

**MAN
ENOUGH
TO BE
A WOMAN**

JAYNE COUNTY

with Rupert Smith



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INTRODUCTION

‘I guess if you stay alive long enough, people eventually catch up,’ writes Jayne County in the new epilogue of her autobiography. Here, she describes finding inner peace and wider recognition after a whirlwind life that took her from the Deep South of the USA to the Warhol Factory and the Stonewall Riots, the New York and London punk scenes, the queer underground of West Berlin just before the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and back again. As the title suggests, it also took her from male to female, but although the theme of feeling ‘different’ as a child comes up at the start, *Man Enough to Be a Woman* – named after County’s signature punk rock song – is miles from your typical transsexual memoir.

County opens with the place that formed her: Dallas, a small town in Georgia, rather than the largest city in Texas. It’s where she realises she would rather have been a girl, but also that to express this in such an environment, riven with class divides, still segregated and deeply racist,

and where nobody knew terms like gay or transsexual, will require incredible toughness. Many points in County's youth will be familiar to queer readers: encountering homophobia at school and in the local and national media; her furtive self-discovery through pop and rock music – especially the British Invasion bands she loves, who her contemporaries call 'queer' because of their long hair; and finding herself through pulp novels, and memoirs such as the one by transsexual advocate Christine Jorgensen. The scenes where County goes 'wrecking' (freaking out the squares, basically) with the 'screaming queens' she meets after moving to Atlanta are, like much of this book, often riotously funny. But they also convey her tension between wanting to stand out and wanting to blend in, and her difficulties in establishing control over this contradiction. Worse still, they carry real dangers: breaking out from the violence of her family and her neighbourhood, County then finds herself dealing with discrimination at work, queer-bashers in the street and sexual assaults at the hands of the police.

When County moves to New York, the book becomes the story of her evolution as an artist and trans woman, and of where and how the queer underground met the musical counter-culture of the 1960s and 1970s. Already highly aware of how the folk-rock and civil rights movements intersected, and the hippies' relaxed attitudes towards sexuality and gender, County forged a complicated, courageous path through the emerging glam, punk and new wave scenes. She often formed a bridge between them and radical queer theatre and film – even if her ideas got stolen, and the influence of that theatre and film on more

mainstream works from *Midnight Cowboy* to *The Rocky Horror Show* was seldom acknowledged. Her accounts of the plays she wrote and directed with the Theatre of the Ridiculous (because ‘things had gone beyond the absurd’), one of which was ‘totally saturated with sex to the point where sex seemed just like drinking a glass of water’, still retain the power to do what they intended – to shock.

This makes the conservatism and passive-aggressive transphobia she encounters in a music industry happy to flirt with gay and bisexual culture even more dispiriting, be it Jim Morrison refusing to be photographed with ‘drag queens’ or Patti Smith treating County with scepticism; people in the ‘anything goes’ punk scene distancing themselves from County after she came out as transsexual; or labels signing her and then refusing to release her material, claiming it was too uncommercial (and admonishing her for giving bad reviews to Elton John and Paul McCartney when moonlighting as a journalist). Proving herself as a serious musician able to tackle serious themes – as County did with her second album, *Storm the Gates of Heaven* (1978), recorded with the Electric Chairs – took far longer, and was far harder than it might have been for a straight, cisgender man at the same time. (Perhaps the most bitter irony comes when she defends herself against sustained attacks from ex-wrestler and Dictators singer Dick Manitoba during a gig at CBGB in New York, which is then covered by the press along the lines of ‘Mad Drag Queen Attacks Poor Defenceless Wrestler’.)

That everyone involved with the late 1970s music scene claims to have been at, say, the Sex Pistols’ gigs at the 100 Club in London or the Lesser Free Trade Hall in

Manchester is a long-standing joke, but County *does* seem to have got everywhere and met everyone. Being there isn't always everything – Nico speaks to County just once, to ask where she might get some heroin. But County's story of her encounter with John Lennon where she felt too star-struck to speak is relatable, as is her admission that she spent Woodstock 'stoned out of my head on acid for three days sitting in the mud listening to fucking Elektra Circuit'. This reminded me that at Glastonbury in 2000, I smoked too much skunk to walk down the hill to see one of the musicians referenced most often in this book, one of many now passed, and who County's team tried to get to produce an LP with her: David Bowie. Besides Bowie, whom she says was 'very jealous of his status as Freak Number One', County meets almost everyone else from Lou Reed to Johnny Rotten to Pete Burns, befitting someone whose tastes and influences are so broad – and who gets called a cross between Iggy Pop and Bette Midler. My favourite descriptions are probably those of Sting and The Police, who she recalls as 'the most boring people I have ever met', saying she thought she and her bandmate Greg scared them to death, but there are so many great anecdotes here that yours will almost certainly differ.

County was not only present at important moments in pop and rock history. Her accounts of 1960s American queer culture are fascinating, giving an insight into what life was like before the Stonewall Riots, with gay men and drag queens, butches and femmes struggling to assert themselves against a constant backdrop of community infighting and external oppression – although, as County points out, the police didn't often raid bars because those

places kept the queers off the streets. County was nearby, however, when the cops went for the Stonewall Inn in New York in June 1969, and the bar's patrons and especially the surrounding street queens decided to fight back. This uprising later came to be seen as the 'birth of gay liberation', but County downplays its importance, saying that riots were happening all the time in the US back then ('anti-Vietnam, anti-police, anti-whatever'). She also cuts through the arguments about who threw the first brick: 'the queens took the lead', she recalls, but beyond that, it was hard to tell who instigated the rebellion, and there were certainly no 'leaders'.

County records her disappointment that the fuzzy, welcoming queer underground of the late 1960s gave way to fierce struggles over identity during the 1970s, as the liberation movement strove for mainstream acceptance and respectability. Encountering gay men who didn't want to be associated with transsexual women and drag queens clearly hurt, throughout her career, as did her confrontations with trans-exclusionary feminists. As County says in her original text, and reiterates in her new chapter, 'Some people try to use their ideas of "liberation" to suppress others: in the end, they're no better than the book-burners or the Christian Right. Gay or straight, an asshole is an asshole.'

One of the things that makes *Man Enough to Be a Woman* so distinctive as a transition memoir is the amount of time it devotes to trans art and culture. This isn't an academic exercise though – yet again, County was *there*. Her accounts of life with the three trans superstars of Warhol's Factory – Jackie Curtis, Candy Darling and Holly Woodlawn – are

not just historically vital, but also complex, moving and frequently hysterical. There was considerable animosity between them, recalls County, as ‘they were all bidding to be Warhol’s favourite transvestite’, which was ‘what really broke up all their friendships’, but they also had different attitudes to ‘passing’ as women, which exacerbated this mutual suspicion. Big egos, and drink and drug habits, didn’t help, turning their desires to be accepted as artists into something destructive, leading them to be consumed by jealousy and paranoia. Especially around the Warhol scene, County deals with so many early deaths that mere survival distinguishes her, and her manner of describing these, largely without judgement, is all the more moving for her refusal to dwell on them.

This resilience becomes even more important as County moves from the 1970s to the 1980s, from Wayne to Jayne, and from London to West Berlin. Two films mark her shift between cities: she doesn’t spend much time discussing Derek Jarman’s ‘pretty boring’ *Jubilee* (1978), in which she played the Lounge Lizard, but tells us more about Rosa von Praunheim’s raucous musical *City of Lost Souls* (1983), in which she had the starring role. *City of Lost Souls* is a neglected gem of queer cinema, despite its unpromising origins – it took six weeks to shoot, in von Praunheim’s basement, and County struggled to work with the director, whom she suspected was trying to get easy laughs in West Germany by ‘taking the piss out of Americans’. Still, its combination of County’s title song and material from her musical, *U-Bahn to Memory Lane*, and improvised dialogue from its ensemble cast remains a real treat. Made in late 1982, just before the AIDS crisis hit, *City of Lost Souls* was

touched by tragedy: this book is dedicated to its most compelling character, Tara O'Hara, a 'transvestite' from New Orleans who played a version of herself and who, like County, was raised in a religious family. Amidst the epidemic, Tara was cavalier about sex, says County, and caught the disease, but it didn't kill her. Rather, she fell to the old scourge that they had both left the Deep South to escape – queer-bashing. It was only ten years later that County found out about how doctors pulled the plug on Tara after weeks in a coma, thus depriving the trans world of a new heroine on a par with Jackie Curtis or Candy Darling – but County's descriptions, and dedication, form a worthy tribute.

The final chapters are less about County leading a queer culture and more about her coming to terms with it changing. Her homecoming as a transsexual woman, reconciling herself not just with Georgia but her family, have a sweet, sober sensitivity that contrasts markedly with many of the other scenes in the book, and prompt some interesting reflections on visibility – summed up with her worry that 'the more straight people know about us, the more they have to hate'. The sense of a queer generational handover is just as striking – her meeting with RuPaul feels like a changing of the guard – but most moving here is the way County comes to terms with herself. Her transition wasn't a 'journey' with an endpoint in mind, more a sincere expression of who she felt herself to be and how that changed over time, with other people's perceptions becoming less important as she grows older. County's reflections on times when her behaviour wasn't so sympathetic are as frank as they are funny, and more

than anything else, she embodies *Orange is the New Black* star Laverne Cox's idea of being a 'possibility model' rather than a 'role model'. For any trans or queer person struggling to break out of stereotypes, or striving for social acceptance based on working twice as hard or being twice as good as your cis/het counterparts, County shows you how to be an actor or singer, outrageous or conformist, whoever or whatever you want.

Juliet Jacques, 2021

SISTER BOY

I grew up in Dallas, Georgia, a small rural town about forty miles from Atlanta, in a four-room wood frame house with a toilet on the back porch, plum bushes out back and morning glories and petunias out front. One of my earliest memories is of my mother holding me over the kitchen sink extracting a tapeworm out of my mouth. The worm crawled up from my belly and I was puking it up. I was about four.

When I was a little kid I used to sit out on the back porch with my Granny Calah watching the trains go by and counting the number of carriages on each train. We'd make bets with each other about how many carriages there'd be, and then we'd count them out loud. I grew up with my mother, my father, my little brother Josh, who's two years younger than me, my Granny Calah and my aunt Laverne. They'd had to move in with us because my mother's father was an alcoholic and they couldn't live with him any more, because he was getting really crazy. My grandmother would give him money to go get the

groceries and he'd come back with a bag full of potato chips and a dozen bottles of vanilla flavouring. Paulden County, where we lived, was a dry county and he couldn't get liquor, so he drank little bottles of vanilla flavouring and paint thinners.

Our house was in a section of four-room wooden houses – a housing project, you'd call it now. In the house up the street lived my mother's childhood friend Ruth, who used to listen to Andrews Sisters records with my mother back in the 40s. Then there was us. Then down the red dust hill was the Graham family, who used to curse like sailors, and in the next house down was Miss Morgan, who had about ten children, all girls, all born out of wedlock. My favourite playmates were Martha and Jenny-Sue Morgan, and we used to play all the girls' games. They'd put me in their dresses and blouses, and we'd put socks down the blouses to make tits, and then we'd feel each other's false tits. I told my mother about this game, and she slapped me in the face. 'That's evil and horrible,' she said. 'You must never do that!'

I was what is known in the South as a sissy boy or a sister boy. I don't know whether it's due to my environment or my hormonal make-up or both. My mother was being injected with huge doses of estrogen while she was carrying me, because she had a hormone imbalance which runs in the family. But my environment certainly played a part too, because I grew up almost entirely surrounded by women. I lived with my mother, Aunt Laverne and Granny Calah, and I played with the Morgan girls and with my cousins Pearl and Millie, who were the daughters of my daddy's sister Vivien who lived down the road in Dallas.

I'd walk around the house dressed in my grandmother's old frocks, and I had dolls. I was very comfortable in a female environment. My grandmother used to say 'Wayne should have been a girl and Pearl should have been a boy.' Pearl was a tomboy, and we would swap toys. She always wanted the ball-glove that my father would give me, and I'd get her dolls.

My father couldn't understand any of this, but he never said anything. He was working as an accountant at the Chevrolet company in Atlanta, and he wasn't home very much. He'd get up at six in the morning to drive to work, and he didn't get home till seven or eight in the evening. He'd be really tired, so he'd just have something to eat and go to bed. Me and my brother Josh used to wait for him to come home in the evenings, and when he arrived we'd jump off the settee onto his back. But he was so tired, he just used to brush us off. He was more or less a stranger in the house, just a man who came and went. He had no time for his kids. He could never show his feelings. That's the way he was raised.

On weekends Daddy would go out playing poker with his buddies, or he'd go fishing. He took us fishing occasionally, but I hated it. I once got the hook caught in my finger, and to get it out I had to tear out a big chunk of my finger. And I used to cut my hands on the fishes' fins. We had to bait the hooks with worms, by sticking the hook in one end of the worm and then sliding its whole body along the hook. When the men caught a little fish, they didn't throw it back into the water; they just took it off the hook and threw it over their shoulders. There were dead fish lying rotting all over the banks, and the smell was horrible.

My brother Josh had a lot of male friends who were always coming round to play. I used to play with them sometimes too, but instead of playing with toy guns, I would be making cakes out of mud and cooking them in a little kitchen that Pearl and Millie had in their playhouse. I played cowboys and indians too, but I would always be an indian princess. I used to wrap a T-shirt round my head as an indian head-dress.

Every once in a while I'd tell my mother that I wanted to be a little girl, and she'd have to remind me, 'You're a boy, Wayne.' I'd say, 'No, I'm a little girl. I'm like Martha and Jenny-Sue.' As time went by, I really began to long to be a woman. I know it sounds stupid now, but when I said my prayers I'd add on in my head, 'And oh God, when I wake up in the morning can I please be a woman.' I'd go to the movies and see the leading man kissing the leading lady, and I was always Lana Turner or Marilyn Monroe. I always identified with the women, never the men. It was me kissing those men. When I looked at a man, it was always from the point of view of how nice he was and how attractive. Nobody knew expressions like gay or transsexual. It was a small town. Eleven thousand people and one red light. They knew about sissy boys, and they knew that's what I was, but they weren't mean or antagonistic about it. Dallas wasn't really very sophisticated. When our country cousins came for a visit, Daddy would drive them up town just to gawk at the one red traffic light. When it would change colour, they'd go, 'Oh, ain't that purdy!'

It wasn't until I went to school that I began to realise that I was different from the other kids. First of all, there

was a problem about clothes. I was very disappointed that I had to wear boys' clothes to school. Then I started to get crushes on the other little boys. I had my first crush when I was six years old on my cousin David, who was six too. I told my mother, 'I really like David because I think he's purdy.' She told David's mother and they just laughed.

The other big thing in my early childhood was rock & roll music. When I was about five, my mother promised me that the Easter Bunny was going to bring me a record player. I remember getting up on Easter Sunday and having my Easter basket, and there it was: a little pink plastic record player with bright-yellow plastic records with little nursery rhymes on them. But I didn't want those records. What I really wanted were the songs I was hearing on *American Bandstand*. My aunt Laverne was a rock & roller, and because of her I had got turned on to Jerry Lee Lewis. Laverne used to wear a ponytail and white bobbysox rolled down to her ankles, and she used to dress me up as a girl as well: she'd put a headscarf on me and we'd dance around the room. I had a jump-rope with red going through it and little wooden handles; I used to tie the rope round the doorknob, so when *American Bandstand* came on the TV I would dance with the door, doing the jitterbug and winding the rope round my waist.

My grandmother worked for a while in Graham's Cafe in the middle of Dallas, which had a jukebox. I remember hearing Jerry Lee Lewis's 'Great Balls of Fire' on that jukebox, and that great suicide song by Jody Reynolds, 'Endless Sleep'. We used to drive along in the car listening to the rock & roll station, and my parents would talk about Jerry Lee Lewis and how he moved his hair about,

which my mother thought was a bit too much. We loved Elvis, and we listened to the Moonglows and the Chantels – ‘Look in my eyes and say you love me’. My folks never really listened to much country music. Every once in a while the radio would get tuned to a country station, so I heard a bit of Hank Williams, but my mother and my aunt Laverne and most of the people in our neighbourhood were rock & roll people. When I was forming my sexual identity, rock & roll music was there as well. And thus now – rock & roll transsexual, of course.

My father wasn't earning a lot of money in my early childhood, and the neighbourhood I grew up in was very trashy. At the back of our four-room wooden house was a yard, and beyond that was a gulley that people emptied their trash in. One of our favourite games was to jump clear across the gulley, and one day I landed on a broken bottle and practically cut my foot off, because of course we were playing barefoot like all the little kids did. I had to be taken to the hospital to be sewn up. We hardly ever wore shoes at home except in the winter. We went to school barefooted until they passed a rule saying you had to wear shoes. People were always getting into trouble at school for not wearing shoes. A lot of the kids who went to our school were real country people that used to pick cotton, and they'd come to school wearing overalls with pencils stuck in the pockets, the trouser legs rolled up, barefooted with their hair too long. Their parents were such poor white trash they wouldn't even give them a haircut.

Up the road from our house was a truck-stop café called the Twin Pines Café, Bar & Grill, where all the drivers