

Venus de Mars  
Narrator

Andrea Jenkins  
Interviewer

The Transgender Oral History Project  
Tretter Collection in GLBT Studies  
University of Minnesota

September 12, 2017



The Transgender Oral History Project of the Upper Midwest will empower individuals to tell their story, while providing students, historians, and the public with a more rich foundation of primary source material about the transgender community. The project is part of the Tretter Collection at the University of Minnesota. The archive provides a record of GLBT thought, knowledge and culture for current and future generations and is available to students, researchers and members of the public.

The Transgender Oral History Project will collect up to 400 hours of oral histories involving 200 to 300 individuals over the next three years. Major efforts will be the recruitment of individuals of all ages and experiences, and documenting the work of The Program in Human Sexuality. This project will be led by Andrea Jenkins, poet, writer, and trans-activist. Andrea brings years of experience working in government, non-profits and LGBT organizations. If you are interested in being involved in this exciting project, please contact Andrea.

Andrea Jenkins  
[jenki120@umn.edu](mailto:jenki120@umn.edu)  
(612) 625-4379

1    Andrea Jenkins -AJ  
2    Venus de Mars -VD  
3

4    AJ:     So, good afternoon.

5    VD:     Hi.

6    AJ:     My name is Andrea Jenkins. I am the oral historian for the Transgender Oral History Project at  
7           the Tretter Collection at the University of Minnesota. Today is September 12, 2017, and I am in  
8           northeast Minneapolis for a . . .

9    VD:     North . . .

10   AJ:     Actually, north Minneapolis. OK, I'm in north Minneapolis and I'm here for a second interview  
11           with Venus de Mars. Venus, how are you?

12   VD:     I am good, always in a scramble, but I'm good.

13   AJ:     That's our life, right, it's always kind of like a scramble thing going on. So, Venus, we've done  
14           this interview once before and we really talked a lot about some of your early days and that kind  
15           of stuff, but just because this is a separate interview, can you just state your name, spell your  
16           name, make sure we got it all spelled correctly. State your gender identity today, your gender  
17           assigned at birth, and your pronouns.

18   VD:     OK. So, Venus de Mars. V-e-n-u-s, like the planet, de Mars, lower case d-e and then M-a-r-s.  
19           So, kind of like de Milo.

20   AJ:     Right.

21   VD:     So, it's kind of a play on Venus of Mars, which is the documentary.

22   AJ:     Right, yeah.

23   VD:     So, Venus de Mars, Venus of Mars. And, so I'm a trans female, male to female trans. Born . . .  
24           actually, I think I was born with duality.

25   AJ:     Really?

26   VD:     But, technically was raised and on my birth certificate it says male. But, yeah, I had surgery  
27           when I was a baby that I found out.

28   AJ:     Wow.

29   VD:     And, evidently it was . . . well, that would explain a lot, but back then it probably appeared that I  
30           was more male than female, so they went in that direction. It might not have been as  
31           pronounced as some people. But, that was something that I suspect was the case.

32   AJ:     That happened for you.

33   VD:     Yes.

34   AJ:     Where were you born?

- 1 VD: Duluth. Duluth, Minnesota, and I think it was St. Luke's Hospital. 1960.
- 2 AJ: 1960. And your pronouns are?
- 3 VD: I've been doing he/she.
- 4 AJ: He/she?
- 5 VD: No, no – why did I do that? Not he/she, she/her.
- 6 AJ: She/her. OK. I was going to say he/she that's an interesting choice, but some people do.
- 7 VD: Yeah, it used to be . . . because my transition has been really long, meaning I came out as trans  
8 in the mid-1980s and maybe even the early 1980s to people close to me – my wife and then  
9 immediate family. But, my transition has been so slow and because I didn't, because I'm a  
10 singer, I never altered my voice or tried to change my voice through practice or surgery or  
11 anything like that. For a long time, it felt like I didn't worry about gender so much, so either/or.  
12 But, as I have moved farther with my transition now over 20-some years, and just age, I think,  
13 I'm feeling much more comfortable with the female pronouns. But, it's developed over years.
- 14 AJ: Sure. You mentioned the documentary *Venus of Mars*. Talk a little bit about that. I've seen it, I  
15 haven't seen it for a while – for a long time, but it was emotionally moving, it was very . . . I  
16 mean, it was deeply music based and the music is amazing.
- 17 VD: Thank you.
- 18 AJ: But, what was that process like for you? I think you were . . . it's a documentary, right?
- 19 VD: Yeah.
- 20 AJ: So, they followed you around for a long time.
- 21 VD: Yeah, the filmmaker and the crews that she put together, they were different people but a core  
22 that she would rotate and sometimes just herself, followed us for about four years – not  
23 constantly, but off and on. And then, if we were on tour, pretty constantly.
- 24 AJ: Right, and they would go on tour with you guys, right.
- 25 VD: Yes. So, she followed us to New York a number of times and to England. And then, let's see, the  
26 film was finished and then in 2004, had its premiere in Amsterdam at the Paradiso for the  
27 Amsterdam Film Festival, that was a premiere, so we performed there for that. And that was . .  
28 . well, I was just looking at my memoir and that actually premiered at the end of 2003, so that  
29 was the first show of it. So, it technically was finished in 2003, just before that, but then it went  
30 into formal . . . the formal film festival circuit all through 2004 and it actually went through 2005  
31 and 2006, so it did a three-year run on the film festival circuit, which is unusual for a film.
- 32 AJ: Yeah, usually they're airing out in one cycle.
- 33 VD: Yeah, that just kept getting invited back and it, of course, tapered off, but the last one was in  
34 Spain, one of the last big ones, and that was in 2006. And, that actually was a small town in  
35 Spain called Tui, T-u-i, near Portugal, and that was their . . . it was called Play-Doc and that was

- 1           their debut festival, the first time they had it and we were a part of that first thing. And, they've  
2           done it continually since then, so they've been going forever. That was a real important time for  
3           us; it was also right after I had put the band on hiatus.
- 4   AJ:     All the Pretty Horses.
- 5   VD:     All the Pretty Horses.
- 6   AJ:     Which was a major musical tour de force, I would say.
- 7   VD:     Yeah, well, we worked really hard, and that's kind of what the memoir that I'm writing is about,  
8           it's all of that whole time. When you're trying to be successful in rock-n-roll and you're doing  
9           that just normal work to get ahead, I had the boost of the documentary that was helping me  
10          expand my footprint and my tour possibilities by getting us farther than just in the states. But  
11          then, being trans was good and bad – good in that it caused attention. People were curious so  
12          they wanted to find out, but bad on the business end of it – the music industry was afraid of that  
13          and didn't feel like it was something they could sell. So, I could not get anywhere with the music  
14          industry.
- 15   AJ:     What do you think the music industry is like today for trans artists?
- 16   VD:     It's great – like that is a plus.
- 17   AJ:     Is that right?
- 18   VD:     It's a plus right now. It helps your career; it might even be kind of in the middle of that right  
19          now and so therefore, they might be cooling off on it.
- 20   AJ:     OK.
- 21   VD:     But, they're not afraid of it like they were, at all.
- 22   AJ:     Who are some trans performers that you can think of.
- 23   VD:     Well, the big one is the person that I toured with, that's Laura Jane Grace.
- 24   AJ:     She is hot, yes.
- 25   VD:     And her band Against Me! She really did . . . I think she was the one on the cusp of that  
26          changing landscape in the music industry. So, when she came out, her record support people  
27          embraced it and went with it and took advantage of the new interest in the press over that and  
28          it propelled her career forward, even though there were internal issues I know of and some  
29          changes in her band and in her relationship. That's her story.
- 30   AJ:     Which, I'm very honored and grateful to say, we have her story as a part of this . . .
- 31   VD:     Oh, well – wonderful, there we go. Hello, Laura, you're just right over there – on that shelf.
- 32   AJ:     On that shelf.
- 33   VD:     Great. Yeah, I was lucky enough to spend a month touring with her with my band and it was a  
34          wonderful experience. And, to be honest, I have to say, when she first came out, I felt jealous

- 1           because when she came out, it was the right time so it helped her career move forward and I  
2           had been out there struggling for almost 15 years before that. And, it was doing nothing but  
3           destroying my possibilities to move forward in my career. I felt an irony which was terribly  
4           frustrating. But then, the way the world works and karma works, I get a chance to meet her and  
5           I have to be humbled, and she is a genuine person that is struggling just like everybody.
- 6   AJ:     She is, absolutely.
- 7   VD:     And, trying to navigate and she just was lucky enough to find the right time – none of us choose  
8           when we come out, it just happens and we have to.
- 9   AJ:     Yeah, but you helped to create the right time, you were out there blazing a path.
- 10   VD:    Well, yeah. I think that is . . . yes. You know, I wanted to be successful and I wanted to have a  
11           career in rock-n-roll and I wanted the big records and I wanted the record label and I wanted  
12           financially to be able to take care of the debt and the investment I had put into the project – all  
13           of that, you want all of that.
- 14   AJ:     Absolutely.
- 15   VD:     So, yeah . . . I think I did make a difference and I did get farther, but I had to. It wasn't  
16           something that I thought, "OK, this is what I'm going to do; I'm going to change the world."
- 17   AJ:     Yeah, you were just trying to make music.
- 18   VD:     I'm just trying to get ahead in a business that I love doing. I love being on stage and I love the  
19           excitement of rock-n-roll and interacting and that kind of excitement. I was inspired by David  
20           Bowie and the Ziggy Stardust era and that 1970s glam stuff – not the hair metal. Everybody  
21           thinks I was into hair metal; I was not. I was just past that. I was . . .
- 22   AJ:     Define hair metal Is that like . . .?
- 23   VD:     Hair metal is a lot of spandex . . . they did have a lot of gender play, a lot of gender shifting, but  
24           nothing upfront. They were all doing it with a big helping of masculinity and so it was . . .
- 25   AJ:     I'm trying to think of the band with the make-up.
- 26   VD:     Oh, sure almost everybody was doing that in the hair metal, with big poofy hair, but then they  
27           would be very masculine with the rest of it. I just didn't . . .
- 28   AJ:     Just gimmicky kind of . . .
- 29   VD:     Yeah, I didn't get into it. I was much more interested in the way Bowie did or T-Rex did back  
30           then where it was more genuine and more honestly exploring sexuality and gender without fear  
31           of consequence – more of a challenge to it. Whereas, I think in hair metal there was a hesitation  
32           and there was a protective layer going on with hypermasculinity even though there was gender  
33           play and obviously . . . and that might speak to the times too. I think things might have been a  
34           little bit more open and exploratory in the 1970s, but in the 1980s things were starting to get  
35           very defined gender-wise, and then, of course, in the 1990s it got very absolute. And that's  
36           when I was working – in the 1990s, as trans out. I'll just ramble forever.

- 1 AJ: No, this is fascinating.
- 2 VD: I've found the only place I was able to gain a foothold and to move forward was in the fetish  
3 world.
- 4 AJ: Like balls and rubber balls.
- 5 VD: Yes, fetish balls. There were a lot of big national . . . that was kind of when fetish kind of came  
6 out from the underground in the 1990s and it became kind of fashionable and I think Madonna  
7 did this exploration – she did a lot to pull it out . . .
- 8 AJ: Mainstream.
- 9 VD: Yeah. And before that, I had kind of fallen into it on a more general level just because that was  
10 also a place where I was able to be myself and explore as a trans person – and Lynette, the two  
11 of us, were falling into that whole scene. Mostly for the fashion and the social and interaction,  
12 but we were seeing all of it and exploring and sharing and seeing other people's fetishes and  
13 what they were doing, but we weren't seen as the complete freaks that the rest of the world  
14 was seeing us as.
- 15 AJ: Right.
- 16 VD: So, we found some comfort there and then, in the band, opportunities came up because I was  
17 out in the band and I loved the fashion and I wanted to be strong onstage as a trans person, so I  
18 gravitated to the dom look. That attracted a lot of people's attention in the community, so our  
19 fan base was a mix of fetish and the trans community was really, really emeshed in the fetish  
20 community back then because the gay community wasn't really accepting the trans community.
- 21 AJ: Trans identities, yeah.
- 22 VD: I mean, there was a drag culture, but a lot of performers I knew who were doing drag were kind  
23 of adamant that it was theatre and not identity.
- 24 AJ: Right, very much so.
- 25 VD: It was kind of insulting to consider the possibility . . . and then some of the performers who did  
26 explore actual identity and moving, they kind of got pushed out of the whole scene.
- 27 AJ: Right, yeah.
- 28 VD: So, it was a really bizarre place and the trans community really didn't have a home and it didn't  
29 really have an identity for itself, for its own community. It wasn't seen as a community, it was  
30 seen as a fetish. So, that's where I was working musically; so, I did a lot of that and that got me  
31 moving forward and the audiences were growing and the interest was there. And then Emily  
32 Goldberg, the filmmaker for the documentary, happened to be friends with one of my studio  
33 neighbors, in my old studio in downtown Minneapolis, and she had been working for the PBS TV  
34 as a filmmaker for them and had filmed me previous to my transition and coming out for Art  
35 Cars. So, she knew me previously in my artist self, as my male self, in the early, early 1980s.
- 36 AJ: I ran into Emily a few months ago. She's still working in film.

- 1 VD: Oh yeah, yeah – she’s still doing it. So, I was part of the Rifle Sport art scene in Minneapolis.
- 2 AJ: Where was that?
- 3 VD: That was on E-Block before it was town down. It was right next to Moby Dick’s. It was kind of a  
4 takeover gallery by an artist who was living illegally in the space and then she, that was Colleen  
5 Barnett, and she turned it into a gallery, an underground gallery, it wasn’t an official one. But, it  
6 gained official attention. Then her husband, after that . . . Bill . . . it was just on the tip of my  
7 tongue while I was talking – that’s the problem with these things, it’s like I don’t have a chance  
8 to sit down and you just have to . . . Bill Taylor, that’s it. They were married in the gallery and I  
9 was one of the core artists, because I got in kind of at the ground floor, and I was doing  
10 installation work and paintings. I drove my art car, which was a Honda Civic that I had done, up  
11 the stairwell and secured it in the stairwell.
- 12 AJ: What?
- 13 VD: Right there in downtown Minneapolis. People had to squeak by on the side. I have video of all  
14 this – I do.
- 15 AJ: Really?
- 16 VD: Yes.
- 17 AJ: You drove the car up the stairwell?
- 18 VD: Yes. We had to do it at like 5 in the morning and we staged it all. That was when Hennepin was  
19 a one-way street and I had to go the wrong way, so we had to plan it and Bill was there and we  
20 opened up the double doors and we had the chain all ready and we had the ramps all ready. I  
21 came around with my Honda Civic, made a U-turn, went up over the sidewalk and straight to the  
22 thing – and got right there to the ramps and then just . . .
- 23 AJ: Floored it.
- 24 VD: Yeah, pretty much. And it’s a straight stick, so I was struggling . . . I had no clue that 45 degrees  
25 is incredibly difficult to drive up in a car. I worked . . . I just gunned it and gunned it and gunned  
26 it and finally got the backend far enough in so that we could shut the doors and then we chained  
27 it up on the stairwell fence and . . .
- 28 AJ: Hoisted it up?
- 29 VD: And just held it there.
- 30 AJ: Oh, wow.
- 31 VD: And then I built the installation in the stairway and in the car there. That was because they  
32 didn’t have room for me to have anything in the gallery proper and I said, “Well, how about the  
33 stairwell? Let me do the stairwell.” And they said, “OK.” So, yes, that was my big infamous . . .
- 34 AJ: Did they know you were going to drive an art car in the stairwell?



- 1 VD: They did, they did. But, they got very scared once we really saw the gravity of doing that – but it  
2 worked.
- 3 AJ: Wow.
- 4 VD: So, that was a pretty big deal.
- 5 AJ: So, you're a musician and a visual artist?
- 6 VD: Yeah.
- 7 AJ: And, one of the reasons why we're doing a second interview is because we're here in your  
8 studio and you have two sound booths here.
- 9 VD: Yes.
- 10 AJ: You have the master controls, which is kind of where we are right now.
- 11 VD: This is my control area, so I've got one larger control booth over there, and then I've got a  
12 smaller one over there and they're connected with video cameras back here and then I talk to  
13 people through there. This is basically . . . I've just been able to finish this about four months  
14 ago; I've been remodeling for almost a year, this space, and I finally got it so it's functioning. I  
15 am still not working full-on as a recording studio, but it's functional and now I'm just trying to  
16 get people to come in and start working, and I'm doing my own stuff. And, right now I've been  
17 doing some mastering for some people and that kind of thing. But, it's what I'm hoping I can  
18 spend more time doing.
- 19 AJ: And then you have sort of a visual art studio right next door.
- 20 VD: Yes, that's next door to this – a large space, which has enough room for a stage where we can  
21 rehearse if I'm working in a band setting, or we can use it to film music videos or convert it into  
22 whatever. It's large enough for my large paintings, my paintings are like 8' x 12', they're real  
23 large. And, then I've got my little animation table, I do filmmaking. So, I have an animation  
24 table – I can do animation, traditional, and a little lounge area.
- 25 AJ: Sure.
- 26 VD: I've got a pinball machine.
- 27 AJ: Yeah, it's pretty amazing over there. What would you say is your influence for your visual art?  
28 And then I want to hear about what you're doing musically now. So, visual art, what influences  
29 that?
- 30 VD: Well, I wanted to finish one thing. Emily Goldberg was friends of the neighbor, she heard the  
31 band rehearsing there and came over to . . . because my friend who was the neighbor said,  
32 "Yeah, we can introduce her." And she remembered me from previous and then when she  
33 opened the door, I was me with breasts. And she was kind of completely floored by that; she  
34 didn't really know what to think about it. But then, immediately, her filmmaker mind triggered  
35 and she said, "I want to make a film." And she asked me within days after that if I'd be willing to

- 1 do it and, of course, I wanted to originally because I thought, “Well, wonderful way to get free  
2 publicity.”
- 3 AJ: Right exactly.
- 4 VD: And then it slowly developed into a story about me and Lynette, not just the band and me. And  
5 then we had to kind of reconsider it all, but then we agreed and we went with that. We can talk  
6 about . . .
- 7 AJ: It’s very much a love story, right?
- 8 VD: Yeah, and the film . . .
- 9 AJ: Or, a story about love, maybe.
- 10 VD: Yes, it is. And she was really nice . . . she was really generous as a filmmaker. I mentioned to  
11 you before when we were on camera, I’m writing a memoir around . . . from 1998-2006; 2006  
12 being when the film finished its run and I had put the band on hiatus, All the Pretty Horses.  
13 1996 was before the film started and I was just beginning to push the band to begin climbing, so  
14 it was kind of like the most things happened during that timeline. And, I’m writing about this  
15 whole thing and trying to sort it out; I’ve been doing it for years and now I’m really trying to  
16 formally work on it. Lynette is writing a memoir also about . . .
- 17 AJ: Lynette is your wife.
- 18 VD: Yes, she’s my wife, and she’s writing a memoir which is overlapping that, although she’s going a  
19 little earlier, so she’s dialoguing in her memoir more about my initial coming out and transition  
20 and how she grappled with that. And we both have been talking within the last couple of weeks  
21 about one particular argument that we had in New York, which really kind of blew everything  
22 apart – and Emily was filming, and happened upon the argument in front of the hotel, the  
23 Carlton Arms Hotel, we were at. And, Lynette was screaming at the top of her lungs at one of  
24 my bandmates and I was trying to navigate, she was also screaming at me, and Emily, the  
25 filmmaker, and her camera person were walking right up and instead of jumping into the mix  
26 and trying to catch that big meltdown, they didn’t, and they kept to their original plan of  
27 interviewing each of us and keeping on course. And what happened then, and that would never  
28 happen now with a filmmaker, they would just go after it.
- 29 AJ: Oh, yeah – reality TV, right.
- 30 VD: Yeah. And so, what happened was, she gained our trust and we were able to get much deeper  
31 in interviews with her because of that – because we trusted her not to sensationalize.
- 32 AJ: Sure.
- 33 VD: And so, the film is what it is, and I think on a level it got fairly deep with questions and  
34 exploration in those early days. The film came out in 2004. The memoir that we’re working on  
35 now, what we want to do is get past that. We want to go into the real nuts and bolts, the real  
36 trouble. Lynette and my relationship unraveled and we’re trying to figure out why and how that  
37 happened. And so, we’re talking . . . as we’re trying to re-create the timeline, we’re going back

- 1 to those really difficult times and trying to understand why and how that happened, what we  
2 were thinking, what we were afraid of, why we felt our relationship was threatening us in some  
3 way or was falling apart despite our best efforts. And, we're trying to really get down to the  
4 foundations and those experiences in the memoir. So, the film is a very nice piece.
- 5 AJ: Sure, but it's not the whole story.
- 6 VD: I'm hoping the memoir is going to get very detailed and very intimate and very deep.
- 7 AJ: So, you said the relationship unraveled. Where are you guys now?
- 8 VD: We're together, we're fine.
- 9 AJ: OK.
- 10 VD: But, we separated for almost a year.
- 11 AJ: Wow.
- 12 VD: Twice. The first one was on my leaving and the second one was on Lynette's request. The  
13 second one was a longer one. Yeah, we lived apart. The first time was a trial and we tried it  
14 again, but that lasted about three months; and then the second one lasted for about six months  
15 – twice as long. That one was pretty much we were trying to re-build our lives away from each  
16 other.
- 17 AJ: So, I had started in kind of just asking about what influences your visual art.
- 18 VD: Yes, yes, yes. So, back then, before I transitioned, I was doing everything I could to try to, (1)  
19 avoid trying to deal with being trans because I had no language for it, there was no language for  
20 it. I didn't know what it was. I understand, at that time, being transsexual, but that all entailed  
21 moving away and re-inventing yourself and coming out and re-creating a life separate from the  
22 life you know, and that seemed very frightening to me. I also didn't know how to go about doing  
23 it because I grew up and this was all happening in Duluth and Minneapolis, so I had no  
24 resources. I didn't know how to even explore what to do. If I had been on either coast, I might  
25 have had more options to explore, but this was before the internet – there was no Google, there  
26 was nothing. You would have to come out to your doctor, which was very threatening and that  
27 wasn't a good idea back then – that was not a good idea. It was a very scary world back then.  
28 So, I was trying to avoid all of that and I was really going into being an artist and exploring my  
29 otherness through art. I was going as far out as I could in that whole world and I became an  
30 installation artist, inspired by all of the art stars from the 1980s in New York, the New York art  
31 scene.
- 32 AJ: So, Warhol and . . .
- 33 VD: All of those people – yeah, all of those . . . oh, God, I can't think of them all now. But, they were  
34 . . . I could get a paper and write it all down. But they were the artists . . . Keith Haring.
- 35 AJ: Keith Haring . . .

- 1 VD: There was another installation artist . . . I'm forgetting his name, but he would re-do cartoons  
2 and he was doing all this stuff. There was a big explosion of interest in the New York art scene.
- 3 AJ: Sure.
- 4 VD: I was so fascinated, so interested in all of that, that I began to work in that medium.
- 5 AJ: Basquiat kind of came on the edge of that.
- 6 VD: Yeah, yeah. All of that – really experimental art and really working with the element of time.  
7 So, creating an art piece that you actually walked into, treating the space so that you became  
8 part of the art rather than just looking at the art. Those things were just fascinating to me. I had  
9 been in music before that, I had a band previous to that, so I understood the rock-n-roll stage  
10 and all of that. So, I had this element of time that I really wanted to explore and I brought it in  
11 in the form of installation work. Found Rifle Sport when I was starting and brought my portfolio  
12 over there and invited them to my home, which was in north Minneapolis – an apartment that  
13 we were renting and I had turned that into a gallery space, an installation space, and they loved  
14 it and they gave me space to do all of that. And so, I became an artist in that style and stayed  
15 with them as my gallery until they closed. And then, I couldn't get into any other gallery. By  
16 then the whole interest in the Minneapolis collecting arts had dried up, the banks who were  
17 investing in art, they were driving a lot of the investment at that time, they quit doing that. And  
18 so, I could never find another gallery to go into. I tried doing independent shows, but my  
19 subjects were all trans figures, so they were exploring the dualism of a trans character . . .
- 20 AJ: Body.
- 21 VD: A trans body on a large format, so there was always a penis. And that was so threatening to  
22 people that every time I did something, I would either get criticism from people seeing it or from  
23 the establishment that let me do it. I had art shows taken down, I had a big one that happened  
24 – that we tried to do in a hair salon in the Lumber Exchange Building and they just shut that  
25 down the day it opened. The owners of the building were like, "No, you cannot have that up." I  
26 had to take it all down. I had one at . . . which is the Black Dog Café, but then it was Copernicus.
- 27 AJ: In St. Paul?
- 28 VD: In St. Paul, but I got very mean comments in my book, people were really upset about the  
29 imagery. I did one at a café . . . before it was Black's Café, it was a little breakfast spot in  
30 downtown Minneapolis, then it became Café Solo, that's when I went and did it – this is back,  
31 now, in the 1980s. And, I did a big installation there with all my paintings and I got death threats  
32 in my notebook. I had business people go to their office and type up how they would never  
33 come back to the café until my work was down, and then they came back and taped it into my  
34 comment book.
- 35 AJ: Oh, my goodness, wow.
- 36 VD: There was a lot of hatred and a lot of anger at representing trans figures in visual art in a public  
37 space.
- 38 AJ: I mean, art should have some visceral response, right?

- 1 VD: Yeah, I pushed it. And, in doing that, I began to confront myself. I started not, but then as it  
2 went I was kind of at the front lines and I began to . . . it actually gave me the language I needed  
3 to understand who I was and through some therapy sessions and marriage counseling, because  
4 my struggle in myself was destroying our marriage at that point. I had a very good therapist that  
5 was able to help me face and admit to myself that I was trans. But, in doing that, there was no  
6 help. I had kicked myself out of the mental health system by coming out as that. He was  
7 overjoyed. I'm sure he was part of the LGBT community but he couldn't come out to me on that  
8 level because it would have threatened his job career because that was a time . . . there was no  
9 protection for any of us. He wasn't trans; I believe he was gay. But, he basically said it was a  
10 huge breakthrough, "We're on the right track, you're on the right track," he tried to help me out  
11 all he could by giving me a little care package of phone numbers and suggestions, but then just  
12 said, "I can't officially help you any more in this setting."
- 13 AJ: "You're on your own."
- 14 VD: Yeah, "You're on your own because we can't . . ."
- 15 AJ: Where did you go after that?
- 16 VD: I didn't have therapy. I called one of the numbers, which was a number for, and it still is in  
17 existence now . . . now it's called the City of Lakes Crossgender Community; back then it was  
18 City of Lakes Crossdresser Community.
- 19 AJ: Right.
- 20 VD: But, it was just basically a club, a clandestine club, for crossdressers – technically open to  
21 anybody, but it was primarily male to female crossdressers who were middle age, more  
22 suburban. They had freedom and they had the money to be able to put together these kind of  
23 clubs in their houses where they could have a party and you would be welcome to cross dress.  
24 Super secret, you didn't know anybody's real names, you had to go through an interview to be  
25 accepted, and in your birth gender not in your chosen gender.
- 26 AJ: Not in full chosen gender.
- 27 VD: Right. And, a lot of the members were feeling the pressure of losing their jobs or their families  
28 or anything if they got outed, so there was all these protocols to keep people's privacy in place.  
29 And, it was very strict and very important. Spouses were welcome to be part of it and so, what I  
30 did is I found that a little place for a number of years. I actually became an artist, I created the  
31 logo which, I believe, is still in existence, in use.
- 32 AJ: Yeah. Wow, you created the CLCC . . . OK.
- 33 VD: The CLCC logo. And, I had a little comic that I did in a newsletter and I got involved – I got to be  
34 one of the interviewing people who went on interviews to help bring new members in.
- 35 AJ: So, you were like moving up into the organization.

- 1 VD: I got very involved in it until I got to a point when it had expanded enough to begin to bring in  
2 people who were identifying as transsexual. By then, I had come out to my band and publicly  
3 and I wasn't satisfied with just being in this little clandestine place, and so I needed to be out . . .
- 4 AJ: You outgrew it.
- 5 VD: I had to be in public. Lynette and I were going out, we were clubbing, I was on stage, and it  
6 became too small for me, really. And so, I kind of just moved away from it.
- 7 AJ: Sure.
- 8 VD: But, it was an important place for me for a number of years.
- 9 AJ: And, they're much more open now, right?
- 10 VD: Yes,
- 11 AJ: Wouldn't you say? I know the group still exists and . . .
- 12 VD: Yes. Yeah, they've really expanded and they're more open, they're more involved, they're more  
13 advocacy – a whole different thing than it was. I think they still have the umbrella option for  
14 people who are closeted and are trying to be private, but that's its foundation. There are  
15 people that still need that.
- 16 AJ: Yeah. So, you are one of the rare people on the planet that was able to make a life and a living  
17 as a working artist.
- 18 VD: Yes, yes.
- 19 AJ: I would say under some of the most challenging of circumstances, given your gender identity  
20 that was once despised and now somewhat embraced, but actually we're moving into an era  
21 where trans identity is under attack again.
- 22 VD: Yeah, it is. I think it's always been there. I think the support was louder for a long time, but now  
23 with our change in government and the attitude, it has given permission for people to voice  
24 their displeasure and their fears of the other and feel justified and empowered by doing that,  
25 which is a frightening place.
- 26 AJ: Sure.
- 27 VD: So, those groups of people are getting louder and getting unified and it is a frightening thing to  
28 see that unfold because we've seen it happen before in other countries and how far will it go  
29 here? Are the safety places that we've built in our government going to really withstand or are  
30 they going to crumble? This is probably the most dangerous place for America to be, I think,  
31 with a sitting president who is making an atmosphere kind to that kind of unfolding landscape –  
32 that is very frightening. So, yeah. I did not try . . . I didn't want to be or try to be an activist, I  
33 was just trying to get somewhere in a career and getting frustrated and angry that it wasn't  
34 working and I couldn't see why. And then, because I was traveling and I had to deal with  
35 people, as a trans person, I kept my birth name and my license and that kept me on the front

- 1 lines traveling overseas on tour or anytime I had to deal with any medical or legal people, that  
2 was something I had to self-advocate for.
- 3 AJ: Had to deal with, yeah.
- 4 VD: I got kicked off jury duty and right soon after . . . we had just passed the Human Rights Act,  
5 which included trans people, which I discovered was . . .
- 6 AJ: Right, 1993, I believe.
- 7 VD: It was the first in the nation to include trans people.
- 8 AJ: It was, absolutely.
- 9 VD: And, within a year after that, I was on jury duty and they got confused by my appearance and  
10 my name and there was an argument over whether I should be on jury duty or kicked off of that  
11 particular call, because it involved child molestation. And, the defendant . . .
- 12 AJ: Wow. Are you kidding?
- 13 VD: No. And the defendant was fine with me being on jury duty, but the prosecutor was not and it  
14 made it to the judge, who had to rule and he ruled that I was not a protected class, which was  
15 wrong.
- 16 AJ: Not true, yeah.
- 17 VD: Because we had just passed this thing, but he ruled that and basically saying that the prosecutor  
18 could presume that I would be biased in favor of child molestation because of the appearance  
19 and the clothing that I wore, and my presentation.
- 20 AJ: Oh, that is so gross.
- 21 VD: And so, I was kicked off jury duty because of that ruling and it hit the newspapers and every  
22 place and it went . . . back in the day, without any internet, it went viral – at least here in  
23 Minnesota. And so, that kind of outed Lynette and I. I contacted Lambda . . . at that point, I  
24 knew I had been in contact and was working with John Killacky, who was the performance art  
25 director at the Walker; I had been filmmaking, I had done some work . . . I had been working  
26 with John and Patrick at Patrick's Cabaret, I had done . . .
- 27 AJ: Patrick Scully.
- 28 VD: Yes. I had done some work with Channel 2 to do some film work with Tim Miller, who was one  
29 of the NEA Four when he was in town. So, we did a film together, which actually got censored  
30 from Channel 2 at the last minute, so there's a whole other story. So, John encouraged me to  
31 contact Lambda; I contacted Lambda, and they were ready to take on the case and go into a  
32 trial, or challenge it in court, but Lynette did not have tenure and she became very afraid of her  
33 job security and was already . . .
- 34 AJ: Your partner is a writer and a professor.

- 1 VD: And a professor, and she felt like it had already rocked the boat with her school that she was  
2 teaching at, because it was everywhere – on all the news, and I was presented like I was dressed  
3 like somebody from *Priscilla Queen of the Desert*, like I had done it in order to get out of jury  
4 duty, which is not what happened. I was just being androgynous.
- 5 AJ: Oh, my goodness. You were just being you – yeah.
- 6 VD: So, that was an issue, so we didn't pursue it and we just let it kind of unfold. We did an  
7 interview with the *Star Tribune* and the irony of that interview, although it was nice - it was a  
8 human-interest interview, but they were more interested in how bizarre it was that I had tried  
9 to go to jury duty and they didn't even talk about how this was not right because of the new  
10 legal decision being made giving protection to trans people.
- 11 AJ: Or, I wonder, did they even talk about the insulting nature of you would be sympathetic to a  
12 child molester because of your identity.
- 13 VD: I brought it up, they didn't. We still have the article . . . I'll probably be writing about it in the  
14 memoir, it's on my timeline.
- 15 AJ: Wow.
- 16 VD: No, it was such a different world. And, I have to say that I didn't even have the sense in myself  
17 to know how to counter that – that story was a story that I had been told so much, that it was  
18 internal. I had to spend so many years untangling a storyline about what being trans was in  
19 myself.
- 20 AJ: Oh, wow.
- 21 VD: And that was a long process of fighting through things – on stage, being on the front line, seeing  
22 things unfold in ways that were harmful. Yeah, it was a long process of self-awareness really.
- 23 AJ: So, you've been a part of this trans and gender non-conforming community here in the Twin  
24 Cities from one of the early organizations that have helped to create space for the community . .  
25 . I know you and I worked together in the All Gender Health Program at the University of  
26 Minnesota and that was 15 years ago, in the mid-1990s, I would say. What has changed, in your  
27 mind, about how transgender people have been included in mainstream culture in Minneapolis?
- 28 VD: I started . . . when I toured New York, began touring in New York with the band, I understood  
29 and became aware of how they worked on nights, theme nights, creating an atmosphere – not  
30 just bands playing in a line-up with an opener blah, blah, blah. They actually created an event.
- 31 AJ: Gay Night and Women's Night, Salsa Night, right?
- 32 VD: Yes. We were out in New York during SqueezeBox, at Don Hill's and there was a lesbian night,  
33 Fraggie Rock, and Meow Mix had nights. There was a place . . . actually a place I'm going to be  
34 performing at, the Parkside Lounge, there was a night called Cheese Whiz, which was . . .
- 35 AJ: Cheese Whiz.



- 1 VD: Cheese Whiz, which was a night for trans people and the little cabaret stage in the back of the  
2 bar, and that was . . . I performed at the Meow Mix one night and a friend of mine who was out  
3 as trans there and performing in rock-n-roll also, brought me down here for the after party. I  
4 met some of the trans women who were there on the front lines at Stonewall.
- 5 AJ: Oh, wow.
- 6 VD: They were elderly at that point, but they were still out and doing stuff and being part of the  
7 scene.
- 8 AJ: Sure.
- 9 VD: Some of them had been drag queens back in the day. So, I would be introduced to these trans  
10 women all around there, all dressed up. Jane County was performing.
- 11 AJ: Who was that?
- 12 VD: Jane County.
- 13 AJ: Jane?
- 14 VD: Jane County, she used to be Wayne County. I think we talked about her in the last interview.
- 15 AJ: Yeah, yeah.
- 16 VD: She was part of the Max's Kansas City rock-n-roll era with . . . it was Jane County and the Electric  
17 Chairs. She was part of the Bowie scene and the Warhol scene.
- 18 AJ: The Velvet Underground and all of those guys.
- 19 VD: Yes, and she came out and transitioned while she was in career as a rock-n-roll artist and she  
20 moved into the early punk era days and became an early punk icon trans person.
- 21 AJ: Jane County. I don't know that name; I've got to look her up.
- 22 VD: She's still alive, she is down south. My dancer, Shannon, is still in contact with her. I met her a  
23 number of times and we performed together. She's an icon and has her own story. She put out  
24 a book, I think *Man Enough to be a Woman* or something like that. I'll have to get that title.
- 25 AJ: I love that title.
- 26 VD: Exactly. But, she talked about coming out in the 1950s and doing stuff like that. But, her own  
27 story is kind of detailed in that book. I read it, of course, that memoir. So, I saw all of that and  
28 then I brought it back to Minneapolis, and I started building theme nights. One of the theme  
29 nights I had . . . I had my fetish nights I was doing, which was brand new here, so we had big  
30 fetish nights and I was getting a lot of attention with those theme nights, but then I started a  
31 trans night called The Kitty Cat Shack, which was at the Turf Club. I was trying to specifically  
32 encourage trans people to come out and to be out and in the open and in the scene. I would get  
33 emails and I would get phone calls from fans that wanted to know if it was OK if they came as  
34 their trans selves. I said, "If I'm on stage, you're OK, because if the audience is there for me,  
35 they're going to be OK with you." More often than not, they did not feel brave enough to do it

- 1            anyway. But, I would talk to them sometimes in the audience and I would find out who they  
2            were and they would . . . eventually they started to come out, but it was very slow and very  
3            careful. It would happen here and there in the fetish scene – here and there, not very much. It  
4            was so underground and so closeted, I really felt like one of the only people around. And even  
5            when I went to New York, most of the scene there was drag and then they had that separation  
6            of theatrics and then your real life.
- 7    AJ:      Right.
- 8    VD:      The trans people out there, it was more than here, but it was in very, very early stages. There  
9            was a club called the Now Bar that used to have a trans night, but then that also turned out to  
10           be a pickup night for a lot of working girls who were taking advantage of that night. You would  
11           go there and you'd have to be prepared for some requests that you would have to turn down,  
12           because that was the scene. But, we used to do cameo shows there with the band and the  
13           people that ran the night . . . Gloria Wholesome and her husband, Gil. Gloria was one of the  
14           drag queens there that was working as a trans person and had transitioned and made that part  
15           of who she was.
- 16   AJ:      OK, wow.
- 17   VD:      So, she was also another person who was an activist in the early days out there. They were very  
18           supportive of me and my work, so we would get a . . . I'd be able to do a cameo there to kind of  
19           set up the weekend gigs that I had planned. What's changed now, long time around to answer  
20           your question . . .
- 21   AJ:      No, that's fine.
- 22   VD:      . . . is that it's amazing, it's amazing. Kids in grade school are coming out, feeling comfortable  
23           enough to come out to their parents – in grade school. Parents are recognizing kids expressing  
24           and not following gender stereotypes and they're letting them explore and giving them space to  
25           find how they feel. It is amazing to me and, with that movement forward as you talked about,  
26           there is the backlash and the anger against that and feeling like that's wrong. But, as a trans  
27           person and knowing my own growing up and isolation and mental health struggle, this is like the  
28           best that could ever happen. And then we can't forget that this is just here in America and  
29           probably specifically in the more urban areas, not in the rural areas.
- 30   AJ:      Rural areas are still struggling.
- 31   VD:      This is a limited bubble of experience and forward thinking. But, it is more and more and when I  
32           toured with Laura, I got a chance to see that full on with her all ages shows, which were the  
33           shows that we did when we toured and all of the trans kids, almost exclusively the kids that  
34           came, were trans or at least . . . or at least were trans open, but the majority were trans kids.
- 35   AJ:      Wow.
- 36   VD:      And their parents, their parents would bring them often. So, it was just amazing to me what's  
37           changed in my lifetime that I didn't expect. I'm trying to think of what was the tipping point.

- 1           Thank you for your generosity in offering me a place of trying to lay some foundation work. I  
2           didn't set out to do that, but I think it happened.
- 3   AJ:     It absolutely happened.
- 4   VD:     Because I had to navigate my life. I think the tipping . . . but then, Jane County was before me –  
5           and Stonewall and those drag queens I met at the Parkside Lounge, at the event Cheese Whiz,  
6           they were there before me.
- 7   AJ:     Yeah, Miss Major and Marsha P. Johnson.
- 8   VD:     Yeah, they were getting arrested, they were the ones that the police were targeting and . . .
- 9   AJ:     Yeah.
- 10   VD:    The tipping point, I think . . . Laura has to have part of that. I think her coming out when she did  
11           was a significant tipping point in the social scheme of things. I think she has that position.
- 12   AJ:     Yes.
- 13   VD:     And what else happened? I think the activism of the trans community as a whole . . . I saw the  
14           beginnings of that out in San Francisco. They had a rebellion before Stonewall in San Francisco.
- 15   AJ:     Yes, the Compton Riots.
- 16   VD:     Yeah, and so they . . .
- 17   AJ:     The Compton Cafeteria Riots.
- 18   VD:     Yeah. So, they were already . . . when I was touring out there with the film festival, I saw the  
19           activism there in a group so much farther along than we were anywhere else. They made a big  
20           difference. And the organization of those people caused the President, President Obama, to  
21           acknowledge trans people. I think that was another tipping point – when he included trans  
22           people in his State of the Union address.
- 23   AJ:     Yeah, it was huge.
- 24   VD:     That was immense – and then he followed it up with the bathroom bill recognition and  
25           suggestions, which unleashed the backlash, but that was also a tipping point of the support. So,  
26           I think those three things were significant and the point where things changed.
- 27   AJ:     Sure. Venus, you are an amazing performer and singer and songwriter. Would you be willing to  
28           share a number with us?
- 29   VD:     Sure – we're at that spot. OK. I won't scream my head off because the business that runs the  
30           warehouse that my studio is in is still working upstairs.
- 31   AJ:     We're here during business hours today.
- 32   VD:     I'll do it with as much force as I can do.
- 33   AJ:     What's it called?

1 VD: It's called *Take My Shoulder* – and this is actually the song that while I was on tour with Laura,  
2 my producer, who is in New York and a friend of mine and I've been working with for yours, and  
3 she also produced a lot of the music that was used for the film *Venus of Mars*, those albums,  
4 worked with Laura and I to try to coordinate the possibility of Laura guest featuring vocals on a  
5 song and this is the one we finally were able to coordinate and she was very generous to find  
6 the time in her tour schedule to add a little bit, so this is the song where, on the recording of it,  
7 she . . .

8 AJ: Did you guys record in the same place? Or, she sent you vocals?

9 VD: No, wouldn't that have been nice. She found a recording studio somewhere. I sent . . . my  
10 producer sent her the tracks and then she was able to add her track to that and sent them back  
11 and then we incorporated the two and mixed them.

12 AJ: Wow.

13 VD: But, that's the way the world works now.

14 AJ: Yeah.

15 *VD musical performance:*

16 *take my hand*

17 *take my shoulder*

18 *I understand*

19 *I can hold ya*

20 *I know you can,*

21 *You're something bolder*

22 *There's is no plan*

23 *And it's getting colder*

24 *Oh my brother*

25 *see my sister*

26 *there are no others*

27 *there is no difference*

28 *I could be you*

29 *I could be you*

30 *you could be me*

31 *(you could be me)*

32 *We struggle onwards and desperately*

33 *there's too much fear*

34 *there's too much hardness*

35 *there's too much fear*

36 *it's me*

37 *stop your hate*

38 *stop your gun*

39 *stop your fighting*

40 *we are one*

41 *hold me sister hold me*

1 *hold me bother hold me*  
2 *hold me father hold me*  
3 *hold me mother hood me*  
4 *hold me sister hold me*  
5 *hold me brother hold me*  
6 *hold me father hold me*  
7 *hold me mother hold me*  
8 *hold me sister hold me*  
9 *hold me brother hold me*  
10 *hold me father hold me*  
11 *hold me mother hold me*  
12 *hold me sister hold me*  
13 *hold me brother hold me*  
14 *hold me father hold me*  
15 *hold me mother*  
16 *carry me*  
17 *I'll carry you*  
18 *we could be stronger (we could be stronger)*  
19 *we could be true (we could be true)*  
20 *make me wise*  
21 *make me breathe*  
22 *make me feel you*  
23 *make me grieve*

24 AJ: Whoooo. Thank you so much, Venus, for your journey, for your music, for your artistry, for your  
25 creativity, for your love. I'm so honored to call you a friend and so honored to have shared this  
26 past hour-plus with you just hearing a little bit more about your story and your life. I'm deeply  
27 grateful.

28 VD: Thank you. Thank you for including me.

29 AJ: Yeah, wow. That song is so powerful. I'm in tears, literally.

30 VD: It's a good one.

31 AJ: It absolutely is. With that, I don't think I can have any more questions that are going to be able  
32 to top what we just heard here. I am just going to close it out and say thank you so much.

33 VD: Thank you.