

## TAPES OF SANDY

Elodie A. Roy

*I met her in Paris in the early 2000s, and began taping her stories. At the time I was writing a book about Britain's underground art during Thatcherism. I spent weeks in regional archives, looking for records and magazines in people's garages, interviewing artists and musicians in Glasgow, Manchester, Liverpool, and London. But the book was impossible to write. Something seemed to resist. When a French photographer introduced me to her, I felt that maybe the story would begin living. I've spent the afternoon listening back to the tapes of our interviews. What struck me was that she always spoke about the past in the present tense. She made no difference between eras in time. Maybe it was just that, over years, she had picked up the habit of using what the French call the 'narrative present'. One day she told me about a painter who had been her close friend twenty years before in Manchester. They had recently met again. I think the encounter upset her. She kept repeating 'Poor Sandy'. Sandy was her nickname for him. Later, when his real name came up in other conversations, I realised with a little shock that I had heard his story before – told very differently by very different kinds of people.*

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"Sandy lives in one of these already obsolete, ominous lodging houses – a maze of rooms and confused stairs. From the outside it looks exactly like an enormous boat, fated for a long and uncertain journey. I gently push the unlocked front door, and climb up to the third floor. A record is playing – *Meat is Murder*, which has come out in the winter."

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"Sandy is making coffee; I can see his back bent above the small gas ring. He turns briefly, with a smile, and gestures towards the small table, telling me to sit down. So I move the big, dreamlike, strangely unsubstantial overcoat to free one of the chairs. The fabric feels soft and worn under my fingers. Sandy has inherited the garment from his father – and wears it every day of the year. It is one of these dull, romantic postwar coats – many years later people would claim Ian Curtis made them popular – but to me they appeared out of nowhere, flooding the entire city overnight."

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“He hands me a cup of burning, black coffee and sits in front of me – his long, abstract hands rest on the gingham oilcloth, motionless for a while. At some point he jerkily pushes a little pot of sugar towards me. The record is still playing, and both of us are silent. Sandy never speaks much. We met at art school one year ago. He is a tall, serious, quietly antagonistic boy – barely out of adolescence. Clothes hang funnily on his gaunt frame, and he makes me think of an ever-more sedate Buster Keaton – a smile of eternity on his face. The world makes him sad and often angry – he despairs at the lack of love, the general pettiness, and the immense greed of people – yet he is not bitter. He is too busy drawing, painting, and dreaming things up. I like his unbroken integrity – his rages and his sudden, childish joys are a refreshing novelty. We both love music, and we quickly become friends. We spend hours at the Grant’s Arms or at Band on the Wall, walking all the way back to Fallowfield in the dead of night. We speak about what we read and see, and often grow silent together as we are doing now – each of us contently withdrawing into our thoughts, alone yet bound. Our solitudes have met. We barely have separate, individual existences at all.”

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“The landlady had been a friend (or perhaps a cousin – I cannot remember) of his parents. Because she is childless and a bit bored, and because her other lodgers are mostly very old or deaf or sternly waiting to die, she cares about him, is sentimentally protective about his youth, lamenting upon his thinness, plying him with biscuits and teacakes, and constantly asking to see his drawings. I sometimes stay for tea, unceremoniously devouring scotch eggs in the half-deserted lounge, exchanging a few light, pleasant words with her. Two or three decades ago, she may have been a different person, objecting to my presence in the house, my regular visits at almost any time of the day. But now the doors are forever open, the windows barely close, and the place is traversed with the defiant, gentle awareness of its own doom. By the end of the decade the big draughty house would be divided up into individual flats, nothing remaining of its former life.”

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“Sandy’s room is bare, and neat – two chairs, two cups, a table, a cupboard. I remember, too, a postcard reproduction of Paul Klee’s *Glass façade* pinned above the narrow sofa bed, next to a photograph of Nico – her hair dyed black, and a look of wildness in her eyes. There are not many objects, but in a corner, by the bed, is a record player. Dozens of records are carefully lined up against the walls. The first time I visited we spent hours listening to Bowie. On every subsequent visit more records would have appeared – Sandy is always playing me new songs. He has a peculiar way of handling and touching the objects surrounding him – with grave delicateness, as if they were enchanted. The records shine and flutter between his hands and, as he places an LP on the record player, he reminds me of a magician – conjuring up doves and flimsy images. Years later I would meet a pianist whose restless, vulnerable hands reminded me of Sandy’s. I almost thought it was him. But the pianist was blasé, disconnected from his art – he could only play mechanically, without a core. There is hope and tenderness in the way Sandy slipped the records out of their white or brown paper-sleeves, intently dusting the grooves. He seems possessed by music. It is a strong, consuming feeling, almost an addiction. There is something inflexible and strangely beautiful to his love of music.”

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“We never speak about his stealing the records, although nothing is hidden. I think the landlady must have known too. He has taken me on a shoplifting trip before, on a busy afternoon after work (he has a part-time job at a frame shop nearby). From a corner I observe (without quite believing it) how he skilfully places the record into a fold of his coat, holding it close against his breast, indifferently leaving the shop. The whole operation amazes me, but I am overcome with nervousness. I do not follow him again. Though I cannot feel the least trace of guilt (we have read and confusedly understood fragments from Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle*, which a friend laboriously translated from the original French, and are both convinced that ‘money is a mean master’). There is something helplessly conformist within me – a deep root not of morality, but rather of fear and cowardice. My rebellions are timorous and naïve: I salvage junk from the street – broken objects, splinters of painted wood, sometimes old reel-to-reel tapes, and 78rpm records. I sew my own dresses, I lurk around Xerox machines at the library, hands trembling a little bit, making quick, clandestine photocopies of fanzines or copying pages from back issues of *Shy Talk* or *City Fun*. A few years ago bands started demystifying the cost of music – The Desperate Bicycles, Buzzcocks, Scritti Politti, printed the cost of pressing a record at the back of the sleeves. Most of our friends occasionally steal, mostly to survive, sometimes out of rage – gratuitously.”

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“Sandy never steals anything but music, and he steals it because his need of it could never be satisfied – he never resells any of it, and never steals anything for anyone else. There are tacit rules. His job at the frame shop is precarious, and art school, too, feels temporary, soon to be over. We have an acute sense of transience – Sandy, because he is virtually orphaned, and me, because of some innate, disastrous melancholy. So we make things with the beautiful energy of despair. We drift together, sit in his room with sempiternal coffee and cigarettes, and hungrily read the same books. We love Leonora Carrington and her lunar, twisted visions, and discover the fractured grace of Hannah Höch and Kathy Acker. We paint, and draw side by side. In 1986 we start a small fanzine and he tentatively befriends Linder Sterling (whom he had long admired from a distance).”

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“If not for drawing he might have slowly disappeared down the road of what was then called ‘petty criminality’. One night he scribbles ‘never work’ in chalk on the pavement, and the following morning he sells his first drawing. The irony is not lost on him.”

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“Confronted with the landlady’s clumsy, though well-meant questions about what we intend to ‘do’ with our lives, we think it best not to reply. We know what we *don’t* want to do. We also know that we don’t believe in political or collective salvation, but rather in a kind of individual courage: we imagine that collective liberation can only occur through personal acts of resistance. We take this extremely seriously. Maybe we have read it somewhere – or we have come upon the conclusion by ourselves, through observation, and systematic, stubborn hopefulness.”

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“We often think about Debord as a dear, distant friend and even send him a collage once, addressing it to sun-drenched Arles where he lives in exile, estranged from Paris (a ‘commercial’ city which he no longer recognizes). But we know too he can afford to drift: there are wealthy friends and lovers ready to support him. They give him money egoistically, for their own good: so that he can drift, and lose himself, and be absolutely free – or absolutely mad – on their behalf. The knowledge that there is someone ‘outside’ the system, apparently free, makes them feel better about their own captivity. They live through him – and we all do, somehow.”

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“Sandy has no family left in Manchester, apart from the effusive landlady. Sometimes he mentions a cousin and an aunt living near Carlisle. A girlfriend appears briefly: because she loves him, she feels compelled – and authorised – to cure him of his kleptomania. She tries very hard for a little while, but her patience soon wears out. When I watch a few years later Robert Bresson’s *Pickpocket*, I recognise in Michel the fever, the compulsion which had inhabited Sandy – which is also a compulsion to love and to be loved.”

Elodie A. Roy,  
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A number of her short stories and poems were published in French and British magazines, and over the years she has self-published many fanzines.

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