

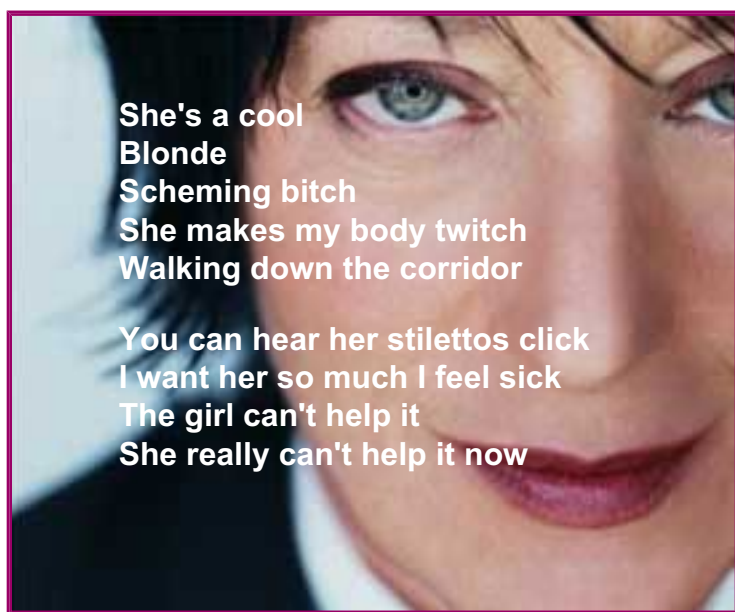
## STEP INTO MY PARLOUR



## SHAUN PROULX TALKS TO CAROLE POPE

By Shaun Proulx

It's 1980. The skinny small-town Ontario boy is trying to roller skate, barely keeping his balance as his grade 7 peers whiz by. But keeping from falling on his ass is not the boy's primary focus, instead as he wobbles along he's paying more attention to the arresting lyrics of the song blaring from the speakers high above the roller rink.



She's a cool  
Blonde  
Scheming bitch  
She makes my body twitch  
Walking down the corridor

You can hear her stilettos click  
I want her so much I feel sick  
The girl can't help it  
She really can't help it now

The singer's voice is deep and edgy, but through the bad acoustics of the community centre the boy makes out it's a woman. A woman singing about a woman. The boy smiles. He gets it.

It's his first introduction to a band named Rough Trade and a woman named **Carole Pope**, who at the time, when not being barred from (or bleeped during) radio play, was busy breaking musical and performance boundaries with her brazen

explorations of sexual innuendo, taboo and raunch, complete with Claude Montana leathers, rigs and harnesses, and a police presence at concerts. Pre-Madonna and in Toronto no less.

Since the break-up of Rough Trade in 1986, Pope has remained busy, moving to Los Angeles in 1989, recording film and television soundtracks, playing gigs, and recently guesting in *The Vagina Monologues* in Toronto at the New Yorker Theatre. *Anti Diva*, her autobiography published in 2000, flew out of bookstores and made Canadian bestseller lists. In it, Pope describes with trademark unapologetic frankness her time in Toronto, including hanging out in Yorkville in it's hippy heyday and the druggy early Rough Trade days. Pope also details a mosaic of sexual relationships, and friendships with the likes of U2, Robert Mapplethorpe, Sandra Bernhard, Gilda Radner and David Bowie. Key in Pope's story is her relationship with British legend Dusty Springfield, who died of breast cancer in 1999.

Fast forward to the first glorious spring day of 2002. 'High School Confidential' has since been remixed for the *Queer As Folk* soundtrack and is all about boys. Pope has just returned to her New York City home having spent ten days in a Toronto studio recording her upcoming album. The boy (who can now balance on skates just fine, thank you), makes a phone call at the very anti-diva hour of 10 a.m. to talk with the woman who sang the song none of the other kids at the roller rink got quite the way he did over 20 years ago.

**Shaun Proulx:** You're back into Toronto making an appearance at Hugh's Room on May 4th. A little bird told me you might be going into detail about some things you weren't allowed to talk about in your autobiography *Anti Diva*.

**Carole Pope:** The Hugh's Room appearance is music and spoken word. I'm going to read from the novel I'm attempting to write and from *Anti Diva* - expanding on some of the dirt. I'm just going to go into a bit more detail about some things. Like Dusty. Volumes have been written about her and some if it is one-sided and not that well researched. Some people are absolute fanatics about her.

**SP:** So you'd almost like to speak out in her defence and say, 'Well, stand back a second and consider this' and give your perspective on her.

**CP:** Yeah. I'll see what I can get away with.

**SP:** Were you surprised by the success of the book?

**CP:** Yeah, I kind of was. I thought people would be interested, but I was pleasantly surprised. It's always gratifying to know people want to hear what you have to say. I'm sure people wanted to read all the dirt but I know others were interested because the book is a window to really amazing and interesting times.

**SP:** You've talked about having a "stinkin' childhood". Are you over that?

**CP:** Well it wasn't all terrible, but I'm really into celebrating my inner child now. I can get very child-like. I can have a lot of fun and celebrate. A lot of people can't get there. A lot of people won't even try to get there.

**SP:** I also heard there may be a film version of *Anti Diva* in the works.

**CP:** We're thinking about optioning the rights.

**SP:** Who would play you?

**CP:** Chloe Sevigny.

**SP:** I can buy that. Have you met her?

**CP:** No, but she could do it. She's got the eyes. I think for me the eyes have to be right. She's got the eye thing.

**SP:** There's a passage in the book I loved where you were talking about having just dropped acid and then seeing this girl in Yorkville you described as 'an exotic hothouse flower'. That whole part seemed like it was written through the perspective of the acid trip you were on.

**CP:** Well I was on acid almost every other day. (Laughs)

**SP:** But it was pure then.

**CP:** Yeah, it was pure then. I don't even know what it's like now.

**SP:** What's your take on the whole drug usage issue in the gay club scene right now - e, k, the whole alphabet of options?

**CP:** I don't know, I tried e once. I understand it but I don't have any desire to take it again. It seems like there's a whole range of drugs out there now that are maybe more frightening drugs than there were. Special K seems like a frightening one.

**SP:** Have you tried it?

**CP:** No. I'm just not really into drugs. The last time I used them was when my brother died of AIDS because I just couldn't handle it. But taking drugs today is like playing Russian roulette with your brain.

**SP:** How long ago did Howard die?

**CP:** He died in 1996. He was younger than me so I had a hard time losing my baby brother.

**SP:** It that still an open wound for you?

**CP:** I went past the building he lived in here in New York not long ago and just lost it. That stirred up so much.

**SP:** What are your thoughts about those who are confusing the drug cocktails available now with an actual cure for AIDS?

**CP:** People are in denial about AIDS. They think they are immune to it, and that if they have unsafe sex and test positive, they can just take the cocktail. However in my brother Howard's case, all the meds he took were toxic. He had allergic reactions to everything. People should get a grip and wear a fucking condom. Having unsafe sex is selfish and irresponsible. Is a fuck worth dying for?

**SP:** Back in the Rough Trade days you were referred to as "crude, lewd and socially unacceptable" - who are you all these years later?

**CP:** I'm still about sexuality and I still don't know how acceptable that is. Especially in a country with these scary white men running things.

**SP:** Do you find that more so in the States than in Canada? You've lived in the U.S. for what, a dozen years or so now?

**CP:** Yeah. I don't find that as much in New York, but elsewhere. So much is going on in the world right now and our leaders are doing what they are doing and then still tell us that sexuality is something to get uptight about, which given what they're doing)

**SP:** Dropping bombs all over Afghanistan and turning around condemning sexuality or more often homosexuality.

**CP:** Yeah. And then there's all the imagery we have that's sexual in front of us every day and that gets confusing for people.

**SP:** Do you think by now people are numbed by sexual images? Especially the superficial sexual images, the unattainable ones?

**CP:** Oh absolutely.

**SP:** Kevin Staples said you were fascinated by all things sexual.

**CP:** I've always been interested because I see the humour in it. Especially when people are so uptight about it still.

**SP:** Why did you leave LA for New York?

**CP:** I just got bored! (Laughs) I played all the clubs there)there was talk of a record deal) In LA it's like they're always dangling a carrot in front of you. You just have this carrot dangling with everyone saying 'Oh, something's gonna happen, there's a record deal coming'

**SP:** And you just got tired of the carrot.

**CP:** You know what? I don't care about the carrot in the end. I liked being in California because of the climate and the beach and hiking and all that stuff.

**SP:** It could have been worse. They could have been dangling a celery stick.

**CP:** Then I would have gone sooner.

**SP:** Still afraid of celery?

**CP:** Absolutely.

**SP:** So you should be.

**CP:** (Laughs) Yea! You don't like celery either?

**SP:** Not particularly.

**CP:** Yea! And I just missed the whole social thing. Although there is a great music and arts scene in LA.

**SP:** And did you OD on the people who are making music purely so they can become the next superstar puppet rather than because they've got to make art so they can express themselves?

**CP:** There's a lot of great music going on, but yeah, there's a lot of stuff that's just so overproduced. Yeech. A lot of them can't even fucking sing anyway, it's all controlled.

**SP:** You moved to New York City just before September 11th and you were there that day. What was that like?

**CP:** It was just really)horrific. I'm in East Harlem so I wasn't right there, but I went to try to give blood and couldn't. I wanted to help like a lot of people did, but I couldn't. I went to Ground Zero, but of course wasn't allowed anywhere near it. People were just walking around like zombies and people were being nice to one another and trying to help each other.

**SP:** It's amazing the resilience we've seen since then. Does it feel like you're living in a city that is bouncing back?

**CP:** Yeah it does. The only thing that's pushed me over the edge is all the patriotic crap. The people, the firemen and the police were all so brave, but after awhile the whole flag thing)it went overboard.

**SP:** But you've got to get off on a city full of the energy of resilience, given that you are all about resilience.

**CP:** I am resilient. I am tenacious. You have to be if you want to do what you want to do.

**SP:** What makes you afraid? Besides celery.

**CP:** (Laughs) What makes me afraid? I don't know. I guess financial stuff. But that's what you live with all the time if you're an artist.

**SP:** Why keep exposing yourself? You pushed the sexual envelope with *Rough Trade* so much during a time when Madonna couldn't even spell envelope, let alone push it; you've opened painful wounds by writing *Anti Diva* years later, and you still continue to write and sing about sexuality and human nature. Why?

**CP:** It's what I have to do. It's what I have to write about.

**SP:** Why not just sit down on a stool with an acoustic guitar and strum away softly? Why such bold exposure of self?

**CP:** Oh I could do that. It's just not the way I want to deal with the subjects I want to deal with.

**SP:** What's the price to be paid for this kind of truthfulness?

**CP:** Some people love honesty but some people find it off-putting. For me though it's about being true to

your self.

**SP:** Tell me about the new album you are recording. You were just in Toronto for 10 days recording.

**CP:** I'm working with a guy named Vince DeGiorgio, who re-mixed a dance version of 'High School Confidential' for *Queer As Folk*, that's how we met. He works with \*NSYNC, but I've never been in the same room with them.

**SP:** Good.

**CP:** (Laughing) What I'm doing now is a lot more acoustic. Ambient. With some dance mixes on there. There's a new song called 'Edible Flower'.

**SP:** No need to ask what that's about. What else can we expect?

**CP:** I'm doing a new version of 'Love Strikes Hard', an acoustic version with new loops, plus a new version of 'All Touch No Contact', kind of a tribal electronica dance version. There's a new song called 'Shadows', about oh, sex! That's all I can say for now. I have to be vague about everything else because it's not all set in stone.

**SP:** This is the first time you've been back in a recording studio since *Anti Diva* was published. If writing that was as cathartic an experience as I'll assume it must have been, what are you bringing into the studio now that you weren't before?

**CP:** Oh yeah, it was cathartic. I guess it feels like a weight has been lifted and so it's nice to go into a recording situation with that feeling.

**SP:** When you are performing, is that a time to be 100% Carole Pope? When we met for the first time on Pride Day last year and spent the afternoon together, I was surprised not to have seen a really aggressive personality, but rather someone who is quite shy and quiet.

**CP:** When I'm performing that's my time to do what I want to do, and do it as I want to do it. I like to put myself right out there during that time. But afterwards I prefer to just be left alone. And that's my art.

**SP:** There were some gaps in *Anti Diva*. Were there people you just weren't allowed to talk about?

**CP:** Yes.

**SP:** Any names?

**CP:** Nope!

**SP:** Can you blame me for trying?

**CP:** (Laughs) No!

**SP:** You're in and out of Toronto all the time. What are your comments on the Toronto gay scene?

**CP:** I wish you guys had more land! One thing I always appreciate is the support I get. And I'm always thrilled about new people coming out to see me.

**SP:** Do you think having 'High School Confidential' re-mixed and on the *Queer As Folk* soundtrack has helped with that?

**CP:** I'm not sure, but it probably did. There's definitely a whole generation now that would never have been familiar with it before *Queer As Folk*.

**SP:** Do you get tired of singing it?

**CP:** Yes, sometimes. But it's a song people want to hear so I have to do it.

**SP:** Wanna play a game?

**CP:** No, but okay.

**SP:** Word association. I'll throw a couple of names and give me the first word that comes to mind.

**CP:** (Laughs) Oh, God.

**SP:** Mariah Carey.

**CP:** Ewww.

**SP:** Celine Dion.

**CP:** Ewww.

**SP:** Dusty Springfield.

**CP:** Brilliant.

**SP:** Kevin Staples.

**CP:** Sensitive.

**SP:** Tim Curry.

**CP:** Multi-talented.

**SP:** Divine.

**CP:** Icon.

**SP:** This is for our Fashion Cares issue. With your dad having been a circus stilt walker, what do high heels mean to you?

**CP:** Bondage. And a lot of work.

**SP:** So no more fetish heels?

**CP:** No!

**SP:** Thanks, Carole. I promise to pick up your new CD the day it's out.

**CP:** You'd better!

Carole Pope will be appearing Saturday, May 4th at Hugh's Room 2261 Dundas Street West at 8:30 p.m. Tickets are \$16. Full info: [www.hughsroom.com](http://www.hughsroom.com)

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