

Lydia Lunch No Wave Now

I hit Manhattan as a teen terror in 1976, inspired by the manic ravings of Lester Bangs in *Cream* magazine, the Velvet Underground's sarcastic wit, the glamour of the New York Dolls' first album and the poetic scat of "Piss Factory," by Patti Smith.

I snuck out my bedroom window, jumped on a Greyhound bus and crash-landed in a bigger ghetto than the one I had just escaped from. But with 200 bucks in my back pocket and a notebook full of misanthropic rantings, sporting a baby face which belied a hustler's instinct and a killer urge to destroy everything that had inspired me, I didn't give a flying fuck if the Bowery smelled like dogshit. I wasn't expecting the toilets at CBGB to be the bookend to Duchamp's urinals, but then maybe 1977 had more in common with 1917 than anyone would have imagined.

New York City during the late 1970s and early '80s was a beautifully ravaged slag, impoverished and neglected after suffering from decades of abuse and battery. She stank of sex, drugs and aerosol paint. Her breath hung heavy, sweetly tubercular, sticky and viscous. She leaked from every pore like a sexy corpse unable to give up the ghost. A succubus that fed on new meat and fresh blood, who in turn suckled on her like greedy parasites alchemizing her putrefaction into a breeding ground of intoxicating fauna. A contaminated nursery overrun with toxic belladonna, a deadly nightshade whose blossoms mocked death by embracing a life which defied death, which in turn mocked everything else.

Long before family-friendly gentrification and capital-gain criminality whitewashed all of New York City's kaleidoscopic perversions in order to make it safe for anyone who could afford the ridiculous rents charged for shoe-box-size apartments, the Lower East Side played crash pad, shooting gallery and bordello to dozens of art-school dropouts, avant-noise musicians, radical poets, no-budget filmmakers and fly-on-the-wall photographers who all lived in glorious squalor in cheap tenement flats spitting distance from each other's front window. A drug-fueled, no-holds-barred, blood-soaked pornucopia of art terrorists documenting their personal descent into the bowels of an inferno in a city which felt like the lunatics had taken over the asylum.

Creativity acts as a rogue virus spontaneously combusting, splattering the brain matter of its host carriers across a finite terrain for a fleeting amount of time, forever staining the landscape. Hippie radicals flocked to Haight-Ashbury during the Summer of Love seeking revolution before the acid wore off. Heavyweight Southern African Americans migrated north looking for paid work and ended

up singing the blues in Chicago in the 1940s. The devil hollered when he caught his "Great Balls of Fire" in Memphis in the 1950s. The scandalous theatrics and outrageous decadence of the Weimar Republic in the 1920s—fostering both an uprising in prostitution and performance art—made the Golden Age of Hollywood in the Dirty '30s seem quaint by comparison. The boisterous orgy that had begun in Andy Warhol's Factory in the Swinging '60s had become a bloated Technicolor corpse kicked to the curb by the gutter punks and no-wave nihilists of the late 1970s, whose idea of a good time was defined by how much noise they could make, how much art they could create and how much trouble they could cause before the cops arrived to close down the after-party.

Like the anti-art invasion of dada and the surrealist pranksters who shadowed them and had a blast while pissing all over everybody's expectations of what art was, no wave was a collective bowel-cleansing caterwaul which spat forth a collective of extreme artists who defied category, despised convention, defiled the audience and refused to compromise, and who have consequently influenced and informed pop culture as well as mainstream media ever since.

It's only a movement in retrospect. Post-Alan Vega's pre-punk two-piece, appropriately named *Suicide*, and before pop-punk-grunge *Sonic Youth*, New York City was the devil's dirty litter box. No wave was the bastard offspring of *Taxi Driver*, Times Square, Son of Sam, the blackout of '77, the dud of the Summer of Love, the hate-fuck of Charles Manson, the hell of the Vietnam War, Kent State and the Kennedy assassinations. It was a mad collective of death-defiant miscreants desperate to rebel against the apathetic complacency of a zombie nation dumbed down by sitcoms, disco, fast food and professional wrestling.

Yes, we were angry, ugly, snotty and loud. We used music and art as a battering ram and a form of psychic self-defense against our own naturally violent tendencies, an extreme reaction against everything the 1960s had promised but failed to deliver. A mania that shot through the night skies of a decade riddled with all the failures and frustrations that had come before it.

But beneath the scowls of derision, the antagonism and acrimony, the beautifully hideous harangues and the nearly unbearable shrill of that grotesque soundtrack, we were howling with delight, laughing like lunatics at the brink of the apocalypse in a madhouse the size of all New York City, thrilled to be rubbing up against the freaks and outcasts who somehow, for some reason, had all decided to run to land's end and scream their bloody heads off.