

Aleshia Brevard Crenshaw Interviews

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Introduction

Aleshia Brevard Crenshaw was born male in 1937 in Tennessee. She had an effeminate youth, and lived as a femme gay man during late adolescence in both Memphis, Tennessee and Los Angeles, California. She began working as a female impersonator at Finocchio's in San Francisco in 1959, and had genital surgery, male-to-female, in 1962, with Dr. Elmer Belt in Los Angeles. Crenshaw lived for the next three decades as a closeted heterosexual transsexual woman, and had a career in the entertainment industry during the 1960s and 70s. She was a client of Dr. Harry Benjamin's, and knew several other early transsexuals.

SS: We can start as far back as you like. You said you were from Tennessee? Tell me about Tennessee, and what you were like as a child, and how you wound up in San Francisco working at Finocchio's.

ABC: I started out in middle Tennessee, about 40 mile out of Nashville. I was born in '37. That was the time period. I guess the story is the same. I have to come back to it being a very small community. I was just this little sissy kid, and the community gave me lots of leeway because I was queer, though of course no one knew anything about queer. But I knew. I really don't know what to say. It was really quite a normal childhood.

SS: What did your parents do?

ABC: Daddy was a doctor, but not a very successful doctor. He came from a line of doctors. Basically he saw himself as a gentleman farmer, because the land had been there since the revolutionary war land grant. There was a tobacco base--Daddy rode a horse, everything except the Panama hat! He was city clerk for a while. Mother was--there. I think we were actually very poor. Didn't know it. Everyone was that way. That old landed gentry thing. Genteel poverty. That's exactly what it was.

SS: So everybody just gave you a lot of room to be yourself?

ABC: It was a small county, the smallest county in Tennessee, and I was considered "The Artist." I was the one who sang and drew and--

SS: --and we all know about those artists being a little light in the loafers.

ABC: --right, and Daddy definitely wanted an athlete, and I was about as far from it as you can come, and was the last one chosen for any game, whenever there was any game. I just spent a lot of time pretending to be Veronica Lake.

SS: Best hair in Hollywood.

ABC: Oh, wasn't it? Yes! And I had this wonderful imagination, so whenever I was doing chores around the farm, bringing in the wood or whatever I would pretend that I was Veronica Lake. I had a little imaginary world I lived in. But what wasn't imaginary, and I wonder if it's what started all this, if we need to look for a cause, is--Daddy thought that because I would dance in my grandmother's shawl--it buttoned at the neck and I'd wrap it around my waist, so I had my little skirt and I would dance-- Daddy thought that it was very important that I have male companionship. So I was carted off to play with neighborhood boys a lot--and honey, was laid from the time I was four years old. It started, and it never stopped. That's a true story. It went on all through high school. I started sleeping with men at a very young age. I've wondered about whether it was because, whenever we would play cowboys and Indians, I was always determined to be the cowgirl. Well, usually, I was always determined to be the Black Widow, who was a Saturday afternoon serial. You know I'd open my little compact, and so forth. I would insist on playing the Black Widow. I don't know if that's why I got laid so much or not. But it was habitual, a lifestyle. And because I was treated by these young men as a girl, I played the female role until high school, and it felt right to me, it just felt natural. I, well, I don't know exactly what I'm saying. That maybe there was as much a social as a biological conspiracy going on. That's the childhood. I remember feeling very distant because I was different from my peers. But I was treated nicely.

SS: How long did you live in that small little county in Tennessee?

ABC: Until I finished school. Until I went to Memphis State when I was 17.

SS: That would be 1955 or so?

ABC: Right. I went to Memphis State, where there was a gay community. And they insisted, right away, that "you are one of us."

SS: Now, in '55, had you heard of Christine Jorgensen? She was news in '52, '53.

ABC: Yes. When I first--well, I was in high school. When I first heard, I intercepted a note about Christine that these two girls had passed, and it said that that must be what I was. I remember feeling just beet red. Embarrassed, because I knew it was true. But

making jokes about it. The family sent me to boys camp, just everything they could do--fortunately, they didn't know about hormones--to try to make my life easier, for me to be a guy, and we were riding back, and I distinctly remember, I got such a big laugh, when I said "Who knows what the future holds. It'll be just like dropping off your clothes at the dry cleaners, and you'll come out as something else." They thought this was so funny. I remember that very well. I remember feeling a feeling of disloyalty. I did not know Christine, or how one went about this, but knew that I was covering. I practiced walking like James Dean. I had this whole male persona. I had it down pretty well. I went steady with this girl because it was a cover. And I knew it was a cover, because I was sleeping with the same guy I always slept with. And when we went to the movies, I immediately took her home, and I couldn't wait to see him. Robert William and I would go to dances in the next county, and we asked girls to dance, because that was what you had to do, but we were dancing for each other. We would stop and make out on the way home. It was so--well, he treated me as his girlfriend, but he was heterosexual in that when I was gone, he married a woman and is now the grandfather of three or four. I still don't understand. It was very unusual.

SS: I think people's real lives, the things we all actually do, are more complicated than most people ever realize. I especially think that about sexuality. I think the more you find out about who they love, and how they love, and what they actually do with their bodies, there's just a very rich complexity to lived experience that obliterates the distinction between straight and queer.

ABC: Exactly.

SS: To me, everything is fundamentally queer. Queer courses through everything. It's like the heart of the universe. The pulse that courses through everything. But that's not to say that people who are straight, who chose to live that kind life are hiding or denying something.

ABC: Are we not saying that, though? Because in talking to Judy, the woman I'm working on this book with, she's so--as a woman, as a heterosexual woman--so fascinated with this early exchange I had with the guys, and with Bill, that she's gone to her husband, and to many other heterosexual men and asked them, and they've said no, we've never heard of anything like this. But it wasn't just the boys, it was men, married men.

SS: Well, I certainly think some people can be closeted, or can deny things to protect themselves, but if I look at, say, the way male homosexuality works in Mexico, for example, the only person who's considered queer is the person who's being penetrated. A man is a man. A man is a person who's on top and putting his penis in a hole. Everything else is a woman. You're not a gay man if you do that. A man who has sex with another man is not a gay man as long as he's the one who's fucking, rather than being fucked. And I think perhaps that was more the case in white North American

culture, too, in earlier time periods. This idea that "any man who has sex with another man is gay," and "anybody who's a woman who has sex with a woman is gay," and that gay is a kind of person that you are—I think people's sexual behavior is usually more complex and messy than that. Looking at this as an historian, I would say that probably since the 40s in the United States, there's been more and more this sense of a modern gay identity, where if you are gay you have sex with other gay people and you don't have sex with straight people. If you're straight you're not gay, and if you're gay you're not straight. I think that's a relatively modern idea. Before we started thinking in terms of exclusive gay and lesbian identities, I think people had more diverse sex lives. You know, there were more people with experiences like yours.

ABC: I was always passive. That's what it was. There were aggressive people who, in my particular case, happened to be males. And that's the way it was for me in the rest of my life, I was a very passive person. The aggressors--

SS: It's like, they could be who they were with whoever was passive.

ABC: Right.

SS: And because you were passive you weren't like them, in spite of the fact that you were both male and could share some kinds of social experiences together, the way boys and girls couldn't unless they were a dating couple.

ABC: Well, back then the girls just did not [inaudible.]

SS: I just think that what you described was more common fifty or sixty years ago than it is now. As definitions about sexual identity changed over time, more and more people denied what they actually did, because they didn't want to seem to invalidate other choices they had made. You know, like a guy saying, "Yeah, I did put my dick in that boy, but it wasn't a gay thing, it was different. OK sure, I know he was a boy, but he was really a girl, and I was doing with him what I do with other girls. It doesn't mean I'm gay. It means I recognize the girl in him. Now that doesn't mean I'm gonna stand up and say that in public, that I put my dick in his butt, because people wouldn't understand it. But I knew what I was doing, and so did he. Or she."

ABC: I accept that. I totally accept that as what the reality of the situation was. Yeah. It felt right.

SS: I think there's a lot of silence around those sorts of sexual activities. People don't want to talk about it unless they really trust the person they're telling. You know, so when somebody stands up and they're some sort of bible thumping whatever, and they want to denounce those damn homosexuals who are gonna burn in hell forever, well, maybe they mean those urban people, who both act like men and do unspeakable things--"not what I was doing, not that thing, that was different." And you know, in

their lives, and their minds, and in their understanding of the world, I truly believe they can be different things entirely. Whereas, you know, from somebody else's perspective, they'd be saying "You hypocrite. You're just latent, that's all you are." I think it's trying to compare apples and oranges. Anyway, I'm fascinated hearing your story. Because to me, what was possible, medically, as of the 30s and 40s, just sort of opened up a new path for people to follow. People couldn't have done in 1920 what you did in 1960. Not that it was easy in 1960, or '70, or '80. But there was this new path to follow. It's the opening up of a new path in a world already full of volatile possibilities that I find so fascinating. You say you don't have anything special to say to me, really, you just lived your life. Well, it's that life itself, how things unfolded for you that I want to hear about. Your trajectory.

ABC: It was such an accident. I still sometimes think, "My God, what if there had not been the medical breakthrough? What would it have been like? I'm sure that there were people in the generations before me. What did they do, these passive people?"

SS: Maybe they lived as men, or maybe they live as women and just did not do anything surgical or hormonal.

ABC: I had a cousin who was slightly older, a woman, who was beautiful, and was accepted as being just a little strange, who never, ever, had a dress on. Just dressed as a guy, and lived out on her farm, and just was. And I'm so sorry I never knew her better. I was fascinated, but we never shared anything. But that was my childhood. Being ashamed. I knew it was wrong. I knew I was, well, a little loose, perhaps? But sex was never the driving force with me. It was more the need to please--this was how I found acceptance.

SS: Was there something validating about it? Like, when you were with somebody sexually, it was like "This person gets me. He really gets me at this deep, deep level."

ABC: Yes. He gets me, understands me. Yes. And that I think would then in turn start the actual pulse and nature of this whole looksist society. Because you know I thought they were attracted to a certain look--I know I was--because I heard always "too pretty to be a boy." That sort of thing. Complexion and all. The earliest recollection I had of knowing, I think I was six. I had this aunt. She took me to town with her, visiting my grandparents. And we met some of her young friends at a record shop. I guess I was four. I was still in curls, and they said, "Oh, what a pretty little girl." And I so adored my curls, and she was so embarrassed and I was so aware of it. And she didn't correct them. And then I was forgotten, and they went on talking, but I realized that the way I looked was an embarrassment. I think that helped start the whole process. Only after landing up in San Francisco, and learning that there was a way out of this, was there any future for me. I just remember how traumatic that was, knowing that there was no way out, knowing that you could never be what you were expected to be, what you should be.

SS: So we heard about Christine Jorgensen; you were in high school in '53 right when it happened. Did you think at that time that "Yes, that is what I'm going to do someday," or did you—

ABC: No. Denial. I'm sure I did not say—it just seemed too removed from anything that would be possible for me. She had gone abroad for this, and it never dawned on me that I could.

SS: Might as well have gone to Mars, huh?

ABC: Yeah. Yeah. it did not register. I was just a teenager. And then when I went to Memphis and had my first, what I would have referred to then as my first homosexual relationship, because what had happened prior to that wasn't, and I had a relationship with a professor at Southwestern, and fell in love, I decided that I was gay. That I must be. And it, again, was all about how I was treated. The romance—my God!—I thrived on the romance. So when Bill dumped me, and got married to a harpist, hah! I hitchhiked to California. I mean, it was ridiculous. Here's the delusion: I meet Bill, this man who's in his late 20s, is—I stayed with him, it was very romantic, he'd take me back to school, he'd drive me to school, I'd hide down on the floorboards so people wouldn't see. I think now, who were we fooling? But at the same time, I was thinking—he was to come and meet my parents? I was delusional, that I thought my family would somehow meet Bill, my man, and life would be happy ever after. What, you know, that we were going to walk and get married? But that was always it—that I would go off and get married. And I wanted children from every limb of the apple tree. It was just this whole Cinderella complex. And I somehow managed to delude myself that that was all possible. And then I just died.

SS: Tell me a little bit more about Memphis before you hitchhike out to California. You said that's where you first became aware of a homosexual scene. Was there any sort of drag scene going on there that you were aware of?

ABC: No. Never. Never seen, never ever heard about drag. I did go to some parties—Bill just hated—I knew all these guys that camped a lot. I had this one roommate that I was supposed to be staying with, Bobby, who was gay, and we would go to these parties, where there was a lot of camping going on. And I thought this was just heaven. Running around in scarves and such.

[Break in taping when FedEx package comes, drinks are refreshed.]

SS: So we're in Memphis in 1956. Elvis hasn't made an appearance yet.

ABC: Well, he'd made his appearance in Memphis, but not to me!

SS: OK--so you're camping it up with the boys in the gay community--

ABC: Camping with the boys, yes, and Bill, my lover, did not like this. Looking back, I realize, he wanted a boy. It's that whole gay thing. That's all it was. Well, that's not all it was. There was standing on the street corner, there was a very active sex life, that's a good deal of what the gay community actually was. I was very much a part of that, I mean the cruising, actually.

SS: Was this down along the river?

ABC: No, this was on street corners. I mean, a friend from school was on an adjoining street corner, and this was our game [shouting]: "Likes me more--went around the block four times!" [Laughs.]

SS: Were there hotel lobbies or bars that people went to, like the Commodore?

ABC: There were. There was one bar, where downstairs, I don't remember the name of this place, where I got thrown out every time I tried to go in. My friends did hang out there, but I was underage, and obvious, very obvious. This is it--I started out as an art major, and I was told I should not hang around with, should not be seen with, some of these people, that they were homosexuals, gay guys. And the agreement--I loved this--the agreement in the women's dorm was that I was not gay, that I was just like this doc caught in the headlights of an oncoming car. And I liked that so much. So when I say obvious, I think it was that I had started, well, at that time I had discovered that I could put ink on my eyelids, because I could say that I had had ink on my hands and rubbed my eyes. So there was my eye shadow. I was getting into this whole looks thing. Letting the hair grow. I had sort of a little pixie cut. Trying to get by with all this stuff, because I mean, well, just going to the barber shop--tears! Even as a teenager, as a teenage boy, I remember going home and just crying, and hating it, hating the boy look, hating it all.

SS: Oh yeah, I know. I was raised in an army family.

ABC: Oh God! Poor dear! So, you know. It's so good to meet some one who knows. How did you get past it? How did you cope?

SS: Well, it was a different era, so by the 70s, I was able to be a rocker.

ABC: Oh, very good! That's, hm, yes, exactly. Short shorts? I was very into short shorts. When I look back now, I would have to say I was a screaming queen.

SS: Well, so there you were in Memphis, living the life, mid '50s, you've been dumped by your honey, you high-tail it out to San Francisco. What made you think of San Francisco as a place to go?

ABC: I had read Kerouac. The Subterraneans. 1956, '57, somewhere around in there. I'm really bad with dates, because I spent so many years in there just eliminating them--this whole age thing, you know?--that none of it really gels anymore. I've told so many different stories that, well, you know. But The Subterraneans. Thinking that somewhere, there must be, you know, a place that is, um--it was the whole beatnik thing.

SS: You didn't think of it as a gay thing?

ABC: No.

SS: Was there any sense you had of San Francisco as a place where gay people go?

ABC: Actually, I came to Los Angeles first. That's where I hitchhiked to. I--well, I'll tell you the traditional story. I met a priest, who then took me to San Francisco. Gave me the clap, and took me to San Francisco.

SS: I was about to ask what you meant by "met a priest," but you just answered my question.

ABC: Yes, I lived with him. I was kept--kept by a gay priest.

SS: Where in Los Angeles was this?

ABC: Oh, in the hills. It was in Silver Lake. So he tried to--well he was a great guy, he really was. He took my education in hand. He said have you read this, have you read that? Well, I'd read nothing. Old Yeller. You know, [pointing to her head, ringing it back and forth as if empty] "Ding-ding!" You know, sent me to beauty school. I was into partying. I had discovered that I had something. Had--[laughs] had youth; youth is what I had.

SS: Oh come on, and beauty.

ABC: Oh, well, yes, but a lot of what we mean by beauty is really youth. And we were right in the midst of a gay society that was very butch and femme. I was very femme, and so I was very popular with the very butch men.

SS: Tell me about Silver Lake.

ABC: It was very much a gay community. On the whole hill across from me--I love this story--was this young man from Jackson's Hole, Wyoming or some place like that, and this traveling salesman, heterosexual, married, meets this young kid, and brings him back to Hollywood. Moves him in with the wife. Which seemed not to be that unusual. My college roommate--same thing. So anyway, there they are, both vying for this man's

attention, and in both cases, the male won. So I guess they were not so heterosexual, if there is such a thing. Well, I lived totally at night. I partied all the time, every night. I had friends out from Memphis. Dick Hollander, a big hair dresser later. And we went out places every night, to places where things were happening. And there was just too much going on to make it to school the next day. And John was really worried about my future. But I just--the excitement of that whole world to me, it was--well, that just was my life. That's all there was to it. I just lived up on my little hill.

SS: Now, were there clubs that you went to? Tell me about that.

ABC: The Fireside Inn. I'd meet Johnny at some of the bars downtown sometimes, but we didn't really do that. We were sort of elitists. Piss-elegant queens, you know? Being kept by someone who'd give me a little Alpine Sunbeam to tool around in. You know, enjoying it very much, because by this time I'd gotten past the ink on the eyelids, so I was lining the eyes, and the hair was in the face, and starting to dress, well, a lot of velvet and velour, stovepipe pants, vogue-neck sweaters, very androgynous.

SS: What were some of the names you used for yourself back then, in that phase of your life? Like, I came across the slang term "hair-fairies" recently. What were the vernacular names you used for yourself, or got called?

ABC: My friend Dick and I, we called ourselves Lisa and Leslie. But how did I think of myself?

SS: What did people call you? I mean, there seem to be so many terms that gays and lesbians come up with to distinguish between different types. Like if you only like Asian partners, you're a "rice queen," things like that.

ABC: Oh, I see. Just "femme." That's all. I was just "femme." In fact, that was a nickname I had. "Femme." I think there's a difference, though. I mean, I say I was part of that gay society, but at the same time, I wasn't. I was a loner. I had my friends, and we ran around, and went to the clubs and all these things, and would meet someone, and sleep with them, yes. But it was never that this was--I guess, well, I was never that comfortable. It was that, well, this wasn't a sisterhood. It wasn't. I didn't really belong. I belonged with the men that were attracted to me because they appeared for all intents and purposes to be straight. Now, we can talk about rice queens or whatever, but the difference I guess is that I always thought I was real. That's the difference. Now, I said "piss-elegant," but like with my friend Kathy--Stormy--when we would go to the Black Hawk, the Broken Drum, Black Cat, places like that in San Francisco, we were very removed. You'd see Kathy sitting there with an ermine stole thrown over her bare shoulders--we really thought we were real.

SS: Well, you were.

ABC: So we sort of removed ourselves from all that. We were queenly, queenly, with just a small group of friends that we had grabbed. We'd sit and preen and wait for somebody to offer to buy us drinks and take us home. That was sort of just what I did. Looking for true love. I swear to you that actually was the goal. Someone to save me from all this, take care of me. Accept. So, here's the big change with John. We had a fight, and I told him to go, and just get rid of his lust. And he took me up on it. And when he came back he had the clap and he gave it to me. I don't think he knew it, until after he'd cleaned it up, and I reinfected him. But he bought me a new wardrobe, and took me to San Francisco to show it off. It was the first time I'd been to San Francisco, and we went to Finocchio's. And that was it.

SS: Hello!

ABC: Yes, Hello. Exactly. Everything else that had been sort of a blur up until that point became pinpointed and focused.

SS: What kind of wardrobe did he buy you?

ABC: Same old thing. Sweaters and those stovepipe pants. A lot of velours. That was all I wore. As close to slacks as I could get, and oversized shirts. Androgynous. It was also interesting in that period of time, when I first met John, he took me to Friscotti's which was a restaurant--I thought, poor little old me with my background in Tennessee--of note. I was so impressed when he pulled up and they recognized him. We went inside, and he sat beside me, not across from me, and ordered for me. And told me that it was not polite for a date to watch his partner eat. I had never heard this before--and I had read Miss Post cover to cover--but so, John, you see once again, I was his girlfriend, though male. I felt very, very feminine. I started practicing all that, all those feminine wiles. Telling him to go and get rid of his lust, things like that. This was all an exercise in how to--how far I could go with myself. So what happened, at Finocchio's, we sat ringside, and Lucien came out. Lucien did a lot of patter. And one of his bits was that he had this school for female impersonators, which wasn't true, and "Ladies and gentlemen, this is one of my star pupils--won't you stand up, darling?" Well, of course I did as I was told, and stood up, and got applause for the way I looked. And Lucien said these magic words: Isn't-she-beautiful. I'd never been called "she" in my life. It was just--oh--well, ah!--just turn the page. It was Brer Rabbit in the briar patch. I turned to John and said "You say I have to have a profession, well this is it." It was just that simple.

SS: Wow. Had you ever seen female impersonators before?

ABC: No. John had taken me to Long Beach to a Sunday afternoon--they had some sort of drag show, and we had met someone. I mean, this was strictly amateur. We met someone however, a couple, and had gone over. John wanted the drag queen to make me up. And this person did, but it was sort of garish, you know?

SS: Scare queen?

ABC: Yes. I looked awful. It was just dreadful. Then that one's lover came on. But I had never, never seen a drag show. I had never been in a dress in my life. I mean, growing up, you asked what it was like, I had a few friends, I'm digressing, but back on the farm, there was a tenant farmer's daughter, who was maybe 8 or 10 years older than me, and we would sit in the swing and we would play, and this was our game. We had a Sears-Roebuck catalogue, and we would pick out what we were going to wear to various functions. And Helen was OK with the fact that I always picked out the dresses. And she did take me into her house once and insist that we get into her sister's clothing. And it turned out that her brothers--the whole family, actually--was outside the door watching this through the keyhole. It was just humiliating. I panicked when it came down to actually getting into the clothes, because I was afraid of getting caught, afraid of what my Daddy would think. So I guess that effectively kept me out of female attire until I saw the show at Finocchio's. I thought that was the most glamorous--Joan Bennett was in the audience that night. And I was so, well, impressed, that all these sophisticated people were coming and applauding--me, actually. I saw this show, had no--it was just like being transsexual, had no idea about the surgery, no idea how you did it, but knew that it was me. So John went and asked how one auditioned. And Mrs. Finocchio told him that you sent in a picture, and if they were interested, that was it. I went home, this was about Christmas, and had a picture made. This is interesting, because it just dawned on me that I'm now comfortable talking about the past. When we were talking about the male child, it's all sort of a blur to me. It's really hard for me to pick things out. I guess I've just sort of eliminated it. But this I could talk about all day, because it was a wonderful, wonderful period of my life.

[End of side 1]

SS: [continuing to talk about the uncomfortableness of remembering the male period of her life] So you tore up--?

ABC: My mother and I, after surgery, we went through and tore up most of my male pictures. There are some that have survived. And there is the one that I had done at Christmas, had made for John--oh, vanity, vanity!--He loaded a table with gifts for me, and I went out and spent his money on a picture of me! [Laughs] Ah, God, how embarrassing to remember that! And while I was doing that, the guy that lived across the hill from me, the guy I told you about, was going to the same beauty school that I was, and was very good, and I conned Jake, who knew something about this sort of thing, to come and do my make-up for this picture. And I went to some costume shop on Hollywood Boulevard and rented some velvety garment and I did go to--I think it was to the Broadway department store--and get some flimsy negligee--telling them this whole story--making it up, don't you know?--how this is for your mother or aunt or whatever it was. I felt just compelled to make up this major story so there would be no questions. So I had this picture made, and sent it off to Finocchio's. And I got a call

saying come up. I had no act. I had no talent. I had nothing. "Sugar Blues" was this song at the time, this record that was current that I liked to dance to--

SS: Oh, I like that song. It was actually on the radio station I was listening to on the way down here.

ABC: I still like it, too. I ran around dancing to that all the time. I looked in the Yellow Pages, found somebody to arrange the music, and had that done and went off with my friend Dick--John didn't go--as my chaperone. That's another thing John did. Whenever he could not accompany me somewhere, he always sent a chaperone. The world had united to make me believe, or rather to foster this belief that I probably wanted to believe, that I just couldn't cope on my own. The idea of buying train tickets or anything like that was just sort of beyond me, because I was just sort of this thing that I wanted to be. So I had a chaperone. Jake went with me when John had family coming in--I'm digressing here, this is before San Francisco, but John had family coming in and so he sent me back to visit my family in Tennessee, and Jake came with me. So I've come back with this screaming queen, there's two of us, right? This little Southern town. And my sister says, "Are you wearing mascara?" And I said, "Oh, yes, dear. Everyone in Hollywood does." And they bought this. And Jake had his billfold, one of those skinny little long things, and we were going out for dinner and he goes [pointing hands out, palms open, elbows drawn in at waist] "Oh, darling! I've forgotten my purse." Well, honey [laughs, shakes her head]. And my Dad--let's see, this was with John, not with Bill, I was getting letters from him, every day. And you know, there was this old chiffarobe, and I locked them in there, but Daddy broke the lock, and got my letters and read them. I didn't know this until later, but he read them to my mother. And she said, "Well, dear, aren't you just glad that there's somebody who cares so much for our little Buddy?" They just let it go at that. They were delusional, too. They just didn't want to see it. I just had this friend who was protective and wanted to care for me, and that was it. And even when I brought this screaming queen back with me, it just was not questioned. No one said, "Are you gay?" And when it all came out, it came as a great shock to them. So, that's that. It's just amazing to me.

SS: Well, off you went to San Francisco. You had your picture taken, you went up for an audition, you had your arrangement of "Sugar Blues"--

ABC: Which I'd never heard before, and I had my little outfit. That's where I met Stormy, who became my best friend, who followed me into the transsexual thing. She was the resident stripper at Finocchio's. She had the most phenomenal body, just this little tiny waspish waist. And she came in, and the way they auditioned you there was just to put you into a show to see how you did, audience and everything. It was a great scene, worthy of a play, but there was Jackie Phillips, the resident comedienne, crawling around on the floor looking for a false eyelash that I'd dropped in all my nervousness, Jay put my wig up, and I'm trying to do the powder thing, and in walks this exotic creature, Stormy, that I had been warned about by Jackie, that this was a high-riding

bitch, get out of her way, hates new people, especially dancers, will eat you alive. And this person is posed in this duster in the doorway, and she says "Who did your nose?" So, when I said I hadn't had my nose done, she comes over turns it up looks inside for proof that it has been. Then she walks around a bit, and says, "When did you start hormones?" Well, I had never--I didn't have any idea. I--and this is what I think is so wonderful, that I was so totally naive. Had no idea--I had no clue as to what she was talking about. All I knew was to tape up with duct tape. I'd always had too much tissue up here [pointing to breasts] and at boys' camp they'd call me "the milk wagon," because I had a little, you know--[grabs breast, shakes it a little]. So Stormy comes over and grabs me and says "You've got a core." I still don't know what any of this is about, right? So I do my audition, and Lester, who was the emcee, asked what name I would use. And, since Dick and I had always been Lisa and Leslie, I would just be Lisa. Lester says "Too feminine. You'll be Lee Shaw." And that's--I was Lee Shaw. So Lester goes on and says "Welcome the long-stemmed American Beauty Rose Lee Shaw." And they sent me out into these stark white lights to fail. And the bitch of all bitches Stormy came down to see what my act was--and there was none--and said "Give the kid a break. Put her in my lights." And they softened me up. I went through my little thing, took off everything that I had planned--took off my gloves, and got down to this little tacky-assed thing I had bought at the Broadway's--well, actually it was sort of pretty but it wasn't a costume, you know? And I was through. And the musical arrangement, which I'd never heard, kept going clang, clang, and I didn't know what to do. Well, there was this soldier, sitting by a post. And in desperation, I went over, arched my back, and took hold of the post, arched back--and he turned bright red. The audience laughed. It was like--well, I guess I am a performer. What to do just came. I even got an encore--me, this little new Nanette who knows nothing--nothing--hasn't been on stage before--but was very pretty. And Mr. Finocchio came back stage and said, "Well, what are we going to do?" And Stormy said "Hire her." And he said, "Well, what can she do?" And Stormy said, "Don't worry, I'll teach her. She's beautiful, and if you don't hire her, somebody else will, and you'll be very, very sorry." And he hired me at \$90 a week to be in the chorus--except there was no chorus. It was nothing--but it was enough to enable me to move to San Francisco.

SS: That's a great story. So when would this have been, '57, '58?

ABC: '58, '59, more like that.

SS: Oh, so you weren't at Finocchio's all that long?

ABC: No. And what happened--two things happened that caused me to not be at Finocchio's all that long. One, I naturally promptly fell in love again. The era of the neon-lit suit, you know, and Kathy had explained to me very carefully that queens, very feminine queens, were considered good luck charms to members of the syndicate. A lot of that--had a lot of that at Finocchio's. Finocchio's had at this time its own clientele which was the Gray Line Tours. It was very elitist, not really a gay club at all. And I had

a long run with a guy that I met at the club, who was there with friends and came back to see me. And then I met the love of my life--and I have to tell you this too, and I don't mean to go on, but I just love to tell these stories.

SS: No, really, you're not boring me.

ABC: I started doing Monroe things in the show, and one night Marilyn came to see me. And it wasn't that I was impersonating Marilyn so much as--and, well, you would know this, too--so much as I was looking for myself. I was trying to create Aleshia. And by this time I had started hormones. Because when I was with Lane, and I had left the club, we were going to go to Paris, and his Dad was in the syndicate--well, this is a long story, a whole long story. And at any rate, I quit the club to run away with him, and when that didn't work out, I came back. And when I wanted to come back, I didn't have any money, and Mr. Finocchio said "I'll give you your job back but I won't finance your getting here." So I called Stormy--we had not become great friends yet, but she was the only person I could think of who might help me get back on my feet. Well, she and Mike--he was very interesting, Mike Hobin, who became an entrepreneur. He has North Beach Leather? Kathy and Mike started North Beach Leather, which is now a multi-million dollar business. Mike was a hood. Just a hood who was coming to score some dope at the club. He was going to hide out, and Kathy said you can hide out at my place. And this was just one little story, but this is sort of the legend of what gay marriages were back then. It was a butch-femme thing. Well, she said let me check with Mike, and they not only said I could stay with them until I could get back on my feet, but sent me the money to come out. And we got along so well, that we continued to live to together. Well, one night, when we were putting on our make-up, she took out this little purple pill, and I said what is that, and she said "It makes your boobies grow." And I had just gotten there. And I said "Give me one." And she did. And she called Dr. Benjamin the next day. And I went to see him, and he gave me an examination, and I became one of his girls. And the rest is history.

SS: Let's back up just a minute so I can get the story straight. Well, not straight, but you know what I mean.

ABC: Yes.

SS: You got your audition, you were hired at Finocchio's, and then you moved to San Francisco, you were making \$90 a week.

ABC: Uh-huh. I was living across the street above Mike's Pool Hall.

SS: Now, you're still with the priest at this point?

ABC: Yes.

SS: The priest came up to San Francisco with you?

ABC: Yes.

SS: This is John, right?

ABC: So you want to go through all this? You just lead and I can pull with you.

SS: Yeah, let's go through it all blow by blow.

ABC: Yeah, John comes up. I had my Grandmother's silver in storage. I just had very little with me, because we wanted to see if it lasted. You know, he said, "You might just make it through the summer"--not knowing what a true star I was to become--but during this time is when I met Lane Erskine, of THE Erskine family of San Francisco. And Lane and I had our thing. I was living. This, to me, is what I had always wanted. So now I'm hearing that there can be surgery, and this is what I wanted. This was always the plan with Lane.

SS: So you've just gotten to San Francisco and you're having this affair with a member of San Francisco high society--

ABC: --oh, yeah!

SS: --and you hear, while you're doing this \$90 a week gig--

ABC: --from Kathy. Kathy, although she didn't really talk about it, had already started treatment. But we weren't friends enough, and I was just there for the summer, so Lane and I were talking about it, that this is what our future would be, but still there were no particulars of it, how to go about it or who you see, or anything. And I'm just now starting to test my wings. You know about the old three items of male clothing thing? Well, that's where I still am. I'm dressing--I've got long hair by this time, that I wore up under one of those sailor's skull caps, to and from work. That was pretty much how it was. This is pre-hippies. So I dressed in black, sometimes doing a little light lip and doe eyes when I can get by with it. But I would leave the club and hail a cab and would go to the Streets of Paris--which was this sleazy, sleazy but straight bar with merchant marines down in the Tenderloin. And obviously, had I been caught, and not only by the police, who did hang out at Fin's all the time, we had to be really careful. We had to leave without make-up. So we'd powder down, because the cops knew who we were, and they were always there, and they'd give us little Christmas presents. But prior to me, prior to the '50s, the Finocchios had owned the queens. I mean, if you tried to leave--there were still stories told about this--you ended up in jail. When I said I'm going to go have surgery, I'm breaking my contract--this is with AGVA, and it's supposed to be a mutual agreement, and I'm called in to the office with a representative of AGVA,--"You'll never work again. We'll track you down. You can't change your Social Security

number." I mean, it was a great scene--like something that only a queen getting ready for her surgery would pull. I said, "Do what you will." And I go to the door--they have this door leaving the office. And I stood there waiting until this representative from AGVA rose and opened the door for this real lady. Don't you just love that? I just stood there being as grand as I could possibly be. So, yeah. Well, I'm lost now. I don't know what I was talking about.

SS: You were talking about being in an affair with Lane, but where should be pick the thread up? You were telling me about the Streets of Paris.

ABC: That's it.

SS: And you were learning to test your wings. When would this be now, about 1959? You were just starting to get out into the world.

ABC: Yeah. Before Lane, too, there was a guy I dated, Jim Tarrantino, of the Tarrantino family. He started, really, getting me out. No more Streets of Paris, but dressing in drag and going to the Top of the Mark and doing this sort of thing. I don't know if you've gone through this with your transition, but in the--well, I did this every night: sang, hoofed, all that--but going to the Top of the Mark with the Tarrantino heir so impressed me. He went to the restroom, and the waiter approached me--and you know, you have to answer a question? That--oh! that's the most frightening--oh! yes, as we all have gone through that, those beginnings of--well, "I'm immediately going to be made, and tossed out of here on my ear, probably just over the precipice here." It was, yeah, that early testing, testing your wings, that you begin to leave those three items of clothing at home. And I think it's really important, I think, for people who do not know about us--they think it's all about the clothing. And it's not--I did T-shirts and tube socks. There was a man who wanted to take me out on tour as an impersonator, and so he wanted to discuss business and was taking me to the Fairmont for dinner. So I went out and bought a suit, a man's suit, and I tried to do the hair back, pull it back, but the waiter kept calling me "miss"--which I loved--but I was trying so damned hard, you know? But finally I just said, "Hell, would you take me home?" And I went home, and put on a dress, and we went back to the same place and had our business dinner. That's when you know that you're there.

[break in taping]

SS: So, still trying to get your chronology down here.

ABC: It's tough.

SS: I'm still fascinated with this period here, when you're just starting to transition. In some ways it's just a wonderful, exhilarating, magical phase of life.

ABC: Oh, I can go on about this more, all of this is very clear. I have just been skipping around, but I can go on in great detail.

SS: Please do.

ABC: But what sort of thing . . . ?

SS: Just, how did you live your life, what were your experiences? You said you were living above Mike's Pool Hall, you had been involved with this priest, and suddenly you're all caught up in this very fast social set, you're very successful with what you're doing at Finocchio's, you're meeting wealthy and socially prominent people, moving in very fast circles. Just tell me what you were doing, who you knew, places you went to, what the circles were that you moved in—I'm all ears.

ABC: OK. After John, when I came back, I was living at 860 Geary, which gives you sort of an indication of the part of town. Kathy—Stormy—and Mike were there. So we were right there in the Tenderloin.

SS: Were there lots of other folks who were what we'd now call transgendered people living in the Tenderloin then? Were there many street queens, and hustlers, were there other girls who did impersonation? What was the Tenderloin like for you in 1959?

ABC: Yeah, OK. Because it was—because gay life, which then encompassed it all, was so decidedly femme-butch, there definitely were a lot of queens. The names—there was a place called The Downstairs that I frequented.

SS: That was in the Tenderloin?

ABC: It was, but I don't remember quite where. Then there was a place called the Silver Dollar, a dump further down, further, ah--

SS: --further down towards Market Street, or towards the Embarcadero?

ABC: Um, yeah. This was an entirely different--The Downstairs was sort of an elitist gay pub. When you went down, well, there was a lot more transgender down towards Market. We just did not have people who were out on the street doing drag, or being that flamboyant.

SS: Tell me--you said there was a lot more transgender stuff down on Market. Tell me about that.

ABC: Well, there was Louise, who you mentioned earlier.

SS: Louise Ergestrasse? Or Louise Lawrence?

ABC: I'm not sure of her last name, but she'd had surgery. She managed 860 Geary for a while. I'm--well, I think she had had surgery. Yes, I'm sure of it, for she showed Stormy, one of these show and tell sessions, but I didn't look. There was associated with all this, whether it be drag, or people partially in drag, whatever it was, but that real femme approach, it was very tawdry. A lot of--I don't think this is just me--I don't know whether the life sort of turned people into--it has nothing to do with perversion--it's just--it has nothing to do with decadence--it's--well, maybe decadence to a certain extent--but it just attracted--low class, no breeding. And it's not even about prostitution--I don't quite know how to say what it was about, just an ignorance and a disregard for self that I found very unattractive, that well--these people are just scum. Scum. So I removed, tried to remove myself, from all that as much as possible. Of course, we were all vying for the same men--just gotten out of prison, whatever. It was really a scuzzy, low time. I mean, darling, these places were just scuzzy, low, dirty dives.

SS: Part of what I'm interested in here is where the edges of certain neighborhoods were in San Francisco, where the different kinds of bars were, what kinds of people hung out where, just what the--you know, I want to find out about the kinds of things, that, no matter how many old newspapers you read, you're just not going to--

ABC: Well, the Embarcadero, the after hours places on the Embarcadero, which was the Broken Drum--that's the one that really comes to mind. And then there was something on Turk--an upstairs, after-hours place. But it seems that there was--oh, I don't know. Perhaps because we were so illegal, everything was so underground that for the transgendered there was no place. There was no community. We were just femme boys. There was--see, until you were able to break through all that, and start dressing, and get a letter from your doctor saying that you were undergoing treatment, that you have this medical condition--so that if you are stopped, that at least they might apologize after beating us to a pulp. You must have a sense of what that time was like. And the bars that did exist were windowless dives where--because this is all pre-Stonewall, so you were hiding from society. That was the only way society allowed you to live. You were very aware that as long as you didn't address it, or flaunt it, or be seen--so we had our own subculture. And that was what the Tenderloin was. And it was all up and down--so it was Turk Street, and there was a bar on Pine, or Polk I guess. But that's about as high as it went up. There were clubs--Anne's 440, and Dee's Club, which was right there at North Beach.

SS: Anne's 440--is that what had been Mona's 440? 440 Broadway?

ABC: Yes, that's where it was.

SS: Yeah, that had been Mona's back in the 30s and 40s. That was the first lesbian bar in San Francisco.

ABC: Oh, I hadn't know that. Now Dee's, that was supposedly where Johnny Mathis was discovered. She had a contract, as I understand it, with him. She introduced [inaudible]. So it was an acceptable place. The Matador. I don't know if it's whether being from the South, or--but I didn't--or if it's that old "no one loves a fairy when they're forty," all of that--I absolutely worshipped and idolized all of the feminine drag queens I worked with. Men were all very important in our lives--they were like a purse, you must have one hanging on your arm--and that he be attractive, but most of all that he be attentive. Same thing, when I went to Vegas, it was exactly the same thing with the showgirls, they acted exactly the same way. So, it wasn't enough, I guess is what I'm saying. I didn't spend a lot of time in the gay bars. I took up with a model that I met at The Downstairs, a print model who did Macy's ads, Don, Don Dawson. And the men that I met--it was an entre into a different world, the world I wanted to be in, which was the straight--well, it had nothing to do with heterosexuality, but with acceptability.

SS: And it had to do with being real.

ABC: Yeah, exactly. And this other thing, it was just some sort of twilight half-life. And I did start taking--doctor...doctor--you see, I've changed his name in my book, and I can't--Dr. Lyles, in the Haight. Yes, I had prescription drugs, Seconal, Dexedrine, and I really misused them. And the alcohol. But I look back at that life now--I remember going to The Downstairs one night, and I'd had like five Seconal, and was off work. But I did it at work, too. I was going through five Seconal, five Dexies, and a pint of Brandy--this was nightly--until I met the man of my life, Hank Doyle, who at one point said "You've got to stop this or I'm gone." And I stopped like that! [snaps] And I also had surgery then. I think at least partially because of Hank, that this was what life was about--a straight man who was willing to overlook that I had, as he said to the nurse after I had my surgery, she said something about "that surgery," "that sort of surgery,"--well, he just called her on the carpet and said "I never want to hear you say 'that' surgery, that sort of thing again. For those of us who love Aleshia, this is no more significant than if she'd had to have an appendectomy." And I--you know, that's it. Lane, that I started talking about before--you know, whether your mother rode a pink elephant before you were born, or what ever it was that made you the way you are, I think for you, for me, for all of us, that's what we've all been looking for. And when that sort of acceptance comes along, I don't know whether one needs to have surgery or not. But when it completes the process, and allows people to treat you the way you've been wanting to be treated from day one, of course you're going to go through it. It's just part of that transitioning. It was for me. So you want to talk about the Tenderloin--well, for me, it was cheap and tawdry and ugly and something that I would have probably ended up taking an overdose of pills had I stayed there because I could not live like that. I simply couldn't. So I can't give you a lot of information about it.

SS: It was just a place you passed through at a certain stage of your life.

ABC: Exactly.

SS: I wasn't expecting you to have any particular opinion about it, but just--

ABC: After surgery I can tell you about the places I did hang out, places I went. Prior to, though, my life was totally working at Finocchio's, because it was the only place I could find total acceptance of me. Everything else is an act. I have to dress as a boy, I can't wear make-up, the hair has to be up under a hat. If the wrist is too limp it's dangerous out there. You're suspect.

SS: So because of that attitude there's a big ghetto.

ABC: Yes, honey, it was definitely a ghetto.

SS: I'm kind of interested in where that ghetto was geographically, what it was like passing through there, maybe how you saw it change in the time you were there. Because, in a lot of ways, that ghetto is gone. In some ways it's not. There's still transfolks in the Tenderloin, but it's a different place than it was in 1959. So I'm just wanting to know about the qualities of daily life there then. The particulars. Paint me a picture of the Tenderloin as experienced by a transgender person in 1959.

ABC: OK. The Tenderloin was peopled by--gays, certainly, but predominantly prostitutes, pimps, addicts, ex-cons. It was sort of the underbelly of society, the Tenderloin, it definitely was. This is way before the open sex bars and all of that. When we say low-rent district--well, that's exactly what it was. But, it was also an area where you were safe to a degree because you were all outcasts. So you could look a little strange, without the fear. I felt safer, actually.

SS: You could walk down the street knowing that you had to watch your back, and be ready for the fact that the next person coming down the street might try to put a knife in you or rip you off, but as long as you are aware of that and keep your eyes open, that you have as much a right to be there as anybody else, that you are no more of a freak and no less of a freak, no more of a criminal or no less.

ABC: Yes. Exactly. Until you said that just now, it had not dawned on me that every one does not know this. Yes, I am to this day a street person. When I go to a restaurant, I am uncomfortable with people seated behind me. I always try to have my back to a wall. And it comes from those days--

SS: You don't ever lose that, once your eyes have been opened to it.

ABC: --and I do not miss them.

SS: Here's that privilege thing we were talking about earlier. That some people have the privilege of not ever having to know "I have to keep my eyes open because somebody

might try to kill me for just being who and what I am." To not have to do that is privilege, but, however hard it is, however much it sucks that you have to do that, I'd rather have my eyes open that way.

ABC: Me too.

SS: Privilege blinds you. I wish I didn't have to worry about whether some stranger is going to read me wrong and go off in a rage and want to rip my body apart, but I'd rather have my eyes open to the world holding that possibility than to walk around half asleep.

ABC: Something I think was really important, that I developed being this street person, going to the Streets of Paris and hanging out with merchant marines, I developed something that after surgery—for I was truly then a fledgling, a neophyte, I had no idea how to survive—but I did have something that I developed on the street, and that is, when threatened, something takes over my body, and words come out of my mouth, and I have no idea who this person is. I become a survivalist. I'm a con. I can talk my way out of anything. And this is something that developed while I was flitting around pretending to be, oh—

SS: Kim Novak.

ABC: Exactly! [Laughs] That's so true—I mean, look at my pictures on the wall over there, the eyes, the hair, the whole thing. And Marilyn. I patterned much of my look after Marilyn. My number was "My Heart Belongs to Daddy," and my red sweater with the merry widow.

SS: I heard that song on the radio on the way down here too, by the way.

ABC: Oh did you?

SS: Yeah, there's this great AM radio station that plays nothing but these old torch songs and show tunes. I love that stuff. Peggy Lee's "Fever," Stan Getz "Girl from Ipanema." They were both on, too.

ABC: Well, I thought I was Peggy Lee, too. You know, you want to talk clubs, that was what North Beach was, was clubs. It was the entertainment hub of San Francisco, and therefore to me of the world. But rather than the Tenderloin, that's where I was. And as soon as I realized that--well, we were sort of idolized by the gay culture at that time, maybe because of our visibility. But I know that if for example we went shopping for shoes, we would go in and say "I work at Finocchio's and I'd like to try on these heels," they would take you into the back room to try on these shoes. And my merry widow, which I found right around Union Square--oh!, it was outrageously priced. But other people couldn't go try on shoes. But we--

SS: Well, you were queens, in every since of the word.

ABC: Yes, baby, that's it! We were sovereigns!

SS: Here's a question. At the Gay and Lesbian Historical Society, one of our people is doing a series of oral history interviews with folks who were involved in some of the political activism of the mid-60s, and he's going back and finding people from the 50s even, and he's got this idea about how some of the neighborhoods changed in San Francisco in the early 60s. He's trying to figure out the relationship between the North Beach scene, the waterfront scene, the Tenderloin scene. Because it looks like--this is the thesis he has going. Well, there was the gayola scandal in 1960 and '61, all these bars owners who said we're not going to pay off the cops any more, and there were police officers arrested, and this is when Jose Sarria is running for city supervisor, and all that, the Tavern Guild gets formed. There was a whole bunch of stuff that happened in '61, '62. And what happened after that was that gay activity along the waterfront gets shut down. The Black Cat gets shut down, and even though North Beach had been a center of gay life--well, you know, not entirely, but it was where so much of old gay life had been. But because of the crackdowns of the early 1960s, the gay life gets driven out of North Beach, and it becomes much more straight tourist oriented stuff--

ABC: Yes, yes.

SS: --and things just get shut down along the waterfront, and things get more concentrated in the Tenderloin. And also things move into the Haight.

ABC: Now, you see, I'm gone by 1962. I got my surgery in 1962.

SS: OK--so whatever you can tell me about--well, what it looks like is that activity along the waterfront, and also South of Market where all the boarding houses used to be, like on 3rd and 4th--

ABC: I was never down in there.

SS: It was just a heavily working class neighborhood, lot of merchant seamen down there in boarding houses.

ABC: Oh, OK.

SS: --and that in the early to mid 1960s, lots of stuff gets torn down through urban renewal. There was a gay presence out in there.

ABC: I would think Leavenworth, right around in there, that, Geary 860, if you know where that is, that was sort of the heart of the Tenderloin. So South of Market, I don't know. I think when I was there, that wasn't--well, I just down know down there.

SS: So what you're saying is that the social world you had was pretty much centered at 860 Geary Street, and reached into North Beach, and reached down towards Market Street. Could you describe the boundaries of what you thought of as your part of town?

ABC: My part of town was North Beach. Period. That was it. I saw what we're referring to as the Tenderloin as the--well, as a little seamy. Well, it was seamy. And it was somewhere you could go. But it wasn't as secure and safe as North Beach. And maybe I say that simply because I worked there, was an entertainer there. So I could go up and down Broadway with a bit of community. It was more daring to go into the Silver Dollar, and down on Market.

[End of tape]

SS: So going down to Market Street felt riskier.

ABC: Yes, definitely it was. And it sort had the feeling of going across the tracks to the other side of town. After I left--well, we had moved to Steiner, Stormy and Mike and I, and that's where I met Hank, and Hank and I lived on Pine. So my whole life was to walk through Chinatown to Finocchio's, do the show, then he would drive, pick me up after work, after the show. I slept until noon, one, he'd bring me something back on his lunch hour, we'd have lunch. So my life really was back stage at Fin's. And then going to electrolysis on Sanchez, and going to the doctor--Dr. Styles was his name, Styles--on Haight.

SS: Now, this was the doctor you got drugs from?

ABC: Um, well, yes, I got drugs from him but he also kept the hormone thing going, did all of that.

SS: So did you have to get hooked up with him through Harry Benjamin?

ABC: Yes, this was about the same time, because Benjamin was always out of town.

SS: Right, only here for his summer practice.

ABC: And then when I did my castration, it was with Styles, too.

SS: So, I do want to get to all of this stuff, but I want to hear more about how you lived and where you went. You said you didn't go to clubs much, because you were working all the time. But every now and then, after work, you'd go--

ABC: Well, it was always just until my confidence grew, until I had guys that I could go out with into straight society, that I would just go to certain gay bars, and for me, it was The Downstairs Club.

SS: So when, how long was it after you started working at Finocchio's was it before you had your first encounter with the purple pill? Days, months?

ABC: It was, well, because I was there several months before I took off with this guy, so I would say I was there maybe three months, and then I had not been at Kathy's two days before I discovered--see, she had not told me at all what she was doing.

SS: So you worked there, you'd met Stormy, she was the big diva, you know that she's doing something but you don't think it's something you can approach her about, or is it--

ABC: I would say that, it's hard knowing me now, but I was a very shy person then. Very retiring. I just smiled a lot. That's what I did in life. I didn't ask questions, and just stayed out of the way, and at all costs just wanted to be loved. Be liked. Don't make any enemies.

SS: So you had been there for about three months, just doing your shows, and then you left, because you were having an affair with some one, and this was--

ABC: Lane Erskine.

SS: So you take off. Where do you go?

ABC: He went to France. I was waiting for my passport to come in. So--OK, here we go. You keep asking these questions, and it gets very involved. It's quite a long life, you know. Well, Lane had left. Lane could not handle the relationship. I had met him at the club. And he came with friends, this married couple. And we started going to breakfast, all four of us, every morning. And this just became a habit. Of, course, we were not allowed to fraternize, so I'd leave and go meet them. And finally, I asked Lane, because he'd always take me home first, and it was driving me crazy, I asked him to take them home first and wanted to know what was going on. And he said he thought he was falling in love with me. And I thought I might be falling in love with him. Now remember I'm still in a relationship with the priest. Well, I told him, told Lane, about this with great tears in my eyes, about what a confused human being I am, and Lane gets on the bandwagon and says "whatever I have we will share together," and that's when I stayed overnight with him. The priest, John, was packing when I got home the next morning. Well, it was all part of my growth process. But, um. Yeah. Anyway, Lane could not handle my being male, and what that said about our relationship. So he took off periodically, but he always came back, bringing pearls. I actually have quite a nice

little pearl collection because of that now. I'm not sure what it symbolized to him. But at any rate, he took off and went to Seattle at one point--this was his big exit. He was gone for a month I guess. Then he called the club one night and said "I'm in Seattle, but I might as well be in Mexico. I'm in love with you madly, and I'd like to come back, if the bridge isn't already burned," and he came back bearing pearls. And we moved in together. And he had already met--this is what's important--he had met on this little sojourn, some members of the Royal Ballet Company. When he came back, the Royal Ballet Company came to town, and he rented this suite at the Mark Hopkins and we had this party. So that broke the relationship up, because all the people from Fin's were there, and the ballet troupe was there, Gilda, who was a big, world-famous impersonator in Paris, and had a talk show in Canada, she was French-Canadian, had come with her entourage--so it was that sort of big thing, right? And there was a fight that broke out, and blood got on the carpet, and all of that. And Lane wrote a check to cover the damages. Well, the check had to go through his father, who was retired military--a general or something--and then Dad finds out about me, right? And he had this uncle, a lawyer, one of the Erskines, whose son was later arrested on marijuana charges--but anyway, according to Lane, his uncle told him "If you care anything about this person, then it's your life, but get him"--he said him--"get him out of the country." That gay thing, you know. And that was the plan. Lane said the only way we could have a life together was to get out of the country, and we were going to--oh, I forget, but it translated to "city of the pines" in France. So I, once again, with this fantasy I had, was going to go off and live in a chateau with this man, and be happy every after. Still hadn't taken care of this little sociable thing, but it didn't seem to matter, I was with my man. And that was always the issue for me. Talk about a born victim. If there was this man who told me I was adorable, and what I should do--you know like, "Bitch, sit in the corner and when I want you I'll motion for you,"--you know? Hah! Well, you say you don't have this history so maybe you don't know what makes people work this way, but that was sort of who I was. So he went off, and Lane was absolutely terrified, and told me all these stories about his Dad, and about narcotics, and I, in my naiveté, thought no one, with that kind of position in society, and in the military, could possibly be involved in running drugs. It just couldn't possibly be. So Lane left me, and I really think now there was something to these stories, because he wouldn't even stay in the same place with me. He stayed with my friend Joyce, and I stayed with my friend Dick, because he was just sure we were going to be tracked down and murdered. So he took off, and I never left the apartment, I waited to hear from him. I went down to the airfield, and nothing ever happened. And I was broke, and there I was. And that's when I came back, and that's when life really started for me, when I got on hormones.

SS: Tell me more about this narcotics story.

ABC: That's about as much as I really know about it, is that when Lane's Dad found out about me because of the blood on the carpet at the Mark Hopkins Hotel--I never met the man--Lane moved out immediately, and he would only contact me--talk about feeling dramatic--he would only contact me through messages through Jackie Phillips

who worked at the club as a comedienne. So I moved, changed phone numbers, all of that. It got to where I would only open my door when it was chained. And Jackie and I standing backstage looking through the peep hole trying to see if we could see anybody carrying a piece. I mean, I was worried that I was going to get killed, that I had a contract out on me. And I don't know if any of that was true. I do know that after Lane moved out, Jackie showed up one day at my apartment, and said "Put on your glasses, girl, and get outside, because Lane is out there in a car and he wants to talk to you." And I go out, and here this man is in this stretch limo with a glass partition, and as we drive around through Golden Gate Park, he's telling me this whole story that his father--I'm not sure but that he was a general, retired--was responsible for his grandmother's, for Lane's grandmother's death, for the general's mother's death, and there was all this intrigue, and all this shit going on. And that--here's where it gets really interesting. Lane had been in the military, too. Air Force. And was up and something had happened to his leg, something exploded. I don't know, I guess what I'm saying is that his father, they told Lane that they were going to amputate, and they didn't, but when he came to, the leg was for all intents and purposes gone. And there had been a mental breakdown, and his father had complete control of him, and he could have him sent away like that [snaps]. That was Lane's basic fear. Of course, he might have been crazy and there might not have been a word of truth to any of this. Except that his money definitely came from somewhere. But as for meeting the father, or the attorney uncle--I didn't. I lived in the shadows.

SS: But basically the story was that this retired general was running narcotics into San Francisco?

ABC: Yes.

SS: And he was using military connections to do this?

ABC: Well, he never said that specifically, but one would of course assume. Lane said that he was like, very high in drug trafficking on the West Coast. But he didn't say using military. But one would assume.

SS: Now, you also talked about the syndicate being at Finocchio's. My impression was that the mob was never as big in San Francisco as it was in New York and some other places. You know, where they ran the gay clubs and got their cut. What was the connection with Finocchio's?

ABC: Well, when I talk about neon-lit suits, and things like this--this is basically from Kathy, and we're talking mostly about Italian. I don't have any real connection with the syndicate until after surgery, where I did sort of become the darling of, um. . . well, I get nervous talking about this. But at Finocchio's I don't have any real evidence--gossip, yes, but--these were people I didn't have any real dealings with, because we were

separated by the lights. Oh—one night Lana Turner showed up. Do you know about Mickie Mercer?

SS: No.

ABC: Mickie Mercer, I guess today would have been an F-to-M. She was just--yeah, with a mustache, and all. And they sat ringside one night.

SS: Lana Turner and Mickie Mercer?

ABC: Uh-huh. And this is during that whole Stompanato thing, prior to that. And the gossip was that Lana Turner had given Mickie Mercer a cigarette case, with an M encrusted in diamonds, and that's why this Stompanato thing came up—started to ask who the—whoever it was that killed him, and all that—that it was about Mickie Mercer, that it was basically a jealousy thing about Turner.

SS: This is the "Black Dahlia" murder?

ABC: Yes, yes, exactly. So—what really, well, all that I know personally is that they were there, and that when we went backstage everybody was all agog, and everybody was all, "Did you see that guy!" It wasn't "Did you see Lana Turner?" it was "Did you see this guy?" This gorgeous guy, ringside, and when we found out that this was indeed a woman, it was like [makes gesture of her head exploding] Waaaah!!! Yeah! Loved that!

SS: Did you know any male impersonators in North Beach?

ABC: No. Not at all. I don't know that there ever had been.

SS: Well, I know that they had had some at Mona's, but I didn't know how long that really lasted. And Gladys Bently would come through from time to time. She, in spite of the name Gladys Bently, was somewhat of a male impersonator. She was "the bull-dagger who sang the blues." She wore a tux, she wore her woman on her arm, that sort of thing.

ABC: I wish that I had—I did not know any of the women in the lesbian community. The women I knew, the people who came around, were strippers, because burlesque--

SS: Did you know Carol Doda?

ABC: Oh, yes. I knew Carol, well, before all that, when she was just, well--

SS: --a 32A.

ABC: Yes, just a little modelish type. It's just that we used to hang out in the same clubs. There was a strip club downtown--the Palace I think it was called--and so we were there for the matinee, and afterwards they would come to our club. And there was a sort of blending, where had I been into women, God--the women! Those who were really attracted to me at the time were really sort of mind boggling. It would have changed my life!

SS: Which women were interested in you, any one in particular?

ABC: No--well, there was one woman named Marge who came night after night after night, sent me drinks, had her picture taken with me, would write "I love you."

SS: Was she a stripper?

ABC: No, she wasn't. I still have some of those letters. There was a Venus. I still have some pictures of the strippers. It was like, well, you know, you'd admire their earrings, they'd admire yours.

SS: Just girl talk?

ABC: Yeah. Pretty much. But there was always, I suppose being male, and especially being considered gay, that if they could turn you around or something--but it was a great life. Even though I've talked about living in the shadows, it was a great, exciting life.

SS: So let's see. Who do you remember from Finocchio's, the other performers?

ABC: Felton Harris. Jackie Phillips that I've mentioned. Laverne Cummings.

SS: You say that name with a sneer?

ABC: Well, Miss Laverne was the presiding femme when I arrived. And after that it would be a toss-up. In Laverne's mind, she always was. And in my mind, I was. Laverne was rumored--Laverne and I had very little to say to each other, but I admired Laverne nonetheless--Laverne had her hairdresser come to the club every night to do her hair, when I was still wearing wigs. She had her own mop of hair. She acted like she was singing at the Waldorf. She was just so above and beyond it all. She yelled at Stormy one night, when they were having a fight--I love this line--"Oh, just go and do your dirty dance!" and Stormy shot back "You'll have to learn a dirty dance when that hair falls out and your voice is going, you big slob." Just lots of queenly back stage yelling and hollering and bickering. Bunch of bitches, but I thought it was all absolutely wonderful when I first got there, because I'd never seen anything like this. But it's a very sad lifestyle. That's part of what Stormy taught me--"You can't stop here, honey, you've got to keep going."

SS: Did you ever know anybody named Harvey Lee?

ABC: Hmm . . . no, I know the name somehow, but no.

SS: He was an impersonator. The way I know of him, we, at the historical society, have some of his papers and memorabilia. He lived in San Francisco for a long time and worked at Finocchio's, I'm not sure exactly when, but eventually went back to Arkansas, and died there. Most of his papers are at the University of Arkansas, but we've got some material, old Finocchio's programs and such, duplicates. There's lots of clipping files on other impersonators. Harvey Lee really seems to have known everybody in the business. That was really family.

ABC: Yes, I can certainly understand that.

SS: And there's some stuff from Finocchio's from the really early '60s, from about the time when you were there.

ABC: I have some stuff, too. There's Kara Montez, who was there, Raedie Young, the flashing eyes of Raedie Young. Laverne, of course. There was prior to me, did very well, went on, and I understand was a great beauty, but this was prior to me—Les Lee, oh, that's what I was thinking of when you said Harvey Lee, it was Les Lee, who went to Paris and had quite a success. And of course Raggie Dahl was there at the time, who professed to be the nephew of Arlene, but I don't know if that was true. But yeah, it was an interesting time.

SS: Was Li-Kar still around at that time?

ABC: Yes, he was, he was our costumer. And interestingly enough, years later, I met a guy, in a couple, I don't know quite how to tell this, we stayed in touch, I probably have his phone number around somewhere. But they were from New York, and as I got to know them they found out my history, and he said "Oh, who were you?" And I said who I was, and he said, "Oh, I know you. I was just a child at the time, but my Dad did publicity for Finocchio's." So his Dad was the one who had come up with all this Monroe stuff—they just made stuff up out of thin air. I was supposed to have been taking an electronics course at some point, if I remember right. But Marilyn came to see the show based that publicity, I'm sure that was why. And so here it was years later, that you run into somebody whose Dad did it. But yeah, it was Li-Kar who did our costumes, such as they were.

SS: So, is there any interesting story to tell about Li-Kar? I don't really know anything about him other than as a name on an old program.

ABC: OK. My take on him was that, I think, this is what one has to look forward to. Lee had worked there in drag I think, had outlived his--well, like I said about Stormy, she had this amazingly small waist, but this amazingly bulbous nose, it was just terrible--this is important, she had three or four surgeries to correct it, it was never good enough. And I mention that because it was sort of like--a woman is allowed to have some imperfections, but a drag queen is not. So, I sort of saw the same thing with Lee. Lee was not all that old, but had outlived that bloom, flush of youth, and was therefore living in some little place stitching together costumes for the drag queens at Finocchio's, who treated this poor soul just terrible. Were just--he has no talent, screamed, bitched, you can't expect me to wear that, can't expect me to have both my palms up at the same time because it makes my shoulders too wide, I'll only expose one shoulder, or it doesn't show enough leg, so we'd sit backstage whipping up these things to make them shorter. You know we had this famous gypsy finale, just ripping up these gowns that Lee has put down to our ankles until they are stylishly above the knee. We're backstage whipping up these skirts, and Lee is having a fit--"What are you doing to my wardrobe?!!!" What a bunch of queens. You know, I now see myself as a really competent director, and you couldn't force me to work with a bunch of queens. That's why I don't want to dwell too much on back stage at Finocchio's. It was great for someone in her late teens and early 20s, and my God it was a far cry from Tennessee, but I saw enough of it to say, "What a terrible--" doomed, that's just how you were in society back then, the drugs, sitting and praying in front of the mirror, crying about getting old--and they were every bit of thirty. You know. God.

SS: OK, let's go on to--

ABC: --the escape?

SS: No, I'm not going to let you escape just yet. In my mind, you're still three to six months in to Finocchio's. Just been jilted by Lane, have managed to get your job back, Stormy has taken the purple pill, and you've said what's that, she's said it makes your boobies grow, and you've said give me that. So tell me about that next day, going to see Harry Benjamin. The very next day?

ABC: The very next day.

SS: So tell me about Dr. Harry Benjamin. Where was his office?

ABC: It was somewhere around Union Square, I think right on that block actually, the upper side of Union Square, whatever that street would be. The only thing I remember about it really is that from his office there was this unobstructed view--I mean, he was what, on the sixth floor of this building?--unobstructed view of the bay, which really shows you something about the time, you know?

SS: Yeah, before the 70s, there was really nothing to speak of downtown, still basically the same city Dashiell Hammett lived in the 30s. The city whose roofs Jimmy Stewart runs across in Vertigo.

ABC: Yes, exactly. It was wonderful. My take on Dr. Benjamin was--a kindly old gentleman. But definitely that, a gentleman. He got very excited when he did my examination, because he thought he'd really found something. And that disturbs me a little now, looking back on it, because what he got excited about was the pattern of my pubic hair--and of course I had shaved it. [Both laughing, sharing a joke without saying a word about how clueless even supposedly educated and informed nontransgendered people can be.] So--yeah. [Laughs]

SS: What about your "milk wagon" breasts?

ABC: He started poking and prodding and said I definitely had a core, whatever that meant. I still don't really know what having a core means. But yeah, he added me to his little list. You know how there are RGs--real girls? Well he always said there were RGs, and HGs--his girls. But I can't say enough nice things about him. He really went to bat for me. He talked to my parents. He set up everything that there was to be set up, the meeting with the psychiatrist that we joked about, all the legal rigmarole that we had to go through, it was all relatively painless because of him. Dr. Benjamin just sort of took care of you. So when I talk about leading up to surgery, to the actual event, it was really nothing. I had just the one meeting with a psychiatrist. "So, you think you're a girl?" "Yeah." [Shrugs.]

SS: Looks like a girl, acts like a girl, must be a girl.

ABC: Yeah, exactly. And plans on getting married like a girl right afterwards. The love of my life is there--Hank made all the difference. And I hate to keep coming back to men all the time, but that's what my life was then. If there was a very masculine appearing man in the picture, then life was very easy for me--other than actually being with the man of course, I had to pay my dues there--but society was very easy on me, treated me so much better. After surgery, when I had to go back home--I'm getting ahead of myself, but when I have to go back to this small Southern town, they were terrible to me--until Hank shows up. And then here's this strapping, 6'3", brown-haired man, and it was sort of this mind set of, "well, if he's attracted to her, then she must really be feminine, it must really be 'she'." They accepted me, more than they had previously. Very strange, but very telling of how our social structure works. If you want to be a woman, you'd better have a man in tow.

SS: Yeah, for me having lived a lesbian life post-transition, that's one of the things that's been especially hard in terms of how my gender is perceived. "Oh, she's still with women, so she must still really be a guy."

ABC: Right.

SS: Or that the person who's with me isn't really a lesbian. It's just a whole different ballgame.

ABC: And because I haven't experienced that, I don't really understand that either. I mean, I can sit here and talk to you and yes, you are definitely a sister, I mean--yes. Definitely. So I have no questions about what you want to do with your life or how it is, but I don't understand it. So I don't see we can expect others to.

SS: Yeah, it's tricky. I think some transsexual experiences are never fully translatable to the experiences of others.

ABC: Yes, that's very true.

SS: So--Harry Benjamin. He took one look at you, poked and prodded around a little, and said here's a scrip for your hormones and let me make an appointment for you with the psychiatrist?

ABC: Yeah. And made my appointment with Styles. Stormy--Kathy--was already seeing Styles. We got to the point where we were giving each other our own injections.

SS: Do you remember Styles's first name, just to make it easier if I want to look him up in a directory from that time, maybe find out a little more about him?

ABC: No, I really don't.

SS: But Styles, on Haight Street?

ABC: Yeah. It was an upstairs office. But anyway. A long time ago.

SS: This would be 1962? No, earlier--

ABC: Yeah, 1960, maybe. He was really interesting, in that he was an older, elderly doctor, and that he was so accepting, which was so unusual, because they weren't all that way. For example, when I first met Hank, which is something that I want to write a play about some day, because it really is such a romantic story, it was his birthday. But well, it's a long story.

SS: He was somebody that you met at Finocchio's?

ABC: Yes, I met him at the club. I was singing "My Heart Belongs to Daddy," and--oh, why don't I just tell you the story, because it really is such a good story. Not that you can use it, probably. I was doing my song, "My Hear Belongs to Daddy," it was my

signature number, and he was there with a couple ringside, and I'd come down, do a couple of numbers, go back up, and as I would hit the top level of the stage I would do a little pivot, throw my hair into my face, you know, bring a few wisps across my face then blow them out, one by one. It was a very Marilyn thing to do. And there this man was sitting ringside, and I hadn't even see him, in fact I was already doing my pivot, had thrown my hair, and there I saw these dark brown eyes--ah!--I forgot the words to my song, my stomach literally felt like it turned over. I made a complete ass of myself. There was nothing else in the world right at that moment. I believe in love at first sight--it happened to me. I have never felt so undone. I ran off stage, and ran upstairs, and into Stormy's dressing room--and this is what's so great for me--I ran in, and this was the dialog--"There's a man in the audience!" And she was so cool. She was getting into her barbecue at Twelve Oaks, Gone with the Wind strip costume complete with florescent hoop skirt, so she's got this over the shoulder barbecue thing on, and she says, "God, I hope so." She didn't understand me. She said "Honey, when we start working for an all female audience, I'm getting out of the business." I tell her what has happened, and ask her what will I do. She says, well, first see if he sticks around after work. See, I'm trying to draw this picture of this innocent that I truly, truly, was. All these people that had been in the business forever--Kara, Reggie--they would sit and lecture me on how to survive in this world. Things like "They're all out to get you if they can," all this man stuff, "you'd better use it while you can, you won't be young forever," like I was being schooled in all this. So, he wasn't there, five nights in a row. Then there he was, ringside again, and he just watched. That was on the 8th of December, which was his birthday, there was a note on my dressing table, and it said "If you feel about me the way I feel about you, shame on you." And as I went by his table I said "Hank," kind of under my breath because we weren't supposed to fraternize, "meet me after work." And I got off at two, so now it's December 9th, which is my birthday, and we weren't allowed to fraternize, so I just shook hands with him, because the doorman was right there, and the cab was waiting, and I had my phone number on a little slip of paper in my hand, and I muttered under my breath "I'll be home in 10 minutes." The phone was ringing when I got there, and he never left. It was so romantic. I was still living with Kathy and Mike in this old Victorian over on Steiner, and my hair's been under a wig, it's all up in pin curls, and we're trying to straighten out this place, and Kathy pulls out this peignoir, which was certainly a little too transparent for a first date, which is what this was, and setting out the brandy snifter, and getting a fire in the fire place. Then Mike and Kathy got lost, it was to be our celebration. Then when Hank comes over, and he comes up those stairs and sees me, he says, and I'll never forget this, "Thank God. I spent five nights worried that offstage you would be some one else. That you wouldn't be the same person. Can I do something that I wanted to do five nights ago?" And he kissed me. Well honey, that was that! I went to Dr. Styles the very next day with him in tow. And the doctor said it looked like I had run into a little more than I could handle, because he said I had a rectal tear. [Laughs] Now is that graphic, or is that graphic? Hank was there when I went through surgery. Hank was actually, I would say, the impetus for me to really confront my parents and finding the doctor and stashing money under the carpet for me to have it for my surgery. And supporting me

and sticking with me through all those emotional roller coasters with the hormones that you know about. Crying every day. He went through that with me. Got me off the drugs, the Seconal and all that. He's the only—I've married four times and engaged 15, and I think this is the only man, the only person that I have ever really loved. And maybe that's how it is only with a first real love. Maybe you can only feel that with your first one. But you know when you talk about sacrificing yourself for another person? Well, if there had been a question of whether it was to be his life or mine, there would have been no question. Whether he was worthy of it, or any of that, I loved him with every fiber of my being. And I still do. And if we were to sum up what surgery is all about, for us individually, it would have to be for that feeling, that commitment to another human being, which I am so sorry that don't have now, but what I think makes life itself, which is the glory of it all, the spiritual side of it all. And I know how vain I am, and how shallow I am, but that's when I was really worthy, because I loved some one that truly.

[break in taping]

SS: So we've taken a break, but you were just telling me how for years, before Hank, you used a gaff all the time and pretty much pretended that you had no penis—

ABC: Exactly.

SS: And that you then had surgery.

ABC: And that was part of the push towards surgery. I try to make this clear in everything I'm saying now. I still have questions, I'm always looking at this while writing my book, what will they think of someone else who did this, because I just don't know how they're going to deal with the self-mutilation, the castration. But also with surgery itself. But here was somebody from the heterosexual world who saw this, even surgery, which is quite an invasive procedure, certainly, but—My acceptance came, the acceptance of who I thought myself to be, started on stage at Finocchio's, because it was the only place I was allowed to be me. Everything else was an act. And because of that, the blossoming, when you're finally allowed to speak, to walk, you know? You have a little swing to your hips that you try to camouflage all these years because it's so sissy—but then you just blossom. And I think that attracts—you can talk about the quality of the men, or their spirituality, or that sort of thing—but it attracts a certain sort of person, which also build your confidence, but at the same time it points out that you're not complete. I was hysterical. I was so jealous of every--every!--female walking the face of this earth. Because I loved my man so much, and I was so afraid that I he would wake up and realize that I wasn't quite there. You know, that there was something wrong with me. That I wasn't real, and why waste his time. So that not only the desire not only to fix what I don't have--

[tape runs out]

SS: So, I guess the two things I'd like to talk about today before we run out of time, I'd love to hear more about your friend Stormy, how she wound up founding North Beach Leather and all, but also hearing something about the castration, and moving on then to surgery, just how you accomplished that, because it seems like at that time it was fairly difficult to get here in the States. Which do you want to start with—well, why don't we start with Stormy.

ABC: OK. We've talked a lot about Stormy already. Stormy was my, I guess I've used the term my sister--she was my sister, that makes her my closest friend. I've had a lot of good women friends, but of course Stormy is the one who went down the same path I did. I've often referred to myself as her adopted daughter. Stormy did not have acceptance. Her family did not accept it at all. When she had a family reunion, and she goes back, and she's married, and she's had surgery, and is very successful—and her mother says to one of her little nieces, "Would you take this tray in there to your uncle Richard?" "Which one is he?" "The one sitting over there in a dress." That sort of thing, cruel, cruel, behavior. Stormy had come up much different--her life was very different than mine. Her Dad died when she was 16, 17, something like that. And Stormy had been very, very, feminine. Her family lived in Annapolis, they took her to see doctors, who did the male hormone thing. I think if I hadn't been from such a backwater place I would have had to have gone through that too. And it did nothing of course except make her hirsute--[laughs] oh, poor thing, electrolysis was a nightmare for her! So, she was extremely feminine, and ran away from home, and went to New Orleans, did that whole drag sort of thing there—because there was nothing else to do, prior to Christine.

SS: So, was she several years older than you?

ABC: Yes, seven years older than me, I think. And I think that's why she loved me so much, is that she, for her survival, sacrificed her innocence. And became jaded, manipulative. But the things she did for me—she protected me her entire life. Almost a mother in a sense. And she worked hard to keep me innocent—to allow me to keep my innocence. And there's no greater gift. I think if we look at the times, at what they were, Stormy became, for survival, what that time typified, that oppressive social order, what it did to us all. And I was just very lucky to have escaped it. And I think that—I'm not saying that I'm not manipulative. Like when I went to the—I mean, it's manipulative even telling the story the way I just did—but when I went to the psychiatrist that Doctor Benjamin set me up with, the one who said "You feel like a girl?" well, I was with Hank at the time. I went convinced that I was just going to con this guy, tell him anything he wanted to hear. But he made me angry, you see. He told me he was smarter than me, and I—well, that pissed me off so much that I thought—OK, I'll shock you. So I just let it all come spilling out. And his take on all of this was—you get the government stamp of approval as a certified woman because you are so emotionally manipulative. And there was nothing wrong with being manipulative as long as you recognized what you were doing. So I think to this day I probably got my stamp of approval because he had a very

manipulative wife at home who kept him hen-pecked. That, plus the fact that I was going to marry this man. But Stormy--she was the typical, I mean, in her relationship with Mike she was--

SS: Oh, let me interrupt for a second. Who was your psychiatrist?

ABC: I have no idea. Saw him just that once.

SS: But somebody Benjamin set you up with, somebody here in San Francisco?

ABC: Yes.

SS: Somebody to whom Benjamin had already said "she's transsexual" and they just rubber-stamped you?

ABC: Exactly. And it was fifty dollars an hour. It's the fifty dollars I remember more than anything else.

SS: So--the relationship between Stormy and Mike was . . . ?

ABC: Sort of the typical--well, she wasn't exactly a typical person--but just, well, polar ends. I mean . . . oh, macho. Mike practically had cloven hooves. I mean, she waited on him hand and foot. She sent him through beauty school. And if he comes home and has invited people over for dinner, she wouldn't even ask him to stop by and pick something up. She had to do everything herself. And I understand that comes out of this feeling of not being worthy. I certainly understand that because I shared it, too. My big split with Stormy came when I got together with Hank, and Mike had been sort of putting the moves on me. And me--what a dummy, I mean, here's this sister, the best friend I've got--but I'm flattered, and it becomes a rivalry sort of thing--it was all so sordid and unattractive, I feel nasty just saying it. But then when Hank came on the scene--just to give you the flavor of what this was--Mike was jealous. Not that I'm sleeping with Mike, but he'd take me out, and we'd go dancing while Stormy was at work. It was all just signals of what to come. I went into the bedroom to hang up my coat, and he made a pass, and I told Hank about it. He said, "We have to move out." And we did, that very day. Then that caused friction with Stormy. I have the feeling that this is the sort of thing you want to hear about. It does show that we had our own little subculture going here. It was definitely all about role-playing. We had our roles to play, and when somebody else's husband makes a pass at you, you go running to your man, and he does--um, oh, well, I'm lost now. But their relationship, he never did anything. She cooked, she cleaned, she earned their living. I don't know what else I can tell you. We moved together from Geary to Steiner. Surely you won't be using all this, because part of this will be in my book too. But this is a milestone, in a way, that we had moved. We had been packing all day, so we weren't at our feminine finest. Mike's great fear was that we might get made, that one of the moving men might question our

gender. And so we go to the apartment on Steiner. And he insisted that we hide in the closet while the moving men are there. And we did. We didn't question that something was needed—we accepted without question that we were—and rightfully so—an embarrassment. So the kind of things that you are doing, anything that can change—I mean that's my whole purpose, too, in talking with you. I want to make as much noise as we can so we can keep any child from ever feeling that again. That's the issue. So what's their relationship like? That was it.

SS: And she had surgery...?

ABC: After me. She went to Morocco.

SS: With Georges Borou?

ABC: Well, I don't know. She went alone. The reason she did, was—we were going to do it together. We were going to get castrated, so we could do our surgery here, and not have to have our testicles up inside our body. And we had met some one—people drifted in and out—there was a person, Robin somebody, from Oregon or Seattle or somewhere—who'd had surgery, and came with this story about somebody who'd done self-mutilation with pruning shears or something.

SS: How did you meet Robin? She just showed up at work, or what?

ABC: How did I meet Robin? Robin stayed with us on Geary Street for a while, and probably came in through this Louise person who was managing the building.

SS: The building at 860 Geary?

ABC: Yes. Robin had had surgery. I don't know Robin's last name. I liked Robin. But straighter--straighter than we were. I mean, we were pretty out there. So it's always amazing to me because if you had not slipped that far—Robin had not been Robin all that long. But to hear this story of self-mutilation, and if you do enough damage then, well, they just have to do something, now don't they? Right. So that was the intention. So I went to Styles and said "I want to castrate my cat." Now whether he knew or not—I think he had to know—he drew a diagram for me. And while he was drawing it, I opened his cabinet and stole a syringe and some Novocain. He just didn't want any--

SS: He just wants plausible deniability.

ABC: Yes. He knew, otherwise that cabinet would not have been open. I mean—can you imagine? I'm sure he gave me [the mental suggestion]: "Oh, here, steal this!" So I did this—oh, God, look at the time, you and I are both going to have to go—you know I worked with Robin [White the freelance NPR reporter through whom we met] on that little audio thing, and I was so upset, I don't know if Robin White told you about this,

because it turned out to be this poor pitiful me epic. You know, [feigning melodramatic stage sorrow, wrist on forehead, fist clutched to chest] : "Oh, I was treated so badly! My family, my life! Ya-deeya-deeya-da!" Violins in the background. And I so hate that. So I just hope that you can bring out that there's also great humor in all of this. If there's one thing that we learn, from our survival on the street, is to have a great deal of fun. You laugh in the face of adversity. And this is one of those instances. So to be sterile and all this--of course, I had taken agriculture, though I had wanted to take home ec at my high school, and they wouldn't let me, I was so angry--so I had seen castrations. Had even aided in this. Nothing ever died. So I thought, honey we are going to be so on top of all this, we'll even sterilize everything. So we sprayed the sheets with Lysol and put them in the oven. [Laughs uproariously]. And then we draped the kitchen table. And then I put on Thurber's Carnival, which was this little comedy number, and I took a lot of Percodan and climbed up on the table. We were just going to go "whack, whack" and then I was going to get off, and aid Kathy, and we'd just do this and they'd be off. Well, what the diagram left off, when we saw all the blood we just weren't prepared for this. And we whacked those suckers off and then we didn't know whether to close the wound, or leave it open. So we compromised. Kath got sick. I sat up with all my Percodan haze, and ate. And she was wise perhaps not to do it. And then I passed out. And they just sat around waiting to see if I was going to die. You know--making plans about how to get rid of my body down in the basement of 860 Geary so they won't all go to prison. I mean, it was just this horrendous scene. And then when I do finally come to--I was asleep for about 24 hours--and try to put on some pants to go to the doctor, there's--oh, I was so swollen! What a mess! And I struggled up the stairs to Dr. Styles office, who acted shocked. And then of course gave me penicillin, and said to me "Of course you can't breathe a word of this, I can't put this in the record." It was a stupid, stupid thing to do. I do remember--I was as I've said naive, but I wasn't that naive--but it's the choices, it seems to me, and this was prior to Hank, this was before--the choice to me, I didn't see that there was going to be much of a way that I was going to end up going to Casablanca. So--if I died, I died. You know? If it's better than this So, that was that little story.

SS: And that was how long before surgery, that you castrated?

ABC: I guess a year and a half. And then I recovered--and that was sort of a real little recovery period that I had to go through--took off work--and I guess the shock--I guess that was actually kind of a touch and go thing--and then I continued to work. And it was just a money issue, as you know. We're talking, back then, for surgery, \$2500. That's a spit in the bucket by today's standards, but I didn't have it then. So, getting it together was--well, saving my money. Hank putting little bits of money under the carpet for me. And then it was the day of going. And we left San Francisco, and drove to Los Angeles, so I'm sure we didn't drive across the Golden Gate Bridge, but in my mind's eye it seems I remember driving across the bridge and throwing my skull cap, that dreaded cap that I had to wear to and from work, throwing it into the breeze, throwing that sucker away saying "never again!" My God, it was like a liberation kind of thing. And then we went

to our apartment as if we were--well, I guess we didn't say we were married--no, wait, we did, we rented as husband and wife. Once again, I'm out of that town where I'm known. It felt so neat, it was like Disneyland. You know, I guess it actually was Disneyland. No wait, was it? No, we went somewhere, I guess it wasn't Disneyland, but an aquarium or something, but just being able to go places and be dressed. You know how you have to do this year thing, dressing, before surgery? Well, I didn't have to do that, because they thought it was enough that I was learning to be feminine working at Finocchio's--hell, I wasn't learning to be a woman, I was learning to be a drag queen. It has nothing to do with the life that comes after, with the day to day existence that had been denied me. So I only had that day to day existence for a matter of a month, a few weeks prior to surgery.

SS: So you left the job at Finocchio's and moved to Los Angeles to have the surgery?

ABC: Yes, got an apartment just off of Western, down near the Presbyterian Hospital. And, uh--

SS: How did you find your surgeon? You said you went to Elmer Belt?

ABC: Hm--you know, I said I saw the psychiatrist in San Francisco, but you know, I'm really not sure if that is the case. I think it might have been somebody that Belt set me up with. Because I remember--well, I remember my clothing, once again--I remember money was really, really tight. Of course we were putting everything into this surgery. I of course have just left my job, and Hank, he doesn't have a job yet. So we're spending money we don't have. So yes, the psychiatrist was in Los Angeles. I remember going shopping at the Broadway's looking for something suitable to wear, but not having enough money for a nice suit, so I ended up with some chartreuse linen thing with black buttons--I remember it well--and going to see the psychiatrist. Yeah--it was very important that I look right, that I not look like some two-bit whore, but that I dressed properly. But anyway, my surgeon, how did I find him? Well, we talked about this some on the phone, but I'll say it again, I found him condescending and rude. And the whole set-up there, as I told you earlier on the tape, one of the nurses there, one of the nurses at the clinic, saying [imitating a very haughty, condescending tone of voice] "You understand of course that we're talking about an elective procedure when we're dealing with this sort of surgery." So this sort of condescension. And they were very slow to bring me morphine because "he" might become addicted. That sort of thing. And it was July, and there was no air-conditioning in this clinic, and it was ab-so-lute TORTURE!

SS: So, I did want to hear how you found him as a person, but also how you found him in the sense of how you got connected up with him. Was it just Harry Benjamin saying "well, I know this guy down in LA..."

ABC: Yeah, that was it. And I had never seen him before I moved down. I hadn't even flown down for a visit. I went into his office for some meetings prior to, but nothing of any real consequence.

SS: Was he, as far as you knew, the only person doing this in the United States?

ABC: I think so. And he had done a few. I did know one that just immediately preceded me, and her name was Carmelita. And the way I know this--she had had an affair with Mike Hobin prior to Kathy, to Stormy. So it was quite an incestuous little group we had going back then. So, that brings us up to "the deed."

SS: Well, that may be a good place to stop for now, since we need to wrap up soon. It seems like a good transition moment.

ABC: Yes, it certainly was that, a transition into real life. So I suppose that's why I'm so on the bandwagon about this issue of surgery. Yes, I understand the limitations, I understand that even if society changes to--ah, Jesus Christ, that distinction between what I was prior to and the person--well, a few growing pains, but--immediately afterwards, it just, that's just--well, it is a stopping point for now.

SS: So, a final point to wrap up on. You said you actually had very little experience living day to day as a woman.

ABC: Yes. I'd never even seen a vagina. I had no idea what this should look like. Although Benjamin, and certainly Belt, had drawn some little diagrams, so much of this here, and so much of that there, and yet I paid absolutely no attention whatsoever. It was--well, I wasn't the brightest person in the world. But it was just of no consequence to me. It was all about--"Make the pain go away. Fix it. I don't care how." And that was sort of my surgery story. And what did they know, really? I mean, it was just flipping a coin. Trusting that there was enough know-how, enough medical know-how and technique that you'd come out of this OK. But to me the main thing was that you would come out of this legally whole and able to get on with your life. Which to me, was being like Mrs. Jones down the street. Actually, in my case, being Mrs. Doyle. I would be perfectly happy with a little tract house, and kids, all of that. It was a long number of years getting to that point, but that's what it symbolized for me. Coming back to Finocchio's, I mean it's just important to me, to think--well, it was husbands and wives, tourists, who would come to see the show. And we all had this happen, it wasn't just me, but you would know that the guy on the second row or whatever was so intrigued, or mesmerized by whatever your persona happened to be, and that the wife was a little miffed, but they would stay show after show until closing, and then, because we had to exit out the back door down the side street alley, to have them there, and, oh, countless times it seemed like always the same line: "My husband was so taken with you. You're so attractive--beat, beat, beat--on stage." You know: "Hah! Don't get delusional with me bitch, because I'm real, and you ain't, he sees it, and I'm pointing it out." You don't have

to be a rocket scientist to see how that works. This transition, as far as I was concerned, was so that you never had to glance at the ground again as you were walking past someone because you don't want to see the contempt and the hatred of what you represent as a human being. That's what I had felt like, what life had been for me all those years. Even in my small little town, I was sleeping with some of my classmates, but I was still held in contempt. Everything was a struggle. Being told by everyone, even my mother, who was my staunchest supporter, always, because she understood the pain, to a certain degree, and knew I was different, and never tried to tell me I wasn't. She would say, "Wouldn't it be a boring world if everybody was the same?" And I thought she was out of her bloody mind, because that's exactly what I wanted, to be like everyone else. But to have even your parents tell you that you need to learn how to fight to defend yourself? And I'm saying, good little old Church of Christ fundamentalist, "But I'm not mad at anybody." You know, all I wanted to do is be liked and get along with everybody. But no, you have to fight to defend yourself. I'm going to school at this time, out at this little one room country school, where you took your lunch and your thermos every day, and they'd take my thermos and break it, every day, and at recess hold me down and tell me I was a pig and they were going to castrate me. This sort of being ostracized. There was a swing, and I was not allowed to swing on it. They'd pull it back and throw it at me—I've got a scar here where it hit me, it was a stovepipe swing, it was like shooting an arrow through the air at me. My clothes were pulled, I had a new jacket once, they pulled it off me, tore it. My life was absolute hell. And even as I grew up, and developed a personality, so I was an entertainer—I was the artist, the singer—and I had my little core group, and I had a sense of humor, and all of my jokes, well, at least then I didn't get beaten to a pulp on a daily basis. But I was still the butt of everyone's joke. Like the coach comes in in high school, and says "OK, who's going out for football?" And like there were 30 people in my high school class, so every male hand goes up except mine. So I'm thinking, "This is not going to work," so up it goes, and then there's the locker room—ho, ho, ho, the scourge of everyone's existence, where you have to change in front of the others. So I would always hang out in the library, making myself late, which meant that I'd have to run around the football field. So there I was running around the football field, and would always connive to have one of the other football players late too so I'd have somebody to run around the field with, but then I'd usually have to put out. You know, it was not a nice life. I got off on a little tear there. I guess it's just the sorts of things we all experience. But I want to try this on, as sort of a thematic sort of thing, that as transsexuals, surgery is not making us anything, it's taking us back to what we were intended to be all along, always were, knew all along. And I always thought I was treated improperly—and I was treated improperly, they all insisted on treating me like a boy—that's it in a nutshell. And I don't know, I'm really anxious to hear, and to keep on talking, and to learn from you, how the world has changed since the generations between us. Did you experience the same sorts of things as a male child?

SS: No, it was different for me. [Did not record response.]

SS: Just a few more things. Geary--860 Geary, you were saying?

ABC: And the woman who lived in the penthouse had been a prostitute, a professional prostitute, years and years before. And she kept several floors down an apartment for her children. But there was a lot. There was a man living there who was a manager of a motel over in Marin County, where they had some great big, art displays, would do exhibits. And because he so admired queens, he wanted to live among them, and they went to his club all the time. We used him. Would say--we're throwing a party. You bring the booze and the paintings. My, God! The man stole paintings out of his own exhibits, and used them as tickets into our parties. Stole all the liquor, until it finally got to the point that one day when we came back to 860 Geary, the police were there, and Kathy, they wanted to check our apartments, and Kathy told them to go check mine, because she, she suspected that something like this might happen, she had stuck into my closet a sheet of plywood, just a sheet of plywood, and had stuck the paintings behind them. But she still had all her paintings up on her walls. So while they checked mine, she's downstairs throwing her paintings out the window. Meanwhile, upstairs, the prostitute in the penthouse, which has a balcony, sailing them like Frisbees out into the air. So that was the sort of people who populated this building.

SS: Tell me about this woman Louise who managed the building.

ABC: All I really know about her is that she was transsexual. Where she had surgery, I have no idea. But she had had it. And--well, I really don't know anything. I do know that when we all paid our rent, she took our money, her receipts, and ran with them one day. And took my luggage--all I had--packed my bags with her things and left town. So you see, she wasn't the highest kind of a transsexual that there ever was.

SS: You don't know how long she'd been there, what her story was, nothing?

ABC: She'd come in, conned her way into managing this apartment, just for a matter of months, just, real--

SS: So she hadn't been there a long time.

ABC: No, not at all. The manager for a long time--no, she was not, she was married, she'd only have sex in the tub, she'd put her husband to bed and then come downstairs to our parties--oh, honey! There were constant parties going on. And all this revolved around men. And you know, I'm so happy for you, that you've got your life together, and that you've found a partner, and I so enjoy talking to you, but I'm just sorry that all this with men is something that you missed, because it's a whole other area of discussion.

[End of Tape]

Second Interview
August 28, 1997
Watsonville, CA

SS: Where I wanted to start today was with some photographs, to see if they could jog your memory at all. I've brought--do you remember this magazine, Pageant?

ABC: Yes, of course.

SS: Well, there's a story in this one [10: 4 (October, 1954):114-121] called "The Tragedy of a Sex Changeling." It's about Charlotte McLeod--

ABC: Oh my God in heaven!

SS: --and you said you knew her.

ABC: Oh, God, to read this. Yes, oh, well, this certainly makes me want to get back in touch with Charlotte.

SS: You say she's still alive, you think?

ABC: Well, we were in touch--um, well, you know she was doing lingerie modeling, after surgery, right after she came back, and she was from Tennessee, of course.

SS: She was in Memphis for a while, a little earlier than you were there.

ABC: Now she's in Brownsville I believe, and had gone back there for her mother, and started an old age home sort of thing, was working somehow with Social Security. Now, she was in very bad health when I last spoke to her.

SS: When was that?

ABC: Well, let's see, I wasn't here [in Watsonville] yet, I was maybe in Chicago, so ten years? No--more like five years, four years? I really can't quite remember. High blood pressure, just not doing too well. Oh--[looking at Pageant article] working on a book. Did she ever do it?

SS: I don't think so, at least I've never heard if she did.

ABC: I don't believe she did.

SS: This article is from right after she comes back from Denmark.

ABC: And you know, Charlotte then went on tour, sort of on the circuit, the nightclubs--and of course Charlotte was not an entertainer.

SS: How did you meet her?

ABC: She was also--I met her originally with Dr. Benjamin, but then I got to know Charlotte rather well, because--

SS: So you stayed in touch with Dr. Benjamin after surgery?

ABC: Well, no, not really. But I saw Charlotte. We were really close for a while. We were both living in Los Angeles. We were both married and we did a lot of socializing together.

SS: And you met her through Harry Benjamin in the early 60s? Right around the time of surgery, right after, when?

ABC: Just before my surgery, actually, is when I met her. But it was just sort of a passing thing. I didn't really get to know Charlotte until later.

SS: So how did this happen? Did transsexual people socialize with each other regularly? Did you all sort of know who else lived nearby, and keep up--?

ABC: Well, Dr. Benjamin would take us out to lunch. Charlotte had just come in from New York, and he wanted--he took Kathy, and--it was just the three of us--out to lunch. I remember, that was also where he introduced me to Dubounet [sp?--Benjamin's favorite liquor]. But Charlotte--I was very impressed. Charlotte was one of those--I made the statement to you earlier, that I've not met a transsexual that I didn't just adore--and Charlotte fell into that adored category. She was very attractive, and very passable, and this is what I wanted to be. Very genteel. If we were ever going to say only one thing about Charlotte McLeod, it would be that she was extremely genteel.

SS: So she came to Los Angeles on business?

ABC: No, she lived there. She was married. She was working, at some point in time, and I believe this was somewhere near Los Angeles, in a beauty salon. You remember I told you that I had done that at one time myself. And one of the customers said,--oh, it was a brother or a son, but just fell in love with Charlotte and wanted her to meet this eligible bachelor they knew. And so Charlotte and this guy--whose wife had either died somehow or--suicide, I'm not sure, but there was some sort of a tragic story there--and this person introduced them, and they had a courtship, and he had two or three children, three I think, and they went off to Mexico, where he proposes. And out on this deserted beach--I was just fascinated by this story--Charlotte just goes and tells him that she's transsexual. I mean, can you imagine? I mean, I would have thought that she'd be

fish bait. But she had this nerve. And he accepted her. She had more surgery. Ah--this gets into really personal stuff. She had more surgery, and there were complications. And he went through all of this with her. Just a marvelous man. Supportive and caring and loving. Then Charlotte's mother got ill, and wanted to return--the father, I gather, who was a banker, had divorced her--wanted to return home to Brownsville, Tennessee to die. And Charlotte--I was working, doing theater in Albuquerque--and Charlotte drives this big U-Haul truck through Albuquerque, and stops to see me. And she's going back home. Left this wonderful man and the children and takes off to fulfill her mother's last wishes.

SS: When was this?

ABC: This was about 1979, '80 I would think.

SS: She'd been living in Los Angeles that whole time?

ABC: Yeah, in the Valley, actually. They had a home in the Valley somewhere, somewhere out near Van Nuys. And she stopped in Albuquerque--told me--Charlotte always talked to me that way, you know, she was always a little condescending. She thought I was too wild, and too out there, and too theatrical. And that I really didn't grasp the meaning of life. So she stopped by and--I was just heartsick. I mean, here she was in the middle of this butch adventure driving a truck across the country, and I wanted to commend her for doing this for her mother, but I thought it was a needless sacrifice. And it was a needles sacrifice, because she told me the last time we spoke, her Dad, the banker, would pass her on the street and still not talk to her. Now, I had my own history of going back to one of these small towns in the South and I know what these people are like. But she was very much concerned about going to the Country Club, and finding some acceptance. And she turned the old home--I guess what had been her grandmother's home--into a rest home until her mother died. But then she went on with it, and was doing some sort of social work, but--and this is my judgment, my take on it--but Charlotte did not seem happy. I remember she made the statement that there was some man next door who was showing interest in her, but she was convinced that it was because he just wanted to get half interest in the adjoining property. Sad and pathetic. Charlotte just had so much more than that going for her. I don't know if you know the Charlotte McLeod story.

SS: Not too well, I've seen dip and dabs of it in various places, but I don't have it all put together.

ABC: She was a lingerie model in New York, and had met this merchant marine, and they had this ceremony in Florida--invitation only, of course--but some "friend" comes in and takes pictures and sells them to Dorothy [Kellgallen?] and the marine is out at sea and gets hold of this newspaper and reads about his own wedding, not knowing this about Charlotte. And when he came back, he didn't leave her, he bought a house, I

think in Marin County, and sticks her in it, but virtually ignores her. I think a lot of men react that way sometimes. You know, "I will not desert you, but"--and I've been in this situation myself--"since I know this about you, I'm doing you a favor by staying with you, so you will in turn do whatever I say, whenever I say." And I think that was very prevalent with many of us in that transitioning state, or period. So--and this is one of those things, I've told you a lot about Charlotte, and it's all very personal, and I don't want to out Charlotte quite that much. But I think the story is important. I think I know you well enough to tell it, but--a sad story.

SS: Do you think she was sad her whole life? Do you think she had any regrets about what she did?

ABC: Oh, no--no, not at all. I knew Charlotte. Charlotte did not have any regrets about what she did. That we certainly shared. I think that Charlotte's regret--and this is just my take on it--we talked a great deal--now I said Charlotte was condescending. Well, Charlotte certainly didn't mean to be, but she always sort had that attitude. I've talked a lot about my friend Stormy and Kathy who pulled me in one direction? Well, Charlotte sort of pulled me in the other. She wanted to protect me, because she viewed me as Southern gentry, and I wasn't really living up to my potential. That if you had breeding--this is so very much Charlotte--but if you had breeding, you really should, you must at all costs remain a lady. And I didn't. In Charlotte's eyes I had fallen from what I ought to be. I was wicked. Wicked.

SS: I noticed in this Pageant article that it said Charlotte had lived in New Orleans for a while, in what it called the "homosexual colony" there, and that she hated it, that she hated being gay, and that this didn't last very long.

ABC: Yeah, I do remember having that discussion, because you know Stormy came out of that scene, too.

SS: That's exactly what I was wondering about, if they knew each other in New Orleans.

ABC: I think they had--yes, they did. They had met, but once again, Stormy worked in a club--Cy's Place, I think it was, that comes to mind somehow--and Stormy had run into Tennessee Williams there. I mean, who really knows if any of this is true, but Stormy told how he had made a play for her man, and they had this exchange where poor Stormy bested Williams. [Laughing] Well, don't you just know that that just must be true? But yes, somehow Charlotte knew the place, and they met, but I don't think that they were really taken with each other. And certainly not in those surroundings. I know that Charlotte certainly did hate being--well, look at these pictures here. Charlotte was a very attractive woman, and--

SS: --but she's wearing high lace collars.

ABC: Yes. Yes, she did do that, even though she was a lingerie model for a while. But she was not--not really a very attractive male. So we can look at these and say she was not really made to be popular in gay society. And coming out of gay society myself at that time, it was--well, you know you're not [gay]. You just know you're not. Would perhaps like to be. Would at least like to be something. Would like to belong somewhere. But that this wasn't it. And I know Charlotte felt the same way. So for those of us who transitioned then and were early transsexuals, society really had to be pushing us, because we didn't know what we were doing or where we were going. And Charlotte was there. There was some misunderstanding, I think she was in Denmark, and she went into Russia, I think it was, with a male passport, and had difficulty getting out. Well, I'm lost.

SS: So back to New Orleans. Was she doing drag at all, probably not?

ABC: Who, Charlotte? Oh no, no, no!

SS: I wouldn't think so, but it does seem to me that there have always been people who, though male, have not been men, and that they've lived as women regardless of whether there was any access to hormones and surgery or whatever. They're going to have their life in whatever the best way is that they can do that. And that people did that to a degree in gay society or not, that you might try to do it in straight society, and I just wondered if she was trying to live as a man in gay society, or if, well, I'm not finding words for this very easily, but if she was trying out other options. Now Stormy, you say, she was in New Orleans then, was she doing theatrical drag at that point?

ABC: No, she was working as a bartender at this place. I don't know if it was called Cy's Place or what, but I know--Stormy went to jail all the time. It was one of those bars where they would back up the paddy wagon to the doors--and so it was sort of the arched eye-brow, limp wrist group. Very feminine in attire. Oh! I know the perfect example--wearing a man's shirt, but tying it up high, having the waist exposed, the low-riding pants, whatever they were. But still male. Although full-face make-up. That's what we all did--yeah, that was it. But not, I'm sure that was not what Charlotte was doing. Because by living that lifestyle, it puts you--we talked some last time about the Tenderloin--it did put you in a certain class, if you will. It opened you up to an unsavory side of life.

SS: So when did Stormy start doing impersonation? In New Orleans, or afterwards?

ABC: Oh, she went immediately to New Orleans from high school, from Annapolis. Her dad died, and she went to New Orleans, was working--

SS: When was this? You remember the year, about? You had said she was several years older than you?

ABC: Six years. Let's see, her dad died, must have been '49 or '50. That would be about, probably, the time, somewhere around about in there. And then she met the stripper Stormy--Stacy Lawrence was her name--and, I have somewhere, some of the pictures of the lesbians from that era, the really butch lesbians with the ties--and Stormy was in that avenue, running with them. I think that Stacy Lawrence, who had some fame or notoriety as an exotic dancer, was a femme gay woman, worked in the French quarter. It was a tough tough, life. Um--well, I'm just talking now, but I remember once, this was not long before Kathy died, I remember saying once that I had always thought her to be so strong, and so in control--and I've said "sister," but it was actually--well, maybe a big sister, certainly--but really more of a mother. I sort of went from my protective Mom to Stormy's protection. And I admired her, but I felt she was perhaps a little too tough. I met at a support group here in Santa Cruz, a man who had been partners with Lou Pearson--the impersonator I replaced when I first went to work at Finocchio's--and he asked me, I'm digressing, but he asked me, he said, "Did you ever know Lee Shaw?" And this is very interesting, he said "Lee was this very, very vulnerable--well, I forget the word he actually used, but--person. And I said, "I am Lee Shaw." And then I asked him--and he didn't believe me, which hurt--oh! have we changed so much, you know?--but I mentioned Stormy, and Lou, who he was with, and this guy, his name, his last name, was also Shaw--and Stormy had said stay away from him, he's a scoundrel, and he also belongs to Lou. So once again, you see, that protection. But where I was going with that, when I mentioned Stormy to him, he described her as the epitome of carny trash. Just a terrible thing to say, but--the thing was, Stormy was a survivor. She took care of me when we were in San Francisco in this rather transitional period and looked rather freaky of course, and we'd go into a department store on Union Square and people would not want to wait on us. And Stormy would create a scene. You know, [shouting] "What are YOU looking at?!!" and I of course was looking for something to crawl under. But she had that background, that training, and she got it in New Orleans. Which brings us back there, to the paddy wagons pulling up to the doors, and being hauled off to jail, and of course being immediately bailed out, but still--knowing every cop on the beat, as I did in San Francisco, too. And they all learned, they all, there's always this--I don't what the words are. Well, just that you are always treated as such a low-life. It just--well, it just took with her. And so I said, "You are always so in control, and I feel so lost, so often." Well, she told me then a story about living down in the Quarter, in one of the old slave places, and there was this woman downstairs from her, and this man [who Stormy was involved with], he had a relationship with the woman downstairs, and when he confronted Stormy with it --a younger, vulnerable Stormy--she just fell apart, and was crying, weeping in a corner, just curled up in a fetal position, and he goes out on the balcony and cries out to the woman downstairs, "Come up and look at this freak. Come up and look what I done to this freak, reduced to tears in the corner." And she said she sat there in the corner and said to herself that that will never, ever happen to me again. And I think we all have those moments where we lose our innocence. And I think it's such a shame. And I don't know, but talking about Charlotte, my goal is now at 60 to be the person I was at 17. That vulnerable--well, I

think I might have told you this because I'm using it in my book, but in college, at the dorm, the women talked about who's queer and who's not, and--

SS: A doe in the headlights?

ABC: Yes, right, so I did tell you. I so like that. And you know, nobody wants to be stupid or unaware, but I do think--and I suspect that this might be a transgender thing, I don't know--but that's what attracts us to this nurturing, to this gentle side in us. I abhor--I don't like men, and yet I sleep with them. And look to be brutalized, I'm starting to recognize, I think that still stems from considering myself without worth. You know, maybe that's what it is. Or maybe it's this daddy thing. You know, still trying to work out what it is. I do like having the control. I do like knowing I can attract--ha! I wouldn't know that I could hold, I mean look at my track record--but yeah, there we are. I've run down, run out of things to say. It's up to you if you want to record this, but I do think it's important with Charlotte, with Stormy, with me, you have three very different types of early transsexuals, who--I remember, well, this is just so tacky but it does explain something. Charlotte--Kathy, Stormy, was married to this louse, was living in Beverly Hills, certainly across the railroad tracks in Beverly Hills, but she just wanted that address, that Beverly Hills address, she was pushing this songwriter. But anyway--Charlotte shows up on her doorstep with a baggie of ambrosia--of which Charlotte was so very proud, of her ambrosia--and Kathy said, "What? You threw up?" [Laughing] And Charlotte of course had no sense of humor about such things. She was just absolutely livid. And of course Stormy always went beyond the pale to shock Charlotte--but it was so easy to do, you know. So I was caught in their war. Charlotte was determined to save me from anyone so evil. [Laughing] Threw up in a bag, I mean really! "Got sick on the ride over, did ya, Charlotte honey?" You know, that sort of thing. So I wish--well, what finally happened with Charlotte, you know, I'm telling you these stories, and I do try to have as much fun in life as I can, you know, I mean, it's all just so painful anyway you might as well laugh. But Charlotte just doesn't quite get that. And I insulted her in this card--we were corresponding--and I said in this card, sent her this card that said something about, something like, "I knew you when you hadn't a pot to piss in, much less a window to throw it out of," and she was so incensed! And I just thought--oh, puh-leeze. I don't have time for this, don't want to deal with this. So that was the end of that.

SS: Well, that's really too bad.

ABC: It is too bad.

SS: But back to Stormy. How did Stormy get out of New Orleans and wind up at Finocchio's?

ABC: I think from New Orleans she went to New York, and worked at the--now, she did not work in New Orleans at the My-Oh-My, I don't think, but she did work at Club

21 in New York. Bobby Darin was there then. So she was doing that circuit in New York. Now I say Bobby Darin, but once again, and Bobby Blue Bland, but with these people, I don't know if a word of this is true--because Kathy would just create her history. And even I never knew what the true history was. I suspect--well, she told stories of great, great, wealth but don't think that is necessarily true. So--I think, I only mention that, because--I think I've told you this, about creating a history, talking to people about losing a child, about crib death, and all of this stuff--you know, not only does it get sympathy, but in talking about this child, you know, if you tell somebody that you lost this child, well, it could certainly get traumatic, but when you went to bed with them, they're not necessarily looking then for tell-tale signs. Yeah, so, I did all that sort of stuff. And Kathy did too. I guess it's the whole social thing, but damn, it's an unfortunate thing that anybody who's born onto this planet has to go through that kind of shit. It just is. And I think, especially with the early transsexuals--well, I guess it still is--we're going--well, I don't know that I even would have had surgery--God I hate to even say that, because this is not what we want to get out there, right?--but I just got through writing this part, in a chapter about Hank--my surgery became, it was much more important to Hank than it actually was to me. I think I was really ready to take a breather. I mean, it's not that I didn't want to have surgery, but that the desire wasn't as consuming as it had been, because I had found the person I wanted to spend the rest of my life with, and this person loved me. Me, imperfect though I might be, loved me. And there was something grand, perhaps, about being loved even though you are not complete. That's it. But I needed to hear, "Even without surgery you are more woman than any other woman I have ever been with." And I needed that desperately. So I wanted to hold on to it for awhile. But I knew that it was unfair to him, and I think that's what pushed me right out of Finocchio's and right into surgery. I think that's true. And so I now really question, wouldn't it be lovely if we all had options, if we were all treated as if we were legal and as womanly and as desirable, without surgery? And I know we've talked about that. I had no idea--my best female friend, who I've told you about, she said, "You have no idea who"--well, she's nicer than that, nicer than saying to me "You have no idea who you are," but she says you have no idea who you would have been, or what your life could have been, had you been allowed to mature naturally. And I think that's true, and I do think that's important.

SS: Well, OK. Still working on the theme du jour, of showing you pictures and getting you to tell me about people, not just your story but also your story of them--so Stormy went to New York, and then came out to San Francisco?

ABC: Went out to New York, yes, and then came out to San Francisco. Worked at Club 21, and wanted to audition at Finocchio's, and came out with a man named Lucky, a gambler. And with Val Du Val, a friend of Stormy's, a Cajun, a Louisianan. I believe they had possibly known each other in New Orleans. Val danced with pythons, all of this. Anyway, the three of them came out and settled on Leavenworth, in the Tenderloin. Stormy auditioned at the club three times, as did Val, and got a job to come in for the summer, and Lucky, that very night, shot someone in a card game and got

sent to prison. And when he came out Stormy, Kathy, was then with Mike Hobin, who you know about, North Beach Leather and all that.

SS: Now, how did she meet Benjamin? Was that from New York, or out here?

ABC: She met him in San Francisco. How she heard about him I do not know. I don't know that. Quite possibly--there was another person, I've thought about this since we last talked, just naming everyone--there was Louise, and--

SS: Hold on one second. So when did Stormy come to San Francisco, how long before you met her? You said New Orleans by about 1950, then New York for a while, but when to San--

ABC: I think she was here for about three years before I got there. So I would say '55, '56, that brings her in. And they were afraid to hire her, Finocchio's was. She was doing the hormone thing, for one thing--well, I don't know that that is actually true, I don't know that she had actually started the hormones at that point when she came to work there. But she was a stripper. And she was very feminine. Finocchio's, I think I can say this, well, it's certainly my take on this, and I think they've gone back to this now--in that period, when Stormy and I were there, we were of course the only two that were doing hormones and things. But they were real reluctant. This was not--Finocchio's saw themselves as--this was male, these were impersonators--and so our position, well, I think I've told you this story, maybe not. But they had a medical convention that came, and said that there was false advertising, that men did not have the skin tone that we--and of course we all know that this is not true--well, maybe it is true? Who knows? Who's to say what's male and what isn't? What makes you male? And the shoulders and bone structure, and all this, too. And Finocchio's was very reluctant to hire transgender people. And they went back to that, because both Stormy and I left them at the height of the tourist season, which upset them very much. And I did my castration while I was there, and missed work for a while. But at any rate--what were you asking?

SS: When Stormy got on to hormones and got hooked up with Benjamin.

ABC: I don't know.

SS: But in San Francisco?

ABC: Yes, In San Francisco, I do know that. And with Angel, who was doing our electrolysis. But Stormy was the kind of person who--well, she was just a little hustler. She was out there--I admired that, don't have any of that myself--but just her tenacity, her legwork in finding all this stuff out. She had a purpose, and a goal, and she would have just sought Benjamin out.

SS: You mentioned Angel, who did your electrolysis. What's her story?

ABC: Well, she was on Market, had her little business, and we went every week to go through that torture, take our little Percodan pills, go down and have Angel--

SS: So she was not transgendered?

ABC: Oh, no. She was just this nice little old German lady who enjoyed torturing us.
[Laughs]

SS: So, let's look at some more pictures.

ABC: OK. You showed me Charlotte's picture and look what happened.

SS: Yeah, off we went. Let's start with these old Finocchio's programs. Now some of these are from before your time.

ABC: It's so nice to know that there was a before my time.

SS: I think this one is from 1948. [showing program] Walter Hart?

ABC: I only heard of Walter Hart. Oh! There's Ray [Francis]! This can't be that old, not the 40s. He was one of the "Two Old Bags from Oakland."

SS: Yeah, I really do think this is the 40s.

ABC: I guess you're right, I guess this is a much younger Ray Francis. Might of worked there before.

SS: I think that's it, because this program says something about being produced 15 years after Finocchio's opened, and I think they're probably dating that from 1933. I know Fin's existed back in Prohibition as an illegal speakeasy, but went above ground in 1933. So I'm placing the date of this program as about 1948.

ABC: You're probably right, so yeah, Ray Francis was still working there when I did.

SS: And you said he was one of the "Two Old Bags from Oakland?"

ABC: Yeah.

SS: Now, John Lonas?

ABC: No huh-uh. But, oh--Lester!

SS: Lestra La Monte?

ABC: Yes. Now Lester, I know Lester had been in vaudeville, and was mistress of ceremonies when I was there. The "Papier Mache' Fashion Plate," made all his own gowns out of papier mache'. Hm--so he had been there for a long time.

SS: There's Li-Kar.

ABC: Now isn't that interesting.

SS: Nicki Galluchi--never heard of her?

ABC: No. [turning page, looking at group shots on stage] Now this is the period, probably, it's interesting to see this, because I had heard all these stories of Mrs. Finocchio having all these sables, and furs, and being robbed. And she was afraid to leave them at the club because she thought she would be robbed, and she actually was robbed on the way home. And there was someone who would make her entrance with Russian wolf hounds, wearing sable. But to look at all this, it doesn't look all that--well, I'm not sure what period that was they would talk about. Interesting. [Turning page]. Freddie Renault, now I remember hearing about him. [Turning page] Oh, now this is really interesting. Here's Ray Francis again, in "Francis and Lonas," but with a different partner, and it's not called "Two Old Bags from Oakland."

SS: Milton Le Maire?

ABC: No. [Turning page, another shot of Li-Kar, in a turban, as art director]. Oh, that's very attractive. I have to say, though, look at these things. He was doing these godawful things [pointing to some "ethnic" costumes] still in the '60s. It was just a carry-over. Now I have to ask while we're looking at these things--oh, god, the dressing room certainly hadn't changed in all those years either. So tacky. It was terrible back stage. I mean, my god in heaven. So how are you tying all this together, the impersonation thing with the transsexual thing?

[End of tape]

SS: Well, like I said before, I'm interested in the trajectory of your life. It seems like there's something about you--and about me too, it seems, though not maybe about all of us--but something about you that has always essentially been you, whether you were a boy, a female impersonator, or a faggot, or whatever you were at the time, that is essentially Aleshia.

ABC: I do agree with that.

SS: And that there's just different possibilities, different opportunities, at different times, and in different places--like when you were a little kid in Tennessee, there was

only a certain set of things that was possible there, and then. You're always trying to be one's self to the best of one's ability, but given what's possible, and what one knows at any given moment, that we always are sort of experimenting. That we are always works in progress.

ABC: Yes, I would agree with that.

SS: And that as you move to different places, and have different experiences of life, and as history marches on, different things become possible. What I find so fascinating about transsexuality is that it's a new path that opens up. You know, that there have always been people who felt the way you did, or that felt the way I did, that there have always been people who were mismatched between what culture said they were and what they felt themselves to be, and are like water flowing through the cracks of the categories, of what it's possible to be, what it's possible to find, places it's possible to get a foothold on—those places are different in different cultures, and in different geographical locations, and in different time periods. And this transsexual foothold, this thing where somebody's going to shoot you full of hormones and cut up parts of your body and you're going to get a different legal identity because of this—like just because they did this to you, you've become a different person? It's fascinating to me that this thing emerges as a possibility for somebody to do. So you ask me how I'm putting all this together. I just want to hear how you moved from one thing to another, that might or might be connected conceptually, but were in fact connected in your life, that you had a certain path that you followed. You know, you were just who you were. But also, you were a participant in a very early period of this new transsexual possibility. So besides you telling me about who you were as a person, you can give me some really good information about some stuff that I can't find out about any other way. I can only learn so much reading newspapers and magazines and court records and the other sorts of things one does as an historian. But I think of those sorts of things as the old bones of the past. Your memory is like the soft tissue that doesn't get fossilized into the historical record. So whatever quality of life you can report on—you know, nobody knows what color dinosaur's skin was, because nobody remembers it and it didn't leave a trace—whatever you can tell me about things I can't read about or recover. And also, what was the story behind the story, the dish behind the dish. You know a lot of this stuff just because it happened to you, you were there, it was just the life you had. So I'm not really trying to put anything together, I'm just interested in the life that you had then, and in trying to elicit as much information as possible. Think of it as a debriefing.

ABC: OK, good. Well, let me say this on tape, because I think this is important, and I'm struggling with this with what I'm writing. I think—I can only say this for me, and well perhaps also for Stormy—there were some people who were impersonators who were so—well, who were transgendered, but they just didn't want to go through surgery. You know, they had their lovers. Kara Montez, who had this body from hell, Raedie Young—I mean Raedie is singing in this lovely soprano—and yet they were horrified at the very idea of self-mutilation. But they were all the same—I was surrounded by a bunch of

women. And we all—I think this is what was so important—we all found ourselves living only on stage. You asked me earlier, last visit, about what was life like outside—there was none. I thought about that after you left, about why did I not have anything to tell, and it was because there really wasn't much. Life was—and it was this way with Stormy, too, she had her man, and this why men were so important, to have a loved one—on her days off she was home with him. We did do the marketing and all of that, but we scurried like rats with our hair up under our hats and our arched eyebrows looking really freaky in the daylight hours. We just scurried from place to place. Because there was always this—I suppose an over-riding fear—that someone is either going to say something, or it's going to be dangerous. You'll just be brutalized. And the only place we lived was on stage, and with the protection of the club. There we were stars, and dressed as women was where we got lots of positive strokes and acceptance. God, people wanted to go to bed with you—and maybe they had been drinking, but whatever—and they say an illusion, but it wasn't an illusion. Even for those who did not go on to have surgery, I think this was not—no more of an illusion than putting on make-up to go wherever. This was who we were. We sat backstage, we spent a lot of time in those tacky old dressing rooms, and we swapped recipes, and because I was very young they'd be telling me how to live my life on the street, a lot of advice on how to survive. I remember there was this old film producer, had probably slept—though I did find out it wasn't sleeping, wasn't a sexual thing—but he had to, this conquest, just some old producer out of Hollywood, I have no idea what his name was, just old, and he had to go through the cast. Because you know I was the newest member of the cast, they said, "It's OK, he won't bother you." I remember Elton Paris saying "You're not going to be young forever so you'd better make it while you can." So they told me—Stormy told me—this guy would show up with a bottle of champagne, and that I was to be dressed, and pour the champagne, and that we were to have a conversation, and that he would give me this money, and I was supposed to put it under the mattress. Now, this is how naive and green I was, I met the man at the door, dressed in some chiffon Stormy had pulled out of the closet, and he hands me the champagne and the money and I run immediately to put the money under the mattress and leave him standing there. So then I sat there with this man, telling him how wonderful he is. I mean, that's all that happened, there was no sex involved. It was quite bizarre. And that, unfortunately, even there, went hand in hand with that whole drag thing. I don't want to say—it seems that all the drag queens I knew, well, had a scam going on some how. It was—and I now look back on that say, "Yeah, we all were very aware that we had to make it any way we could. And I do believe that with some of the less fortunate people, prostitution was the way. You can see how I've been sort of skirting that. But I do think—I know that later, some of those prostitutes that frequent Hollywood Boulevard, have I told you this? No?—well, I was being kept, so what's the difference, I mean really—but we were hanging out at the Beverly Hills Polo Lounge, and this guy, well, this is so much later, but well, I was on my way home, and I had had—was in my cups—and I thought this is just so wrong, and so pathetic, and I knew that they went for coffee at Denny's on Hollywood Boulevard, and I went and was going to buy coffee for all these street urchins and tell them that there was another way, and that maybe you can't buy

your body right now, but instead of buying these boots that come up to your thigh, whether you go to school to be a manicurist or whatever it is, you can work your way out of this. And of course, God, sanctimonious twit that I was, the answer was: "Oh, uh-huh. And whose corner do you want, sweetie?" That was the mentality. But they had a very good point. I mean, how dare I? Just how dare I do something like that? But that had been the whole message of the Tenderloin at that time for me. I'm sure in the 40s it was even worse.

[break in taping]

SS: So you were mentioning the 40s, and you said how some of the older people would teach you some of the tricks of the trade, and how some of the techniques were done, what the styles were. You mentioned beaded eyelashes?

ABC: Yes, they would just build those things up. I guess it was some sort of a wax, the beading was done with this wax, and you just kept heating and melting and layering this wax. You can see that in some of these pictures.

SS: Well, let's keep going with these old programs. Vaughn Auldon?

ABC: Oh, yes.

SS: So you knew him? Or Francis David, Francis Stillman?

ABC: Oh, I didn't know any of them. I was just so taken with the look of this Vaughn Auldon, the picture. Just great craft at work there. [Turning page] Aha! Well, this was not the band that we had there. We had some old woman who would sit and conk away at the piano. This was much more grand, to have two baby grands. We had a three-piece orchestra when I was there. And with the drummer looking at dirty magazines while he performed.

SS: This here is from about the same time period [showing another program]. Here's Walter Hart again, but also Harvey Lee.

ABC: Oh, Harvey Lee. Yes. What a beauty. Now this was, after all, the name that was still kicked around a lot. And I guess we can see why.

SS: Now, Harvey Lee lived in San Francisco for a long time, just moved back to Arkansas in the late 80s or early 90s, where he died. He's the one I was telling you about last time, who was at Finocchio's, it appears, from some time in the late 1940s. I'm not sure when he stopped performing, or even when he started, but from some of the costumes it really looks like the '30s, so he seems like a very early performer. I don't know that much about him, but we have, at the Gay and Lesbian Historical Society, some of his personal papers. He took everything with him back to Arkansas, it's a very

extensive collection, but our archivist knows the archivist at the University of Arkansas, and they sent us all the duplicate materials, like if there were two copies of a photograph, or if they had xeroxed news clippings. They sent them to us since he was such a San Francisco character. So we have a modest box of stuff on him.

ABC: I don't think I ever met Harvey Lee, or if I did, or if he came to the club, I was such a neophyte at that time, that it went over my head.

SS: Now I can show you some pictures—he was probably in his late 50s in the mid-1960s, so he was no longer performing then in quite the same way, though he still did benefits and things.

[Does not recognize any more people in the pictures from the 40s.]

[Looking at photos of Harvey Lee, I mention that in some of his later pictures, Lee is often posed with Russian wolf hounds, and Aleshia remembers that Lee is in fact who people in the early 60s remembered with such awe, who made her entrance in sables, with wolf hounds.]

SS: Now in a couple of these from the 60s, it looks like he has implants, though later in life it seems that he did not. It could just be clothes, either way, because you can do almost anything with clothes, but look here—there's one picture in particular where she's wearing a see-through body suit, and it looks to me like implants more than falsies. So I just wondered how common it was, in the period when you were working, I know you said that you and Stormy were the only ones at Finocchio's on hormones, but if anybody else you knew of in the business was doing implants, or hormones, or whatever.

ABC: No.

SS: Nobody in your immediate circle?

ABC: I think that all came later. I think even with the implants, I think that would have been early for that. I mean, society really just wasn't going to allow it. I think, looking, this is probably just, well, he probably did have a core, and was just very soft.

SS: Well, look at this picture--it's a xerox, so you can't see it as well as in the original photo, but it just looks like a full breast to me.

ABC: Well, once again, this is a picture. And there is a line here.

SS: That's the body suit. I wish I had the original to show you. I just think if this is artifice, it's very good artifice.

ABC: Well, Kara Montez, who did the hula number, had birdseed, did bras out of birdseed, and that was very convincing, because they moved right. So--[shrugs].

SS: OK. Well, enough about Harvey Lee.

[We look at some other programs from the 1960s, which she dates post-1963 because neither she nor Stormy are there any longer. She identifies several individuals. Elton Paris (real name Felton Harris, whom she thought might still be around San Francisco, owned property there, though she had not found him in the phone book.) "Elton I was friends with, through Stormy, we got to meet Sara Vaughn, Ella was a friend of Elton's, Elton had a lot of these sorts of connections, and this is sort of what allowed us to hob-nob, because we too were 'professionals,' don't you know." [Laughs] Laverne Cummings. Ray Francis. Lucian Phelps. Reggie Dahl. J.J. Van Dyke. Jackie Phillips. Looking at other miscellaneous female impersonator materials, Aleshia recognizes Ray Leen, whom she says was out of New Orleans and was "very good friends" with Stormy, and who was later a dress designer: "In fact, I think I have hanging up back there a gown of hers."]

ABC: Now, here's somebody I want to ask you about, Bambi, in Paris. I know you mentioned earlier that she had surgery and did hormones, in Paris, when would this be?

SS: About the same time, or maybe a little before.

ABC: Before you?

SS: Uh-huh. Just before me. And she was quite the French sensation. And as I said earlier, I think married a Duke or an Earl. And there were pictures of her in--

[She finds, looking through some of her own pictures, a photo of Kathy, from the later sixties, also of Raedie Young ("I just loved Raedie."), the second Mrs. Finocchio. Sal Mineo, ringside at Fin's. SS: "So you met Sal Mineo?" ABC: "Yes, yes. I mean, they all came." Shows a picture of herself as a young man, visiting family in 1960. Looking at another picture of Stormy, she says there was also "a picture in Dr. Benjamin's book, with her face blacked out, where she's doing this hermaphrodite statue sort of thing." Finds of picture of Sally Rand, who "could not have been sweeter."]

ABC: Here's a postcard from Finocchio's that I sent to my parents.

SS: I had just noticed that. It says "If you won't come pick one up for yourself, I'll just send it to you. But you don't know what you've missed. Lee." So this would be about 1960, 61?

ABC: Yeah. And of course that was passed around--well, not that one, but I sent other pictures, in my red sweater and all, and my Grandmother, my family, well, what I was doing was preparing them for surgery. Trying to break this sort of as gently as possible. And of course my grandmother passed the pictures all over town. Gave them to some of my old schoolmates, they spit on them, threw them on the ground, that sort of thing.

SS: So--let's get back to Bambi.

ABC: Yes, let's. Now, Bambi. The stories of Bambi--of course we're separated by an ocean--but the stories of Bambi, that transsexuals were very accepted, in fact even lauded I would say, in France, was a real incentive for me with surgery. And I really wanted to--I think if it hadn't been for Hank I would have gone. Yeah. I just wanted to where I would be accepted. I mean who wouldn't?

SS: Oh, I had a question about your chronology. I wasn't quite sure looking over the transcript from last time about when you and Lane Erskine were going to take off--now, did you actually leave San Francisco and go somewhere else?

ABC: Yes, we left San Francisco and went to Los Angeles, and then he left Los Angeles and went to Paris.

SS: So you never left the country, you just went to Los Angeles?

ABC: Yes. After he left me, I never heard from him again. Well, actually I did, years later, after I was with Hank. He was sitting front row, smoking a big cigar, saying "I've missed you." The ass.

SS: So you never actually made it to Paris, but you had heard of this scene--

ABC: Certainly.

SS: --and had heard of Bambi?

ABC: Oh, yes, and had seen pictures. There was a picture of Bambi in very short shorts on a sailboat with her Duke or Earl or whatever he was, in some magazine, and I just thought "Jimminy Cricket! Here we are living under a cloud, only going out a night, and here she is--and she doesn't look any better than I do--we're the same damn thing." I thought all I had to do was get out of the country and I'd have me a lord of some sort.

SS: On the sailboat and off you'd go into the sunset. So you never met her?

ABC: No, I never did.

SS: Did you ever meet or know Coccinelle?

ABC: No. I mean, saw pictures, knew who she was. Yes, she was another then. And then there was the other one then, I showed you her picture, Gilda.

SS: Yeah, Gilda, French-Canadian, talk show. She also had surgery and did hormones?

ABC: No—she never did surgery, and I'm not sure about the hormones. I just meant that she was grander than grand. Another Miss Cummings. But yes—Laverne was a beauty and talented, and you know I did hear that she ended up selling ties in a department store. In fact, when I went back, two years ago I guess, to Finocchio's, and went backstage, J. J. Van Dyke was there, and he said Laverne ended up selling ties at Macy's.

SS: In the Harvey Lee papers at the GLHS there's a story on Paul Laverne Cummings, in a San Francisco paper, I think the Examiner, from the late 70s or early 80s, that he had retired from the profession, blah, blah blah. There was a picture. But, yeah, I think it was working in a department store.

ABC: Oh, that's sad. But J.J. said she was let go—that her voice had gone. Well, her voice was always, eh-h. Poor Laverne. I mean, she always thought she was singing at the Waldorf. Just so above and beyond. But was a beauty. So I think that's probably what let go. Damn. You know, that's what makes me angry. That's the shame of it all. You know, having to become one of the old bags from Oakland. That's what's wrong with that profession, that there's nowhere else for you to go.

[end of tape]

SS: I want to continue with something that you were just saying, about how with the early transsexuals you felt there was something quite charismatic about them all. I want you to say more about that. I also want you to go back to a point that you made earlier, where you said something about all of those early transsexuals, how "society just pushed us along, and we didn't know where we were going." So, what did you see that was so charismatic—give me some examples drawn from people that you knew—how you saw them as charismatic, special people. And then if we could go on to that other question. Pushed along how?

ABC: Well, you'll have to help me with this. OK—I can think of some examples. Certainly Stormy, Charlotte and myself. Robin, that I mentioned earlier.

SS: Yeah, I want to hear more about her.

ABC: OK. All people who had--we had very low or no self esteem. And yet--well, I understood the attraction to someone who was on stage, because you represent something attractive. But I never understood--I thought I was just this flawed being--

why people would be so drawn--what it was? Protective, that was one issue. I don't know how to explain it, but even now I have friends who say "When you go out, and you walk into a room, every head turns." They send you drinks, want to get to know you better. And at 60 years old you know it's not because of a physical thing. It's not that you're the prettiest thing that just walked in the door. So I think we carry with us, I think people perceive, that we differ in a non-threatening way. I don't know what it is. For me, I think if I had the criteria for being transsexual, I think that there is a--well, purity is my word for it. There is a spiritual connection. There is something spiritual beneath the desire. I don't know--I'm sorry we're wasting tape--but here's one example, that woman who called a little while ago, that woman from work that I really do not care about all that much, but she just learned that she was getting her children back, and who does she call, but me? And I think this is an example. Because she knows that that would be important to me somehow. That it is just right that these children should be returned to their mother. I think that all the transsexuals I have known--at least the ones that I label as transsexual--have had a very caring, nurturing side to them. And we've talked a bit about hustling, which I do think--we do whatever we have to do to survive. But I suspect that if there is something that can keep us on the straight and narrow, we do that. That hurting another being is very painful for us. I know I'm rambling. I can't pinpoint what I'm trying to say. I suppose it's like from the Indian culture. I do believe that transsexualism is a spiritual place between the genders. I don't know if that quite captures it though. But I am so glad that at 60 years old I can say that we are very special, very special people. And I am so delighted to be included in that number. I really mean that. I think it's a gift. And I differ from you, I think. I think it's something we come in with, it's not something that our eyes are opened to, or that it's a special road that we travel. I think we come into this world with it. We are very special beings. We have a great deal of knowledge that other people don't have. Knowledge is not a good word. We have a sight, a sense of things around us, that maybe other people are just too comfortable in their skins to notice. Maybe that's what it is. But there's an ability to read. And I think in reading the pain of others, and I think that may be what part of the attraction is. People want to share their pain. OK--this is beginning to make sense to me. I've always believed--I've spent a lot of time in bars and clubs and am supposed to be this party animal person. But it never fails that those come to you who are hurting. And they share that pain with you, sensing that you will, if not make it better, at least care. At least empathize. There. That's it.

SS: OK. What did you mean by being pushed, all the early transsexuals?

ABC: Well, this will just be rambling again. I think especially in this country, with Christine having surgery, we knew that it was possible. And I think by saying that society sort of pushed us along, there was no other way to be. We weren't going to be allowed to be ourselves unless we had surgery. I guess that's what I'm saying. That--I don't know what I'm talking about. But going to that psychiatrist, who said do you think that you are a woman, all very cut and dried, and then talking about Hank to you, I might not have gone, I might have stayed, not had the actual surgery, because of not

having the money, and having to face my parents, and having to acknowledge it. I don't know what I would have done, I don't know at what point I would have stopped. And if, as you've said to me, it just doesn't leave you alone and you have to keep going—but I didn't have the chance to stop and have a breather. I was afraid of life in the daylight, afraid of being made as a freak, so I didn't have the option of stopping without completion. Running into situations—we haven't talked about this, but running into situations after surgery where I had to prove—the police showed up at my door once and I had to drop my drawers for an inspection. [Later, when I was] stripping, some one said "I know that's Lee Shaw from Finocchio's in San Francisco." And they pooh-poohed the very idea, but the master of ceremonies, some old fag with an axe to grind, he paid for a waiter from Finocchio's to come up, and they set this trap.

SS: This was in Vegas?

ABC: No, Reno. He sticks his head in the door and says "Lee?" And fool that I am I turn around. So they go to the manager, this little cigar-chomping lesbian, and said that this was just outrageous. And she calls me in, and says that there has to be an inspection, and so I drop my drawers. And she sort of just grunts, and sticks her head out into the hallway, and shouts "Looks like a twat to me, and I've seen a million of 'em!" So—but, I don't know that that clarifies for you what I mean that society pushed us along. We had no idea, there was no one to turn to, to say to you that this is what you will be. There's Christine on television saying "Don't look at my hands, I was gardening today," [imitating Jorgensen hiding her hands] which just sort of breaks my heart, and it breaks my heart that the camera of course runs in on her hands. That's what it was all about. It was very scary. And there was this new medium, television, and they are going to look for an adam's apple, or zoom in on your hands, or zoom in on your feet. So you are under this microscope. My god, that was just very scary. And yet, it was worse to be caught between. I look at that picture of Harvey Lee as a male—such a beautiful and attractive woman and what, I'm sorry honey, but what a faggy guy. You know—who's going to want that? I mean, if you have a choice of who you're going to go to bed with—not that it's all about going to bed—or live with, or be seen with. It just disturbs me so much. So yeah. It had to be. And yet I'm angry—I'm delighted that there was surgery and therefore a way out, but angry that there had to be a way out. And granted, that at the very beginning, you hear things like you're too pretty to be a boy? This--this angers me. Because--well, as I told you earlier, I'm so proud of you, here you are a generation later, you did go on. Of course, you did it as a boy at first. Do we know of anyone who—well, I did actually, I went back to school as a woman, so yes we do know of someone—and the only things I accomplished, I accomplished as a woman. School meant nothing to me before. Afterwards, life was acceptable, and I was acceptable. I was an attractive human being now. And president of this club, and asked to run for that. And life was grand. You know, being in the Miss Tennessee pageant, running for student body president, you know. It was lovely, lovely. But none of that would have been for me as a male. I was a nebbish. And I took it to such an extreme—I mean, honey, the eyebrows weren't even arched, they just weren't even there. They were cut off to little nubs so we

could pencil them in at night. So the face was just a palette on which to paint our night-time personas. Miserable. You asked where in San Francisco did you go in those days. Nowhere. Just scurried around. I hated it. And it was Hank—I've been writing about this part so it's all very fresh—but it was Hank who made me go out into the daylight. I was just programmed, walking to work, going through that tunnel on Broadway, having people throw bottles at me from passing cars.

SS: OK—so as I said my big agenda for the day was to get you to talk about people that you knew and met. You had mentioned Robin earlier, said that you met her at 860 Geary Street, said she was from Oregon or Seattle somewhere. Can you tell me any more? You said last time that people were always coming and going from that building, and I want to pick your brain, because I thought you meant transgender people were coming and going all the time. But first, what about Robin?

ABC: Um--yes, that's true, but there weren't all that many. Robin, and then Louise from down in San Diego. Where Louise had her surgery, I don't know.

SS: You don't remember her last name?

ABC: No. She had been a truck driver, had been in the Navy, she lived in San Diego, and she met all these young sailors shipping out. And she was old enough to be their mother, certainly.

SS: Tell me what she looked like.

ABC: She looked like a truck driver.

SS: Was she big?

ABC: She was a very sweet person, and so I hate to say this, but she was like, oh, with a sailor, 19 years old, skinny little thing, and she's "Here honey, let me help you with that" and she'd hoist up his duffel bag and put it over is shoulder.

SS: This sounds a lot like Louise Ergestrasse, or Louise Durkin, which was a married name of hers. I'm just trying to figure out--

ABC: It could be, I just know she was from San Diego, and that she actually ended up being a housekeeper for Stormy and Mike, and she was in and out, a very nice person, but I have to say that Stormy and I just sort of dismissed Louise because she just didn't seem right somehow. I mean there's one story about this Louise, someone questioned her gender, a neighbor, and she threw her down on the porch and pulled down her panties and stuck this vagina in her face—I mean, this, my dear, is not what we would like to think of as transsexual behavior.

SS: Now, this really fits the description. There's a woman in the Tenderloin--

ABC: You mean now?

SS: No not now, but if it's the same person I've heard of she still lives up in the Russian River, though I haven't been able to find her. But there's a woman in the Tenderloin named Louise, who in 1967 had the last name Ergestrasse, but later married and had the last name Durkin, and she is the person who, in late 1966 or early 1967, started demanding that the city of San Francisco start dealing more equitably with transgender people.

ABC: Well, good for her!

SS: Now, I've read some of the newspaper articles from the time, and interviewed people who knew her, especially this police officer Elliot Blackstone, who was slightly after your time in San Francisco--

ABC: Well, no it's not actually, because that would be about the time that this Louise was the housekeeper for Stormy and Mike, at where ever their house was.

SS: Not in the Tenderloin?

ABC: No.

SS: But they've got North Beach Leather by this time?

ABC: Yeah, and I'm trying to remember where their house was. I know we had lived on Steiner for a while, one of those nice-looking places that we see all the time now as representing San Francisco, but that was Elton's house, and we lived upstairs. Then they bought a house once they had had their success, out--oh, I think it was towards the Mission, out towards there. And Louise worked as a house keeper.

SS: Wow. Well, if it's this same Louise, this Louise I'm talking about. Well, let me give you the background story on this. [Tells story of homophile activism in the Tenderloin, Glide Memorial, establishment of central city anti-poverty program, Don Lucas, Elliot Blackstone, etc.] One day, either in very late 1966 or very early 1967, this woman, who's been described to me as "a great big old football player type transsexual" comes barging into [Blackstone's] office and just demands that he do something for transsexuals. And according to Don Lucas, who I've also interviewed, when I asked him how he would describe Louise, he said something to the effect of "she was a great big old gal, a real juggernaut. She was real nice, but hah! you certainly knew when she was in the room with you. You certainly knew she was there." And her husband, Jerry, everyone describes as a runt, a really scrawny little guy, and both Don and Elliot have described

to me how she was always sort of dragging him along, like she was the big mamma and he was her little rag doll. That she really ran the show.

ABC: That sounds about right. Now I don't know anything about this husband, but this sounds very much like Louise.

SS: Yeah, Don Lucas says he remembers the day very clearly when Louise barged in to Elliot's office and read him the riot act and demanded that he do something for "her people." And Elliot says he is still in touch with her from time to time and that she lives up on the Russian River.

ABC: I bet that's her. It's just too much of a coincidence.

SS: And that she had been a patient of Harry Benjamin, and that the way Elliot told the story, one day this football player type transsexual came in, he said, "well you know it's just unfortunate that some people are transsexual, that psychologically definitely she was a woman, and a very sweet person, but my god, hands big enough to palm a basketball."

ABC: And that's what's so surprising to me, because--well, it would make sense that Stormy had come to know her through Benjamin, but that surprises that Benjamin would have gone that far with her. Because he was very into this whole image thing.

SS: So maybe Louise barges her way in with Benjamin the way she barges her way in with everybody else. But Elliot Blackstone tells me that when she came in to him he said, "Oh, you're a transvestite." She said "No, I'm a transsexual." and he said "Well, pardon my ignorance, but what the hell is a transsexual?" And he said she gave him the book by Dr. Benjamin, and that he later became a friend. And see, this is in late 66, early 67 right when that book comes out, and Elliot Blackstone meets Benjamin, gets hooked up with Reed Erickson, who funded Benjamin's work, and helped set up the clinic at Hopkins, and also at Stanford. He was FTM, by the way, I don't know if you know anything of him.

ABC: No, not a thing.

SS: Well, he was from a wealthy Southern family, in Louisiana, and he spent a good deal of his money making sure it was possible to get surgery in the United States, which it increasingly is after 1966.

ABC: Oh, how wonderful!

SS: [Tells a bit about setting up the NTCU through Blackstone and the Erickson Foundation.] But all this starts with Louise Ergestrasse. And she had also apparently started this support group. I mean, I can just imagine this from her point of view, like--

my god, there's a clinic open at Hopkins, and Stanford, and Minnesota, and Benjamin's published this book, there seem to be all these new possibilities, and we've got to take the bull by the horns—

ABC: This has to be the same book, what did you say it was called?

SS: The Transsexual Phenomena.

ABC: This has to be the same book that Kathy's picture is in.

SS: Yeah, it was Harry Benjamin's only real book-length publication, so it would certainly have to be.

ABC: I see.

SS: So yeah, Louise apparently still lives up in Russian River, around up in there. And it's fascinating to me that she could be this person from 860 Geary.

ABC: It has to be, just has to be.

SS: And you know, I might even have a picture of Louise Ergestrasse, though I think it uses a pseudonym, in this newspaper article in the San Francisco Chronicle. I think the person in this article is Louise. It identifies her, though, as a prostitute.

ABC: Oh!

SS: Yeah, that she hustled, and actually that a lot of the people who first started organizing in the Tenderloin were prostitutes, who felt like they couldn't find work anywhere else, and that's why they hustled.

ABC: There's a lot of truth in that.

SS: Yeah, and this was the rationale: You say you want to reduce crime in this neighborhood, well, I'm a criminal because I'm a transsexual. And if you don't want me to sell my ass to pay my rent, then find me a job. Get me access to electrology, to hormones, to surgery. If you want me to be a good girl then you'd better give me the opportunity to be one. That was sort the attitude behind it. The name of the group was actually Conversion Our Goal.

ABC: I understand that. Good, good, good.

SS: So this all happening 66, 67, and Louise is the real mover and shaker behind it all.

ABC: It must be, it just must be her.

SS: I'll have to mail you the photo of her that I may have--I didn't bring it today because I brought all the stuff on female impersonators. But I have another file on the Tenderloin.

ABC: Of course I'd love to see it, and if you can find her, I'd love to see her. Now Charlotte, who we were talking about earlier, she, too could probably also give you all sorts of information, if she would. But I don't know that she's even still alive.

SS: So, Robin. That's where we were. You don't know much about her?

ABC: No, she came through, and she stayed--and see, I don't know what the connection was. She stayed with us for a while, I think she even rented a room there from us perhaps. And was just--maybe she was down to see Benjamin. I just remember Robin was very sweet, and we went out a few times together, but I really don't know anything.

SS: You said last time she told you the story about the person who auto-castrated, who self-mutilated, and that this is where you got the idea?

ABC: Yes, this person also came down, too, from Seattle or Portland or somewhere--and had gone to a hospital saying she had fallen with a pair of pruning shears but had done this sort of self-mutilation thing. And came down, and was going to help. So she was there, when I was going to do it. And the idea was, I would do my castration, and I would then get up and help Kathy, she would take my place on the table, and we'd go snip, snip, and then we'd both be OK.

SS: So Robin was there?

ABC: No Robin was not there, but the other woman, the one who had done it. I don't remember her name.

SS: Claire Elgin, does that name ring a bell?

ABC: No, not at all.

SS: Well, she was somebody who was around San Francisco in the 50s, who had self-castrated.

ABC: Oh really? Well, it could have been her. It was a small little community.

SS: If it's her, and you know, I've been talking to people who are trying to remember things from forty years ago--

ABC: Right, exactly.

SS: But there was a woman who had auto-castrated here, who had apparently been a sailor, and who was tattooed from her neck to her ankles to her wrists.

ABC: No, I don't think this was her. Heavens, oh no, I think I would have remembered that.

SS: And Claire, apparently, was that person, and the story I've heard is that she took a meat cleaver and just--chop!--everything, penis and all. And that because of that, she got her surgery at the University of California at San Francisco, that they actually did a very few surgeries up there, between Jorgensen and 1964, up there on Parnassus, and one was Claire Elgin. And I think in part they did it here simply because Claire butchered herself so badly, that they just had to do something immediately. Now there was another person who I had mentioned to you that first night when we spoke on the phone, and this is Louise Lawrence. A cross-dresser?

ABC: Yes. I think so. I think this would have to be the same Louise who came to visit when we were living on Steiner.

SS: And this is not the Louise who was the manager at 860?

ABC: No, definitely not, this was definitely a transvestite. And I think--no, actually, I'm not sure where she worked. I think I'm confused, I was thinking that she worked for a union, but that was some one else. So I don't really know that much about Louise except that she was an avowed transvestite. She was very upset that I was following Stormy's lead and was going to have surgery. You know, that I wasn't a transsexual, but rather a transvestite. And of course I was very offended. I thought "Why you little--!" But that it. That's all I know. She would just come over. Very much the grand dame with her hats and her pearls and her suits.

SS: I have a picture of her as well.

ABC: Tall, thin, sort of craggy as I remember. Grand Dame.

SS: So she was somebody who knew Stormy--from the club?

ABC: Well, I don't really know. When I came, dropped from heaven into the scene as it were, this was all already established. So, I just came into a world that already existed. Louise was just there.

SS: You got the sense she was somebody who had been around forever?

ABC: Yes, very much so. And she didn't come around all that much. She wasn't somebody that we partied with. It was, I suppose, because of where we worked, and we were all sort of in the same boat—that this was some place where Louise could go and hang out of an afternoon and be accepted—Stormy's and our apartment, I mean.

SS: There are a few people that I've come across references to even earlier. Benjamin first met a transsexual here in 1949. And Louise was in town from the early 1950s. [Tells story of how Don Lucas had met Louise Lawrence]. So Louise knew Stormy, that was your connection to her.

ABC: Yes, that's right.

SS: Because Joanne Meyerowitz, who's also researching all this, was telling me the other day that she'd seen a typescript autobiography by Louise Lawrence, and that she mentioned something about being enamored of, fascinated by, female impersonators. Kind of idolized them. I know she went to the Beige Room—did you know that place?

ABC: No.

SS: It was a theatrical drag place in the 40s and early 50s, very popular then, but I wasn't sure how long it lasted. So apparently Louise would go to these sorts of places. Do you remember her coming to Finocchio's?

ABC: Yes, now that you mention it—I do remember—see, just jog that old memory! Yes, I do remember seeing Louise at the club. She definitely did.

SS: And you said she tried to persuade you not to follow Stormy into a life of transsexual degradation?

ABC: Yes—but well, everyone saw Stormy that way, as this conniving, manipulative human being. And there was just so much fear tied up around this whole transsexual business, and surgery. And I think maybe that was so—that was very prevalent at Finocchio's—about the surgery, or that anyone would do it. I mean, I went through these stages myself, when I got there. Raedie, whose picture you saw, I remember her saying "Don't listen to Stormy, we are male, we are impersonators." And I remember going through all of that. I remember saying to myself—OK, I'm going to let my hair grow on my legs. And I will wear opaque stockings on stage. And that lasted until—hah! I met, we had a lot of servicemen who came to the club, and there was this young man who had given me a tiger—he called me "Tiger," and I carried with me for years and years and years this stuffed tiger he gave me—and when we finally went home, I said, "Would you prefer that I shave my legs?" And he said, "Oh, god, yes, please do." So that was the end of that little chapter. And then he ran into Mike Hobin one night, in the bathroom, right down the hall, and he said "You'll never believe what I've just been through," he says to Mike, who is of course living with Stormy at the time.

SS: So he might in fact just very well believe it.

ABC: Mike gets the picture, yes.

SS: So maybe you can tell me more about that, you said there was a lot of fear among the impersonators about the surgery?

[end of tape]

SS: OK--so some people had carved out a place for themselves in the world as a female impersonator, or had carved out a place for themselves in the world as a woman without ever having gone through surgery, like Louise Lawrence. And that this transsexual idea was sort of a new thing. Why was it scary?

ABC: Because I think it called into question the legitimacy, if you will, of their position. There were the impersonators, for example, who had men in their lives, and are for all intents and purposes women--they are parroting heterosexual existence. And yet they have to go out on the streets as men. They have this life where they are butterflies who come out of their cocoons only at night, on stage. Well, for us to come along as a new generation, and to say we are not going to settle for this, this was very upsetting to them. And so they went--well, we heard a lot about mutilation, and hormones make you crazy, and this and that, and who do you think you are. And Louise was one of those. I think by this point she had been a transvestite, and to whatever degree I think this was just something that--and I understand that. Because honestly, when I first met you, I thought "What do you mean that you were married, and that you had children, and that you are lesbian identified? I mean, what the hell could that possibly be all about?" So it must have been just the same thing with her.

SS: Like I was saying earlier, this whole transsexual thing is a new possibility that opens up in the 50s, and that perhaps there were people who felt the same as you did, about yourself, but they had already built a life in another way.

ABC: To survive, yes, exactly.

SS: And then this new medical thing come along--

ABC: And we are pulling attention, yes. We all know those stories about Christine and the razor blades.

SS: Well, actually, no--what's this?

ABC: That with all her publicity, that from within the gay community people were sending her rusty razor blades in the mail and saying why don't you just slit your

wrists--how dare you put this negative attention on us all. And that attitude was very prevalent, even at Finocchio's.

SS: Did you ever meet Christine?

ABC: No, I did not.

SS: But she was certainly a touchstone, you would always hear stories about her?

ABC: Yes, you certainly heard the stories. I think we did talk about that, about the note being passed in high school?

SS: Yes, we did.

ABC: Yeah, so--but, I sort of shared that too, I think, that I don't know that I would have gone to lunch with Christine Jorgensen, because I don't know if I would have wanted to be tarred by association, with that same brush. But I was fascinated. She was a celebrity, she certainly was. And I still don't know to this very day, even as I'm writing this book, I sit and think "Do I really want to go there?" And I think back to Charlotte, and how she went on the road, and just changing a lot of gowns and doing a lot of patter because she wasn't a performer. That was negative publicity, and it takes its toll. So although I think Christine did us all a great service, her life must have been total hell. It must have been. I cannot imagine knowing that people are always saying "Look at what a man this is." Looking always for the maleness in this person.

SS: Ever since you told me that you had heard this rumor from Harry Benjamin about Kim Novak, I've sort of been fascinated, whether it's true or not--you know--Kim Novak and Christine Jorgensen, as these transsexual bookends, these two mirrors of what a transsexual can be in the fifties or sixties. This is how your life is if you're out, and this is how your life can be if you're not. And I don't think Christine really had much of a choice, I think she was probably outed, and just went "Well, on with the show." She rose to the challenge, and went on with her life as best she could. Although to a certain degree as a kind of performing circus freak. Like "OK, I'm a transsexual and I'm going to do it with all the grace and style I can muster. I'll be a professional transsexual for paying audiences." That was sort of what her life became. And if indeed it's true, that Kim Novak--well, Kim Novak gets to be Kim Novak.

ABC: Yes, thank you very much. And also this is sort of what happened with Tula. I mean, just drop dead gorgeous.

SS: Well, I think Jorgensen was gorgeous.

ABC: Eh, I never thought she was. To me that's like saying Patricia Nixon is gorgeous.

SS: Well, I don't know, in some pictures I see of her I think this is a person of average attractiveness, but other times I really do think she has something more. Had a real look put together, was very gracious. But no, certainly never the same kind of icon of white feminine beauty that Novak was.

ABC: And I don't know for sure. I was not old enough to have met Kim and have seen her as we are sitting here talking face to face. And we know that celluloid image can be made to do anything—anything.

SS: Yeah, have you seen any recent pictures? I mean, I really don't know. She's aging the way I've seen a lot of MTFs age. Still a very attractive woman in her way, but she's 60-whatever, but anyway, I just look, and say yeah, I can believe that she's transsexual.

ABC: I, in a way, would like to believe she is.

SS: I've been wondering, fantasizing, whether it might not be possible to speak with her. You know she lives right down in Carmel.

ABC: Well, more power to you. Because once again—and I say that Benjamin told me that, but once again—we're dealing with almost 40 years here.

SS: But he did tell you?

ABC: Oh—did he now? I wouldn't sign a document saying yes, I remember it distinctly, I can picture his mouth moving. I mean, the gossip was there, it was all over the community, was it actually Benjamin who told me? I think it was, but I wouldn't sit in court and swear. But I think--Charlotte was there. And I do believe this is true--he always drank Doubounet, and we were his girls. He referred to RG, real girls, and we were his girls.

SS: HGs.

ABC: Yes, his girls. And I just know he told me that. But then again, it would have been just like him to say that just to stir the pot, too, you know. He had his own quirks.

SS: Such as?

ABC: He had a fetish for very thin girls with very long hair. He had a hair fetish. So that was his quirk.

SS: I had actually heard that one, that he like to stroke a woman's hair while he masturbated. I just wondered if I was about to hear a new one.

ABC: No, that was it.

SS: His widow is still alive, you know. Gretchen, she was 40 years younger than him--he was 60, she was 20. But she's still in New York. I've wondered if it might not be worth my while to track her down and see if she will talk about anything.

ABC: Well, it's interesting. I guess we have come that far. But like in talking about Kim, I have a tendency to be real protective. And about Louise--big Louise, you know, carrying those sacks and marrying all those sailors, throwing this woman down on the porch--and being very proud of this, too by the way: "I threw that bitch down and I showed her rerr-rerr-rerr"--but I tend not to tell those sorts of things. I mean, these are the sorts of things we don't want out. We try to build a mystique about transsexuals. I guess it's time to let the truth be out there, though.

SS: OK--I had a few other people I wanted to ask you about. Dixie MacLaine?

ABC: No.

SS: She was in Los Angeles, she was sort of a burlesque performer, tried to ride the wave of publicity about her surgery, had a bit of notoriety at the time. Did you know of a female impersonator named Rae Bourbon?

ABC: I only know of Rae Bourbon.

SS: There were rumors, there was a story for a while that Rae had had surgery, but it turned out later not to be true, but that he told this story, he went public with it, as a way of getting people to just leave him the hell alone, but then later in life saying well, no I never actually did have surgery. So you never heard that?

ABC: No. His was just another of those names that was kicked around back stage. Just, these were our predecessors, those who had really perfected the craft.

SS: Did you know down in Los Angeles somebody named Elaine Parent, or Nicole Parent?

ABC: No.

SS: [Tells story of Elaine Parent, a.k.a. "Agnes," who cons Richard Green at UCLA into performing surgery, in the case made famous by sociologist Harold Garfinkle. ABC replies, "How wonderful!"] She did get to know a few transsexuals in Los Angeles over the years, and I thought perhaps you might have at least met her.

ABC: No, because even when Stormy came down there, we were very careful, we were so underground. And I did love this, however. There was once Kathy tried to commit suicide, and she went to UCLA--and I'm sorry, but I don't remember the name of the

surgeon, the plastic surgeon, but supposed to be the one who had done Raquel Welch, supposedly—but that she was aging, and that there was no way for her to survive, to make a living other than as a stripper, and so she had to have a breast augmentation, and to have all this other work done. And he went for it, he did it for free. [Chuckling, shaking her head] This man had just driven her crazy, and she tried to kill herself. Actually only to get his attention. She took all these pills and said "OK, I'm going to die now." And he just went in to take a shower, as she lay dying. She's ingested all this stuff. And this nurse from next door comes in and gets her, takes care of this. And I was married at the time and they called me and said "Your sister is in the hospital." And she's in restraints, oh my god, and it was enough to keep me from ever wanting to commit suicide, but once she'd had this experience, she decided to use it to her advantage, which she was always very good at.

SS: Did you ever hear about a book called Take My Tool?

ABC: No—certainly not! [laughing]

SS: Well, you said you were wicked, and got around, so I thought it wouldn't hurt to ask.

ABC: Well, in this case I was oblivious.

SS: It was written in 1967, a porn book, written by someone under the pseudonym Vivian LeMan, but although it's done as this sleazy jerk-off exploitation book, whoever wrote it apparently knew of Elmer Belt, and there's just enough factual basis to see that whoever wrote it knew the transsexual scene in Los Angeles somewhat.

ABC: Do you know how they actually did that surgery?

SS: You mean Belt? What sort of technique did he use? There were several, and the procedures actually changed somewhat over time, so I don't know quite what he was doing.

ABC: Well, yes, that's exactly what I'm asking, what the technique was. I mean, did they bore a hole or what? Why did it hurt so much? Why did it take a year to recover?

SS: I'm sorry, I don't know what kind of surgery you had.

ABC: Me either. You know, I was "Just do it."

SS: Especially in that early period, there just wasn't one standardized way to do it. I mean, to a certain extent, and I hope you don't take offense at this, they were experimenting on you. You guys were guinea pigs.

ABC: Oh, we were. There's no question about that. I know that. And I know they told me, I've just been writing about that, it was so many centimeters this way, and that way, and we had to wear this damn mold, and it ripped the tissue, and it was all so painful, took me a year to recover. But I just dismissed all that. I had no idea--that's why I asked. I don't know enough about our construction. I mean, do they have to make a hole?

SS: Yeah, they have to make it. [Some discussion of various neocolporrathy techniques. With ABC, Belt used skin grafts from her thighs and the bottom of her feet, and they did a form of penile inversion.] If it's not too personal a question, how satisfied are you with your surgery?

ABC: I'm delighted. I'm actually delighted. That sucker works.

SS: That's great. Because I've heard from people, that yes, sometimes the plumbing and the electricity both work fine, and from others that one or the other, or both, really don't. And this is from people who did it way back, as well as from people who did it more recently. So it seems it's always been the case that it's kind of a hit-or-miss thing. You still have to sign a waiver saying you won't sue for malpractice if you can't feel anything down there afterwards.

ABC: I know that Kathy's major problem, and of course she went to Morocco, was in moving the urethra. And that is one thing I will say for Belt, I guess he was a very good urologist. I mean, I started out in a tub with running water, which was as much to overcome the fear at first as much as anything else, but Kathy had problems.

SS: Infections, or what?

ABC: Infections, yes, but also scar tissue.

SS: Painful urination?

ABC: Yes, and with direction. So she was always going in and having a little correction here, a little correction there. I hope it's gotten to the point that all that is pretty much in the past. We were guinea pigs, we really were.

[More discussion of the specifics of surgery, including pros and cons of various techniques, prices of individual surgeons, and surgery as performance art.]

SS: Well, let me see if I have any more names on my list to ask you about.

ABC: I think I've told you about pretty much everybody. Because there was just a handful that I knew, just a handful and that's it.

SS: And the people who came through 860 Geary, there weren't really that many, or that you really knew?

ABC: There was Robin who stayed for a couple of days, and this other person who had supposedly fallen on the pruning shears, and the manager, Louise, who might or might not have been this person you were speaking of. And those were I think the only transsexuals that I met. And of course I really only knew two—and I preceded Stormy. So actually I only knew one who came before me, Charlotte.

SS: Now you did mention somebody else in the last interview, Carmelita.

ABC: Oh that's right, who was just a week or a month or something like that before me.

SS: Now you said that Mike Hobin had had an affair with her?

ABC: Oh yes—yes, yes, yes.

SS: Tell me about that.

ABC: That's all I know. I just know that Mike—and that Stormy was very jealous of this. And she came to see me right after surgery.

SS: Stormy?

ABC: No, this Carmelita person. And I refused to see her, because I looked so bad. I wasn't about to see her. I did, with my mother's help, manage to struggle to the window, to see her walking away. You know it must have been more than a month earlier, because she was walking away. And I must say she looked great. Yes, she looked very good. But she had been the patient with Belt who immediately preceded me, though I don't know exactly what the time span had been. Maybe I was just a baby, but it took me a long time to heal.

SS: So you don't know anything about who she was, or what she did?

ABC: All I know is what I've said.

SS: That she was with Mike Hobin I find very interesting. Was he what we would now call a trannie hawk?

ABC: Yes, now isn't that interesting? See, I don't know quite how this worked, because Stormy and Mike were together when I came on the scene. And supposedly he was this thug. I mean, I know he was. He was this heterosexual thug, though. And how this Carmelita person gets in, I'm not so sure. Two in a row, right? I know that I told you that he was hiding out, and that Stormy gave him a hiding out place, and he insisted

that she always wear a bra to bed. It was very peculiar. So no, I don't have the particulars on this Carmelita person.

SS: But was she down in Los Angeles?

ABC: No, huh-uh. She was from San Francisco.

SS: So why was she there?

ABC: Well, probably just for surgery. And I'm sure, of course, giving her the benefit of the doubt, she showed up on my door step to say "I've been here, too, and more power to you." but I thought of course at the time that it was because I was a star and she wanted to see me at my worst. [Laughing]. You know, so she could leave and go "Hmph. I'm prettier than she is. Bitch." But yeah, that was just how I was back then. But I hear myself telling you this, and I think I lived a really sheltered life prior to surgery. After I left Tennessee, and then Los Angeles, and found out that there really was a real possibility of surgery, it was just staying home, going to the club, going back home, saving my money.

SS: So tell me a little bit more about how all of that unfolded. It wasn't exactly clear in the other interview that we did, you said you first got a clue when you saw Stormy taking her pills. But you also said that earlier with Lane your plan had been to go to Europe and get surgery. Was it that earlier you had sort of the vague idea of it, but no real concrete details, and that you got the details only later?

ABC: Yeah, because it was the night that I auditioned, I told you that Stormy came in and did that thing about had I had a nose job, and did I have a core, and how long have you been on hormones. So it was known at the club that she was seeing a doctor, and that this was her plan, her ultimate goal. And this was all I knew.

SS: And you had just formed the vague plan that this was also something that you wanted to do?

ABC: No, not even that. I don't think I could say—I guess I just can't remember, I think that's what it is—but I don't think it really dawned on me that there was a procedure that I could go through. I was still so busy putting the pieces together, trying to—do that feminine—well, it was all feelings. With me there's no logic, nothing, just feelings. As this blonde creation that it felt really good being at the time, and it was all about how to just take that further. And then when I said, of the pill, after Lane, what is that, and she said makes your boobies grow, that was just part of the progression. See, those of you have some sort of logical tracking in you mind—huh-uh, I'm not one of those.

SS: I just thought there was something in the transcript from last time about how you and Lane were going to go to Paris and--

ABC: Well, there you go. You're right. That was the plan, we were going to go to Paris and I was going to have surgery. But how I was going to put that plan together, I don't know, I didn't have any idea how that would be accomplished. And see, it's also, well, I've had trouble myself trying to put all these stories together. On the one hand, we go to the opera and we go to the ballet, and we're trying to do the San Francisco social thing, me in my little black dresses, but you know you've still got on the other hand--well, it was a balancing act. You've always got this "Will I be recognized, will I be hauled off to the pokey?" And yeah, it was a balancing act with Lane. You don't want to be seen out in public with a man who has problems with who you are to begin with, as representing that drag thing. And I don't doubt, but I think, though I'm not sure, but that all of that Bambi and Coccinelle stuff, if that didn't have some influence, in this idea of going off to Paris, where we knew that this sort of surgery was done. I'm relatively sure I had never heard of Harry Benjamin until I showed up in his office. I'm sure that's the case.

SS: Yeah, I was just trying to figure out those two contradictory statements that you made, trying to reconcile them. And it seemed to me like one way might be if the plans with Lane were rather more vague, and that it only became concrete with Stormy.

ABC: That's right. And what she did--well, actually what she did was "Take one, this is who you are, come with me." She took over, which is the story of my life. Somebody has always taken over and said this is who you are and this is what you should be.

SS: But do you think she got it right?

ABC: I think she got it very right. I think she got it right, and I think that's why I got the job at Finocchio's. I think she got it right, when she saw me there to audition. She promptly stuck this little chick right under her wing. I know she got it right. I know she did. I can't imagine--well, I don't think I'd be here. I know I would not. I would not have made it. I would have been killed or killed myself, I'm sure of it. And that does not mean that I would have had a better life. Well, you've got your life together. I just wish sometimes that I had had my life together before I had surgery, rather than getting it together afterwards, if I've ever gotten it together at all.

SS: Well, I feel pretty much the same way. Parts of my life feel together, parts don't. And I do think from what I've seen, that for all of us, surgery, or transitioning, is part of the process of getting our lives together. It's actually been good hearing you talk, because one of my regrets in life is that I didn't do this earlier. That I wasted too much time. I know I was doing the best that I could, but if I had it all to do over again, I would do it earlier. Just not waste any time getting to the point where I would live as a woman. You know, I knew my whole life I wanted to do something like this, why did I wait until 30 to act on it in a meaningful way?

[end of tape]