

Voices: A Series Of Oral Histories

'TREATING A REALITY PROBLEM'

J.D. Rage, Interviewed April 30, 1994.

J.D. Rage is a painter, writer, photographer and co-editor of Venom Press and Curare, a literary magazine.

by Jan Schmidt



J.D. Rage. PHOTO BY KEN DI MAGGIO.

J.D. Rage: I lived in Ithaca, New York till I was 12 when we moved to the Catskills. That was the traumatic incident of my life. It was a very tightly knit, tiny little community. One-thousand people was the total population and most of them lived around farms. They did not take to me. They were helped along by the fact that I was put into the Special Class for Learning-Impaired children by mistake. When they found out what was going on they had me moved to the regular sixth grade but as a result of that I was behind. In small towns it's always a stigma to be a learning impaired person. It always stuck with me as if I really had been.

Jan: Did you go to college?

J.D. Rage: Yes, in upstate New York. That's where I became schizophrenic.

You don't think you were schizophrenic before?

Yes, I think I had a mild childhood schizophrenia. They told me so, because I used to hear voices. I also used to have this spinning dream. Whenever I would go to sleep I would be in this pinwheel, whirlpool type thing that would just go round and round and a loud buzzing noise would start and it would feel like you were going to die. That was a recurring childhood dream.

I think that mine was really mild, it was just a lack of contact with the real reality. To this day I don't know what that is, the real reality. But for some reason I was diagnosed to be out of touch with it. There were other unrelated things that were amplified by it, such as addiction. I probably started out using different substances in an attempt to treat this reality problem.

I went to one college and I was kicked out. And the kicking out was the second most traumatic event of my life. The nuns decided that I shouldn't come back because I had done a few things including trying to wear pants on campus, which was a big no-no. We had a lettering class and I would do these fancy letterings of Bob Dylan quotes. I put them on my wall. Then when I went home for Christmas or Easter, the nuns came in and took them. They called me in and they accused me of being a communist.

Sometime during the middle of Summer they sent a letter to the house saying that I wouldn't be allowed to come back. My father got this idea if I wrote a nice apologetic letter to the nuns that they'd let me come back. He should have known better. I made my mind up that I was not going to write it. I put in some applications to transfer to some other schools, but Dad ordered me to write the letter.

I was working in a lumber company for the Summer. The black flies were in the window and they were fucking, so I wrote this poem called Black Fly Fuck and I had mentioned certain other sexual incidences of my own. It was like one of the kinds of poems I write now. It was in the typewriter and my father came into my room and he thought it was the letter to the nuns. He read it and then he disowned me.

He kicked you out of the house?

No. He just disowned me. Never talked to me again for years. I got in to Syracuse University. I had two scholarships and my mother paid the rest of it. My father drove me all the way there without saying a word to me. I was a very sullen untalkative person anyway, it suited me fine. I just didn't really care for the fact of my father disowning me.

At Nazareth College of Rochester where I was going before, I had started sniffing glue. It was not airplane glue, it was Best Test Paper Cement. That's what we used in our art classes. It is just as hazardous as any of the other ones, if you put it in a plastic bag and sniff it.

At Syracuse I felt even worse because Nazareth at least had some kind of cocoonish quality to it. Syracuse, I knew nobody. It was one of those big schools that revolve around fraternities and sororities, mostly people who come from Long Island. I had not had any contact with sophisticated types really. I felt bad, so I sniffed a lot of glue. Then I started to hang out at the local bohemian coffee shop type thing, but I felt like a sore thumb. I had to have something in me first like Codeine cough syrup.

Did you graduate from there?

No. My friend Chet Macklan and I decided that we were going to hitch-hike to New York. We were going to bang tambourines on MacDougal Street. This was right up my alley, because I was an artist and I knew that I had to suffer first before I could be a proper painter like Van Gogh. I figured I would come to New York, live in a garret and suffer. Then I would have the suffering experience to do great paintings. Of course there were no paintings at all because my suffering stage was so great that I can't even look at a painting anymore.

That trip got interrupted when my father decided to make a brief appearance. He picked me up from school to put me in a mental institution. He came up totally unannounced; I had just sold all my record collection. If I had known he was going to come and take me to the nut house, I would have kept my records.

He said, 'get in the car.' I had no choice really. I got in the car. He didn't talk to me the whole way home.

I had sent a letter to them when I was high on glue. My mother freaked out. They took the letter to the doctor. The doctor said I was a schizophrenic, but probably psychotic and that they should get me immediately and put me in the nut house for observation. So that's what they did.

So how long did you stay in the hospital?

It was two weeks of observation. I called my mother and I told her, 'Mom, whatever you do, you got to get me out of this place. I'm not crazy, these people are crazy.'

My parents had to come for a meeting at the end with all the psychiatrists. I was there at the meeting and they told my parents that I probably should stay at least a year. My father said no and then we left. My mother gave me 40 or 50 dollars to get a bus ticket to New York, because they knew I wanted to go.

I was all excited and really thrilled and getting on the bus, she said, 'Just remember, just don't call me if you get pregnant or you go to jail.'

So then what, you're in New York, you got 50 bucks, then what? What year was it?

1966, I think. I took a taxi to Hotel Earl which was on the corner of Washington Square Park on the uptown side. I had a job working with a company

called ESP Disc which put out bands in those days like the Fugs. It was a two layer business: the record company on one side of the office and on the other side a dress business. I liked that job because there were really cool people working there.

You've been writing poetry all this time, were you getting published?

In Nazareth I gave a reading in the lounge with a few other young women. I was pleased with the fact that they thought my poetry was so emotional. I didn't feel so emotional, but the poetry seemed to be, and people seemed to like it. At Syracuse, there was a school paper or an underground paper connected with the school that had poetry in it. I wrote them a letter and attached some of my poems.

I went down to buy books at the book store, and the guy that was taking my money saw my I.D. card and said, 'Oh, are you the same person that sent that letter?' He asked me if I wanted to join the staff. I did get some poems in that. And Will Inman, this guy who put out this poetry magazine in New York City, published us. We came down here on a school trip and we were able to buy our own work which was pretty exciting.

Then how did your life in New York progress?

Those were weird days. It was the hippie days. It was right on the park and there were a lot of runaways hanging out. It was right after Timothy Leary did his tune-in, turn-on and drop-out bit. I thought that was what I did—I certainly had turned on—I certainly dropped out. I don't know if I tuned in or not, though.

There were a lot of people that did the same thing. I bumped into this one guy one night who said he had this place that he was living in the Lower East Side for 20 dollars a month. If I wanted to, I could get in on that, pay \$5 a month. It was on Avenue C behind the school on East Fifth Street.

At that time it was one of the scurviest, down-troddenest areas in Manhattan. He lived in the top floor of this place. They were tapping the electricity out of the bathroom in the hall for the apartment area. The whole walls and ceilings were painted with day-glo paintings. It was not bad. There was him and this other guy and maybe a few other people living there. I moved out of the Hotel Earl.

For a couple of days I continued going to my job. But he didn't really have a job for me. I was just hanging around there, doing stuff and they were paying me 50 dollars a week basically for keeping the secretary company. Then he put me to work for his father, filing things in the dress company business. I didn't want to do that, so I just quit going there.

I had no money but I had enough to pay \$5 a month. A couple of days later, this other guy moved in. He called himself a fag-basher. He said, 'I am a fag-basher.'

I said, 'What's that?'

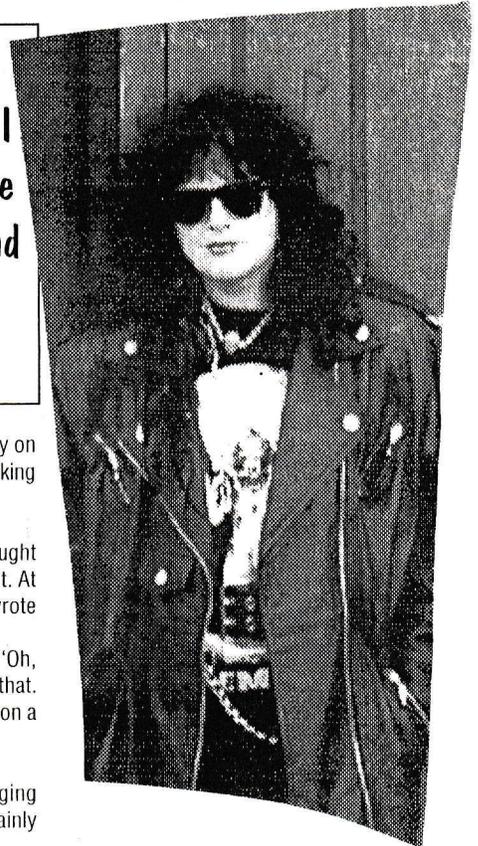
He said he went around beating up gay guys for their money. He promptly, maybe one or two days later, threw me down the stairs. I did manage to have sex with the guy too.

When I was hanging out at night I met Martin—my first husband, Mad Marty. I met him in front of Cafe Reggio, on MacDougal Street. I was there because I often played checkers with a guy and then when we were through, we would go in his car and make-out. That's all we would do was make-out. And he would give me Tuinals. Then he overdosed and died.

So I was hanging out there, and this guy comes across the street with this dog on a leash. He asked me if I would give him 50 cents because he needed to get a headstone for his mother who had recently died.

I laughed right in his face. I said, 'that's the worst line I ever heard in my life.'

"We had a lettering class and I would do these fancy letterings of Bob Dylan quotes. I put them on my wall. Then when I went home for Christmas or Easter, the nuns came in and took them. They called me in and they accused me of being a communist."



He said, 'Oh you don't like that? I thought it was rather clever.' We started up this conversation and I went pan-handling with him the rest of the night. Then I went home with the guy.

It was not that much longer he asked me to marry him, and I did. Right afterwards, I found out that he married me because he had his third case of assault on a woman coming up and his lawyer had told him that it would be really nice if he had some evidence that he was reformed and treating women better. They thought a cute young wife would do it.

Were you writing during this time?

With Mad Marty I was painting. He encouraged me to paint because he would use the paintings as props for his pan-handling.

Your paintings were realistic paintings?

No. The one in the *Daily Worker*, I called it the Nina II. I don't know where it came from, it was a painting of a ship with sails and it came right straight out of my head. It was a realistic painting of a boat, but the background wasn't. All the stuff I was doing was stylized and a little bit abstract. After I got into the East Village Artist Association and met this guy Harvey Keene who was my son's father, it became totally abstract.

So you're with Marty, you're doing painting, you're doing pan-handling, then what?

We had the Artists Association show in the park and this guy showed up that we didn't really know. Harvey brought this big black box over to Tompkins Square Park and he sat in it smoking a pipe. That was his art work. People would ask him questions. 'You call that art work?'

My paintings were right next to him. He was very out-going and talkative and he immediately made friends with all the people there. Except me. I wouldn't talk to him, because I thought he was a total jerk. Naturally I had to move in with him a few days later. I saw Harvey as my ticket away from Mad Marty. I was the next one who was being assaulted.

Marty got off on the assault charges and then proceeded to assault you?

He was already assaulting me. I lied under oath. I said that he was wonderful, he treated me great, meanwhile, the day after we got married, Marty punched me in the face. This was a constant thing, I never knew when I was going to be blind swiped and smashed right in the face.

You guys were smoking pot?

We were doing psychiatric medications. That's how we got on welfare. I was on prescribed Stelazine. Even that doctor thought I was schizophrenic, probably because I would marry anybody like Marty. His doctor knew he was crazy. He was shocked to death that he could get somebody to marry him. Valium and thorazine are what he was on.

I should have just left him, but I was afraid that I would be alone. Even in that situation there was a big temptation to stay with somebody who was being horrible to you, physically torturing you, and mentally freaking you out every day. Just so you'd have somebody.

So then you went with Harvey.

Then I moved into Harvey's apartment. Marty came over to Harvey's house with a gun, concealed, of course. He was pretending to be nice, and then he pulled the gun out and was waving it around. I think Harvey disarmed him. Then he went away.

So you had a baby with Harvey, but you didn't get married?

Nope. I was already married. Harvey wanted me to get a divorce and marry him and when I got divorced, I never told him that I got it. I knew that he wanted to marry me, but I didn't want to at that point...

How long did you stay with him?

Not too long. Probably two years.

Then you took Theo and moved out?

No, Theo stayed with him. I didn't want to have a kid in the first place.

You never told your mother?

Nope. After all, she said don't call if you get pregnant, so I didn't.

Then you and Harvey broke up?

I left him and moved out.

What were the '70s like?

When I moved out from Harvey, I got involved with this guy, Roberto. He was a junky and he had a wife and four kids. I didn't know that. Then he left his wife and kids and moved in with me. I got an apartment on Eleventh Street, between B and C. For my birthday one day, he brought over heroin. So I started doing heroin. Then we moved to Coney Island, we switched apartments with another character.

That's when I lost my poetry—all my early poetry. I left the manuscript there when we switched apartments, because we couldn't carry everything. When I went back to get it, they had thrown it away. That was all of my old poems, gone, just like that. I was heading off into this heroin thing. Then this guy Roberto started seeing another woman behind my back. All kinds of craziness went on, then he left completely. I moved back to Manhattan.

I married this guy from work in '75. He was training me to be a hearing representative, to handle cases. One day I came back from lunch and he was smoking pot in the judge's chair. I said this is the man for me.

Where were Harvey and Theo?

They moved to Texas. I wanted to stay here and continue my drinking.

So you moved in with this guy named Jeff who you met at the job. How long did that last?

Two years, that was my limit. My absolute top limit. With Jeff a lot of strange things happened. First of all, he wanted to be a lawyer. He was going to school, getting married, aspiring to do all these things that he should have done but he didn't do because maybe he was a petulant youth or whatever. I was horrified, because if he was going to law school what was I going to do?

In those days, I had lost everything. I had no art anymore, I didn't listen to music, I had nothing. I was terrified that this guy was going to meet somebody in law school. I would be sitting home being a stupid housewife, even though I had a job. I decided that I would go to school with him. We took the LSAT and I did very well. He didn't get a high enough grade to get into law school.

His parents cooked up this plan, that I would be the lawyer and he would work in my office as a paralegal. Then once he had enough experience as a paralegal, he could probably get into law school. I started going to law school on top of my regular job.

When I was with Roberto and doing the heroin, that was a true addiction. When I stopped it was because they had a



panic, I think it was in '72. It was a government planned panic. They removed all the heroin from the streets in the whole eastern seaboard, especially New York City. It just so happened that the methadone program came out at the exact same time as the panic, so everyone went on the methadone program. I didn't because I tried methadone once and I have never been so deathly ill in my life. I vomited from Union Square Station all the way to Coney Island. People left me alone in the car, I was vomiting and vomiting and vomiting. I kicked heroin cold turkey. I said I'd never do heroin again.

But law school was very rough. It required working all day, studying before school, going to school, being put on the spot by teachers. My husband picked me up and drove me home to Bay Ridge, and I would study all night and maybe get an hour or two of sleep. This went on into the second year. But what saved me is I got hit by a car at work. I was on my way down to the hearings and I got hit by a car while crossing the street. I was out of work for three months. They gave me Percodan in the hospital. I liked staying home, and eventually I dropped out of school. Then I was kind of crazy because I didn't have anything to do at night and I was used to being up all night long, so I started drinking after work with the guys every night.

Drinking and drinking and my husband didn't like it. He tried coming along a few times, but he wasn't into that. One day he went on a trip to New Orleans for his job. When he called me up from New Orleans, I told him I was going to leave him.

Then I went through a couple of guys, decided to play music and got into a band, had so much energy and so many bad feelings. What I thought I was fighting for was to be myself and not be attached to anybody.

How did you start playing the bass?

I got my own place again and immediately I had to get involved with some asshole. I got involved with this guy who turned out to be a confidence man and he stole everything from me, but my dog. It flipped me out. I was totally convinced that this guy was crazy about me, that I was going to quit my job and we were going to travel across the country together and go on the road forever. I took out this car loan, we charged all my credit cards up, and I didn't care because I wasn't coming back. I was going to change my name, credit card companies could go screw themselves, the car loan, the bank loan too.

He took the loan money, he took all the stuff we bought with the credit cards. We were supposed to leave and there was a going-away party planned. He never showed up. I was already drunk, so it took me a while to realize that the whole last four months was a total set up. I decided that I was going to kill myself.

There were people around who were saying if you put yourself in the nut house you won't be able to do that. I couldn't get in. I had a friend at the time whose girlfriend was a therapist. She said, 'you can get in two seconds, just tell them you're an alcoholic.' So I told them I was an alcoholic and I was in Bernstein in two seconds. It wasn't even a thing like 'oh am I really an alcoholic' or anything, I just did it to get me in. The thing was I was an alcoholic but I didn't know that.

They put me on medicine. When I was in there, Sid Vicious killed Nancy Spungeon. Before that I really had not heard about them. I was totally isolated. I hadn't read the papers for years, I didn't listen to the radio, and I hardly watched television. I was always out drinking. That's what I was doing—to the point where there was no other part of life, just work and drinking. I went in Bernstein, they put me on all kind of medicine—for guess what? Schizophrenia. Somehow I can never hide it from the doctors.

Sid killed Nancy. I took Nancy's picture and I drew it during Occupational Therapy. I don't know why I was so interested in some guy that would kill his girlfriend except that it was some feeling that was coming to me from somewhere.

I got out of the nut house sometime after Thanksgiving in '78. Sid killed himself in February of '79. Sometime after that I had this feeling that his essence had come into me. I thought I was Sid Vicious. Right after this, I bought a bass guitar.

As soon as I learned how to play it, I was in a band. I was in bands up until a couple of years ago, not always thinking I was Sid Vicious, but for the first several years. Definitely thinking like and acting like Sid Vicious, who was a great, terrible heroin addict.

You started using heroin again?

Yeah, it was later on down the road, but I did. I was in this band, called the Bandits. We got a new guitar player, and he had a friend, a big tall guy. For some reason, he was very interested in the band and he was comparing us to the Beatles and he would follow us around with tape recorders and film cameras and it made me feel real important. There weren't that many women musicians when I first started out. And I didn't start playing bass until I was 32.

One night he was at a party with us. He said, 'I'm a heroin addict, nobody knows, so don't tell anyone. But if you ever feel bad, just give me a call and I'll be there.' One day I did.

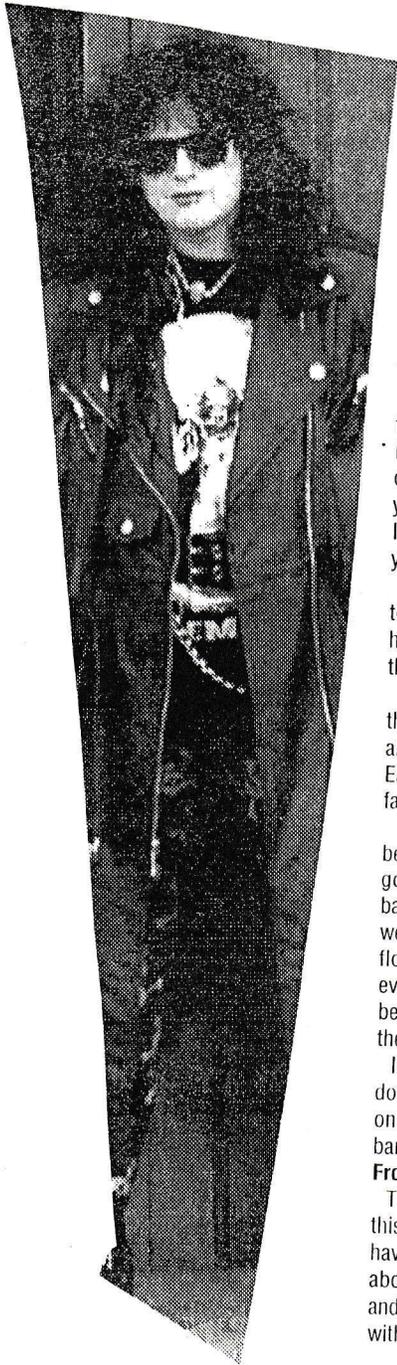
Somewhere along here you hit a bottom.

Yeah. I hit a bottom because I reached a point where I was staying up all night and drinking in after-hours. This guy Frank was copping a lot of heroin for me. I sent him out one night and he got arrested. And then I couldn't get anything. I was too paranoid to go to the spots myself. I got sick. I did it cold turkey, but I didn't feel too much, because I was sousing myself in alcohol and doing a lot of cocaine.

I had gone up to see this doctor because I couldn't write songs anymore. He told me that he could not help me until I cleaned up because I was a heroin addict and an alcoholic. He gave me the name of a rehab which I put into the garbage container on the way out of his office. It was Smithers Institute. I jokingly told my friends at work, 'they want to put me

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into a rehab.'

I was supposed to be at work at 8:15. I was going in at 10, straight from the after-hours totally drunk, coked out. I also started blacking out, which I never did in all the years of drinking. One day something snapped. I remember I was sitting there with sunglasses that looked like venetian blinds; they had little slits in them that you looked out, and nobody could see in, but you could see out, and it was the fashion for about a week. I had these on and I was sitting at my office desk and I was crying and rocking back and forth, and I had a total emotional and physical breakdown.

My friends called up Smithers, and Smithers said they couldn't take me. They recommended another hospital. It was the first one I was admitting was a rehab. I only stayed two weeks because that was all my insurance coverage allowed for. I found out later that the doctors and the therapists would make bets on who was going to make it and who would stay clean. They bet that I was not going to make it.

They have these indoctrination sessions in there and I did feel like I was being brainwashed, but I also thought, I don't need to use drugs. If I go to meetings I'll stay clean. I went to meetings and I assumed that I would always be clean. I had some tough things to do like watching Peter shoot speed in front of me.

You were still in a band? What year was this?

Yeah. '84. Still being exposed to heavy usage by certain people. It was rough. I had a few relapses. The last one, I went to a meeting and I was mad at everybody, I had been mad at everybody for weeks. I had already had two relapses, first I had four months clean, and then I relapsed, then I had another four months, and I relapsed again, and this time I was only up to two months. I had 10 months out of the institution and I was ready to cash it all in. I got mad at everybody, you had your friend Randy who was coming in from California that day and you asked me to come over and I said, 'shit, I'm going to go to Jan's.' I stopped in the liquor store and bought a large thing of red wine. You said something like, 'oh, you're sure you can drink this?'

'Sure I can handle it, just for one day,' I said. I got drunk on the wine, and Randy had pot. Frank came in and he wanted to get cocaine. We all gave money and he went out. He came back hours later saying he couldn't get it. The minute I heard this I ran out of the apartment straight to the St. Marks Bar and Grill and drank up whatever the Jack Daniels they had left.

My contact lenses fell out at the bar because I was so dehydrated from all the alcohol. I couldn't see to even get them. I still wanted cocaine. After I heard the word, I had to have some. I had the alcohol in me so my real feelings were able to come out. I dragged this little mobster guy, that was trying to convince me he was a hit man or something out to Eleventh Street to get cocaine. It was a blizzard. There was snow coming down, you couldn't see a foot in front of your face. This guy came right out of the storm and said, 'What do you want?'

I said I wanted cocaine, and I gave him my money and he came back with cocaine. Which freaked the hell out of me, because even in my state I figured he's going to burn me. He came with cocaine. The big macho hit man guy, he was gone, you couldn't find him anywhere. I looked around for him for two seconds and then I stumbled home. I started banging away the cocaine. I had some needles from where I don't know. I think I took them out of the Sid paintings. They were definitely used. Anyway I was banging it away and then I realized that something was wrong. I laid down on the floor and knocked the phone off the chair so it was on the floor next to me. I called my friend, Bonnie, upstate. She eventually wound up calling the police station on Fifth Street. They came and got me and took me to Bellevue. But not before I managed to shoot up some more cocaine. The police said, 'Oh you don't look like you're in such bad shape, they'll probably release you.'

I didn't want to be released. I felt like I manipulated the interview in order to be admitted. But I look back and I think it doesn't matter what I was doing, because the doctor would have seen through that anyway. He made his decision based on whatever he saw. I always feel guilty, because I feel like I have this power, to manipulate a doctor when I was just barely two seconds away from death in a detox.

From that time on you never had another drink or a drug?

That's right. This is where I'm realizing what schizophrenia is. This is something that is only being revealed to me this year. I always wondered why they say I have it. I don't feel like I'm out of touch with reality, but I really am. I don't have a real depth of feeling about anything. I don't like doing the paintings, I hate writing. I don't feel a sense of purpose about it, I don't feel a sense of connection to anybody else in the universe. I just don't have something. I go around and I act like I have it but I know I don't. It's a very fatal flaw. I think it's what probably prevented me from really connecting with people and enjoying myself throughout my life.

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