

PAT PARKER TALKS ABOUT HER LIFE AND HER WORK

by Libby Woodwoman of Big Mama Rag

BMR: Will you tell us something of your background?

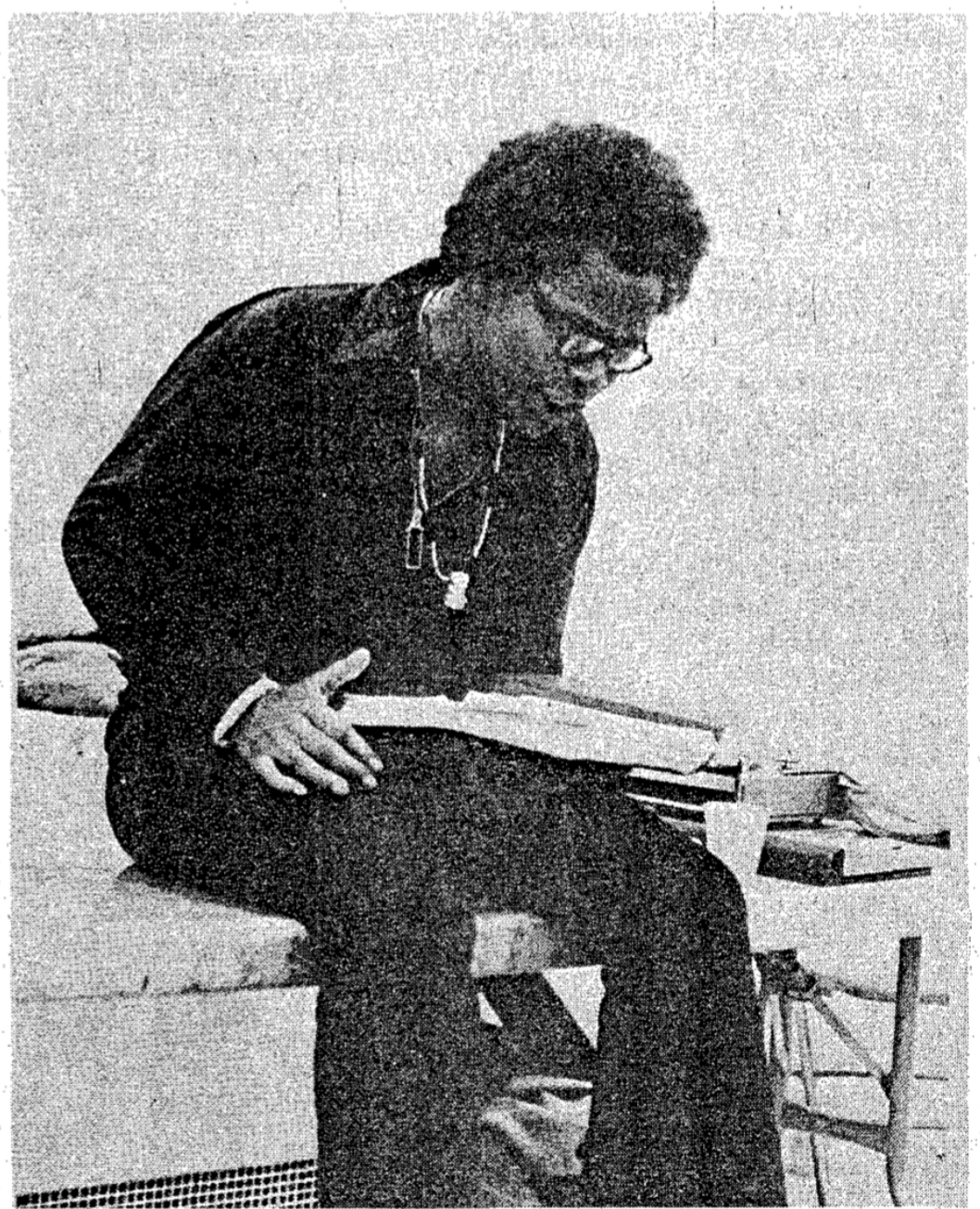
Pat Parker: My parents always encouraged me to get a good education, and they made sacrifices for me. That's what the dedication in *Child of Myself* is about: my father had wanted to be a farmer, but he gave up that idea so we could have the things he wanted for us. I had a pretty strict upbringing.

BMR: Were you ever married?

PP: Twice. My first husband convinced me I was a fuck-up—he was a writer too, and although I was writing prose at that time, his writing was always more important than mine. He criticized my prose, so I got to writing poetry instead. After that I decided to get rid of the husband, not the writing.

BMR: Are you a separatist (a woman who does not work socially or politically with men)?

PP: No, I could never be a separatist. Black and 3rd World



Pat Parker / Photograph by Paula Wallace

assume we're going to make trouble. So far we've been playing basketball and softball, but we're starting a theatre group too. We want to take the emphasis off sports. We've been together about a year now, 25 or 30 of us.

BMR: Could you tell us something about the development of your poetry?

PP: Well you know, first I wrote like they tried to teach me in school. You try to make it as obscure as possible. I think that's pretty crazy, but some people still try to do that. Then I got into writing love poems, but I was making them sound like they could be for a man. Finally I stopped trying to be so damned universal. I write out of where I'm at. Since I came out, most all of my poems deal with racism and me or sexism and me—and love poems for women.

BMR: Do you consider your poetry a vehicle for your politics?

PP: I write about what I feel. I don't hold back from saying what I think because of the audience. The way we publish a book (at the Women's Press Collective) is political. Not holding back is political. You live politics. I hadn't really thought of my poetry as political.

BMR: Will the Collective publish any woman's work?

PP: Some criterion is needed for what to print. Junk is junk. It's not fair to a woman to print her work if it's not good. Sometimes it's not time to print your stuff. It's not good to print something just because a woman wrote it. It's like going out too early and doing a reading. You can really get destroyed if people applaud when you're doing pure crap.

BMR: How do you deal with the question of standards?

PP: All standards seem to exist to obscure meaning. I just want to *say* what I mean. Poetry has been controlled by men for so long. They've set the standards, the criteria for what's a good poem. It's all a bunch of shit, academic wanderings. Children are still being taught that that's what they're supposed to write, and that makes me angry. It's a matter of where the control lies. There's so little poetry for us because look who sets the standards.

BMR: Has your writing changed now that you know you have an audience?

PP: Star tripping can really hurt you as a writer. But you can't help writing for an audience. That's what it's all about, communication.

BMR: Does the composition of the audience make a difference to you when you read?

PP: Yes, I feel different when it's all women. I get higher

when I read to them. When there are men, I make assumptions that they're not going to like where I'm coming from. I try to blow them out of the room.

BMR: Why do people go to your readings?

PP: Because I'm advertised as lesbian poems, fuck poems, kill the whites poems. Sometimes I feel I'm not angry enough to be billed that way.

BMR: How do you respond to those labels?

PP: I guess I play with them more than anything. If I'm advertised as a black poet, I'll read dyke poems. When the audience is women, they're there just to hear the *poetry*. Sometimes when I'm reading with male poets, they'll try to get me to read first, so they can be the main show. I play their game, I know the game. I can be a very hard poet to follow on a program. I blow them right off the stage. They don't know it, but they help me do it, they make me so angry. I read best when I'm angry.

BMR: Are you planning to publish again soon?

PP: Yeah, I'll have another volume of poems out soon, *Womanslaughter*. The title poem's about my sister, who was killed by her husband. I'll be getting a novel to the press pretty soon, too.

BMR: You're working on a novel? Will you tell us something about it?

PP: Yeah, I can go back to prose now that my lover's a musician. . . it's going slow, though. I guess I'm lazy. It's a sort of autobiographical novel, with a few dreams and things thrown in. You can't write without a few fantasies, we sure need them.

BMR: Are there any poets who have particularly influenced you?

PP: Everything you read influences you. But you know, I worked on that poem, *Womanslaughter*, for three years; I couldn't do anything else until I got that one out. Then I read Judy Grahn's poem, *A Woman is Talking to Death*. I read it over and over. Then it hit me how to get *Womanslaughter* out. Judy's poetry is pure delight, it just goes on getting better and stronger, year after year.

That kind of communication with women poets gets me high. We need feedback from each other. Workshops are good for that. Be serious about what's happening. You're not there to receive applause or give it. Keep the shit honest. †††

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