, or other artists' material whom we liked. We both played guitars and sang, and harmonised well. Jane also played flute and clarinet. We were in love and having a nice time.

I came out to my parents by post - they lived in Canada, and my mother completely freaked out. My father later said it had almost killed her. She pretty well disowned me temporarily, and I did not see my parents for four years. Also, my two closest friends could not really cope with my newly discovered sexuality.

One night, I was in bed getting over flu. A gay musician friend of ours, Jamie Hall, had been over for the evening jamming with Jane. Jamie left at around 11pm to get the last bus back to Brixton where he lived in a gay men's community of squatters in Railton Road, The Front Line. Not long after he left, after Jane had just put away her guitar and flute, we heard a thundering sound in the house. Suddenly, four stoned and drunk men burst into our bedroom/lounge. One of them was Danny, and he had three of his Irish mates with him. I shot out of bed, (fortunately I was uncharacteristically wearing a nightgown because I'd been poorly. Normally I slept in the nude). Danny approached me, grabbed me and dragged me to the window, threatening to throw me out of it. Jane tried to get him off me and he punched her in the face. I started shouting while four of them pushed us around. After what seemed like an eternity, Mike came downstairs with his boyfriend. They had been in bed. I used the opportunity to run out of the house to one of the other squats, to get help.

My first thought was to call the police, but the people there would not let me. A few of the men said they would come back to the house with me. There were five or six of them. By this time the action from our floor had moved down to the ground floor. Danny and his friends continued pushing us around, while the half dozen 'friends' stood and watched. One of Danny's mates said to me, "I've done time for the likes of you." Another at some point said, "Let's all sit down and have a joint." I had long hair back then, and one of them grabbed me by my hair and pulled me to the ground. At that moment I thought, "I am going to scream blue murder until somebody does something," which I did, and someone did. The mass of 'friends' shuffled forth and pulled the guy who had attacked me off me. Somewhere in the midst of this Jamie showed up. He'd missed the last bus home.

Danny and his mates decided they'd had their fun, and left. That was our first rude awakening to homophobia. Next came the second.

One would assume, after such an ordeal, that the witnesses would be concerned about us, and think what had happened was a dreadful thing. Not at all. In Violence Against Women cases, it is often the victim who is blamed, and in this instance we were. The middle-class English guilt kicked in as well. They verbally laid into us. "What did you expect?" "He's Irish and you're English" (which, having not been in England very long flummoxed me a little). "What do you expect? It was your fault. You got what you deserved."

At this point Jamie intervened. He interrupted them, telling them to stop, saying they were doing exactly what the thugs had been doing to us. The hippies shut up. They reluctantly said we could stay the night in one of their houses. I don't know where Jamie went. We were personae non gratae. They barely spoke to us. In the morning Jane went to the LEB (London Electricity Board) to get the electricity cut off, because the account was in her name. When one of the hippies discovered where she'd gone, he, a privately educated young man whose parents lived in an eight bedroom mansion, charged into the room where we had stayed shouting at me, "How dare you do that. You won't be here to get the repercussions. We will."

Jane and I stayed the next night at one of my friends who was having difficulty with me being a lesbian, and in the morning said we could not stay any longer. We had nowhere to go. Jamie offered us a room in the gay men's community in Brixton, and this is where we lived for the next three months.

They were fabulous. To this day I am grateful for their kindness. After all, we were women, and they had created this extraordinary gay male community in the middle of the Front Line in Brixton, amidst all the drug dealing and blues parties. Interestingly, they never experienced any homophobia from this sub-cultured group. I think there was an understanding that no one in Railton Road was on the right side of the law and we were all in varying ways misfits, so no one was going to make life any more difficult than it already was.

All those gay men were wonderful, and here our education began, understanding misogyny, homophobia, sexism. We learned the phrase "The personal is the political" and what that meant. They were gay activists and they brought us on board. Peter, Petal, Julian, et al, wherever you are now, thank you very much. They knew about the South London nascent lesbian scene, and introduced us to other lesbians.

It was in Railton Road that Jane and I started writing about our experiences as lesbians and our developing politics. We played our songs to what turned out to be an audience hungry for a reflection of their own experiences. Jamie and some gay friends in Scotland had all decided to give themselves an unofficial surname: Lupin. Jane and I took this up and became the Lupin Sisters.

One of the gay men in Brixton had a two track reel-to-reel tape recorder. In 1976 this was hi tech! We recorded around two dozen of our own songs, using the second track for overdubbing. For home recording at the time this was very sophisticated. We used Jane's brother's cassette recorder to make copies, in real time, tape after tape, one after the other, to sell at gigs. We got friends to hand draw and paint each cassette cover. We titled the cassette, "Women Everywhere, This is For You".

Jamie died in 1985, one of the earliest victims of AIDS in England. Jana wrote 'Jamie's Song' for him which is on our final album, 'Who Gave Birth to the Universe'. Jamie wrote 'Woman behind Bars' about Astrid Proll which we recorded on our first album, 'Ova'. There is a picture of Jamie here in the archive. We owe a lot to him.