

A History Of On Our Backs: Entertainment for the Adventurous Lesbian

The Original: 1984-1990

by Susie Bright



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January, 2009: I wrote this brief history because when I checked online for a history of On Our Backs, there was nothing.

OOB was an influential and remarkable part of lesbian, feminist, and publishing history. I had to cobble something together, and this was a start.

I was the editor in chief from our first year, 1984, until early 1991.

The magazine itself has been long out of business. It had two owners and several staffs since I left. Hopefully, others will write their story someday!

There is a complete set of On Our Backs magazines at Brown University library, available to scholars to review at the library.

Update, 3.25.11: I have written a more complete history of my time at On Our Backs, called "[Big Sex Little Death](#)," which goes into a great more detail.

Update, 9.1.11: OOB staffers, models, and contributors, from 1983-1991: We have created a private Facebook group. Please contact Susie or Lulu or Nan, at their FB addresses, if you would like to join.

If you know of any other histories of On Our Backs in print, please contact me at

I moved to San Francisco in 1980, where I lived the life of the femme diva starlet in an anarchist commune in the barrio. In other words, typical City living.

One night, I read a poem comparing fisting my girlfriend to quantum physics at Modern Times bookstore in their newly title queer poets series. Queer was a subversive word at that time. Afterwards, this blonde chick with a pageboy slipped me a personal letter. She said she loved my poetry, and in-

vited me to be a part of the first issue of On Our Backs, "entertainment for the adventurous lesbian."

If anyone has ever been seduced by the mere title of a promise, that was me. I had been a voracious teen reader of OFF our Backs, the feminist newsweekly, and it had broken my heart when their staff turned so viciously against sexual liberation. This new magazine offered the perfect antidote.

That blonde with the blunt cut falling over her eyes was Myrna Elana, one of the cofounders of On Our Backs. Her "work wife" and partner in crime was Debi Sundahl-- they worked in the peep shows and strip clubs of the Tenderloin district, and shared a Victorian in the Haight Ashbury with Debi's lover, Nan.



In the beginning, i was just a contributor waiting for the bells to go off. But after several months of silence, I sought out these mysterious OOB girls. When I found them, I told them I had been part of a high school underground newspaper, and I could perform any shit work connected with getting a magazine out--- what could I do to help? I could see they were overwhelmed.

The main problem was... you guessed it... money. They asked me to be the "Advertising Director," which if you knew my communist past, was a real laugh. But I worked at Good Vibrations at the time-- in fact, I was the only employee at Good Vibrations.

I earnestly called all the vendors I did business with, and asked them to take out little \$25 and \$50 ads in our debut issue. Hey, buy the whole page for \$100! I remember our two big advertisers were Last Gasp Comix-- Ron Turner told me it was a "fine lesbian humor magazine" and just handed me cash-- and the Mitchell Brothers Theater-- Debi, as well as many of our first models, all worked in their sex club, or starred in their movies.



Kathy Andrew of Stormy LEather, the first woman to tailor leatherwear for women, was another one of our first advertisers. Kathy had an antique sewing machine that she operated like a crazed elf in a leaking basement on Sanchez St. Gosnell Duncan, who invented the silicon dildo, paid us to do a crazy beach/mermaid photo shoot with his "products". It was the first national advertising for dildos, and every issue he let us do another "campaign", culminating in our Mapplethorpe-esque Perfect Moment where we modeled his favorite item, "The Susie," with a callalily and a beautiful round mirror.

My lover Honey Lee Cottrell, shot most of our first photography for the first issues, including those ads for Gosnell. When I think back, she might have worked harder than any of us-- the photo shoots were so hard to arrange, and then there was endless printing in the Harvey Milk public photo labs. She and HER ex-lover, Tee Corinne, had literally invented lesbian erotic photography in the 1970s. Morgan Gwenwald in New York was another pioneer.



You look at the first lesbian sex books, "Sapphistry" by Tee and Pat Califia, and "Coming to Power" by the Samois collective, and there you'll find the first lesbian women opening showing their bodies and their sexuality.

It was no coincidence that the S/M, punk-era women were the

first to show their faces to the public... they were the first to have the nerve. It was as if you had to be a career whore, a dedicated outcast, to show your face in a lesbian magazine... let alone your pussy.

When OOB debuted, some readers complained that they wanted to see vanilla, "bank-teller" type babes in the pictures. We replied, "Well, come on down and let us shoot you!" ---Because the punk strippers didn't want to put on bank teller outfits, they wanted to express themselves.

I'd like to mention some of the models that changed the way lesbians think about themselves: Terri and Caerage--- the most beautiful punk /butch -femme couple ever. Rachel and Elexis-- who turned the black lesbian community upside down. Kitty Tsui did the same in Pacific/Asian dyke culture. Pepper, and Rock 'n' Roll Ramona were the darlings of the first lesbian burlesque--- the girls would drown them in flowers and shots. Cassie and Raven, both now deceased, (breast cancer and suicide, respectively) were the sexist women I ever laid eyes on. They started the first women's escort service and without a doubt could make ANY woman's dream come true between the two of them. I haven't seen such sexual charisma since.

I'm not kidding about the revolutionary effect they had on strangers lives. One woman told me she took one look at the OOB cover of Rachel and Elexis, packed her bags in Minnesota that evening, and moved to California. That story was multiplied many times.

Expressing yourself was what it was all about. I look back on that first year and just sigh at all that talent, and the rage that had pent it all up. Dorothy Allison, Joan Nestle, Pat Califia, Sarah Schulman, Sapphire, myself--- we

couldn't be published in the lesbian presses because of our politics and sexuality, and we couldn't be published in the mainstream world because of its overt homophobia and misogyny. These were some of the best American writers of their generation!



Honey Lee and I were very close to Nan and Debbie, like a little family. There weren't a lot of butch femme younger couples at the time— in fact, we felt like the new demonstration. Even though Honey and Nan weren't technically "editors" they worked on the magazine all the time. When Nan got mildly injured at her day job we were delighted, because she got disability leave, and she never went back. She took over magazine distribution and embarked on the first lesbian porn video production with Deb.

Myrna and Debi had a falling out after the first issue, and I honestly don't know to this day what it was all about. I could see that Myrna was not into working 24/7 on On OUR Backs like the rest of us, which in hindsight, might have been wise of her! But she dropped out, in any case, and I became editor.

I remember writing my first sex column "Toys For Us"-- that was fun. Those columns eventually became the basis for "Susie Sexpert's Lesbian Sex World."

In my first paragraph, I tried to convince dykes to get over their sex toy phobias, especially about penetration. I said, "penetration is only as heterosexual as kissing is". I teased everyone about how they could revolutionize their sex life with a little humor and playfulness. My sentiments were quite spontaneous, but I realize now it was a novel approach. People had been SO GRIM about vibrators and sex toys-- they were called "marital aids," at the time, as if they were some kind of awful crutch. Only hookers and sex workers called them "toys!"

Everyone thought sad, dirty old men were the customer base for such "aids". I had lesbians come into my sex toy shop and actually start CRYING about how they worried that they were going to be kicked out of the gay universe because they wanted to get fucked. No one would believe it now.

The early OOB writers came from a few places, including a lot of classified ads we placed around lesbian journals that would take us. We inherited the Samois mailing list, which was huge at the time. Even though Samois was a lesbian S/M group, it ended up attracting every kind of women who was into



sex on any level, because there was nowhere else to go! Plus, it was stuffed with intellectuals and artists. The east coast counterpart was in New York, the Lesbian Sex Mafia (LSM).

The gay men who edited *Drummer* were our mentors in many ways. John Rowberry, John Preston, Jack Fritscher. They had

patience and wisdom for everything from printer nightmares to diva models who suddenly acted like they were going to run for Miss America.

The magazine started out with three pieces of fiction, one major feature, a few columns of advice and reviews, and three pictorials. Just like Playboy! We even had a "Bulldagger of the Month" in our first issue.

We were so controversial in the beginning, it completely defined us. There were about three women's bookstores in the whole country who would sell us. Instead, we were distributed by gay men's bookshops, anarchist/commie bookstores, the underground comix people, and a few old porn purveyors who thought we were a kick in the pants. Prominent women's bookstores either banned us, or carried one copy with a big sign on it about how treacherous and gynocidal we were. Just try and ask them for a copy!

It was bittersweet when I watched all those same bookstores go out of business as the years went by. Part of their misfortune was tied to the overall demise of independent bookstores --- but to some degree they had alienated their natural audience by being such elitists and censors. They never relented. I loved the stubbornness of lesbian separatism, I even miss it now, but the anti-sex germ within it was nothing but pure destruction.

We thought our scene was awfully smart. I remember composing an ad for *UTNE Reader*, which read: "The most intelligent sex magazine in the world just happens to be lesbian." That was truly our point of view. We were witty and incisive and outrageous. The men's' sex magazines were a torpid bore, straight women hadn't crawled out of their egg yet, and the academics were only talking theory while we were DOING IT. We attracted subscribers from a new hip strata of the counter culture.



Here's another marvel: On Our Backs is the first-- the very first-- national magazine produced with desktop publishing. Debi was the Mac visionary. She thought Steve Jobs was a genius and bought us their first personal computer. I remember SOBBING because I thought I wouldn't be able to operate it because I was no good at

MATH! That makes me laugh so hard now. We used PageMaker 1.0 to design and typeset the magazine. It had TWO fonts, Helvetica and Palatino. It just cracks me up to think of our design disadvantages. But there was no way to pay the printer bills otherwise. But Apple put us into the nascent geek world, and as everyone discovered, geeks were very sex-positive, in fact, they came up with the word.

Nowadays a gay or sex magazine can make credible ad sales. But in the early 80s, it was like soliciting charitable contributions. No one except the old school porn boys were making any money in the sex biz and they didn't understand our audience or mission. We got most of our content for little or nothing. I worked for free until the very end. We all made our nut in other ways.

But because it was a sex magazine, we had to pay a premium to find a printer who would take us. This is the most clear example of how sexual expression is suppressed--- he who owns the press makes the rules. We had to pay 5-10 times the amount a normal magazine would pay who didn't have "dirty pictures." I am still furious about this discrimination to this very day.

The printers were afraid they'd be closed down by the federal government if they printed porn. In truth, they hadn't been bothered since the early 60s. It's just that the same old farts ran the place, like elephants, and they never got over the McCarthy era. Never. I found that being treated like a pariah as a pornographer in America was very much like how I'd been treated as a socialist in America.

I still remember a few other benchmarks... one was that that we were the first lesbian press of ANY kind to run a real article about AIDS, and its risk to



lesbians. The leading lights of the lesbian movement had their heads in the sand when it came to this disease. The standard issue was "lesbians cant' get it." Period. What did they know?

I can't believe how irresponsible they were. AIDS also inspired great dread among dykes because it exposed the fact

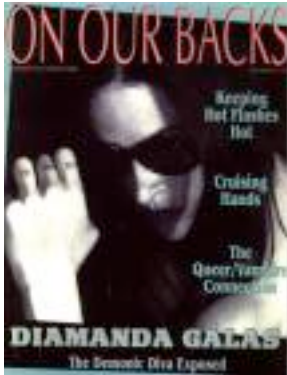
that the majority of lesbians had had some intercourse with men since the epidemic started. In fact, lesbians at that time were more likely to have sex with "high risk men"-- ie, gay or bi men-- than exclusively straight women were. (This was before AIDS became such a big issue for hets as well).

Anyway, we ran the story that no one wanted to tell. ANother instance of speaking the unspeakable was something a bit more fun. At the end of the 80s, I met a number of dykes who told me they liked to watch gay pron. Funky! I thought it was a hoot, since I'd never tried it. But when I started talking about, I found that many lesbians thought this was another new low in dyke aesthetics. We decided to do an article about dykes digging gay porn, and Honey Lee shot our first pictorial with a real PENIS... two gay guys doing it on the floor while Kitty and BC watched.

Not long after that story, we ran the first lesbian story about female to male transsexuality, and Loren Cameron and Justin Green posed for Honey Lee again. I had no idea what a huge story that would end up being... how many women would be inspired and touched by their words.

On a more practical level, I would easily claim that On Our Backs created the first mainstream acceptance of "women's erotica", the practical steps to finding one's g-spot, and having a free 'n' easy attitude toward dildos and vibrators. We taught the world how to use a strap-on. We made sex fun and smart for women, something that was entirely in a female self-interest. It went way beyond homosexuality, it was really feminist sex liberation.

Lesbians have often asked me if I have any regrets about On Our Backs, and why I ended up leaving my work there after 6+ years.



My regret is that very subject, the leaving. It was brutal. I couldn't read *On Our Backs* at all for a few years after I left, it made me so upset. They might have been great issues, but I was still heartbroken.

In retrospect, I see that when I had my daughter in 1990, even though I planned to go right back to work, I was naive about how my life would change, as many new moms are.

I had a real baby on my hands, and yet *OOB* had always been my "baby" as well. It was really rough to divide my time without feeling like I was an utter failure at both responsibilities.

At the same time, my business co-partner, and best friend, Debi, was going off in her own new directions. At the time I would have told you, "She's nuts, she's inside her office screaming about wallpapering her bedroom!"-- but nowadays I wouldn't presume to judge.

We were all way overdue for a first-rate nervous breakdown. The entire lesbian establishment hated our guts. Mainstream publishers and pornographers ignored us or cheated us. The money pressure was hideous and any moment I expected to be taken away to debtors prison. We had a couple thousand starry-eyed fans who had no idea what kind of trouble we were in, and we didn't want to spoil their illusion. The reality of our impossibility was devastating, and it didn't help anymore to hear we were "ahead of our time."

When I decided I needed to change the balance of my tightrope act in favor of Mommy-ness, Debi hit the roof. She hit the roof, of the roof, of the roof. It was like some Sicilian grandfather who hears that you're defecting from the family. If only I had let her wrap herself in wallpaper first, maybe I could have avoided the whole thing!

Debi served me with a subpoena for subordinating my corporate responsibility. She had a meeting with me and a lawyer where she said she wanted me to pack my bags in a week (I had in mind a yearlong, find-the-new-editor process) and she wanted a stipulation that I could never write professionally again, at least without paying a hefty portion of my income.

To this day, I have no idea why she went so vengeful I walked out with nothing but my baby in my arms, but that was the reason I had to leave anyway. I don't regret it, because my motherhood improved about 5000%-- I actu-

ally took care of her and saw her little face when I wasn't one my way to or from work, crabby and exhausted.

But my *OOB* breakup was gutwrenching. We really did love each other, and I guess that was what made it so bewildering. If everyone had taken a chill pill, I would have loved to work 20 hours a week and find the next new hottie editor. My only solace when I look back on this nightmare is that I hear many other creative teams have had similar fireworks when they broke up. So we were not unique!

Debbie got married to a man, and steadily lost interest in lesbianism, creatively and commercially. She had always wanted the magazine to make money-- real money-- and it must have galled her to ultimately sell the whole operation for a pittance. She realized that videos were where the profits were. I never saw her again after the lawyer nonsense.

Nan got a new girlfriend and moved to Minnesota, working at one of the women's bookstores that used to be a hard ass about *On Our Backs*, but then changed their ways! She looked me up one year a decade later and when we reunited, we hugged each other for an eternity.

Nan and I, along with Debi and Honey, are the *only* ones who truly know the hair-raising, insane stunts we pulled, day after day, to put out our beloved bit of revolution.

Honey Lee and I broke up after 7 years, and subsequently I was the most fickle and gadabout gal in town for a few years before I settled down with my current lover, Jon. My "baby" is now a teenager, and her godmother, Honey Lee, just showed her how to wind film for her first photography class.

I'm very close to many of the artists I met through *OOB*-- they're my family. Aretha is taking some photo prints from the early *On Our Backs* to show her class, and I have to play it cool around her, so she doesn't see how giddy that makes me feel. I'm so touched she sees the beauty and authenticity in those things that made me feel so powerful in the very beginning.