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# Arkansas Punk

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JEAN ROBERTA

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## Coal to Diamonds

by Beth Ditto with Michelle Tea  
Spiegel and Grau. 176 pages, \$22.

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**G**HOST-WRITTEN AUTOBIOGRAPHIES of current celebrities and tell-all biographies by “friends” have long been popular, even if the information in them is suspect. It’s not clear if this book belongs in one of these categories, because it’s not clear how much was written by Michelle Tea, an award-winning chronicler of working-class lesbian life, and how much really comes from the mouth of Beth Ditto, lead singer of the punk band Gossip.

The book is a first-person narrative in the straightforward language of a girl from rural Arkansas who escaped a traditional fate of lifelong poverty and oppression by following her dream. Her story will seem familiar to anyone who has read about the rags-to-riches lives of popular music stars in the tradition of Elvis Presley, Dolly Parton, Johnny Cash, and Loretta Lynn. Even the title of this book seems to echo the title of *Coal Miner’s Daughter*, Loretta Lynn’s 1980 biopic, filmed before Beth Ditto was born.

Despite the clichés in the writing, this life story contains digressions from a well-worn path. Beth Ditto credits the Riot Grrl movement of the 1990s, not Jesus or a loving family, with saving her life. She identifies herself as a fat-positive femme lesbian, and her discussion of her upbringing makes it clear that sexual abuse (especially of girls) is not an individual misfortune but a feature of down-home American culture. Beth describes her own mother Velmyra at age twelve, “sitting in a courtroom as a judge decided whether or not her father had raped her.” This information is not a revelation about an unusually dysfunctional family. As the author explains, “In a place where so many men were abusive, the whole system operated to deny the existence of abuse, to make it normal, unpunishable.” The judge decided that Velmyra was lying.

Punk music from urban centers in the Northwest is described as a rebellious shout from the outside world that inspired young Beth to resist the social pressure to fall into a traditional feminine life of childbearing, shame, and silence. Punk became the soundtrack that she lived by in the 1990s. In high school, she found a few like-minded friends, and singing became her way of asserting herself: “Jennifer and I would stay up late singing Counting Crows songs into a tape recorder and making up our own songs too. I loved to sing, I loved to take the thoughts in my mind and braid them into a melody.”

Eventually, Beth and the other members of her fledgling band escaped from small-town Arkansas by moving to Washington state. They began acquiring a cult following in the local music scene, but performing remained largely a labor of love for them. As though the struggle for survival were not enough, Beth began experiencing strange medical symptoms: she became thin-

ner than ever before while losing her sight. Then she had trouble swallowing and noticed that her voice was changing. Having no medical insurance, she delayed getting a diagnosis, and when she did, the news was worse than she suspected: she had a rare autoimmune disorder called sarcoidosis, in which the body attacks itself. Steroids enabled her to function more-or-less normally, but no one could promise her a cure.

After being hospitalized for depression, Beth apparently made decisions which led to several much-needed breaks. She and the remaining members of her band moved to a larger city, Portland, Oregon, and went on tour with a better-known band, Le Tigre, which raised their visibility. At last they were able to live on the proceeds of their music instead of juggling gigs with low-paid service jobs.

The message with which Beth Ditto (speaking with or through Michelle Tea) concludes her life-story is simple but profound: “Take your [own] inspiration and let it lead you out into the world, into your big amazing genius life. Voices in your head, echoes of people trying to hold you down—tell them to fuck off. You’re perfect the way you are. You don’t need to change anything but the world, so get to it.” This advice has been given by various iconoclasts in various eras, and it coincides with the words of earlier feminists. As discouraging as it is to learn that a woman artist born in 1981 faced essentially the same obstacles to self-determination that Virginia Woolf described in 1929 in *A Room of One’s Own*, it is always encouraging to read about individuals who learn to survive on their own terms and to tell the truth about their experience.

Of course, much of the message of salvation through music is in the beat. Whether or not this book records Beth Ditto’s voice in an accurate way, her performances and recordings certainly do.

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*Jean Roberta is a writer based in Regina, Saskatchewan.*

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# How to Be Gay in Asia

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CHARLES GREEN

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## Imagining Gay Paradise: Bali, Bangkok, and Cyber-Singapore

by Gary L. Atkins

Hong Kong University Press. 316 pages, \$25.

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**T**HIS FASCINATING STUDY explores three places in Asia and the Pacific where gays have created and defended a community for themselves. Atkins, a communications professor at Seattle University, tells the stories of Bali, Bangkok, and Singapore on their separate journeys to becoming, respectively, the aesthetic capital, the pleasure capital, and the intellectual capital of the region.

Atkins begins with Bangkok and Vajiravudh, heir to the throne of what was known in the early 20th century as the kingdom of Siam. Vajiravudh, educated in England, succeeded his father and worked hard to navigate between traditional

Siamese culture and the demands of European powers to “civilize” the kingdom and accept Western standards. For instance, the kingdom relied on the relationships between a man and his multiple wives and their children to maintain order. Vajiravudh’s father had 77 children by 35 wives. This was a major offense to the colonial powers’ values, as was the gender-neutral clothing worn by many Siamese people.

Vajiravudh continued his father’s and grandfather’s practice of *siwilai*, blending Siamese and Western cultures in unique ways. The king himself was an unusual figure. He married rather late in life and preferred spending his time with men from all classes, whether in dramatic societies or sport clubs. Whereas his father’s palace was essentially run by women, he abandoned this practice and created a more European style of administration by appointing men to posts. Vajiravudh’s preference for men made many Siamese suspicious, and even his own mother strongly encouraged him to marry. He would die without an heir, and Siam would later change its name to Thailand, but his legacy would continue in a fashion through businessman Khun Toc’s luxurious gay sauna, Babylon, which prominently features a photo of the king.

Paralleling this story is the history of Walter Spies, a gay German artist who settled in Bali in 1923 and lived productively until World War II. Spies, whose lover at one time was director Friedrich Murnau (*Nosferatu*), was well known for his gorgeous depictions of native Balinese men, and was friendly with both natives and foreign visitors. Sadly, he was caught up in a morals scandal brought by the colonial Dutch government, which arrested him and other Europeans for having sex with underage native boys. Atkins methodically demonstrates that the charges were simply a way of getting rid of undesirable elements in Bali, since the age of consent was 21 for homosexuals (as opposed to eighteen for heterosexuals), and using European methods of determining age for natives was a difficult task. Spies spent a few months in jail, then went back to his normal life until his German citizenship made him a suspect. He was sent to a prison camp before being evacuated and left to die on a sinking boat, attacked by a Japanese submarine.

Atkins focuses his discussion of Singapore’s gay community on the website *Fridae.com*, looking at how the country’s oppressive prohibitions on homosexuality, taken from British colonial law, made the on-line world the only safe place for gays to meet. Creator Stuart Koe, or S2 as he called himself on-line, formed “the largest network of local gay men Singapore had ever seen,” using this on-line presence to form the annual Nation dances, held on Singapore’s National Day. While government restrictions eventually forced future parties to move to Thailand’s resorts, the website gave gays in Singapore a voice and a place to explore what it meant to be gay in the country.

Atkins weaves together history, architectural theories, gender studies, colonial practices, and even Confucian dualities into a compelling narrative that feels like a novel. The book illustrates the remarkable changes in the region’s history through the personal stories of a few unusual men.

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## Herstories Three

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IRENE JAVORS

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**All We Know: Three Lives**

by Lisa Cohen

Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 429 pages, \$30.

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**B**ACK in the glory days of 1970s, “second wave feminism,” feminists sat in consciousness-raising groups across America talking about their lives and the lives of their mothers and grandmothers. We wanted to know about the dreams and aspirations of women’s lives. We yearned to document what we now term “herstory.” In *All We Know: Three Lives*, Lisa Cohen, who teaches at Wesleyan University, rescues from history’s dustbin the lives of three extraordinary, glamorous, brilliant, independent lesbians. Cohen’s project is a welcome addition to the herstory project.

Cohen profiles the lives of Esther Murphy (1897-1962), Mercedes de Acosta (1893-1968), and Madge Garland (1898-1990), three names that are virtually unknown to readers today. Yet in their heyday they occupied central positions in the intellectual, cultural, fashion, and social circles of Europe and North America.

Esther Murphy, whose family owned the Mark Cross leather goods company and whose brother was Gerald Murphy, artist and friend of F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway, was famous for her brilliance and vast storehouse of historical knowledge. Her friends and lovers included Edmund Wilson, F. Scott Fitzgerald, society hostess Muriel Draper, writer Natalie Barney, journalist Janet Flanner, Gertrude Stein, novelist Sybille Bedford, and many others. She married twice. Her first marriage was to John Strachey, and her second was to Chester A. Arthur III, grandson of the president. Number Three, also known as Gavin, was bisexual and, according to Cohen, one of the founders of the Radical Faeries.

Cohen tells us that Murphy did not finish any of her major writing projects, including her magnum opus on the life of Madame de Maintenon. She was a nonstop talker and an alcoholic. She knew everything and everyone, yet she was unable to live up to her own aspirations. Cohen uses Murphy’s habit of starting all her conversations with the phrase “All we know” as the title for the book.

The second section is devoted to the life of Mercedes de Acosta, who came from a wealthy Spanish family. Her lifelong pursuit was to collect celebrities both as lovers and as memorabilia. Her conquests rival those of Don Giovanni. She purportedly romanced Greta Garbo, Isadora Duncan, Marlene Dietrich, the actress Eva Le Gallienne, and legions more. She spent her life memorializing the accomplishments of other women.

The final third of the book focuses on the life of Madge Garland, an early editor of *British Vogue*. In comparison to Murphy and de Acosta, Garland was a positive dynamo of creativity and productivity. In the early 1920s, she and her companion/lover, *Vogue* editor Dorothy Todd, made *British Vogue* not just a fashion magazine but a place to publish the works of Mod-