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Ann Magnuson: The Wisdom and Charisma of 'Rave-Mom'

By **Ron Rosenbaum**
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Sometimes I get a feeling about someone, an artist, writer or performer: a feeling that they have more than talent, they have Wisdom. And sometimes I'm wrong. You can mistake genius for wisdom; I'm not sure they're the same. But in any case, I've had that feeling for some time now about Ann Magnuson. Some of her fanatic cult of fans on both coasts may find me a little late in coming to this realization. ("I'm a fuckin' goddess in San Francisco," Ms. Magnuson averred at one point during our recent lunch.) But I'm often late to appreciate pop cult phenomena; this column is called The Edgy Enthusiast not because I consider myself cutting-edge—I can't stand the word edgy when it's used that way. I'm edgy more in the sense of irritable .

Anyway, I never really picked up on Ms. Magnuson's work in the 80's when she became a downtown diva slash club scene chanteuse slash performance artist slash front woman for semi-legendary, semi-underground rock bands called Bongwater and Vulcan Death Grip. For those of you who want to catch up on that scene, she has a piece on the Club 57 scene she fostered in the current issue of Artforum . No, I first really caught on to Ms. Magnuson's talent, if not yet her wisdom, in more mainstream vehicles, during that period when she was briefly taken up by Hollywood. I thought she gave an amazing performance, for instance, in Susan Seidelman's underrated comedy Making Mr. Right where she starred (opposite John Malkovich) as a high-strung, beset and vulnerable 80's everywoman. Saying that doesn't capture the pure spark of wit and, yes, Wisdom she communicated, radiated really, in that role. The rest of her Hollywood career wasn't that stellar. In a poem she read at her Joe's Pub Halloween appearances ("Daughter of Horror: An Evening of Appalachian Goth Lounge") she wrote: ... in some 80's vampire flick I played the New Wave video slut chick Who gets killed by an Egyptian ankh worn by this rock star stud. I was mad I didn't get to be covered with any blood You see it was all cross cut with ripping out each other's throats. Still I got to make out with Bowie and, sort of, emote ... She had a couple seasons on that sitcom Anything but Love (the one that starred Jamie Lee Curtis and Richard Lewis), and she brought a delicious comic imperiousness to the Anna Wintour-Tina Brown role. But clearly it wasn't her métier, her town Hollywood, except in this sense it was Fitzgerald's

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town—a place to savor the sad beauty of broken dreams. Material for the ongoing hybrid cabaret acts she began writing and performing, acts that combined personal monologue (think a more acidic Spalding Gray), a slightly demented sense of humor and a kick-ass backup band. When I listened to the CD of one of her first such ventures, one she called The Luv Show —about the disillusioned odyssey of a Hollywood party girl—which breaks out of its Weltschmerz with a mad ecstatic rocker called "Sex With the Devil"—I found that the combination of bitter wit and lyricism reminded me of the later Marianne Faithful, a woman who also went from sex and (sympathy for) the devil, from chick singer to sophisticated chanteuse. Both of them had been there, done that and done them, and ended up wised up but not worn down with a sly, no-regrets fondness for all the passionate mistakes of a colorful past. "The road of excess," wrote William Blake, "leads to the Palace of Wisdom." To the kind of Wisdom I sensed Ann Magnuson possessed. What finally made me decide I wanted to meet her in person was seeing her live a couple of times. First, about a year ago in a show she called Ann's Adventures in Hollywood . Hard to capture that mad evening in words. It was at Life; there was the kick-ass backup band; Ann appeared in a gauzy Glinda the Good Witch costume complete with wand and tiara although accented in an off-kilter way with the nontraditional touch of a big surgical neck brace (to signify "a mild case of psychic whiplash that happens when you're in Hollywood too long," she later told me.) I recall that evening as a kind of controlled chaos with Ann exhibiting Multiple Personalities from Glinda the Good to Bad Girl rock chick in lingerie. But I sensed beneath the costume changes a fanatic artistic discipline that nonetheless accommodated itself to anarchic club conditions. Although I wasn't sure until I had lunch with her whether the biker guy who came on stage and simulated intercourse with her was a programmed part of the show or just Ann going with the moment. But I decided I really had to meet her after I witnessed her deliver a remarkable tour de force monologue about her trip to the Burning Man desert ritual gathering at one of "the Moth" storytelling evenings at Joe's Pub. I don't know if you've caught any of these events, which are curated by the storytelling evangelist Joey Xanders. This was my first, and there were some impressively accomplished performers most notably, in addition to Ann, the brilliant Mike Albo. Do you know about Burning Man? Again I'm a little late to this one myself; it's been going on for some 12 years out in the desert beyond Reno, Nev., but I've only begun to read and hear about it in the past couple of months. It's loosely based, I think, on a Celtic ritual centering around the Wicker Man in which a gigantic figure made of sticks is constructed and set on fire to the accompaniment of pagan rites and human sacrifice. Apparently, they don't do human sacrifice in the Nevada desert, but pagan rites, yes: a weeklong carnival of what Ann calls "cyberhippies," rave culture, freaks and fetishists engaged in an unstructured, noncommercial, Web-generation desert Woodstock that climaxes in the construction and incineration of a gigantic Burning Man—and may have something to do with the construction and incineration of one's conventional workaday identity. Or, as Ann described it to me over lunch, "It's Road Warrior meets renaissance fair on Mars." Anyway, in Ann's hands her trip to Burning Man became an odyssey and an allegory about her attraction and resistance to losing

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herself in ecstatic experience, to losing her individuality in communal mass mind.

So, interestingly, was Mike Albo's monologue that night at "the Moth," which dealt in a somewhat carnal but no less hilarious way with his trip to a Chicago gay sex club and his attraction and resistance to losing himself in "the party"—the lure of capitalized and uncapitalized Ecstasy. Perhaps this is the signature dream of the fin de siècle —can you be an exquisitely aware artist, a smart person with an individual vision, and still be a part of the millennial party without losing that which makes your voice distinctive? First thing you notice in person or, anyway, first thing I noticed when she sat down at my table at the Time Cafe is that despite being able to belt out vamplike rock anthems with a big Chrissie Hynde-like voice and a bitchin' bod behind it (which she's given to showing off in lace-patterned lingerie on stage), she has an elfin delicacy to her no-makeup daytime persona (if you set aside the gleaming electric-blue nail polish). Her fine-boned features are topped by a shock of hair colored rust red; she says she grew up towheaded but, spiritually, I think, she is a true redhead. The West Virginia she grew up in was, she told me, urban Charleston, not backwoods Li'l Abner, but she's got some eccentric Southern preachers in her family tree, and I came to think of her and her performance as profane preaching in a way: Her shows are revival meetings for a postmodern congregation of lost souls who have done everything and lost their faith in anything. But Ann has an intriguing disclosure about her show tonight: "It's very different from the last show," she said. In that while it riffs on Halloween, on goth culture, Marilyn Manson and the like, it all builds to, "it's all an excuse to read a poem," she says in a poem she does at the very end, a poem she's written about her brother's death. And then, in a quite matter-of-fact way, broken once by tears, she tells me about the sorrow beneath the shows she's been doing and the hard-won wisdom she's wrested from it. It turns out that the Burning Man trip came at a time of spiritual exhaustion for her, not long after her brother's death, a death that was a culmination for her of a whole decade of friends dying. "The 90's to me were death-laden," she told me. "Because so many of my friends from New York beginning with Keith Haring and so many, many other people ... That's one reason I went to L.A. I just ... New York was full of just too many ghosts. With my brother, it was AIDS, and I had to keep that a secret. He didn't want anyone to know. I found out in '87. Now it seems kind of shocking [to keep it secret], but I remember the hysteria back then. And, you know, they said that thing, you're only as sick as your secrets. Those things just destroy you from the inside. You can't communicate it. And all my shows were about that, but indirectly. Now I'm becoming more direct about it." She was trying to come to terms with it last New Year's when her friends invited her to come to Las Vegas to see Marilyn Manson, the beginning of an odyssey that ended up with her out in the desert with Burning Man—a transformative, cathartic experience for her grief-saturated year. I loved listening to her tales (some very off-the-record) of that wacked-out cyberhippy Woodstock which she's working up into a new monologue she wants to call "Rave-Mom." She spoke of the way that, when she first arrived at the remote desert site of Burning Man in a giant Winnebago with some San Francisco friends, all she could think about at first was plotting her escape route. But then she "put

on a little Squeaky Fromme red dress and some cat ears" and got into it. Eventually, she found herself captivated by the spectacle and by the "little wrinkle of utopia" she saw emerging. "Interesting contrast to Woodstock '99," I said, thinking of a harrowing piece I'd just read on that debacle (by David Samuels in the current Harper's). "Complete opposite," she said. "I've tried to describe the difference, something to call the mainstream Zeitgeist at Woodstock and elsewhere, you know, 'show us your tits!' and that kind of Fight Club bullshit: what about 'frathouse nihilism'?" I said I liked that. "Oh, Lordy," she said, reverting to her West Virginia roots, "there's got to be another direction. That's what I found there in the desert, a way of accessing moments that were tranceformative." "Transformative or trance-formative t-r-a-n-c-e?" "Yes, trance," she said. She's a big fan of trance music, was up all night after her first "Daughter of Horror: An Evening of Appalachian Goth Lounge" show dancing herself into a trance state at the Moby concert. I'm a little skeptical about Burning Man hype, but she has a sense of humor about it. She tells a hilarious story about the overambitious spectacles the cyber hippies prepared, like the gigantic Buddhist lotus that was supposed to open up at the height of the rite, but which just plain refused to cooperate. "A Spinal Tap moment," she said. And, of course, that's what I love about her sensibility: the ability to see the line where grandiose, visionary, transformative aspirations turn into Spinal Tap jokes. Still, she said, the whole experience changed the way she approaches her work. "It's much more my voice than the last monologue you saw. You know I'm not a big fan of ... therapy performance art or confessional ranting. But I really need to, I want to be more direct now with all my experiences. And I think I have something to communicate now. But I still like to have it be fun." The show that night was in fact the most fun I'd had at a live performance in a long time. It was fun, it was kick-ass, it was funny, and in the end it was heartstoppingly sad and beautiful. It was both an exuberant celebration and a scorching rejection of Goth culture, horror kitsch and Hollywood death chic. And I'll get to it in a moment, but first I want to return to the Wisdom question. In part because I loved what she said when I told her I thought she had wisdom. "Lordy," she said. "What?" "Lordy," she said again. "I wish I could apply some wisdom to my love life." "O.K., since you brought it up, what's your wisdom about men, have you learned anything or changed your—" "Thou shalt have no false gods before you," she said, with a smile. From love and sex to evil: "Evil is the absence of God," she said, repeating the later formulation of St. Augustine. But then, not satisfied with that, she gives it a peculiarly Ann Magnuson postmodern theological twist: "Evil is like secondhand smoke in the room." I have to say, as someone who's put in a number of years studying the philosophical literature on the question, that's actually an incredibly sophisticated metaphor, evil as secondhand smoke. One that captures the complicitous interchange between individual and social environment in engendering evil. Evil as something one takes in and yet also something one is capable of giving out. inhale-exhale. Evil as a kind of miasma. A kind of pervasive pollution of being we generate and suffer from. And then there are the implicit Paul Celan-like resonances of evil as smoke in this century, which I could be reading into the

image, but it's quite brilliant and poetic on its own. As was her show that night. She rocked the house down, and then back up again. And remodeled the kitchen, too. As we emerged from Joe's Pub after Ann had left us shaken with that concluding poem to her brother and followed that with a tumultuous encore cover of a Vulcan Death Grip punk anthem, the woman with me—as awestruck as I was—told me, "You must worship her in your column." She deserves worship. I could talk about the charisma with which she commands the stage, I could talk about her total command of the vocabulary and history of pop culture and pop mythology—a command that allows her to bend it and shape it any way she wants to into a pliant and expressive medium for her wit and imagination. But most of all I want to talk about that poem, the one about her brother's death, a tour de force within a tour de force evening. One that demonstrates that in addition to everything else she really is a writer. It's a precisely crafted narrative poem of more than 200 lines rhymed and impeccably if sometimes eccentrically metric. And it's a challenging poem, one that takes all the seductive imagery of death chic in the culture, imagery that's seduced her in her youth—and turns it inside out, shows us the skull beneath the skin, the true texture of death and dying that Halloween-Goth culture is desperately masking. The poem follows a rock-out version of "Dead Babies," by that original Goth star Alice Cooper. And then begins quietly in the back of a limo where Ann's hanging out "between takes/ while doing the graveyard scene from that Meryl Streep movie about the kid who kills his girlfriend by mistake/ I played the mother who had to cry ..." She finds herself asking the guy who plays the mortician (who's a real mortician), "What do they do with the blood?... All the AIDS-tainted blood they suck out the body and replace with embalming mud?" They just pour it down the drain, he says. "You mean all the blood of everyone who ever died every minute of every hour of every year is flowing underneath, through sewage lines along with the pissed-out Coca-Cola and beer?" After exploring that cheerful image she shifts back to West Virginia to the childhood when she and her brother watched "Chiller Theater" and grew up loving bloody vampire flicks. And how she's had to learn from the fate of her brother and her friends that death is not like that, "Death is not what it used to be/ Death isn't anything like Halloween." Death does not wear Goth makeup. But rather death is "the sound of the ventilator ... the dull machine rhythms ... harsh institutional lights shining bright on the asbestos ceiling/ down a hospital corridor that could use a good cleaning ... Death is the boring strip mall in the unremarkable suburb of Baltimore, the prefab funeral parlor between a 7-Eleven and a Pizza Hut and a mini-storage warehouse" where her brother's body finally lay. It goes on in an almost unbearably tender and painful and sad and funny way. And the fact that she read it so beautifully while clothed in a filmy black lace nightgown, while it may add to the effect, has nothing to do with my conviction that I was in the presence of "a fuckin' goddess." After all, the woman I was with—who has little patience with hype—instructed me: "you must worship her." And I do.

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