



William Coupan

SIN, GUILT AND LUNCH

Suppose Truth is a woman. What then?

Nietzsche

SWN: Why do you have this superior attitude towards your audience?
Lydia Lunch: What audience?

If Dracula were into rock 'n' roll, Lydia Lunch would be on the back of his motorcycle. Not that she needs the excitement, but *he* could use the class.

Down here on the corner of Bitter and Twisted, where Thirteenth Street crosses A and B and the rest of the crumbling Spanish alphabet, Lydia Lunch, Diva of the Disgusted, sits in the half-light polishing her scorn.

Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, Lydia's previous band, has just been declared dead along with her own teen age. Her new group, Eight-Eyed Spy, is yet to hit the circuit. So, as she turns 20, the somber young mistress has time to go about her domestic duties.

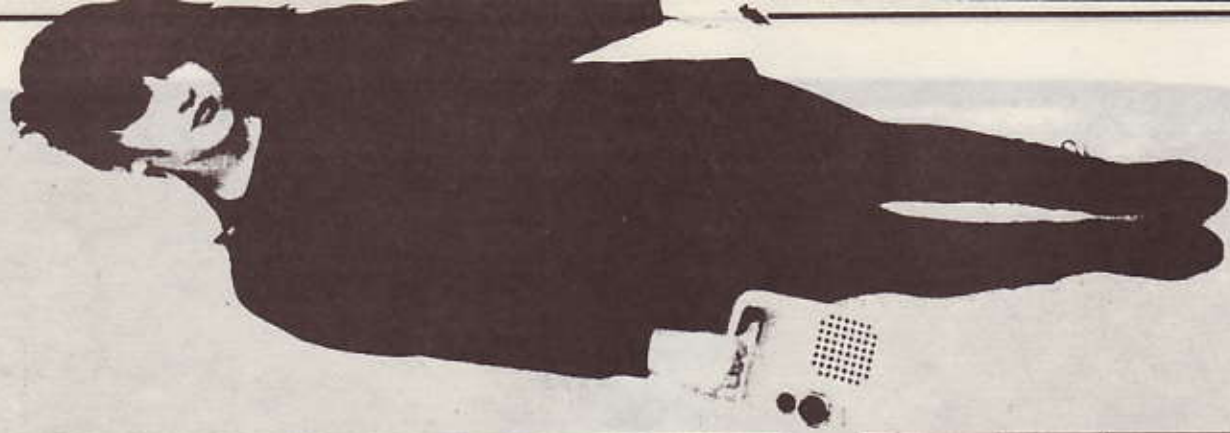
Every two weeks she blinks her big dark eyes at the mirror to check the severity of the look — spandex pants (black), dyed hair (black), biker's jacket (black) — and hits the street where the click-clack of her spike heels gets a look from Jose and Jose for which they will both later go to confession.

Back in the quiet apartment, Perry Mason lifts his spaniel eyes from the soundless black and white TV and scans the jury of his peers — seventeen dolls, a toy nun and Action Man all sitting around a warm dent in Lydia's bed. He looks beyond them at the public gallery on the shelves — a few tortured Christs, a couple of

Virgin Marys one Lazarus on crutches and two nuns digging a grave. His glance settles on a skull. It is resting on a swastika. He opens his goldfish mouth and begins a soundless invocation of the Fifth — the right to remain silent.

The Dark Lady of the Spleen click-clacks back in the door. She opens her package. Thirty live crickets. She drops a handful to her tarantula spider in the kitchen and tosses the rest to the lizards in the living room.

Then she lies down again in her bed, closes her eyes, pulls the white sheet over her face and plays her favorite game — Dead.



David Geddis

Rock culture is a kind of agreed mediocrity that bounces around among absolutes, and Lydia Lunch is one of them. The Transylvanian psychodrama that Lydia calls a lifestyle is worth mentioning, because it shows the lengths to which her black sense of humor will go to keep her amused. She chooses to walk on the dark side of *everything*. It shows a sense of herself which goes way beyond the bleak reality that she brings onstage in her songs.

Teenage Jesus and the Jerks was one of those bands which really brought something new to rock during the punk uprising a few years back. It attacked the assumptions of rock so radically that most of the recognizable elements of music were cut away altogether. All that was left was pure rage. Lydia could barely play guitar and limited herself to a series of atonal chords that she played in a monotonous crunch. Bradley Field played "drum." Bang bang bang. There was a bass player who went to the same school.

But the impact of this abrasive un-music was enormous. Lydia didn't exactly give performances. She inflicted them. If you had a good time, you were missing the point. The point was the presentation of a self that was so pessimistically real that it seemed Lydia, despite her minimalistic technique, was one of the few honest, even honorable musicians around.

She would stand still and scream her rhythmic abuse and lurid nightmares with no element of melody or harmony to get in the way of the awful picture.

My eyes are gripped my feet are clenched my brain is open my mouth rips I woke up dreaming . . . you are my wound my wrists are split my elbows twisted my shoulder bent my knees arthritic I woke up bleeding you are my razor.

Aaaaarrrgh. Good ugly stuff. Some say ugly is the only shade of beauty that true art ever concerned itself with, and that is doubly applicable to rock, a second-rate art at best, bastardized and riddled with compromise, but art all the same. In the battle between the good and the pretty, the blight of prettiness usually prevails. In rock, prettiness is a string of slicko licks accompanied by the correct facial expressions — variations on the witless cressant pout on Linda Ronstadt. Linda's pout is a facial twitch of such gilt-edged consumer appeal that it has taken on a life of its own, like William Burroughs's Talking Asshole. It now appears on the faces of many otherwise attractive people, but on Linda the lip muscles are so permanently pumped up that, if you're quick, you can stick her to a tiled surface like a sucker-tipped drain-plunger. Rumor has it that Jerry Brown regularly leaves her stuck to the toilet wall before retiring.

But Lydia Lunch's early songs were far more than exercises in gruesomeness. The violent imagery and music of Teenage Jesus was just an attention grabber. Go beyond the images and you find a catalogue of fears. Unlike the prescription-written poseurs who inhabit the new wave as thickly as they did the old one, Lydia reversed the process of style and content. Her secret weapon is honesty. Underneath the weirdness, she is real in a way most singers can't dare to be. So, instead of challenging your sense of Cool, she knocks you over with frankness. Her songs are those of a needful, frightened child. But they are coming from an apparition of ultra-sophistication, a high-heeled killer who could wilt roses with a look. Miss Attitude 1980. So the honesty comes as even more of a shock.

Also, Teenage Jesus and the Jerks was the ultimate exponent of that New York ultra-elitism which holds that merely *showing* for a gig is doing the audience a favor. James Chance's version was to actually beat up the poor wretches. Lydia's was even more refined. She would do sets that lasted only ten minutes. Perfect. The rabble would be sent into paroxysms of masochistic delight, yelling "Less!" as the twisted trio disappeared into the gloomy bowels of CBGB with nary a backward leer.

Here are some scraps of an interview done with Lydia while she was still with Teenage Jesus and the Jerks. The very name perfectly expresses Lydia's view of herself in relation to the world. You are either Teenage Jesus or you are a jerk.

SWN: Why do you play such short sets?

LL: Less is more. That's how I feel. Like discipline. Or punishment. You don't need 30 minutes of my music to know what I'm talking about.

SWN: Does a 30-second instrumental say it all?

LL: Yes. It says "Fuck." "Child." "Hurt." "Fuck." I'm a child and it's child-abuse. My band is like child-abuse.

SWN: Your lyrics are all about need, fear and anger. Very basic human functions. Things like affection, humor, frustration, you don't deal with.

LL: I don't feel those other things.

SWN: But you're not a zombie.

LL: I'm pretty much a walking zombie. But not the way most people mean that. But what I feel, I feel in extremes, and everything else is secondary. That's why I refer to myself as a child. I'm very open, very naked. I do give everything, but it's going to hurt them more than it hurts me. Nothing can hurt more than it does to be alone. I already have the hurt. So what I do is self-hurt without the masochism.

SWN: If less is more . . .

LL: So why don't we just do one song?

SWN: Why don't you just send somebody? Your valet, perhaps.

LL: I've thought about that. A poster of me should be enough. That's how I feel exactly. If I could project one picture of me, and not play the music . . . Because Teenage Jesus even sounds like I look, anyway. And it sounds like that because that's how I physically feel. That's how my body functions. Bam. Bam Bam. To me it's very sexual music. That's how I like to have sex. To me it's more than music, it's like a dance movement. Not like a dance band, more like a dance piece. The fact that I don't actually move, is because I'm so selfish. I'm not going to take off my clothes and fuck onstage. Giving them what I give them is more than enough. I'll just play Teenage Jesus and they can jerk off. Not that I play dead when I have sex, but that impact is how I like to fuck. Bam bam bam.

SWN: Is the minimalism very important? There's an absence of dynamics in the music, your words express very simple feelings. They don't even express an opinion. Would anything more compromise your opinion of the audience, which is very low.

LL: I never said that. Only that they're secondary compared to me. I don't think more music is needed. And that attitude is what I feel. It's like primal therapy. I scream for you, you know. I'm up there screaming my fucking guts out. It's for you as much as me, only I'd be . . .

SWN: The last to admit it.

LL: Right. I think it would be very popular in a psychiatric institution, because it is very fundamental and those people, all people are so out of touch with basics. I should be used. I'm waiting for some organization like ERA to sweep me up. I'd compose their anthem. But people never understand my kind of simplicity, which is why my band is so misunderstood. Nobody wants simplicity. They always try to second guess it, which makes them wrong. Which makes them say "Oh, it's a pile of shit" or "It's not rock 'n' roll," or that it's annoying. Sure it's annoying, because it's right there in your throat. It's in all your joints. It's annoying because it's physically uncomfortable. Basically, I don't think people like to get fucked very hard. I do.

SWN: Why do you have crucifixes and a toy nun?

LL: Because I like religious things. Because they look pretty. I'm a Catholic girl.

SWN: Do you like the idea of guilt?

LL: I love guilt. Guilt, Sin and Shame. My three favorite things.

SWN: Would sex be boring without sin, guilt and shame?

LL: Yes. I want to be entertained. I want to have sex like it's a movie. I'm a good little Catholic girl. I spend a lot of time having sex.

SWN: Is it a whole world in miniature?

LL: Well, I certainly get to play all the parts. I do a real good job, let me tell you.

SWN: But what are you doing with their icons around the house instead of your own?

LL: Because I love to feel guilty.

SWN: Are you going to get your comeuppance one day?

LL: MMMMMMM. And I can't wait. I'll probably get stomped by a gang of Puerto Rican boys. They'll take me to the woods and torture me for days and rape me, then kill me.

SWN: What for?

LL: For being me. For having the nerve.

SWN: Did you invent yourself?

LL: Yes. When I was 13. I spent a lot of time alone. Not that my parents were unkind or anything, but I used to just look at everything and all I could see was ugliness. And when you're 13, that's not real terrific. Also when you're 13, boys are a real drag. So I decided I needed to make myself completely self-sufficient, so that I could be happily alone, so that nothing could really hurt me. I needed something which would be absolutely perfect. And I came up with *me*. Would you like a Coke?

That was last year and already I'm getting withdrawal symptoms from living in a city that doesn't have a Teenage Jesus. Lydia is still skulking in the gloom, on the lam from the paranoia squad, still turning out lyrics that make you grab your head in fear and trembling, still collecting icons and relics on the order of the skeleton of a human hand that lies fetchingly on her dresser, still looking sloe-eyed and beautiful under all the severity, still badmouthing every poor slob that ever crossed her path.

But really strange things are now afoot. Lydia has a new band, Eight-Eyed Spy (named for the family who made Pearl Harbor possible — naturally) which is playing very listenable rock 'n' roll and has Pat Irwin playing some terrific sax and guitar. Lydia has packed in the guitar and is now going to just sing. Might even move around a bit. Might even *smile*. But the real news is her new solo album, which is finished and will be out in the new year.

Lydia Lunch (Ze Records) will be reviewed here more fully when it is released, but it will cause a big stir without any doubt. She has made a quantum hop with the album. Choosing to assault the sensibilities rather than the senses, Lydia has allowed her wild mind to be used as an adjunct to some very sophisticated rock, instead of delving into her imagination and presenting it as a kind of tour de force in its own right. There are some extremely smooth rock arrangements and even some big-band production by Billy Van Plank, who has a wonderful grasp of those spooky-lush film-noir atmospherics of the Forties. Bob Quine, one of New York's most interesting guitarists is also featured with occasional passages of tasteful strangeness. In fact, *tasteful* is the only way to describe the album at the risk of making it sound ordinary, which it most certainly is not. Yet it is extremely listenable as well as being solid Lydia. She has simply made the most of her interesting company. One would hate to suggest that the girl has actually begun to relax, but there are even some humorous touches here, mainly a track called "Atomic Bongos," which is her spoof of that whole B-52's regurgitated beach-party surf-rock. She even does "Gloomy Sunday," the Billie Holiday tune, with the music all redone, but the lyrics and that melancholy feel still intact. The whole undertaking is an enormous surprise for fans of Teenage Jesus. The biggest change is in her voice. She has finally stopped screaming and on the album allows her real voice to emerge. It is surprisingly gentle and expressive.

This may be all too much to take for admirers of the world's most bad-tempered performer, and yet the change is really just one of emphasis. The components have been reshuffled but the ace is still safely up the sleeve. It seems that Lydia has realized that she has a future and that her extraordinariness does not only lie in the maximum of shock. Although the ability to shock is the kind of thing that still hangs around her like perfume. She will always be able to make your jaw drop open with casual little morsels like "Do you like this apartment? Me too. We had to move from the place in back because the old guy who had it before us died and nobody found him and his dog ate his face off and we couldn't get rid of the bloodstains or the smell of death."