

## Pacifica Radio Archives Preservation & Access Project

### The Female Angst

*Produced by Sally Davis of KPFFK-Los Angeles in 1972, the program is composed of interviews Ms. Davis conducted with writers Anaïs Nin and Joan Didion, and songwriter/performer Dory Previn. Broadcast on KPFFK on February 1, 1972. Archives number BC0611. Program length 01:43:00.*

[Music: from "Twenty-Mile Zone" by Dory Previn]

I was riding in my car  
Screaming at the night  
screaming at the dark  
Screaming at fright  
I wasn't doing nothing  
Just drive about  
Screaming at the dark  
Letting it out

Well along comes a motorcycle  
Very much to my surprise  
I said, "officer, was I speeding?"  
He said, "no you weren't speeding"  
I couldn't see his eyes.  
He said, "no you weren't speeding"  
And he felt where his gun was hung  
He said, "lady you were screaming  
At the top of your lungs  
And you were  
Doing it alone  
You were screaming in your car  
In a twenty-mile zone  
You were doing it alone  
You were doing it alone  
You were screaming."

### Interview with Anaïs Nin

*SD: Sally Davis, Interviewer*

*AN: Anaïs Nin*

**SD:** When I set out to do this program I began with the idea that somehow there was a whole area of woman's life that causes her difficulty, soul-searching, pain, even anguish. An area which is not adequately covered by the demands of "women's lib," that was perhaps related in some way to her difficulties in achieving equality with men, but was more in the private realm, the private pain that a sensitive

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woman experiences from life. Pain not solely experienced by women, but intensified by her femininity. The pain she experiences by having a feminine psyche, the pain of coping with a male dominated society, the anguish of the male-female relationship, of sex, of children, of functioning in the role society sets for a woman, while at the same time wanting to leave your mark on that society in some totally different role. The pain of being at the center of life, of birth, the menstrual cycle, creation.

This anguish is nothing new to our present age, it can be seen in the few but especially brilliant women writers who've managed to surface from the sea of male culture from time to time. There is much pain beneath the seemingly social niceties of Jane Austen, George Elliot writing, heaven help her, in Victorian England under a man's name, conveys perfectly the agony of the enormously bright, uncompromising, yet feminine female artist.

But what of women writer today? I've invited three of them who seem to me, through their sensitivity, their caring, their gifts as writers and women, to most succinctly express for the present generation what I've called "the female angst."

[Music: from "*Mine was a Wednesday Death*" by Dory Previn]

Mine was a Wednesday death  
One afternoon at approximately 3:15  
I gave up and died, and nobody cried.

Mine was a bloodless death  
Not grim, Not gory,  
More like Ali McGraw's new enzyme detergent demise in *Love Story*  
Neat and tidy, unlike Christ's on Friday.

Friends were fooled by the fact  
that I still breathed, and I spoke,  
and I smiled and I lied  
in my handy dandy life disguise kit.  
I sent away for it.

Styrofoam face fits so neatly in place  
with the prerecorded voice of your choice,  
and it almost sounds real,  
It's guaranteed deal, you can teach it to sing,

and all your friends are deceived  
and nobody grieves.

[Music fades]

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**SD:** Anaïs Nin has already fought most of her battles and won. As a writer and a woman working in the 20's and 30's she couldn't get her work published at all. The critics, all men, at worst ignored her, at best patronized her; so she set up her own printing press to produce her novels and went on to success from there. Now, after innumerable successful works she's written four diaries covering her early life and work which are invaluable because they show us the struggle of a sensitive woman to grow as woman and artists within a totally male framework, yet wanting and needing the approval of the male figure on her own terms. Here's an extract from the *Fourth Diary*:

"At Edmund Wilson's I dislike the dismal, joyless house of the father, his power in the literary world, the solidity of his environment, his good manners, his taste for classical literature. I remembered that many years ago when we read Wilson in Paris, I disagreed with his saying that Joyce had invented the contents of *Ulysses*' unconscious, since no unconscious ever contained so many illusions and associations.

He does not understand my way of life.

He does not understand that I refrain from firing up his neurosis: 'I am a very quarrelsome man.'

Sometimes I suspect that I see him just to prove to myself I could never live in what others call the "mature" world. I always experience a desire to postpone my visits with Wilson. While he confines himself to admiring me as a woman, we are safe. He is not the man creating the future. He is tradition.

He is crystallized and inflexible.

He tells me that he has always loved two contrasting types of women, one destructive, one kind and creative.

To me he seemed to have this hardening of the arteries I find in men of achievement. The florid skin, the satiated flesh, the solidity of the earth and its heaviness. He is didactic: he has conventional ideas about form and style: he has scholarship. He is all brown. Brown earth, brown thought, brown writing. His descriptions of life with Mary McCarthy sound like Jakob Wasserman's character Ganna in *Doctor Kerkhoven*.

Father, man, critic, enemy of the artist.

'You are a woman who does not destroy man.'

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That may be true, but he is a man who would destroy me."

**SD:** Ms. Nin, Edmund Wilson [Edmund Wilson, Jr. (1895-1972) American writer, critic, social commentator, diarist] said in one of his reviews of one of your books that you "deal with conflicts created for women by living half in a man-controlled world against which they cannot help rebelling, and half in a world which they've made for themselves but which they cannot find completely satisfactory."

**AN:** That's one of the themes of *Volume Four*, I think it's run through all the diaries, really. I wasn't very—as conscious as we are now of the evolution of woman, I wasn't as conscious of the difficulties I had in *expanding* and growing, and I think Wilson was right in saying we—I had not yet created my own world, in which I felt that I could move independently, and at the same time I wanted to move in relation to *man* and was believed in relationship, so that I had to bring everything with me, involve the man in my own expansions; and it *was* difficult, it was difficult to do that.

**SD:** But you seem to be saying that you weren't as aware of the difficulties then as you are looking back on them.

**AN:** Not so conscious, I suppose I expressed them spontaneously in the diary, almost subconsciously. I wasn't so aware—two things—I wasn't as aware that it was happening to so many women. I knew that there were difficulties—my women friends were in difficulties when they wanted to paint—that the devotion to the man came first, devotion to the family and to the personal relationships. I became much more aware, the last few years really—more conscious, let's say, of something that was more subconscious.

**SD:** Is that anything to do with the fact that nowadays all of these things have labels. "Women's lib" have put labels on the difficulties, and they're more categorized than they were...

**AN:** Yes, they're more organized. They mention the things that I didn't know about the laws. You know, a lot of things that I didn't know about inequalities in work and—we're more conscious of the situation as a whole; historical and political.

But in my own period the way I expressed that, you see, was my rebellion against Wilson, what he represented. And for one thing, he did not accept my work or me as I *was*, he wanted to re-create me.

And there's a very interesting statement in his own diary, which came out recently, where he says that he wanted to *instruct* women, and that he was so sorry that his daughter was not interested in being instructed by him. And he was interested in a girl [of a] similar age to his daughter, because she asked him

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questions about history. And this, of course, is something I didn't want.

**SD:** But he obviously had difficulties with creative women anyway, didn't he? I mean there's—

**AN:** Because he really wanted to instruct them. He wanted to create them, you know, to his own image or whatever it was that he thought about literature. Two things gave him away in his new diary, he said that he wished he could situate himself back into the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and that's a century that he loved, which of course [was] where I didn't belong. And the fact that he—of course it wasn't necessarily a cruel thing, but he did want to control the women writers, as he thought, to *teach* them, being the critic.

**SD:** But he said that one of the great difficulties of his life was the fact that he was attracted to intelligent women and they were always impossibly neurotic. [laugh] Do you think that's true? Do you think that a woman who feels and creates is generally neurotic or feels more pain—

**AN:** No, I do think that the only way that woman could express, at that time, her—for instance my differing, my differences from his opinions, or his ideas of writing, were very frustrating to me and they would cause neurotic reactions.

In the sense today, I would simply say: "Look, your idea of writing is different from mine, I am sure of mine." But woman is not quite so—as we have discovered in the last few years—self-confident as we think, or as sure. I can't have been as *sure* of myself, I still needed the father or the big critic who would say: "You are fine," you know, "you are going along fine, you're a good writer." And because I needed that then whoever didn't do that because a very threatening force; that's a neurotic reaction.

**SD:** And that's why Edmund Wilson, particularly in the *Fourth Diary*, becomes your threatening force—

**AN:** He becomes a figure of—you see, he's trying to make me self-doubt, give me self doubt again, and I had spent my whole life trying to reach a certain *type* of writing. Now if I had been absolutely secure then, as I feel today about my work, I could have said very simply, I wouldn't even have had a quarrel with him, I could have simply said, you know: "You live in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, I'm trying to innovate something, and I'm writing as a woman," and I wouldn't have been neurotic about it, that's true. We're only neurotic if we feel, uh, something is harming us.

**SD:** Yes. The word "neurosis" and "neurotic" and so on, appears very often in the diary, in the *Fourth Diary*, and you describe it more in terms of the ability to *feel* more than other people, the ability to care more. I think there's somewhere you

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said: "A woman suffers more in a..."—you were talking about relationships—"sacrifices more, and cares more." Well I suppose from the other side that does look, frequently like—

**AN:** It did seem to me that way, from my knowledge of my friends. You see I had so many women friends who were really very gifted. Ultimately they would always give up—one of them that I mention in diary gave up her painting and became, um—in partnership with her husband's work because her husband's work was so demanding.

**SD:** But this suffering, um, be it in terms of human relationships or be it just in the ability to *feel* more than some other people, does it make life more difficult for a woman? And in particular - a creative woman?

**AN:** It made life more difficult for the creative woman. In other words, uh, if a woman lacked self-confidence, which I think she has, and was dependent on others for praise or for approval, it made her very vulnerable. And when I speak of neuroses I really mean nothing more than what we use to call the "romantic". That is wanting the impossible thing, and then being unhappy if it was not possible. The woman wanted somehow or other to grow—at least I wanted to, and I know now it's reflected in many women—I wanted not only to do my work but to approved, to be helped, to be admired, to be inspired by the man, and that was not always forthcoming. Although I must say, for the most, men have helped me in my work.

**SD:** The woman's movement now, of course, has kind of gone away from that idea and turned their back on men, almost. You talk about needing male approval and needing to be accepted into the—

**AN:** At that time, yes in the diary—(overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

**SD:** Would you still need it, do you think?

**AN:** No, no, I think part of our maturity—what I call outgrowing the neuroses—is really that we ought to be able to do our work and believe in ourselves without such approval, but I don't think any of us do...

**SD:** Do you think—?

**AN:** ...there's always someone whose judgment we need.

**SD:** Do you think then that the male, as such, has been one of the chief sources of pain to the creative female.

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- AN:** Yes, because we set *him* up, we accepted him as the philosopher, we accepted him as the historian, we accepted him as the psychologist, and all these fields which had an influence on our education, you see, we gave him this kind of *power*. And when you go through the process of psychoanalysis, and when you go through the process of self-discovery you realize that you should not give anybody the power to decide what is right and wrong in your creativity. I mean the critics should not be outside, it should be within yourself. And when you reach maturity—which I finally have, after a great many years—I find now that I'm the judge of my own work and that if I need opinions and reactions it's *true*, but they're not fatal, they wouldn't keep me from working.
- SD:** You were talking too, about the function of woman and how women act in terms of an agent, almost, a catalyst for the rest of the community. I think you described it as—oh yes, here it is—"Woman is nature, woman is the mirror, poetry and art," and you said "the mirror is also an expression of *fear*, the fear of truth. The mirror allows us to contemplate nature while out of danger." Do you think that's—I mean, that struck me as being a tremendously *graphic* way of describing the function of woman [laughing].
- AN:** Yes, because we thought of woman—for example, even the fact of writing a diary actually is a sensitive recording and portrayal and reflection of life. There are two things involved there; that the art, the mirror sometimes I use as a form of *art*, is where we reflect nature without being in danger, where it's transmuted into a form that is no longer lethal, as experience can be. And then there's also the *mirror* that the woman always was for the male artist, and the mirror that I *am* in the diary, in when I portray others.
- SD:** Does it mean also that in some sense the woman's suffering enables the rest of humanity to *see*, um, to see deeper and to see some of the kind of mystical values underneath things, um, while at the same time not endangering themselves in any way, not becoming *neurotic* themselves, as it were.
- AN:** There's a difference between suffering—neurotic suffering—and "suffering." I think some of the things that women suffered were, were absolutely realistic conditions, which made her life-as-an-artist very difficult. There were many, many more obstacles, say, than there were for the male artist, and the male artist encounters plenty of them. That's the *genuine* suffering. The neurotic suffering comes when this creativity and this growth is frustrated; either by social conditions, by family conditions, by educational conditions, whatever the atmosphere is. Then it becomes neurosis, it becomes negative. But, uh, I think the neurosis theme in our time is almost a collective one, I think there's been a collective frustration for all creativity, and all expansion of the individual.
- SD:** The danger, of course, is, isn't it, that instead of, of directing or channeling that suffering into some kind of creativity—which it can *enrich* enormously—that you

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can go over the edge into kin of neurosis and withdrawal.

**AN:** But then that's happened to men artists too. We've had the poets go mad, we've had Rimbaud walk out of his poetic existence [Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891), French poet], uh, we had the madness of Artaud [Antoin Artaud (1896-1948), French poet, essayist, playwright, actor, director], and I think that many women, instead, the only thing they did—and we have recently the poet who wrote *The Glass Jar* ... [*The Bell Jar*, 1963]

**SD:** Sylvia Plath. [Sylvia Plath (1932-1963), American poet, novelist]

**AN:** Sylvia Plath, we considered those symptoms of women who were not able to fulfill themselves and then decided in favor of death. But then women usually chose a quieter way of, of withdrawing from activity; which is simply to live in the home and give up the piano, and give up the painting, or give up the writing.

**SD:** But do you think it's symptomatic of the same thing, do you?

**AN:** Yes, it's the same. It's the same as Rimbaud's walking off, I mean except that it's not so dramatized. It's not dramatic, she just withdraws into her personal life and then takes care of her children and does whatever is in her *personal* life, but gives up the other challenge.

**SD:** And it represents the same kind of loss? In the last... [overlapping dialogue; inaudible]

**AN:** I think it does, I think it represents a great loss in terms of *culture*, in terms of history, and that woman did have a major, great contribution, and I found the most beautiful quotation the other day from [Marion Manners?] saying that the whole process of culture, you see, which had been too much in favor of the masculine principle, the day that those two worked together and in unison, we would really have something very wonderful.

**SD:** But it certainly hasn't happened yet.

**AN:** No, it isn't. It's happening... It went too far, the balance went too far into the masculine concept of the world, and then now women are trying to straighten that out by going too far in the other direction, and isolating themselves, and separating from the man, and having their own sort of fanatical prejudices too... which I really don't go along with. But that's the transitional stage. Maybe when they both feel strong enough to work in unison. When the woman doesn't feel so endangered; you see, if I hadn't felt so endangered by Wilson we could have had a very interesting friendship—friendship of opposites.



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**SD:** But the interesting thing, one of the most interesting things to me about your writing, is that you never seem to be *too* threatened, there's always a kind of a strength in you, and one can see it, and one knows that no matter what comes along, you're never going to go under. I mean, I think you expressed it by saying: "I care, I care very much. But I will never die from caring." Whereas, um, the other two writers that are part of this program—Joan Didion and Dory Previn—may well die from caring too much, and one gets the feeling from both of them, that the edge that's keeping them back from dying is very thin indeed. What do you think of the qualities in you which made this less of a danger?

**AN:** I think there was always a primary thing of the artist, you know, for example, when I refused to destructive experiences such as drugs and all that, I would always say: "Because I'm a writer I must stay lucid, because I'm a writer I'm not going—" you see I was able to transmute the sorrows. Whatever bitter experience, or whatever *difficult* experience, or *frustrating* experience it all came out in work, and that was my salvation. And even today, you know, if I have to fight a very deep depression, I sit at my desk at 7:30 and I begin to work and the depression goes away. So my *salvation*, somehow, was always in the work, and it, and it happened.

**SD:** And you—I mean work obviously came easily to you. It wasn't a great tearing out experience [overlapping dialogue; inaudible]

**AN:** No, in other words, even in the bad periods of my life I was able to work.

**SD:** Um, Freudian psychoanalysis obviously played a large part in your—

**AN:** Not Freudian, no. I found the Freudian very limited, as I explained when I depicted Allendy, very limited experience. [Dr. Rene Allendy (1889-1942), French psychoanalyst] It wasn't Freudian, it was Rankian psychology, which I think has its termination in Laing, R. D. Laing, who pushed the barriers very much further than Freud did, and also who understood the process of creation much better. [Otto Rank (1884-1939), Austrian psychoanalyst] [R.D. Laing (1927-1989) British psychiatrist, author of *The Divided Self*, *The Politics of Experience*, a founder of the anti-psychiatry movement]

**SD:** I was interested because, of course, the "women's movement" has kind of swung away from Freud particularly, and some [overlapping dialogue; inaudible] in general.

**AN:** Yes, I think they've done a very rather mistaken thing—in swinging away from Freud they think that they have disposed of the contribution of psychoanalysis to liberation, and that is, I think, where I don't agree. Freud was at the beginning, and we've gone much further than that, and a *great* deal of psychoanalysis helped to liberate me—find out all the things that women are finding out today, in a very

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rather haphazard and chaotic way. I had been able to, to sort out, you see, and to know about myself. For example, say the guilt about *creating*, that woman has, it's a typical subject. That's a subject that psychoanalysis deals with...

**SD:** You mean the guilt of, of, of—

**AN:** Feeling that the creation is an aggressive act. That it was something I had no right to do, my father was a musician and my brother was a musician, I shouldn't really try to, to ah, do anything that would cast a shadow on their thing. This is a very feminine thing, which women are beginning now to deal with. The idea that creation is an aggression, is an aggressive thing.

**SD:** You don't feel that anymore?

**AN:** No, no. The fear of creation came from, sort of, the masculine part of ourselves, it was an active thing. They were not able to distinguish between "aggression" and "activity". And this came out of discussion with a psychoanalyst, that there was a difference between "aggressivity" and "activity", and that women had so long played a passive role and that for creation you need an active role.

**SD:** Yes, do you think that women in, in,—particularly in "woman's lib" movements today—are still having great trouble in distinguishing those two things?  
[overlapping dialogue; inaudible]

**AN:** I think they are, yes I really do. I think that they are confusing "aggressivity" with "activity", which is perfectly a part of creativity, and also, ah, creating new prejudices, you know, because not all men have endangered women's growth.

**SD:** Apart from the negative role that men played in your career—like Edmund Wilson—men have obviously been a very positive factor in your life as well. In what ways chiefly do you think? How were men important in your processes of creation?

**AN:** Well, you take for example, a man like Henry Miller who has been a target of the women's liberation. He encouraged me to write. He revised my English—which at that time still needed to be revised, because I was writing always—occasionally—would use foreign turn of phrase—he took pains over, over my manuscripts, and encouraged me. And Rank encouraged me tremendously. They never diminished me, or threatened me in any way. You see the portrait of Wilson is quite a different thing, Rank was extremely helpful to me.

**SD:** There's another little piece from the book that I wanted to discuss with you and it was where you said: "Those who suffer from inner disturbances are contagious." I wondered if the writer feels intense pain at times through the creative process

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and shows it through the creative process, and is more sensitive to unpleasant things. Do they help ameliorate conditions or do they make them worse.

**AN:** No, they help, they help. Because, you see, let's say my sensitivity—or hypersensitivity if you want to make a flaw out of it, which is sometimes what happens with the artist, he goes overboard—and sensitivity is the thing that makes me aware of others feelings, gives me empathy, gives me a capacity for reading what others need at the time, at a crucial time. For instance, answering a demand for SOS's which people make in life, this kind of hypersensitivity can be creative, and it was particularly creative, say, in the work, in the observation of women in relationship, in friendship. You can *use* it very well, I don't think it needs to become a sickly thing, you see, that makes one withdraw from the world or that you get too vulnerable and that so you can't live your life. I think it—in my case I used it as an instrument, as a highly sensitive instrument which made me aware that others were in difficulties; men or women, both.

**SD:** And so you weren't an unsettling force in any way, stirring up your environment. There's something that—when one looks at you now, and when one looks at you in your pictures right through the time that you were working—there's never any doubt of your femininity, or of, you know, your desire to look pretty, to look interesting, to look beautiful, and, um, women today frequently feel that this is a threatening thing to them, that they oughtn't to have to—particularly if they're intellectual women—that they oughtn't have to bother about how they *look* or makeup and so on. Were you ever aware of this conflict, was it ever a problem to you?

**AN:** No, I always accepted that that was part of being a woman and I don't think that it is a threat because I never felt for example that it interfered with my intellectual relationships with men, that if I wanted it to be on that plane, and that was my particular interest in that special person, that it could be as well fulfilled as they say it would be with a woman. I mean, there wasn't any reason why the sexual interplay should be a threatening one to a woman. And the other part about "looking your best" and all that, which I think women have gone—it's a negative rebellion against the slick and the over-standardization of beauty, and making all women feel that if they don't reach that perfection they are nowhere at all, I find that that's a negative reaction. That I think every woman has to bring her own *natural* beauty to a point as much as she can without—it doesn't mean we have to look like *Vogue* or *Harper's Bazaar* or [overlapping dialogue; inaudible] and I think that's a false idea of anti-aesthetics, and that will falsify our relationship to men, I never found that out to be true.

**SD:** And talking of ... of ... of the relationship to men as well: you said: "The development of woman in her own terms, not as an imitation of a man, and the effort of woman to find her own psychology and contradiction to *man-made* psychology and interpretation; woman finding her own language and articulating

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her *own* feelings, discovering her own perceptions," um, and then you went on to talk about her evolution being from subjectivity and neurosis to objectivity, expansion, and fulfillment. *You* have obviously found what you were talking about here but how far away do you think it is for most women.

**AN:** Some of them are very close to it, even younger women. I'm surprised if I compare where I was at 30, and where they are today at 30, I find it's very accelerated, they're way ahead. They have already more knowledge, they have more knowledge of what is happening in the world than I did. They have more knowledge of *solutions*, so I think they're going to do this process that I describe in the diary much more quickly.

**SD:** What role will women's movements have in this? Do you think it's going to hinder [overlapping dialogue; inaudible].

**AN:** No, I think it's been a beneficial thing on the whole, leaving aside the elements in it that none of us like, you know, the fanatical elements, it's made women very aware, it's made them organized, it's made them aware of solutions. See, the interesting thing is that when I was coping with these various problems I was coping with the psychologically, but I didn't know, for instance, that there would ever be a problem with the abortion problem. I didn't realize that women could actually organize and change the law, this I didn't know, this is what I learned from the movement; that there were things which I thought would always be so, but didn't have to be always *so*.

**SD:** Are there any other things that you can think of that you would never have believed possible that have—that you now see—

**AN:** No, I never thought, for instance, women would have their own publishing houses, would have their own newspapers, would have their own book-of-the-month club; which now every woman group is setting up. I think that this is all very good, I never thought that we would have in college, courses on women's writing. And since these things were very unjustly handled, and women were not really given the proper place, because the critics were men, and the teachers were men—I mean, men did practice certain inequality—I think all this is going to make a very interesting, better balanced culture—of course there will be excesses, you know, there always are in a revolution.

**SD:** Yes, and we've got the excesses now [laugh], hopefully then they filter down don't they?

You talked about having a tragic sense of life, and you said the "tragic sense of life means one's obsession with an ideal, not a primitive, natural life, but an ideal, romanticized life." And you asked yourself: "When was it that I set such ideals

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for myself and made my own life so difficult?"

**AN:** Well this was the early diaries.

**SD:** Yes.

**AN:** This doesn't come from *Volume Four*, does it?

**SD:** No, no. No.

**AN:** This is the early diaries where I was a romantic—or a neurotic, if you want to put it in modern terms—and expected extraordinary things. This is no longer true, [cross-talk]. Maturity means that you begin to fuse what is possible, you know, with what you wanted, and also to see that your demands were really very exaggerated and very inhuman to others.

**SD:** Was that one of the chief difficulties in your early life?

**AN:** No, that was a problem which psychoanalysis dissolved. You see, psychoanalysis gives you a sense of reality—now I don't mean in accepting something lower or of less quality than what you wanted, but I how to fulfill it. See, what I really *learned* was to—how to attain these things that I really wanted, and they were not impossible.

**SD:** And you managed it without too much of the pain that you went through at the beginning?

**AN:** Yes. The early diaries, you see, have more of the obstacles and the pains, and the later one—in fact the one I'm writing now—is a very joyous volume.

**SD:** When will that [overlapping dialogue; inaudible]

**AN:** Oh, I think it takes me a year to edit and then almost a year to get published.

**SD:** "Joy" is a word that you use even in the earlier diaries, and you talk about joy in little things—

**AN:** Well I was seeking that. I think the quest for joy is a very wonderful one, and I always did seek that, in the middle of all the troubles. I mean, I really don't think the diaries—when I say a "tragic sense of life" it's because I don't like the comic sense of life, I don't like to laugh at things, I don't think they're very funny; the things we laugh at. But that's a different thing, there's another kind of playfulness in the diary. But "play," in the way the artist uses it with his imagination and trying to transpose and improve on reality, that kind of playful *rejoicing*, and the joy I find in nature I found. You see, um, so we must never give up these quests

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and immediately say that they are impossible to find.

**SD:** Yes, but if the next diary is a joyous experience and comes out that way, then one can assume that you are, at least part of the way to finding a joyous sense of life, and that the pain is now passing.

**AN:** Yes.

**SD:** If you had to, you know, the old question; if you had to do it all again, re-live it, and start creating from the beginning, knowing now what you do know, would your writing be very different? Would your life have been very different?

**AN:** I don't think I would like to change that difficult inner-voyage that I made. It was all very rich and I wouldn't like to erase all the errors I made, I don't think I would change anything really. Except, the only thing I might've changed is, I would like to have been accelerated, I would have liked it not to have taken so much time...

**SD:** Do you think—

**AN:** ...for instance the acceptance of my writing took very long, and I can't say that I rejoice over that; it took 20 years.

**SD:** But isn't it nicer in the end, I mean, isn't that—

**AN:** Yes, yes, but I wish it had happened sooner. But there are time elements that you'd like to have changed. I think mostly in the acceleration, which I think is what happened to this generation, which gives me great elation, which is that they're accelerating, the wisdom is accelerated, and what their experience is accelerated and so they're not—you know, it's not such a long—inner-journey doesn't take quite so long.

**SD:** Do you think that on the whole that women's greater capacity for suffering, if you like, or for feeling, is beneficial to her creative process?

**AN:** Yes, it can be. It can be, it depends how it's used. As long as it doesn't—I'll give an example of that; for instance when I couldn't be published, I might have become embittered, and before this happened, I took the press and I did the books. In other words, I wanted to convert something that might be rebellious, and anger, and bitter, into action. The minute I had the press I didn't care anymore about the publishers. And this is what I mean by, you know, the suffering doesn't need to be an acceptance of an immovable condition, but it *drives* you into change.

**SD:** Ms. Nin, thank you very much indeed.

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## The Female Angst

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### Interview with Joan Didion

*SD: Sally Davis, Interviewer*

*JD: Joan Didion*

**SD:** Joan Didion has written, in addition to a vast body of nonfiction for the *Saturday Evening Post* and other American magazines, two novels, and has published a collection of her best nonfiction pieces, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*. She writes of the confusion and awfulness of modern life; of death by violence, murder, rattlesnake bites, terrible acts of God, evil winds, and the inability of things to hold at the center; the universal falling apart. She has been called this generation's supreme chronicler of angst, she has the ability to show us her own personal pain and in so doing mirror—in the way that Anaïs Nin was talking about earlier—the savagery of nature while shielding us from it. This is a piece from *Play It As It Lays*:

"In January there were poinsettias in front of all the bungalows between Melrose and Sunset, and the rain set in, and Mariah wore not sandals but real shoes and a Shetland sweater she bought in New York the year she was nineteen. For days during the rain she did not speak out loud or read a newspaper, she couldn't read newspapers because certain stories leapt at her from the page: the four-year-olds in the abandoned refrigerator, the tea party with Purex, the infant in the driveway, rattlesnake in the playpen, the peril, unspeakable peril, in the everyday. She grew faint as the procession swept before her, the children alive when last scolded, dead when next seen, the children in the locked car burning, the little faces, helpless screams. The mothers were always reported to be under sedation. In the whole world there was not as much sedation as there was instantaneous peril."

Joan, *The National Review*, in one of their reviews of ... I think it was *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* ... said of you: "She's passed beyond optimism and pessimism to a far country of quiet anguish, bringing the scant comfort." I wonder what the sources of that anguish are chiefly, and how much of it has to do with being a woman.

**JD:** Oh, I don't think any of it does, and I don't know—I don't think, um, I don't think of myself as an anguished person particularly. But I'm not optimistic and I'm not pessimistic. It, um, the way I think doesn't seem to me to have a great deal specifically to do with being a woman, I wasn't brought up too terribly aware of any kind of special woman's role, I mean it just never occurred to me that anything would be expected of me other than doing whatever I wanted to do. And I don't feel very, ah, specifically aware of women's anguish as opposed to general

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anguish, to the anguish of being a human being, um...

**SD:** Well I know that you write about, um, the anguish, for instance, of war and the anguish of the human condition as manifested in things like Haight-Ashbury and the drug culture and so on—but very often your metaphors, if you like, for the general angst, if you like, that goes on in you are female ones. For instance you're talking about, at one point in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, about, ah, going over the edge into some kind of loss of control, some kind of madness, which shows itself with the sardine tins in the sink and the general slovenliness of the house, which is a kind of a very female concept.

**JD:** Well, that comes up because, you know, I am a woman and so I do think, um, in the images that come to a woman's mind tend to be female, I suppose, and I write women with more facility than I write men, and that's how that happens. But I don't—I did write a man once that I liked, I mean I wrote a man once in my first novel, who I was as close to as the woman in that novel, although the woman was the main character, and I thought that he came off as well as the woman, but it was the only time I've ever really gotten into a man's...

**SD:** Psyche.

**JD:** Yeah.

**SD:** Maria, in *Play It As It Lays* is almost the story of a kind of chronicle of anguish and fear, um, which strikes me as being—her anguish is particularly female, particularly concerning her daughter and the feelings about her daughter and her abortion and *all* of those images, all of the manifestations of *her* fear are particularly female ones.

**JD:** Well one of the things I was interested in in that book, I mean one of the things that started coming out of it as I was writing it was the kind of chain of—I mean this isn't what the book was about, but one of the things that kept coming was that kind of *chain* between generations of women, um, between Mariah and her daughter, and when she was particularly concerned about her daughter and about aborting the child, I found her thinking naturally about her mother. I mean it seemed to me to be some kind of *chain* of things understood by women that comes down, um, but that I don't know what that means.

**SD:** She's a particularly *California* kind of type. Her problems are particularly California ones and her way of coping with them like you know, working out how she's going to negotiate the freeways every day and so on. And I wondered about, if you feel particularly sensitive towards the pains and the difficulties of living, why you would choose to live your life in California where those, those difficulties seem to be immensely intensified.



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**JD:** Well, I was born in California and lived in New York for 8 years, and then, um, after I was married, we moved to Los Angeles, which is a very *different* place from the place where I come from. And, well I could only talk about it in two ways. One is that I find it easier to live here, I mean easier in physical terms. I like living here. The other is, that if there is, if there is a place that is—if there is a place in the world that seems to me more *real* than any other place, I would rather be living there. California in many ways, or Los Angeles in many ways, strikes me as a very—I feel very close to the reality of something here, where I ceased feeling that way in New York.

**SD:** What kind of reality are you talking about?

**JD:** I don't even know. At the time that I was writing *Play It As It Lays* and at the time that—that what Mariah's going through in that book, is that she's coming to terms with the meaninglessness of experience, and that's what everybody who lives in Los Angeles essentially has to come to terms with because none of it seems to mean anything.

**SD:** Is it kind of confronting the worst that there is and then being able to cope with anything else that comes along?

**JD:** Yeah, I would think that is what people ought to do—yeah.

**SD:** Because Dory Previn of course, who is also on this program, um, feels pretty much the way you do that, I mean for her *reality* is even more important because the grasp on reality is harder for her to maintain, and she maintains that this is the only place that she can feel it.

**JD:** Feel it, yeah. I would find it very difficult to live, um, in a sheltered way because, um, I would keep feeling, um, that I was missing the point.

**SD:** As you said, you're not optimistic, and you're not pessimistic, but you obviously have enough sensitivity to grasp that life is essentially, as you say, "meaningless", if you like. Do you then seek out subjects to intensify this, to show this meaninglessness. I mean, for instance, things like, I understood you were going to work on a book on Linda Kasabian [Linda Kasabian, b. 1949, was indicted for, the 1969 Tate-LaBianca murders in California. Turned state's evidence, she became the chief prosecution witness for the trial of Charles Manson and the "Family"], and you'd written a long piece on Haight-Ashbury and the Lucille Miller Case [Essays by Joan Didion on these three subjects are published in her collections, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, c. 1968, and *The White Album*, c. 1979], and all of the—the most painful things you could get your hands on really.

**JD:** I'm not doing the book on Linda Kasabian now. I was working on one for awhile. Well, there's certain things, I mean its not consciously seeking things out but

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there's certain things that engage your imagination or don't, and sometimes something just sounds exactly...

**SD:** What you're looking for?

**JD:** What you want, well not what you want, but what, this is something you have to do and I guess in that way its an unconscious seeking out of...

**SD:** Your piece on the Haight was really—the thousands and thousands and probably millions of words that were written about that situation, yours seemed to me to get to the heart of it more than anything else, and yet you said that you felt—I think you said "frustrated" after it was published. That you were unhappy about it.

**JD:** Well, it was a very odd piece to do, because I was there for quite a long time, longer than I'd ever spent before on a piece or after, and I kept staying because I kept having the sense that I wasn't getting it. I did not understand what was going on, and I finally came home, and I still didn't think I had it. I mean I still, you know sometimes... Usually on a piece, there comes a day when you know you never have to do another interview. You can go home, you've gotten it. Well that day never came on that piece. The piece had to be written right away. So I wrote it right away. But I wrote it just in a series of scenes, exactly how it happened to me, and that was the only way that I could write it because I had no conclusions at all...and, um...

**SD:** But at the end of it did you still feel that you hadn't even though, I mean it was highly praised and other people obviously thought that you had said something significant about the whole movement.

**JD:** That piece is a blank for me still. I can't, I have no idea whether it was good or bad. you know...

**SD:** You zeroed in and I notice you often do in other pieces, on the *children* as being, I mean I think there was three-year-old Michael who lived in this kind of appalling barn thing and started a fire, and the little girl, Susan, who was on acid at five (5). Is that part of you're being a mother do you think?

**JD:** Well that was very real to me then because I had a two- year-old at the time that I was working on that, and so it was particularly vivid to me to see these other children, and it was particularly vivid to me because I was away from the two-year-old, and feeling slightly...

**SD:** Cut off?

**JD:** Cut off from her, yeah.

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- SD:** How much of your time, how much of your fears of living (if that's the expression), kind of zero in on Quintana, your own child?
- JD:** Well, um, not a great deal. She's very—I mean I am apprehensive about everything and anxious so I have to try to not lay this on her, and anyways, she wouldn't have any of it if I did try. I mean, she's very, very...
- SD:** You described her at one point as being the kind of child that likes to get up in the morning.
- JD:** Oh yeah, she's very competent, I mean she's, ahh...
- SD:** Which brings me back to your own childhood and the piece you wrote in *Slouching Toward Bethlehem* about keeping a notebook. The way you told what to me seemed an incredible story about your mother giving you this notebook, and the first story you chose to note down in that was about the women who thought she was freezing to death in Alaska or something and woke up to find that she was dying of heat in the Sahara. Um, and I think you were five (5), you said.
- JD:** Yeah.
- SD:** And I wondered what kind of sensibility in a *child* can *possibly* take that kind of a story and put it down as the first entry in her new notebook.
- JD:** Well, you know I read someplace once that children, people in the nursery, within hours after birth, some children you can poke, the doctor can poke them and they don't flinch, and some children flinch. And then they've done studies about these children, and the children who flinch turn out to be flinchers all their life. and the others are extroverted or happy or competent children like my daughter. I think I was just a flincher at birth.
- SD:** Your not a subscriber to environment obviously, because your own environment sounded very stable.
- JD:** Well, it was, it was very stable. My brother is an entirely different kind of person from me. Um, it was mystifying to my mother and father I think, why I was so dependant, um, but that was...
- SD:** Anaïs Nin, when she was here, talked a lot about the creative process in terms of neurosis, and the word neurotic was bandied about a lot. Do you think your anguish or your fears are realistic fears or would you describe yourself as a neurotic?
- JD:** Well, at one point I would have described myself as a neurotic. I used to think of myself as a neurotic when I was in college. I think that was during a period when

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everybody was thinking of themselves as neurotic. I don't know now, I don't really think now in terms of neurosis. I mean I think in terms of only extreme psychosis or normal. I mean or you're getting along all right. Someone asked me last night why I had never gone into analysis because I was so shy, and, um, I couldn't think what to say, and I said that finally I said, well actually I wouldn't want to go into analysis because if I found out too much about myself I might stop working, which is more important to me than being good at a dinner party.

**SD:** Anaïs wrote, "I care very much about the human condition but I will not die from caring." Do you think ever, you're in danger, you feel like dying metaphorically from caring too much and being unable to continue therefore?

**JD:** No, not at this point, no.

**SD:** Is it because you can put that caring into your work?

**JD:** Well I think that everybody goes through a period of disgust with or I don't mean disgust, in terms of irritation but of kind of moral disgust with everybody else's, with the way the world is, and everything, and sometimes it seems pointless to write. But then you go through that to just working for yourself alone.

**SD:** But there are times for instance in the piece on Haight Ashbury, when you're feeling that everything is falling apart and that the center cannot hold. Its so intense that one wonders how on earth you could feel as intensely as that and still stay together, and still stay functioning.

**JD:** Well that's the trick. [laugh]. I mean that's the way it's done. I mean that was a period when I did feel that there was maybe not much point in writing, but, just my sheer interest in the techniques of writing kept me going and also, I needed money.

**SD:** The Linda Kasabian book is not coming out.

**JD:** No.

**SD:** What are you going to do next?

**JD:** Well, I'm starting another novel. And I'm starting a non-fiction book. I don't know which—I'll do one for awhile and then pick up the other.

**SD:** Joan, thank you very much.

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### Interview with Dory Previn

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SD: Sally Davis, Interviewer

DP: Dory Previn

[Taped conversation starts mid-conversation, after a hiatus; part of the interview may be missing.]

**SD:** ... scared to be alone and funnily enough, Rex Reed then in a review he did of that album, said I think, if Marilyn Monroe could have written, she'd be Dory Previn, or something along those lines, and she is, to many people, a symbol of a woman who was destroyed by being a woman in a way, by exploitation, by the fears and the insecurities that she had as a result of the kind of woman she was, and I wondered why you chose her, and if it had to do with empathy with that kind of character?

**DP:** I couldn't tell you why I chose her. I think it was just an instinctive, an instinctive choice, um, so I couldn't really rationalize it. If Marilyn Monroe was a victim at all, I believe she was a victim of herself. I know the terrible outer responsibilities and forces, the invasion of privacy, all those things that go into the life and existence of a person, a star such as Marilyn Monroe. Nevertheless, I think it is up to the individual to protect his or her own privacy, his or her own soul and that's where the strength lies. You don't, she ran to outer things for strength and I think instead of running you have to stand still and stay with yourself.

**SD:** Is that more difficult do you think for a woman, for particularly the woman artist, is it more difficult for her to stand still and look inward? Or is it easier in a way because...

**DP:** I couldn't presume to say because I'm not a man so I can't speak from the male point of view, but from observation I would say that women have more chance for introspection. To look to the inner self, because men go out, out into the world. They have to fight in the metaphoric jungle right, and so consequently, what makes them a success...

I think the man is trapped by the feeling that he must maintain personal status quo, because if he then changes at all, ah, he will undermine the foundations upon which he built his success. Now a woman is not so interested I don't believe, in maintaining status quo. Change is part of her life, everything from the menstrual cycle to birth to death—the entire aspect of woman is founded on change rather than *achievement* so much, you know. So, consequently, if there is nowhere else to go, it seems to me that it is easier. It is always harder to look in but it is, it is more conducive, a woman's life is more conducive to looking inward.

**SD:** There's a certain anger in some of your work against male myths in some of the early stuff, "*Michael Michael*," who was the superman who really wasn't, um, and I remember when we talked at the time you told me about the early heroes of the

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West like Billy-the-Kid who was a transvestite and wore satin underwear and so on—and throughout in a lot of your things there's a kind of an anger, the "Hemingway ethic" if you like, the super male. Do you feel antagonistic toward that?

**DP:** No, I think you misinterpret that. Its not anger. As a matter-of-fact it's a real feeling of compassion because I feel... Now, whenever I use the term "victim", I do not mean to imply that I mean victim of society... Perhaps our cultures have set up these mores, but I'm talking about instead of *identification* with group, I'm talking about personal *identity* now. And the male aspect, that's again the situation of what constitutes the accepted form, individually and collectively, of what masculinity is. And everything breeds its opposite. I mean, that is an absolute, correct? Now, if a man is so *desperately* trying to prove his masculinity, it is most likely—and this applies to a female also, it is most likely, I would think, because he is so *frightened* of any feminine or female aspect in his makeup. Now, what happens is when someone *overdevelops* one aspect, its opposite, by virtue of defense, keeps getting stronger and stronger—because there's a war, there is a conflict that is going on within the individual. The result is that it's a death struggle. It's a fight to the finish. And usually, the weaker aspect kills the stronger. Because something which is strong, impenetrable and inflexible cracks and crumbles; something which is weaker gives and survives.

**SD:** That aspect of American society is particularly strong you know, the super masculine ethic because maybe because of the pioneer days, maybe because of the West, and the cowboy on the horse and so on. Working as a writer, a woman writer in America, does that make any difference? Are you are aware that you're working very much in a masculine-based culture, particular even more so say if you were working in Europe?

**DP:** I don't know because I've never worked in Europe, and I only know what goes on in Europe by what I see in films or read in books. I *love* the fact that European men, as portrayed in films and in books, are not afraid to be foolish. Look at Mastroianni. [Marcello Mastroianni (1924-1996) Italian film actor]. They are not afraid to be weak. They are not afraid to cry. They are not afraid to hug each other, afraid that somebody's going to think they are homosexual. They are not afraid that perhaps there are, certainly there are homosexual aspects to that, because I think that heterosexual—and I couldn't say the dictionary term of the meaning, meaning of the term—but I would say it embraces both things. So consequently, the thing of the European men. European men, when they greet each other on a very surface level, they hug and they kiss. Look at an American man doing it, why, they are just terrified. I watched the mayor of a certain town recently, a very local town in fact, [laugh], asked by a therapist to *look* into the eyes of the man next to him, and, um, this was a kind of "encounter technique", right? He turned and he looked at the man next to him and, the man next to him, I believe he was an actor, was looking at him and the mayor started doing things

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- like wetting the tips of his pinky and touching his eyebrow. He could not *look* this man in the eyes, because he was so terrified that he would be committing the actions of a homosexual. Isn't that sad?
- SD:** Yes, he was terrified, terrified.
- DP:** And I thought that's the man that's running, I won't say which city...
- SD:** Yeah, but that is a theme that reoccurs in your work, um, even when you deal with for instance, in another early album, *Veterans Big Parade*, I mean this was an American Legion parade, a masculine, a show of masculine solidarity and patriotism and so on.
- DP:** No, because there were women included also.
- SD:** Were there?
- DP:** There is the line which says, "all the widows proudly smiled, except for one with an infant child." You see, if there is to continue to be violence, I mean I kind of go with the *Lysistrata* thing, women are just as responsible for violence as men are. And if women absolutely refuse to foster war, or any men, any individuals who are partaking in the act of war, war must perish because—It's like if two fighters are in the ring, perhaps this is a bad analogy but for some reason it occurs to me. If two fighters are in the ring and one finally says, "I give up," and raises his hands, the other person is rendered impotent. Is he going to keep punching this person who is pliable and not responding or not glorifying him by fighting back, you know? So giving-in is not defeat to me. Giving-in is sometimes giving up, and giving up—I don't mean in the sense of defeat, I mean giving up the necessity for that kind of encounter, you know. So I feel I cannot, I will not say man is responsible for war, just because women constantly say, "women never start wars", "women never start", but women glorify the hero.
- SD:** And of course Indira Gandhi just started a war. [Indira Gandhi (1917-1984), Prime Minister of India 1966-1977, 1980-1984. Presided over 1971 war with Pakistan over Kashmir]. You know they always say, "if women led the countries there would be no war," but, ah...
- DP:** I was quite terrified by the pictures of the women in Ireland too, the way they're dressing now, and the militant aspect.
- SD:** The masculine symbol of the "father" is very important in your work. Not just your own father, but I think you said that "father" is used for a symbol for a lot of male authority, including God, and you said whatever we're fighting at any one time or whatever you are fighting is heaped under the collective name of "father".

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And I wondered if you could expand on that a little bit. What you meant by that, and how masculine authority figures come under that heading for you.

**DP:** When did I say—how long ago did I say that?

**SD:** That's recently, you said that to me about the...

**DP:** Well, I change so often, ah, which I like. I'm in constant transition. I would like to say that *I* have heaped the authoritative figure under the collective title of "father", and I refuse to accept that any more. It is just like, um, as though—what I was just talking about, about the male/female responsibility in war. I feel that if there is a collective authoritative male figure, I as a woman have fostered it, have given it strength, ah, by saying that it exists as such. I feel that—you see, I'm confused about that. It has very much to do with my play and so consequently—it's a play that I'm writing now—I mean I'm so aware now of the *terrifying* responsibility that men must feel as a result of the fact that while there has been built up a male deity, there also then becomes the *full* blame and responsibility for everything on a male deity. So consequently, I think I as a woman must cease to make *that* terrifying and benevolent figure *male*, and then it will not only allow *me* to bare the responsibility of it, part of the responsibility, but it will unload a great deal of the responsibility from the poor, exhausted male and the male figure.

**SD:** Can you personally accept a female deity, the concept of a female deity? Does that—you know the national organization of women say, "trust in God, she will provide." Does that make sense to you?

**DP:** No. Again I'm talking about my play. I see God as male and female, all things.

**SD:** Yes, which really makes more—if it makes any sense at all, it makes more sense that way doesn't it?

**DP:** Yeah, yeah, and then both the responsibility of the benevolence and the responsibility of the wrath, you know, and the destructiveness. I mean women are equated with *death* because they give *birth*, and again we talk about the attraction of opposites, right? Something that can give you birth can also take your life away from you, so it is a terrifying thing. So consequently, to equate women with death, and male with life—you know like I have read that there is a male feeling that male could become gods, they would become immortal, were it not for women, you know?

**SD:** Yeah, yeah.

**DP:** Well, males are women too, and women are men. Each aspect, we have secondary, I have secondary masculine sexual attributes and I have psychic



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masculine attributes and non-attributes, so does a man, and whether we like it or not, we must coexist within ourselves as individuals. I feel that's where the real integration takes place—not one to another, but one to one's self and when I learn to coexist with the opposites of my being, I will be able to comfortably coexist with every *other* minority in the world. We're all minorities. I am a minority. I am the only Dory Previn in the world. You are a minority. You are the only Sally Davis in the world. Therefore, *you* must integrate yourself, and I must integrate myself and when I integrate myself, my minority, I will coexist in a *universe* of minorities, because there is no Black minority, no Greek minority, no white majority, no pink minority, where there is a universe, a world of individual minorities.

**SD:** And this is the theme of your play you said.

**DP:** Yes.

**SD:** That means, I presume, that you would have little to do with movements of any kind.

**DP:** No, I will not align myself with movements. I am not, as I said earlier, I am not interested in identification with a group, with a movement, I am interested in personal identity, not identification.

**SD:** Anaïs Nin, when she was hear, talked a lot about her work in terms of escaping from reality in terms of getting into the mystical and the magical and the fantasy life, and you are it seems almost the opposite, almost the exact opposite.

**DP:** No, on the contrary, its not. Its an amalgam of both. What happened in the past was I dwelled constantly in fantasy. I was so into fantasy that I found the world so intolerable that my psyche cracked and I went into—periodically, I would be put into a hospital and be put away, where I would just dwell in my fantasy land being quelled by tranquilizers and stopped from screaming when I wanted to scream until I was quiescent and obedient enough to society's morays that I would considered deemed to be allowed to be released right?

**SD:** Yeah.

**DP:** OK, well, that's all well and good but fantasy is not something wherein one should be locked up because one has a fantasy, a very strong, healthy fantasy life. However, I had no base. I would go into myself in this fantasy then not know where to come back. Therefore, I would cling to another person, to an idea—not to an idea because the ideas were the fantasies, but to *anything*. I would grasp at any straw, pills, anything to hang on to.

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Now I am in a kind of therapy now which is called Gestalt Therapy, which I do not recommend to anyone because I am not a missionary, neither am I a converter. I am only saying that I needed something that could base me in the here-and-now so that I could go deeper and deeper into my fantasy life, but have a place to come back to, a base. I have learned "bodily awareness." I have learned, or I am learning, I am still a novice. I am learning not to panic if I go too far out into space that I can't get back, because then I become aware of myself as a human entity in the human everyday world. That, I think, is a fine combination of Eastern and Western thought. I believe very *strongly* in the, I guess the, the intelligence, or you call it Tao, I call it Tao, T-A-O, whatever you want to call it, I *love* it. I just *love* what that man says. However, he—most people overlook the fact that he speaks very much of bodily involvement, awareness of "now," of the reality of where we live. To go off into complete meditation, complete fantasy, you get lost as you do when you go in any uncharted place, right?

**SD:** Right.

**DP:** Fantasy and unreality, there are no maps. Also, I find that the more I become aware of the *now*, and my body, the deeper I can go into the other and the non-body...

**SD:** Without danger—

**DP:** --Without danger of not finding my way back or being thought insane.

**SD:** The other aspect of your interest in Eastern thought is you're very interesting concept of eternity, because women writers very often deal with them, usually in terms of the reproductive process of having children and passing on, um, one's soul or some entity, some part of one's self through one's children, but your concept of eternity is a little different.

**DP:** Yeah, you mean about...

**SD:** It passes from one individual to another.

**DP:** The energy, yeah. Well, the thing is I, with everything canceling out in this way, life has become for me—it's a very strange odyssey. I gain by losing. I keep gaining by losing, gaining by losing, and as everything keeps canceling out and I still won't give up, I find myself *gaining* something.

Now, when there was, or there seemed to me in my mind, which is my reality, no other, nothing to which to cling. I reached a point now, I use the word "cling," you see that's a very bad word and I want, you know, and that's the way I was. Nothing to which to cling. I was hooked. I was an addict on *anything* that would keep me above water, the metaphoric water, uh, and not aware that I could keep

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myself above water.

Now, what happened was, when these things all canceled out, its an interesting thing because that's Eastern also. You know, you must cancel everything out you know, and when you have passed *every* self-imposed test, I do not believe these are passed by some kind of God somewhere or something, but self-imposed tests of not being content with your miserable lot, and the way, you know the misery and the pain that I've been going through, I thought well, "OK, now what"? "I do not believe in the God I was taught to believe in. Ah...My father is dead, and had disowned me many years before he died anyway. My mother and I have very little communication other than verbal. Uh, I have no husband, no children. I've written a few songs, um, maybe they'll last a few years," and I thought then, "why am I here? What will I leave when I go? What reason, there must be a reason," and I came to the conclusion when I came to this feeling that I was dying that if I do not understand a reason or find a reason for being, for having been on this earth, then I just don't want to go on living. I will give up and die. And I think you can die without slashing your wrists.

**SD:** Yes, yes.

**DP:** So, I thought, and I thought, and I dreamed, and I fantasized, and I wrote, and I continued plodding on, always hoping to understand something. And I came to a conclusion that my body, the matter of my body when I die, will decay, and at best maybe, be used to grow a flower somewhere because it will just turn into you know, really kind of like manure, right.

**SD:** That's right.

**DP:** Its just a pile of decay. So what is the body? OK, after you're dead there's nothing left there. The genes that I would give to a child. The cells--that child will grow up the way it wants to anyway, in spite of me or because of me, so I really have no *real* directional influence—absolute influence over a child that I would leave, because I certainly did not turn out the way my mother thought I would—*demand*ed that I turn out. So, there is nothing, I mean that child is on its own and that child will make it one way or other and as it will.

But the thing that can't be killed is *energy*. So, if I have an allotment of matter, of bodily matter, I have an allotment of energy, and energy can't be killed. You can beat it, you can hit it, you can put, but it will always go—its like mercury, it will always go somewhere else, so I will leave an allotment of energy. Now, the allotment of energy that I was given when I came into the world, I think was at a certain level of development and awareness. I know because of how I *used* my energy in the first part of my life and how *negatively* I used it and I had an overload of negative energy, an energy which I then *fostered* into more negativity. And what I want to do now is to refine my being, refine my energy. Understand

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myself. Go to the deepest, deepest, darkest roots of myself, to seek to know, to find my energy, to learn about it, to refine it, to make it better so that when I die and that energy is released from my body, anybody can get it and so I think that *all* I can leave behind is a better allotment of energy than what I came into the world with.

**SD:** Yeah, it's a very interesting idea. Talking about your, you know you mention the negative way you used your energy as a young girl, you were channeled very much, from what I gather, into feminine things—acting, modeling, dancing. I wondered if your parents had been, had thought of you differently, or had thought that wasn't necessarily what little girls should do, learn to dance and learn to be actresses and things, if your life might have turned out differently or if maybe you had gotten into writing or reading. For instance, you said at one point that you didn't discover books until comparatively late in life because that wasn't the kind of thing you did.

**DP:** I was not allowed to read. If I brought books home that my father did not approve of, he would burn them. As a matter of fact, I was fascinated and I do not mind saying this because this is what I mean about how you do not transmit to your children. I sent my book home to my mother and I asked her if she received it and she said yes but she'd torn certain pages out and burned them so that if the neighbors saw them, and I said well that's your possession and you can do that if you like, but I said remember, it's all me. So, I don't know. I have no way of knowing how I would have turned out, what I would have become.

My mother and father, my father especially, they didn't do it, "because a little girl does that". My father was, in his opinion, a failure, and he wanted *desperately* for me to be a success. And with a great many people who have limited resources, he thought, I think, I mean I have no way of knowing what was in his mind but I think that he thought you know, we were poor and of very low means, of limited means, and I think that he thought that the best place to make a success would be in the entertainment field, you know?

**SD:** Yes, yes.

**DP:** As so many minorities do today. But he always thought he was very dumb, and he always told *me* I was dumb. He said, "Well you know, you're just dumb, you're just stupid, you have no memory, you can't do this" ... so consequently, I think he thought well, but if I performed like some kind of trained seal, I wouldn't need very much of a brain.

**SD:** You also, at one point, when we were talking a long time ago, said that, "as a married woman, you were limited too because you worked in collaboration with your husband and everyone assumed, therefore—" you said that people used to say to you, "you write nice lyrics," or say to your husband, "your wife writes nice

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little lyrics", and you said that *little* was crucial, which of course it was. I mean was *that* the result of just being, of just the difficulties of working in collaboration anyway which are kind of, I mean its always a kind of a fine line between who does what, or was it because you were the female half of the partnership do you think?

**DP:** We get back now to the discussion of the male deity and the authoritative figure. The husband's role in the situation, the husband, whatever he does, is *his* business. However, he conducts what he feels is his masculine role. He must and will do it as he wants to. The female, or the feminine woman, conducts her life according to the way she wants to. I take full responsibility for the fact that I did not fully express myself when I was married because of *my* fear of what the male, the husband represented. The fear of competition, the fear of *surpassing* perhaps even. The fear of, the fear of equality. Now that is not *his* problem, that was *my* problem, and I don't know even now, whether at *my* point in *my* evolution, whether I would still be able to produce as much as I do, if I were in fact rather permanently—I would never marry again—but *living* with a man, I don't know if I would do it. I don't know if *I* would allow him—now there's a difference between if *he* would, if he would put me in a position, make me feel in a position where no, I cannot put that responsibility on him. I will have to say to you, I don't know if I would allow *myself* to put *myself* into the position of a supplicant of an *inferior* of someone who's afraid to compete with that authoritative figure. I don't think I would, because I'm more aware of the male/female responsibility now.

**SD:** But you also said too, in conjunction with living in a married state, that a woman frequently won't let herself be herself, won't let herself go out of consideration for the husband or the male figure in her life.

**DP:** That's crap. That's an excuse.

**SD:** You think of this now.

**DP:** Yes I do. I really feel...I mean it is *possible* that as a woman in the current evolution of the male/female relationship, it is *possible* that if the woman what did you say, "lets herself..."

**SD:** Out of consideration for the husband or out of the fear that she might bring him crashing down if she...

**DP:** Right. It might happen that she would do that to him but he would be doing it to himself.

**SD:** Yeah.

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**DP:** He would allow *her* to be the galvanic agent which brought his... In other words, *he* would get a natural out to fail, and blame it on her.

**SD:** Yeah, I see.

**DP:** And I believe that the same thing applies to the woman. And I can no longer accept, I will not say—all my life I said, they did it, it did it, God did it, he did it, she did it—no, *I* did it.

**SD:** Yes.

**DP:** And I just allowed those people to work as *agents* to defeat me. For me to defeat myself. See how hard it is even to put it in a more proper "now" term?

**SD:** Yes.

**DP:** Because we are so used to saying, "and that's how it happened to me." What is it? It is *me*.

**SD:** Yeah.

**DP:** It is *possible* that I could be living with a man, continue to grow, and he would not and, therefore, he would crash, but that would be *his* responsibility and not mine.

**SD:** There's another theme which appears in your work, and also in a lot of women writers, and particularly in the two [women writers] that are joining you on this program, and that is the *boundless* love, the love without limits, which is always trying to fix itself into a limited situation, or fix itself on someone who is incapable of that boundless love, or put itself in a situation which has limits and consequently is setting itself up for frustration.

Umm, do you still feel that way as well? Or is that coming back more into yourself? Are you thinking, "that's my fault," as well?

**DP:** I've just been thinking I've been aware of my voice as I've been talking and I've been verbose about this because I'm passionate about it right now, and I have carried on at great length about it, and its not all formulated because it never will be until the day I die.

**SD:** Yes, yeah.

**DP:** Because the thing is an ongoing thing. However, it is a discovery period for me, and I'm thrilled and delighted and in great pain. And I want to say to you that though I can very, very easily *articulate* these things, you know put them into

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some kind of form, that does not mean to say that I can do it yet. I want you to understand that.

**SD:** Yes, I understand.

**DP:** I mean, I backslide, and I grip, and I cling, and I do all those things but I'm aware.

**SD:** You just know at least what you're supposed to be doing now.

**DP:** I'm aware. I am aware of what I am doing and I'm aware of who is doing it. Now I'd like to get to what you said which was the finding of a love object and the boundless love attaching the boundless and unlimited...

**SD:** Yes.

**DP:** OK. Here's the way I think I feel about that.

To take—let's take a man, let's be specific, OK. I take a *man*, and I invest in him boundless, limitless love. That's *killing*. Think of the responsibility on that poor man. How can he *ever* live up to that *kind* of desperate desire, clinging need? Ah...you pin everything in the universe on him. You are my God. You are my father. You are my angel. You are my mother. You are my self. You are my provider. You are my protector. My God, the man would just die, I mean no wonder they leave by droves, no wonder. I mean, one cannot do that. One cannot do that, and I speak now purely from a female point of view. I don't know how the man you know, will respond to that. He may say, "well I want all that." OK, that's fine. I don't want to give that load to a man any more.

And I find you know I've been reading a lot of mythology lately. Its so strange, because the farther ahead you go, the farther back you go, you know, and the more I keep moving forward, the *deeper* I go into the past. And, um, I find the, I find the—the incredible discovery to me which you know wise people have known for centuries, I guess, but I am this person who is just beginning, I am an infant you know. I think in one of those things I talked about my "infant ancient veins." And I have discovered that every odyssey, every myth, every hero, and that applies to heroine, umm, who goes through life, ahh, goes through all kinds of adventures—goes through Dante's Inferno, goes to the Faust, goes to the *depths* of degradation, uh, everybody talks about the second birth in literature. You die, you *absolutely die*, you are *killed* dead and you know, left as a piece of meat on which no more can be done or can you do to yourself. And at *that* moment you are alone, and there is nowhere to turn but to yourself and once you turn to yourself, you realize *that's* what you were looking for *all* that time.

**SD:** Mm hmm.

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**DP:** All that time. Christ, I mean it is just—it is so simple, and so complex as to be, uh, astonishing and *terrifying* in the most beautiful sense—*terrifying*. Earth, you know like *awful* comes from *awesome* you know?

**SD:** Mm hmm.

**DP:** And the thing is, "my God I went and I went and I went and I traveled and I ran and I fell and I tried to kill myself and I did everything and it was next to me and inside me all the time," and instead of retreating now into myself, I have come to myself. Now, I will backslide on this poor, weak, foolish, stupid, idiotic child. I'm a mature, compassionate woman and I'm a crying, jealous, possessive baby in a fur pelt at the same time. And I know those components now, and I accept them and to accept yourself with all the *stuff*—I wish I could use stronger language because I love good, strong language.

**SD:** Go ahead, go ahead.

**DP:** OK, to accept all the *shit* then you can see all the *glory* of yourself too.

**SD:** Yeah, yeah, Dory thank you very much indeed.

**DP:** You're welcome.

**SD:** Thank you.

**SD:** We've looked a little into the art and sensitivities of three different writers.

Anaïs Nin says she's reached maturity. She's fought her fight. She's conquered her Edmund Wilsons, but she remains interested in battles still to be fought, in what this generation of women can achieve.

Joan Didion, while showing the rest of us in the most achingly pointed prose, the horror of her sensibilities, manages to hold herself together, continues to produce great work and is respected as one of the foremost prose writers in this country today.

Dory Previn has had personally the hardest struggle of them all, the struggle against what the world calls insanity. The struggle for reality, for control of her own destiny, for her *personal* responsibility. The struggle against her childhood and her past and more recently, the struggle against publicity and sensationalism. She's winning all of them, even though her battles are by no means over, and through her own pain she's leaving us with a body of work which paradoxically enriches and strengthens our lives.

[Music: from "*Mine was a Wednesday Death*" by Dory Previn]



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## The Female Angst

Mine was a Wednesday Death  
Mine was Wednesday Death  
One afternoon at approximately 3:15  
I was quietly laid to rest  
nobody guessed  
A handy disposable heart  
Marks time in a plastic breast  
And so it goes, and nobody knows  
I am non biodegradable.

[Music fades]

**Voiceover:** This program was produced by KPFK-Pacifica Radio for Southern California and distributed by Pacifica Program Service in Berkeley. All rights are reserved.

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### Notes

As always PRA relies on your additions and corrections. Please contact us at the Pacifica Radio Archives: 800.735.0230.

1. *"Twenty-Mile Zone"* by Dory Previn. Available on the CD *Mary C. Brown & The Hollywood Sign/On My Way to Where* by Dory Previn. Published by BGO (Beat Goes on), 1998.
2. Anaïs Nin (1903-1977) French born, naturalized American citizen. Novelist and diarist. SEE: *Anaïs Nin, A Biography*, by Deirdre Bair. Published by Putnam, 1995. SEARCH: The Pacifica Radio Archives Public Access Catalog for "Anaïs Nin" for Pacifica radio programs with or about Anaïs Nin.
3. *The Diaries of Anaïs Nin, Vols. I-VII*. Published by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978-1985.
4. Edmund Wilson (1895-1972), American critic and essayist.
5. James Joyce (1882-1941), Irish writer. Lived twenty years in France. *Ulysses*, published in 1922 in Paris by Sylvia Beach was banned in Britain and the United States.
6. Mary McCarthy (1912-1989), American writer and theater critic. Married to Edmund Wilson, 1938-1945.
7. *Doctor Kerkhoven* by Jakob Wassermann. Published by H. Liberight, 1932.

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8. Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891), French poet.
9. Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) American poet. Autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar*, published in 1963. Married to Ted Hughes (1930-1998), Poet Laureate of England.
10. Antoin Artaud (1896-1948) French poet, essayist, playwright and director. SEARCH: The Pacifica Radio Archives Public Access Catalog for programs about Antoin Artaud.
11. Dr. Rene Allendy (1889-1942), French psychoanalyst.
12. Otto Rank (1884-1939), Austrian psychoanalyst. Founder of the "Rankian" school of psychoanalysis.
13. R. D. Laing (1927-1989), British psychiatrist. A founder of the anti-psychiatry movement. Two key works are: *The Politics of Experience*, 1967, and *The Divided Self*, 1960.
14. Joan Didion (1934- ), American writer. Married to American novelist John Gregory Dunne (1932-2004).
15. *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* by Joan Didion. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, reissue, 1990. Originally published by FSG in 1968.
16. *The White Album* by Joan Didion. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, reissue, 1990. Originally published by Simon and Schuster in 1967.
17. *Play It As It Lays* by Joan Didion. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, reissue, 1990. Originally published by FSG in 1970.
18. Dory Previn interview begins abruptly, mid-sentence, and without introduction. Apparently part of the taped program is missing.
19. Dory Previn (1929- ) American singer/songwriter. Birth name: Dory Langdon. Early career writing songs for films, often in collaboration with her husband, Andre Previn. Suffered a well publicized "nervous breakdown" in 1965. Later career as feminist singer/songwriter.
20. Andre Previn (1929- ) German born, American musician. Jazz and classical pianist, musical composer and arranger, conductor. Married to Dory Previn 1959-1970. Later married (1970-1977) to American actress Mia Farrow.
21. "Michael Michael" by Dory Previn. Available on the CD *Mary C. Brown & The*

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**The Female Angst**

*Hollywood Sign/On My Way to Where* by Dory Previn. Published by BGO (Beat Goes on), 1998.

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