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## \_\_\_[ ann magnuson ]

LIVE AT THE GREAT AMERICAN MUSIC HALL, SAN FRANCISCO

\_\_\_NOVEMBER\_14\_1997



BY JOHN PACZKOWSKI

I've never quite known why I left New York city; overwhelmed by the filth and attitude, perhaps, and pushed closer to the edge by a self-pity indulged more often than not. But I do know that while I was preparing to leave, watching as the belongings, memories and odd bits of the city that had accumulated in my apartment awaited the bullet like coffee cans on some worn picket fence, it was Ann Magnuson and

the sentiments of her apocalyptic ballad of urban acquiescence -- "Folk Song" from Bongwater's "Power of Pussy" -- that helped me look far beyond what I was leaving behind:

"And speaking of home, isn't it about time that you move out of that East Village hellhole, the one with the Honeymooners view of the brick wall out the window because you deserve something more life affirming, like a tree, or a flower, or a patch of grass? Hello death, goodbye Avenue A, I'm getting tired of waiting, tired of being afraid. Joseph Campbell gave me hope and now I have been saved."

"Folk song" was such a lucid, thorough indictment of a media-saturated culture and the oblivion of complacency and despair that New York can become in those brief moments when you're not paying attention that little was left to my

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imagination. My plight was Ann's plight, and her plight was universal. I packed my final bag, moved to the West coast and tried to ignore the irony. But I never forgot that moment, and I never forgot Ann Magnuson.

A recurring but obscure presence in film and television (remember "Anything But Love"? "The Hunger"? "Making Mr. Right"?) and a celebrated icon in the more transgressive margins of culture, Ann Magnuson has been at once unknown and reknowned for the past 15 years. She is infamous in more insular circles as the creative force behind the cultural mayhem of the East Village's Club 57, a breeding ground of experimentation and absurdity that spawned the work of Keith Haring, among others. (Under the auspices of a Club 57 project, Magnuson once performed a "Tribute to Muzak," singing for five hours straight in the elevator of the Whitney Museum.) But for most of us, she is perhaps best known for her work with Shimmy Disc label kingpin Kramer in Bongwater.

Bongwater was one of those rare singular incidences of creative extremes coming into almost infallible confluence. The band's idiosyncratic style was characterized by Magnuson's hallucinatory satires of the bi-polar relationship between the disillusionment of American media's manifest destiny and the musical kitsch and psychedelia Kramer conjured up around it. At it's best -- "Decadent Iranian Country Club" (Double Bummer, 1988) and "Nick Cave Dolls" (Power of Pussy, 1991) -- Bongwater skewered our reverence for a fictional ideal of normalcy. At it's worst -- "Dazed and Chinese" (Double Bummer), a Led Zeppelin standard sung entirely in Chinese, or the cover of Dudley Moore's "Bedazzled" -- it was simply another media victim. The Bongwater canon was a case-study in the schizophrenia of a modern reality rife with media clutter, of days filled with magazine pages and nights lit by television screens. And though that reality may have been our own, the dreams were always Ann's, culled from the pages of the diaries that so often accompanied her to the stage. In the aftermath of Bongwater's bitter dissolution, it is these dreams that remain her hallmark, as well as the method to the madness showcased in her recent spate of performances.

Tonight's performance in San Francisco has been billed as an "evening of pretty songs," but when Magnuson appears on stage in a cloud of smoke, clutching a quill pen and an old

diary and looking for all the world like a feral and disenfranchised reincarnation of Peter Pan's Wendy in her bonnet and nightshirt, it's apparent that "pretty" is only relative. "What is pretty?" she asks. "Pretty is the Spice Girls, their bones picked clean by magpies. What is pretty? Old people, their smooth white skin, our loved ones; these things are pretty. Or Jon Benet Ramsey, who was never able to grow up to be the next Dorothy Stratten. What is pretty?" We are too busy laughing at the observations to wince at the sentiment, which she has already dismissed anyway: "Sentiment, after all, is the dominant media of our time."

Over the course of the next hour and a half, we are asked our opinion of an Albert Spier-designed Disney World and offered an explanation for the multitude of spent condoms that litter the trails of L.A's Griffith Park (cocoon apparently, each begetting a mythical, winged fairie). We are treated to covers of the 5th Dimension's "Wedding Bell Blues," Bobby Hebb's "Sunny," and Yoko Ono's "Woman is the nigger of the world" ("we've come a long way, baby: we've got our own cigarette ad and our own secretary of state."). And we are indulged in a few -- too few, perhaps -- of Magnuson's surreal ruminations on life in general ("life is meant to be lived like a Ken Russel film ... an early one") and the machinations of celebrity ("You'll never be better than a senator's wife and you'll never sing better than Doris Day"). By the time the performance concludes with a tribute, not to David Bowie as promised earlier in the night, but to forgettable Bowie mimic Jobriath, we're awash in a deluge of media-damaged hallucination, looking on as Ann Magnuson -- never one to proceed with caution -- turns her back on us and wades still deeper.

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