

# Another Dream of Common Language

## *An Interview with Sandy Stone*

SUSAN STRYKER

**Abstract** Sandy Stone's "Posttranssexual Manifesto" is often regarded as the principal point of departure for transgender studies. In this 1995 interview, portions of which first appeared in *Wired* magazine, Stone discusses her various careers in telecommunications, medical research, recording engineering, consumer electronics, and cultural studies of media and performance. The interview has been edited to highlight Stone's persistent attention to questions of language and communication, and the relationship of these concerns to feminist and transgender theorizing.

**Keywords** computers, music industry, cyberspace, language, cultural studies

This interview with venerable transfeminist foremother Sandy Stone, whose field-founding "Posttranssexual Manifesto" responded, in part, to her experience of exclusion from lesbian feminist culture and politics in the late 1970s and early 1980s, was conducted by *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* general coeditor Susan Stryker in Austin, Texas, over the Labor Day weekend in 1995. Portions of the interview were published in *Wired* magazine (vol. 4, no. 5, May 1996) as "Sex and Death among the Cyborgs." Excerpts from this same interview have been edited for publication in *TSQ*, in consultation with Sandy Stone, on August 1–3, 2015.

**Susan Stryker:** *Sandy, you were a child prodigy. You graduated early from high school, and then worked at Bell Labs while still a teenager, audited classes at MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology], did medical research at the NIH [National Institutes of Health] and the Menninger Clinic, and wound up being a recording engineer for a while. When were you at Bell Labs?*

**Sandy Stone:** That was about 1955. I was fresh out of high school. I was there for two years, in the special systems development department. We were building among the very first solid-state digital computers. They were clumsy, yet they

demonstrated the principles that could be done on computers in the future, the technology that could be developed. I arrived just as they were beginning to put the ball into play with digital telephony. We were building touch-tone. It was at a primitive level—are the keys going to be in a circle like a dial, or are they going to be in a simpler shape?

**Stryker:** *When you were at MIT, you sat in on classes with some of the first-generation cyberneticists. Can you talk a little bit about what it was like to be at MIT at that time?*

**Stone:** Those people were the legends of modern computer technology, who jammed on what all this was about in a very basic way. How can we build simple models of neurons? What is a computer going to be? How are these things going to affect our lives? The idea of associated circuits was new, and the idea of networks hadn't really come into being. Even at that time they were called hackers. It was partly a derogatory term, but partly a very laudatory term. It just meant a kind of thrashing, trying to understand how these things worked and how to get them to do what you wanted them to do.

**Stryker:** *So you were a hacker?*

**Stone:** It was our way of playing with the computers. The idea of computer games hadn't happened yet. Spacewar wasn't written until 1961, maybe later. So the idea that people played with computers was not yet really around.

**Stryker:** *Where was the fun in what you were doing?*

**Stone:** Well, the fun was just the thrill of basically perverting, diverting, subverting the technology.

**Stryker:** *Tell me about some of your medical research.*

**Stone:** I did a series of experiments with implants. These for me were one of the most fascinating things I had ever done. I did neurological implants in cats. I brought the electrode out to a miniature stereo FM transmitter which I attached to the cat's collar. I would let the cats wander around outside in the fields. I would put on the stereo headphones and "become" a cat and hear myself walking through the grass. Cats don't hear like humans. You can hear every grass blade. You can hear every insect walking and, of course, you can hear the field mice off in the distance, in stereo. I came to understand something about feline subjectivity. That for me was the beginning of my experience with communication prosthetics. Not just human/machine, but species/machine.

**Stryker:** *Trans-species.*

**Stone:** Yes. And then, around this time, I discovered the Beatles and moved on into rock-and-roll. I went to work for some recording studios in Manhattan.

**Stryker:** *How did you become a recording engineer?*

**Stone:** I went to New York, walked into the Record Plant [studio], right when they were beginning to do their first dates. I didn't understand anything about the recording industry. Gary, the owner, desperately needed maintenance people. He took me into the other room and they had the state-of-the-art machine at that point, which was a Scully twelve-track. Here was this machine that wasn't working right, and Gary said, "Can you fix that?" I said, "Yeah sure, I've seen stuff like that before, no problem," which was a total lie. "But, it looks slightly different from the ones I'm used to working with. Let me see your manual." And I speed-read it.

I proceeded to walk over to the Scully and fix it. It took me about two minutes, and the thing worked, and Gary's jaw fell open. He hired me on the spot. For three weeks, I literally lived in the Record Plant. I had no place to go in New York. I was utterly in another world, no social networks, no idea how to find an apartment, no nothing. But I knew how to sleep, so I slept in the basement. Actually, I slept on Jimi's old capes. I spent every waking moment in the control room. When there wasn't anybody in there, I would fix things. When they were, I would watch what they did and absorb it. As soon as they left I would sit down at the board and mix the tapes that they had just recorded. I was getting really good at it really quickly.

**Stryker:** *When you say you "slept on Jimi's old capes," you mean Jimi Hendrix, right? What was it like to mix him?*

**Stone:** The third week that I was doing this, the engineer turned around to me and said, "I'm sick. You have to take over this date." He got up and left. He had the flu or something. I sat down in the seat at the control console, like Captain Kirk. I put my hands on the controls, and I did Jimi. I was shaking with the energy. I didn't really care about Jimi's aura as Jimi Hendrix. All I cared about was the fact that I loved the kind of music he made. Anyway, there I was sitting at the board, shaking because I had my hands on the controls, on this connection to Jimi. Without me there, it was not really happening. The music was both of us. Jimi picked up on that. Other people could see that blue energy that crackled off me when I had my hands on the console. That was one of the reasons that I got gigs. I got the gigs from the people who could see the kind of energy that surrounded me.

**Stryker:** *So besides Hendrix, who else did you work with?*

**Stone:** Crosby, Stills, and Nash. Van Morrison. The Dead at one point, but the Dead had many, many engineers. Marty Balin in various incarnations, briefly with the Airplane. Johnny Winter, Todd Rundgren. I worked with Ultraviolet. I can go on.

**Stryker:** *It seems like a bit of a jump, Jimi Hendrix to Olivia. How did that happen?*

**Stone:** Let me give you more context here. Gary wanted to start a whole other subsidiary company. They wanted me to do that, but it meant not doing the music. I said, "Gary, I want to mix. That's who I am. That's what I do." Gary said, "You do this, or else." I resigned. I would have been a millionaire. I moved to Woodstock. I was in Bethel for the Woodstock festival, where I hung out backstage. After the festival, I went to an event called the First Alternative Media Conference. The first day of that was great. The "alternative media" at that point was individuals doing alternative newspapers here and there. None of these people really knew each other. We looked at each other and said, "Holy shit, there are a lot of us. We're a community. How do we use this community to build a political agenda? How can we work together?" The second day, Holding Together showed up. Holding Together was the group organized to get Tim Leary out of jail. With a big grin, a person whose name I cannot remember opened an attaché case. It was full to the top with Golden Sunshine. By the end of the second day, it was a totally different conference. Quicksilver Messenger Service showed up, Dr. John, Ram Dass. It turned into a huge party. Party is not the right word. At one point, Larry Yurdin said, "Anyone who wants to go to California, raise your hand and come over here." So I raised my hand and went over there. We got on a bus and we went to the airport in Brattleboro. We got on a charter jet plane, took off, flew with many interesting things en route, landed, and the next thing I knew I was sitting on the curb at the San Jose Airport, coming off the acid. I knew one person in San Jose. I called her up and she drove to the airport, took me in my slightly bemused state to her house, fed me tea, put me up on the couch to sleep. I became part of her extended family. I moved into the backyard and lived in a tent for about six months, maybe a year. That's how I got to California. Then I did all the other stuff.

**Stryker:** *At some point before you get to Olivia you came out as transsexual and started to transition. As long as we're doing context, why don't you tell me something about that?*

**Stone:** After I got to California, I got on the phone and tried to find how to get information about transsexuality. I didn't have the faintest idea who to call. I had

done nothing like this in New York, nothing. So the first group I called was Mattachine Society because that's the only group I'd heard of. They said well, we don't do anything like this but why don't you call so and so. After about half a dozen of these phone calls, I came up with the transsexual counseling project.

**Stryker:** *The Erickson Foundation?*

**Stone:** No, it was run by the police department.

**Stryker:** *Oh, the National Transsexual Counseling Unit. That was funded by the Erickson Foundation, but administered by the San Francisco Police Community Relations Unit. It was run by Officer Elliot Blackstone, and a variety of transsexual peer counselors.*

**Stone:** Right, Elliot Blackstone and Jan Maxwell. I walked in and there was Jan, the first live transie I had really ever met. She tried to talk me out of transitioning, took me on a tour of the Tenderloin. It was like Dante in the inner circles of hell. She showed me people who had gotten stuck, people with bad surgery, electrolysis-scarred faces. People who had dead-ended, gone crazy. Unbelievable poverty, despair. Visiting apartments with no furniture and bare red lightbulbs hanging from strings nailed to the ceiling, people who were not identifiable as a particular sex or gender, sitting on the floor, strung out on smack and sewing their own brassieres. I was supposed to be terrified. I was furious. I said to Jan, "Why aren't you helping them?" She said, "There is nothing I can do to help them." She just walked on ahead of me and walked out of the hotel and back to her office. She said, "You still want to do this?" I said yes, I know there's a dark side, but I still want to do this. I started transition, but then I had a bad automobile accident and was in the hospital for three months. I had twenty-seven broken bones. It took me a year to walk. This interfered with transition. Eventually I went through electrolysis.

I started a business in Santa Cruz, worked for myself. I just couldn't work for other people. Actually, when I first arrived in Santa Cruz I had gotten a job with a home electronics chain store, which fired me when I started transition. I scuttled across the street and rented a storefront and started my own electronics business, called the Wizard of Aud, and within two years I had put the chain store out of business. Schadenfreude is so sweet. Mostly I fixed stereos. It seemed easy. It put me in a public place where I could transition around other people and get their reactions. I couldn't be fired. It was an interesting adventure. I didn't know what was going to happen.

**Stryker:** *I do want to hear the Olivia Records story, but I'm fascinated with Santa Cruz. It seems to be on the margins of all these different sets of influences—it's on the*

*fringe of the San Francisco Bay Area queer culture, as well as all the high-tech stuff in Silicon Valley. The city of Santa Cruz itself is an old resort town, a place to play, with the boardwalk. It's had a significant psychedelic counterculture. It's one of the primary places where surfing culture first established itself in the United States. The University of California, Santa Cruz, was a hotbed of early chaos theory. It has the History of Consciousness Department in critical cultural studies. And yet Santa Cruz is a relatively secluded little place, a very small geographical community. Almost like a big playground or laboratory, situated at the intersection of some fascinating and transformative social, cultural, political, and economic trends.*

**Stone:** Santa Cruz is the crack between the worlds. Many, many senses of that. It was a place where I could transition, open a store for \$250, and be running a successful business within thirty days. When I opened the store I had nothing, one old oscilloscope. By the end of the month I was hiring people to help. By the third month we were just roaring, full scale. Shortly thereafter a woman called and said, "We would like to talk to you about doing an album with us." I said oh good, and this group of women appeared at my door shortly thereafter. It was Linda Tillery and Judy Dlugacz and several other people. They were from the Olivia collective. I knew that these people were lesbian separatists, and that I would eventually say something that was obviously politically incorrect. Apparently this didn't bother anyone much because they asked me if I would like to work with them. I said fine. I did the Be'be K'roche album with them. We enjoyed each other's company. We worked very well together. But I didn't understand the politics. We went through a period of getting to know each other during which I would say totally incorrect things like, "Well if she can't play, we should get somebody who can." Then they'd say, "Sit down, and shut up." We'd do take after take after take and I'd be going oh, what am I doing here. Eventually we would get something and move on.

I remembered the first time I ever heard an Olivia record was when I had been really down, and was having some problems, during transition. A friend of mine said "here, lie down" and she put me on her couch, put these headphones on me, and played *The Changer and the Changed*. I remember thinking, oh this music is beautiful but Jesus, the mix is horrible, and the musicianship is so indifferent. If this had been done by, say, Jefferson Airplane, it would have been transcendent. It would have been selling millions. I thanked her from the bottom of my heart and I told her how wonderful it was, which it was, and how it had changed my life, which it did, and I went off. I didn't realize that Olivia was the company that had made that record until fairly late in the game, after we were working together. Then it began to dawn on me that I had entered the recording industry at the top, and that everything I had done had been with the best musicians in the business. Now I had to adjust to the fact that I was doing something else, that I was making

music and politics at the same time. And the genders were different. I had to learn that being the highest-quality musician was not the important thing here, but rather that supporting other women was the important thing. Learning the spirit of sisterhood was more important than technical perfection. So we did that album, and it was good. They invited me to come down and visit them at Olivia House in Los Angeles. I was stunned at the way in which they mixed community and friendship and professional life in music and business. All in the same house. This was the early days, the collective days. One person would cook, and then rotate. I thought this was what I've been trying to do for my whole life.

**Stryker:** *I've read this next part of the story in your TranSisters interview. Next comes Janice Raymond and all the high drama—your being outed in Raymond's The Transsexual Empire, and the threatened boycott of Olivia because the collective included a transsexual, all the stuff that becomes the background and motivation for "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto." But I want to focus on the continuities, rather than the breaks. I see in you such a powerful desire for connection, and an understanding of the body as a means of connecting to others, a technologically transformable means of connection. I see that desire to connect in your work as a recording engineer, as well as in your involvement with the Olivia collective, and in following a transsexual path in life. I see it in your making a home in the crack between the worlds we call Santa Cruz. And I see it in your eventual move into the History of Consciousness Department. Had you read Donna Haraway by that time?*

**Stone:** Yes. I had read "Manifesto for Cyborgs." I had first gone up to HistCon to meet Donna, I also met Billie Harris, who was at that time the administrative assistant. I got to know her and we liked each other. Sometime later I was standing in line at Straw Hat Pizza and Billie came in, very distraught, and I walked back to see her and I said, "Hey, how are you doing?" She said, "You don't happen to know anyone who could TA for a course in history of film, do you?" There weren't enough graduate students for all the teaching assistant positions, and they were desperate. Just absolutely out of the blue with no particular purpose or anything I said, "How about me?" She said, "You? Do you really think you could? I said, "Yeah, sure I could, just give me some idea of how it needs to look and I'll do it." So the next day they gave me the job. The next thing I knew I was in the class, sitting on the steps of the auditorium listening to a lecture. At one point I was walking between classes, thinking about the professor, thinking about the students I adored, thinking about how gorgeous the sun was; I could see cows in the fields, there was a soft breeze blowing. All of a sudden, I had a vision. I saw my entire life, everything I had done passing before me in the form of a circus train. Each car was a different career. Each car was a different aspect of my life, complete

in itself with all of its little adventures painted in bright colors on the side. As it disappeared in the distance, I said, "Bye-bye. I'm home now." It had taken me a long time to get there. I had actually thought about doing a doctorate earlier, on issues of patriarchal language and memory. The project was to remember and reinvent the essentialist female language. By reinventing that language, women would be able to speak in a way that would bring into being a new consciousness. It would crystallize not just a new episteme but a new kind of being in the world that would cause the patriarchal type to wither away.

**Stryker:** *This sounds like something straight out of a Monique Wittig novel.*

**Stone:** Well, shortly thereafter I met Monique, and we had some interesting conversations about this. And of course Adrienne Rich wrote *The Dream of a Common Language* around this time. There was a lot of this stuff happening, it was something in the air. Part of the process was speaking the language to other women and seeing what happened with them. I was not doing this alone. There were many of us. We imagined a magic ur-time when the images that had become associated with a set of syllables were understood in the same way by very different groups. The language grew out of that, and we could actually speak it to each other. Anyway, it was a very high time. But I then had some very hard experiences being repudiated by some of the feminist scholars I wanted to work with. I felt everything that I had dreamed of in my life quite suddenly shatter. The cracks in the universe got bigger and bigger and crumbled away, the whole thing falling down. That's how the idea of going back to the university became utterly repugnant to me. That's why I didn't go back until much later on.

**Stryker:** *Let's talk about your book, The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age. What's it about?*

**Stone:** The erotization of technology. People sense the computer as a vague and somewhat troubling intelligence. A quasi-intelligence and quasi-life in which they can interact in a way one does not interact with a simple machine. By speaking to it in code we cause the machine to speak back. It speaks back in ways that are powerful and quirky and productive and potent, in the sense of opening up to new arenas of experience and consciousness, and from there to new forms of subjectivity. Which I think is what is behind a fair amount of that attraction. I think it's the tension between the obvious rupture in epistemes that this technology produces, the tension between that epistemic rupture and the change in subjectivity that that rupture produces. The change in subjectivity is just hovering at the edges of consciousness as it were, as something *in potentio*. The tension of that subjective change, I think, produces the eroticization. Desire emerges from that.



**Stryker:** *You see something really useful coming out in play, don't you?*

**Stone:** Absolutely. I think all learning is play. I don't think that learning needs to be work. But I think that the way in which almost the entire edifice of learning in Western civilization has been set up has an intent to recreate the aura of work.

**Stryker:** *The university as a factory?*

**Stone:** Yeah, right, as a production machine. But saying that learning should be fun implies that people should pursue it for their own pleasure because they want to do it, because they are intrigued by the things that they learn for the sake of learning them, not for the sake of . . . whatever, but for the sake of the knowledge itself and the sheer joy of discovery. But that implies an entire world that doesn't really exist in the United States. Nevertheless, I think it is the most natural state for humans. If learning were in fact treated as play, as joy, we wouldn't rank people. If we stopped ranking people, how do we know who is going to be fit for what job? I'm being ironic when I say that. If we stop ranking people, civilization would fall apart. Or it would be a different kind of civilization.

**Stryker:** *When you found cultural studies as an academic interdisciplinary, through HistCon, you seemed to settle into something. At last you've arrived at a place you want to be. Why this place?*

**Stone:** Because it was big enough to hold me. Because I could be in love with the many different things that I am under the umbrella of cultural studies. When I was doing this and that, I always had the sense that there was a ceiling on whatever discipline I was pursuing. I would go up to a certain level and then my interest would stop. The other parts of me would be wasted there. I needed to engage other parts of myself. There was too much stuff not being used. When I hit cultural studies I found that I could bring so much into play—my experience with neurology and telephony, with sound recording and computer programming, with my studies of classics, with my brief encounters with theory. I could take all of those things and find ways in which they fit together. That's one reason why. The other reason is that cultural studies is part of the solution, one of the possible solutions, to the dilemma of the university system.

**Stryker:** *I see it being necessary to create spaces for dialogues to happen between different disciplines. That it's necessary for all of the disciplines to be in conversation, but that you run a risk in doing so. When you try to link psychoanalysis to history of science, or whatever, what you risk doing is becoming unintelligible to people outside the interdisciplinary conversation. It thwarts the purpose of doing what you're trying to do.*

**Stone:** I know what you mean, but the only other solution is staying away from it entirely. In that sense I'm still searching for that common language. I think performativity, or performance, if you will, is very close to that kind of a common language, because when you're performing, you're using a great deal more language than you would if you were simply putting words on a page, or even speaking. People respond to your facial expressions, for example.

**Stryker:** *I want to talk more about embodiment. One of the things I'm always hearing people talking about when talking about virtual reality and the Internet is that it's a disembodied space. We're never disembodied. We never get out of the meat part, we're just performing ourselves in different spaces. I want to hear you talk about the question of embodiment and disembodiment, about where subjectivity happens. Remember that story you told in your book, about the person who has multiple personalities, and some of the alters manifest only online? Where do those alter-subjects go when the body isn't connected to its performative media?*

**Stone:** This is one of those “where does the candle flame go when it goes out” questions. As long as we analyze it in those terms, we're not going to get anywhere. The best analogy would be quantum theory. They appear and they disappear. They go from virtual to real, from real to virtual and they cross back and forth over those boundaries, sometimes predictably and usually not. It is a transactional identity, a riff on quantum mechanics. So when you ask, where is this identity when it's off the Net? Basically, an easily speakable, easily intelligible answer to that question is that it becomes virtual during that time. Now we have to deal with the problem of what we mean by “virtuality,” because the existence of the prosthesis in the network is what makes the virtual persona become real. We still need a little bit of language, a more powerful and complex language to describe this.

**Stryker:** *Transgender studies. Is that going to be a field for exploring this set of issues?*

**Stone:** Uh-huh.

**Stryker:** *I see gender as the language through which you communicate the reality of your identifications and desires to other people. Not just verbally and visually, but with your whole body, in a language of movement and smell and sound. It's a very full language with many realms and registers. I think of transsexuality as an instrumentalization of that language—of the language that makes the world real. I like your term posttranssexual. Historically, transsexuality has been conservative in the sense that, out of the desire to communicate, we're taking on a language that is already being*

*spoken by other people. It's like any other language—the transmission of meaning relies on a shared structure. But, on the other hand, what we've seen happening the last five or six years or so is that there is a new critical mass of transsexuals. Transsexuality itself is now another gender possibility, another site of identification, a place, a space where you have the luxury of obtaining and coining new words, making neologisms. Those new words, the knowledges and the desires they represent, they're beginning to have some communicational efficacy—you can say them to new people who are going to have some idea of what you're talking about, like, "Oh yeah, that thing you just said, I call it this." They know what you're talking about, and whole new discussions come about. This is not just about transsexuality. I think in a lot of ways, transsexuality—the way it has been stigmatized and pathologized, or eroticized in a very suspect way—is really just a powerful mechanism for containing the transformative potential of human existence. As we do the political work to depathologize it, to make it sexy to be what being transsexual represents, to pull people out of conventional human existence, we're going to see it become something very different than it's been before. We really can't even see what that is very clearly yet. Part of this work is pulling transsexuality out of the discourse of homosexuality where it's been embedded for so long, and into a whole new network of ways of talking about embodiment and desire and pleasure and identity.*

**Stone:** Yes. This is what I've been calling "transsubjectivity," precisely because I want to move away from the sexuality model for very much those reasons. The body as an instrumentality for involvement, consciousness trying to evolve that richer, deeper language. We're at the pidgin stage right now. Using that as a guideline, we can look and see that the next stage will be the creole stage, which I think we're getting ready to move into, to where we do have analogies and similar structures, but also words that are composed of combinations of other languages so that they remain intelligible—what are called boundary objects, things which are visible on both sides, a translational process. From there we move on to the next stage, which has its own grammar and syntax and has gone on to involve a richer, deeper set of meanings of its own. We're definitely embarked on that. We're aware that the language that we're currently using to describe this kind of subjectivity is the language of the oppressor culture. When we actually get down to it, it is because societies tend to perpetuate themselves by preserving—by fixing—their identities and keeping those identities intact. We're talking about something which is quite alien. I think it's important to understand that transgender is not so much about sex or gender as it is about a new subjectivity.

**Stryker:** *The flip side of that coin is that, paradoxically, change happens because you're trying to perpetuate patterns over time. Transcription error, mutation, sustainable divergences—that's the motor of change. Flux and stasis go together. Part of*

*the big political picture is to contest whatever discourses and practices emerge to outlaw nomadic subjectivity.*

**Stone:** Yes. Transsexuality is not the end. It's just a place to gather your energies so that you can go on to the next thing.

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