Dear Archivist and Librarian Friends,

Our presentation in Portland will be a lot more about YOU and your archives, than mine. But I thought you’d like to read a little bit of my biography, which describes how I came to have a archival-curious history to share. Enjoy, and I’ll see you soon!

Susie

The Birth of the Blue Movie Critic

by Susie Bright

I was hired by Jack Heidenry in 1986 to write for Penthouse Forum, a pocketbook-size sex journal that porn mogul Bob Guccione published during his heyday.

I had no idea that Jack’s plan was rather experimental. All I knew, was that I’d never been paid professionally to write before, though I’d worked tirelessly on newspapers and underground magazines since I was a teenager. I got suspended for distributing birth control information in high school. My first “Sex Advice Column”
was written for *On Our Backs*, an 80s underground magazine dedicated to
“entertainment for the adventurous lesbian.” I was always the enthusiastic volunteer of
the sexual liberation front.

But I’d never watched an X-rated movie.

I didn’t tell Jack either of my secrets. It was such an amazing opportunity, I
wanted him to think I wrote for piles of money all the time and knew everything about
erotic theater.

Unlike Guccione’s flagship title with its pin-up girl centerfolds, *Forum* was full of
sexy words instead of sexy pictures, read by men and women alike.

Heidenry found me because he admired my writing and editorship of a two-year old anti-establishment lesbian sex magazine called *On Our Backs*. I was shocked
he’d even heard of ua. Our tiny posse in San Francisco didn’t publish our manifesto
with men in mind.
Jack asked me to write a monthly column, “The Erotic Screen,” to review and report on the latest in erotic cinema. A year later, he added an advice column so I could respond to erotic film questions.

It must have been a red-letter day in 1986 for women’s lib at the Guccione Empire— Heidenry hired myself, Veronica Vera, and Annie Sprinkle as monthly regulars. I don’t when any leading circulation magazine in New York ever again hired three talented women as contributing editors and paid them handsomely. I was blissfully out of the loop about how few women worked in these capacities.

I was twenty-eight years old. All those famous hardcore films like Deep Throat and Behind the Green Door had came out when I was in Catholic grade school wearing saddle shoes and plaid skirts.

When I was a kid, I was curious about “X-rated” movies, of course— but by the time I was a teen, I was a radical, and I considered blue movies, the whole idea of them, to be pathetic. I thought the people who made or watched those films must be lonely, at best. They needed to take their clothes off and go have sex with everyone else at the nude beach. My actual life at the time would have made a good porno.
By the time the 1980s arrived, I was creating lesbian erotica every day with a talented band of art radicals at our all-dyke office above a Chinese take-out in the Castro. I worked at a day job in a closet-sized feminist sex toy shop, the original Good Vibrations founded by Joani Blank. It was the only place of its kind. Our great inventory disadvantage was that hardly anyone in the “erotic” world made anything of interest for women.

My vibrator shop colleagues and I talked about “someday” publishing a book of erotic short stories by women—it had never been done. I saw only a few customers per day, and in between talking about the miracle of the Magic Wand vibrator, we talked about how no one seemed to believe that women had erotic, aesthetic, interests of their own.

At On Our Backs, we were inventing everything from scratch. How about mounting a lesbian strip show performed by real dyke whores and strippers who wanted to perform for their own kind? Done! How about making videos of real butches and femmes and punks, people who looked like us, out dykes with real faces, having sex like real women do? Let’s do it!
It slowly dawned on us that there’d never been an erotic magazine put together by women of any persuasion, straight, bi, or gay—nor had lesbians ever published a periodical, even non-erotic, so blatantly and visually out of the closet. Our names and faces were on the line.

My start at *Forum* was clumsy. I asked Jack, “You know I’m a lesbian feminist, right? I’m not going to change my mind about how I see things.”

But that wasn’t the half of it. I wasn’t a professional journalist, despite my political credentials. My first *Forum* review, to my eyes now, reads like a high school book report. Furthermore, I had no contacts in the business, no introductions. I had to buy a ticket like every other dirty old man and march into the Pussycat Theater for a theatrical viewing. I didn’t know what a VCR was—none of my friends watched videos at home.

Now I’m glad for my initial deprivation. I ended up seeing rather amazing 35mm films at some of the biggest and most elegant screens in San Francisco and New York. They raised my expectations, in a good way.
I was the only woman in the porn theater who wasn’t working. I thought at first that the male customers would hassle me as I sat down in a torn velvet seat with my little notepad. But they didn’t bother me—they moved away as if I were a detective. I would have the entire aisle to myself.

I also realized that a lot of the men were having sex with each other in the back of the theater, both inspired by and indifferent to the largely heterosexual activity on screen. I remember feeling annoyed when I would hear them grunting, and I’d yell, “You’re missing a good part!”

I had a friend, now deceased, named Victor Chavez, who worked out of the Local 2 H.E.R.E. banquet hall. We were both union organizers, a subject close my heart. But we discussed other things besides unfair contracts! He’s the one who opened his briefcase one day and told me that the two books he always carried with him were, one, the Bible, which he set out before us on a table. Next, he pulled out How to Enlarge Your Penis, which he told me was the second greatest-selling book in the world next to Genesis.

Victor had a Betamax video player, and a screen, which he insisted on loaning me so I could be a better critic. He believed in my potential. The screen was enormous and I
could barely fit it in my single room. But I instantly grasped the intimacy of this new viewing experience. I could plug in my Magic Wand and make as much of a fuss as those guys at the Pussycat.

I understood the dual whammy of porn. All those people fucking and breathing hard, it gets to you—at least before you’ve reviewed a few thousand. It arouses you to distraction. On the other hand, I was a huge movie buff, a film nerd, and I couldn’t help but critique the bombs, the gaffes, the weird porn canards—as well as appreciate the directors who were obviously great talents.

You see, erotic filmmakers were the original indie filmmakers. The fact that their films turned you on, was no different than a different genre scaring the daylights out of you, or making you cry. Films are great vehicles to elicit strong emotion. When they touch you on multiple levels, simultaneously, we call them “masterpieces.”

The hardcore era that began in the late 60s is now be understood as part of the wave of independent films that broke away from the Hollywood studio system. The erotic filmmakers were pioneers in the same league as the “spaghetti western” directors or the producers of clumsy horror and sci-fi flicks. Sometimes, they were the same
people. The permanent ghettoization of blue films was bizarre, and unwarranted by anything but the priggery of political machinations.

When *Forum* hired me, there were a lot of porn “fan magazines,” but no independent reviews or genuine reporting. You would never see an article in a daily newspaper or legitimate magazine about the economics, aesthetics, or workaday world of the Adult film industry. (The whole expression, “adult,” as a euphemism for “sex,” came into our vernacular because of legal battles that defined sexuality as a subject forbidden for young people’s eyes).

It was truly the “twilight zone,” only referred to in legal and moral debates about obscenity. No Guild reporter actually went out to a movie set or an office, no non-Adult journalist knew the numbers. It was untouched territory, and I was the unlikely character who wandered into it with a pencil and pad.

There was one trade newsletter, like a one-sheet version of *Variety*, edited by Jared Rutter, called *Film World Reports*, which was read by producers and directors in the business. It listed the bestselling movies, who was buying what, classic insider bullet news. After all, they were certainly making money and deals, despite the
indifference of the rest of the entertainment media. Decoding that sheet was one of my first accomplishments.

Yes, you could buy men’s magazines where you’d read breathless interviews with the starlets, or read peanut-size reviews that said things like “Steamy! Ceci is SO HOT!” It was advertising barely disguised as editorial. The people who wrote the reviews did not use their own names. It was as closeted a world as a pre-Stonewall gay bar.

The closest thing to erotic cinema criticism was at Hustler magazine, who deployed a famous graphic they created called the “peter-meter” to cover the latest releases. With each title, the little penis would rise from the pudgy category to a raging hard-on.

“Peter” was always at least at half-mast, until one shocking day, Hustler gave a film a complete limp-dick rating. I was riveted by the reviewer, who used his own voice to say how revolted and disgusted he was by this insult to masculinity and good clean X-rated fun.
Wow. Obviously *Hustler* had not been paid for this review. I decided if they hated this movie, it must be great.

I was right. The film was *Smoker*, by a pair of film students from NYU who’d done art direction for Rinse Dream’s *Cafe Flesh*. Their names were Ruben Masters and Michael Constant. I saw *Smoker* the very next day at the Pussycat, and sure enough, it rattled several customers enough to leave the theater. I think it was the moment when *David Christopher* slipped a filmy blue women’s chemise over his chest and started slapping his cock against his belly, masturbating and fiercely monologuing to himself as he spied upon a neighbor next door. He’s not announced as trans, or cross-dressed, or any label at all. What he is doing is just his un-explained intimacy, so well-acted and shot you feel like you’re in *Hiroshima Mon Amour* a meets 7th floor walkup in the Bowery.

These filmmakers used a pseudonym, *Veronika Rocket*. They’d broken so many rules, their genderfuck was so effortless, with such beauty, that I used their film as a benchmark for the rest of my erotic criticism career. I made a pilgrimage to Philadelphia to meet them and visit their original set pieces. Ruben Masters opened the door of her carriage house, looking like *Louise Brooks* in *Pandora’s Box* and checked me up and down. “Vodka stinger?” she said.
I had so many lucky breaks like that.

Meanwhile, I introduced myself to the baker’s dozen of blue film companies in Southern California and New York. I went to the annual trade conference in Vegas, which at the time was a tucked-away ghetto at the Consumer Electronics Convention, far away from all the new TV’s and stereos. I hung out in the ladies bathroom at the Sahara Hotel with copies of *On Our Backs* to initiate conversations with the “X” actresses who weren’t accustomed to anyone giving a damn about their real stories.

There were lots of men to talk to, of course. Most of the older ones were very conservative. A handful of men ran this business for years, a gin rummy game consortium, and they were as bigoted as Archie Bunker. They had a hard time believing I was there for real, not a joke, not a straight girl on a slumming lark.

My *Penthouse* column— and the video library I created at my old sex toy shop—sold so many videos that they had to endure me. They were jaded, and yet naïve about how much their world was changing.
They’d say the most incredible things on the record: “Women don’t like to see anal sex; that’s nasty. Any white actress who lets a black actor fuck her on screen is out of her mind; her career is through. How can a lesbian get pregnant; that’s impossible! Don’t you have a husband somewhere to look after?”

Some of their sons and daughters were more open, or openly rebelling. Punk rock, queer lib, and feminist sensibilities hit the artistic side of the “Adult” industry. It was contagious.

It used to be a papa and son business tradition, almost quaint that way. One of the 20-something heirs to the gin rummy game, sat down with me one day and explained how Ruben Sturman, the granddaddy of the peepshow and the adult raincoat industry, evaded the IRS for so long. How did he manage to never pay taxes? How did he run a business completely outside of the American establishment? Our conversation took place three years before Sturman finally got busted for good. My friend told me in detail how the money was generated, methodically picked up in bags, and moved from place to place.

“Why are you telling me this?” I asked him.
“Because you make lesbian fist-fucking videos,” he said.

I didn’t realize how daring that act was until he said it. I had no idea that this was the key to mutual confidence— risk.

The lesbian feminist erotic world we’d created at On Our Backs was our own little cloister. We were innocent of what “was” and “wasn’t” outside the law. If we had two lovers crazy about each other who wanted to be videotaped, we didn’t tell them what to do. If they put their hands inside each other at the moment of orgasm, to our eyes, it was terribly romantic.

—To the U.S. Justice Department, it was just about the most obscene act ever. Go figure.

Everything women actually did to get off seemed to be against the blue laws, we found out. Women’s orgasms, real orgasms, real female bodily fluids, were a no-no every time we tried to sell our magazine or videos in conservative states.

Places like Oklahoma and Florida said that g-spot ejaculations were illegal “water sports,” “golden showers,” and therefore on their list of community obscenities
that violated the **Miller Standard**. They didn’t know anything about female anatomy or physiology— and they didn’t care. You can see those same ideas today, in places like Alabama that make possession of vibrators a crime. The old-school porn dudes called them “soft states;” I called them “women-don’t-come” states.

*On Our Backs*, and our video arm, Fatale Video, were rudely introduced to the world of “legal obscenity” where nothing has anything to do with reality. Strangely, our unintended risk-taking gave us the cred to be allowed into discussions in the hardcore boy’s room. They never would have talked to me otherwise.

Video changed everything— in porn first, then in Hollywood. The days of the peep shows and the theaters were numbered; although it’s interesting to see the peepshow has outlasted the elegant theater. People still like to feed those coins in close quarters, the special claustrophobia of tight circumstances.

More importantly, video offered a way “in” for artists, entrepreneurs, and sex radicals— who, for better or worse, never would’ve made a movie before. A new small set of geniuses were born, along with a much vaster set of mediocrities. Not different from film, just multiplied like rabbits.
When I first heard from my readers at Penthouse Forum, who wrote me by hand, (pre-email!) I realized two things. One, the overwhelming majority of women had never seen an erotic motion picture before. At all. Their furtive glances of still photos in men’s magazines were mostly female nudes. —Maybe Burt Reynolds in his famous Cosmo spread.

But what about men? It wasn’t much more sophisticated. Very few men had seen more than a minuscule sampling of erotic films. Ask a random man, if he can name five or six full-length erotic movies he’s seen. If he is able to make such a list, he’s part of an exclusive club.

Watching erotic films, movies that are driven forward by sex scenes, is different than looking at single photos, pictorials, snippets, clips. The medium, the experience of going all the way through an eighty minute feature, is an entirely different ride than a momentary glimpse, a fast-forward.

To prove it, I started throwing living room movie shows for my friends. I would give away my screener copies and show segments of my favorites. It was like I was offering free rocket tickets to the moon. My neighborhood audience was fascinated—and completely inexperienced.
The living room got a little bigger— I created an educational show-and-tell clips lecture called *How to Read a Dirty Movie*, and another one called *All Girl Action: The History of Lesbian Erotic Cinema*, which I started premiering at independent theaters like The Castro and the Roxie. I hit the festival circuit all over the world, including a daring mission by the British Film Institute to get my movies in, despite iron-clad UK customs rules against them.

One college memory stands out: In rural Blacksburg, Virginia, a closeted gay student got ahold of student union funds for “Friday Night Fun!” at Virginia Tech to bring me out there for one of my clips shows. This is a school with a history of devotion to Southern white boys and military service. The students weren’t even allowed to watch R-rated films on this campus.

I didn’t find out this history until I was moments away from the podium. My young sponsor looked like he’d just detonated a bomb and his face was covered in sweat. My “Dirty Movie” clips show started, which happens to begin with excerpts of two young handsome army cadets making out on a firing range.
I thought the roof was going to cave in. Blacksburg boys were running for the doors, making vomiting sounds, screaming.

The half who stayed in their seats watched a full-spectrum array of sexual and human emotion, delivered by porn’s finest auteurs. They got more sex education in 100 minutes than they’d had in their entire life.

The stunned president of the Young Republicans, a co-sponsor of “Friday Night Fun,” took me out to a fast food dinner afterward. He told me that he found it curious that the scenes of lesbians making love had pleased him, while the scenes of gay men had given him a stomach ache. I was impressed that he was calm enough to observe his own reactions.

“I don’t disagree with all of what you do,” he said, “but I think it’s entirely unjust that you receive checks from the government for your homosexuality.”

I stared at him with my mouth full of fries. “Oh, it’s not that bad,” I said, “I only get half as much because I’m bisexual.”
The success of the film shows, despite Blacksburg, led me further into the university world. I started a class called *The Politics of Sexual Representation* at UC Santa Cruz, a rewarding teaching experience. The students were prepared to look at material that was considered ephemeral or taboo, and decode it.

In film circles, in the Ivy League, among artists and art historians, this thing called “porn” became a sophisticated interest, with many reporters and scholars following the same leads that had inspired me so long ago. The public developed a sense of normality and better still, humor about porn, which had been missing when I began my “Erotic Screen” column.

Much like the the topic of gay life, the “porn debate” seems to exist in two parallel worlds. On one side, it’s old hat, a yawn. In the other world, Planet Prude, the legal and public-policy climate is Fundamentalist. Politicians and religious leaders employ sex as their bogeyman more vociferously than ever, enlisting liberal as well as conservative support.

The 21st-century Gilded Age as is one of moralism and slut-shaming for the general public— while corruption and Caligula-like license is the rule for the elite. My entree to the “golden age” in porn looks so utopian now! The 70s and 80s were a
heyday for women’s progress in journalism, for “coming out of the closet,” for breaking down once-impermeable barriers in both the media and sex-film trade. I was dubbed the “Pauline Kael of Porn,” in 1986 by the SF Chronicle, but within a few years there would come to be dozens of reporters and critics covering the erotic film industry and its offerings. It was truly our “Porno Spring!” The art and academic establishment confronted erotic desire; what was once ephemeral drew potent scholarly attention. Among the cognoscenti, blue movies became historic. I was voted into the 4th Estate Hall of Fame of the X-Rated Critics Organization in 2002.

I was lucky to wander in, like Alice with a bottle of something blue and a label that said, “Eat Me.” I’m very glad I did. Unlike Alice, I never went back to being small.