

NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

SIOBHAN MEOW

Interviewer: Aviva Silverman

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Transcribed by Hugh Ryan

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Aviva Silverman: Hello. My name is Aviva Silverman, and I will be having a conversation with Siobhan meow for the New York City trans oral history project. This is an oral history project centered on the experiences of trans identifying people. It is August 1 2023 and this is being recorded in the East Village. Hi,

Siobhan Meow: Hey yo. How are you?

Silverman: I'm great. I asked you how I should introduce you, and you had a few kinds of introductions. I was wondering if you could introduce yourself.

Meow: Yeah, okay, the name I'm usually putting down now these days, because I've had so many in my life, is Sri, which is a Hindu honorific, S, R, I. It's kind of like Sir, but it doesn't really have a gender. And then Gremalkin which is a word for an old cat, you know, particularly an old female cat, elder cat. And then melody is my female persona. And then schlock hammer is from my anarchist punk rock days. This cartoon character I invented named Sledge Hammer Sue so it's a play on that. And then Meow is another pronoun that I use, which I use also as a surname, because it's what my cats call me and what cats call all humans. Basically, they don't say meow to any other animal, only to humans, and it means hello, keep your distance. But you know, when you get really live together with them and they get to know you they never say - they drop the "ow" and just go "ma," which is Mom, mom, you know, because that's what we are to them. You know, big stupid cats that give them food. So that's my formal name, but it's not like in legal - so it's Siobhan Meow is one of the pen names that most people know me as.

Silverman: And what is your relationship to cats?

Meow: Well, I started rescuing them in the kind of mid 90s, I got into doing rescue work with them, and it just took a life of its own, and like I became pretty well known for it. I mean, even the New York Times Magazine did a thing, you know, about the squat and me with the cats and, you know? And I actually spent 30 years like doing that so, but now it's like it's coming to an end, because it's like I'm getting older, and it's like I'm not going to be able to take care of the amount. I can't believe how many cats I used to take care of.

Silverman: How many were there?

Meow: Like during 9/11 I had over 100 in my space, but most of them are passing through because they were like being rescued off the street and stuff like that. But now I'm down to just the ones that have been with me their whole lives, and they're really not adoptable because of that, because they freak out if they went to a different if they went to a different place, you know?

Silverman: Yeah.

Meow: So they like their territory more than even their human they want to stay in their territory. And, yeah, it was, it was in that process, I ended up working with a veterinarian, and I learned a lot of things. And I used to actually do ICU in my my apartment, where I once saved a cat from hepatic lipidosis, which has a 50% mortality rate. Once they turn the color of a yellow cab or a school bus, it's usually a death sentence. But I pulled this one guy back from that you know usually happens when an obese cat suddenly loses a lot of weight, and the consumption of the body fat causes stress on a liver, which causes a type of hepatitis. But I was able to save this guy, and that was, like, amazing, but don't, I couldn't do that now, it's like, it's like, I can't even express their anal glands anymore, like, without getting mauled. So it's like, yeah,

Silverman: And you mentioned that you were living in a squat at a certain time.

Meow: Yeah, this building used to be a squat. When we opened this building, it was a literal ruin. Okay, there were holes in the roof, holes in all the floors. There were three flights of stairs in a row missing. When it would snow, it would snow all the way down from the from the dog house, all the way down to this floor. And it was quite beautiful. In the springtime, when it would rain, there was like moss and algae growing on the walls and stuff, and there'd be rivulets like you're in this cave is so gorgeous.

Silverman: And when you say we, who are the other people that helped live here?

Meow: There was initially me and this woman named Hirta [SP?] from the Netherlands, and then she recruited Steve from the school she was going to. And then we initially opened the building, and then gradually, when people heard that we needed people, people would come. And at one point it was almost like the United Nations here, because we had people from all over Europe, from South America, you know, coming and staying, from all different parts of this country, different states, you know, either passing through or staying for a while and working, and you know, it was just wonderful time. Because- What time was that? What year this was? This was - We opened the building in 1988 November, 1988 so we had to do this really harsh winter with holes everywhere and no windows and no heat and no water.

Silverman: How did you manage?

Meow: There is this little these little rooms in the center of the building on each floor, and we would just go into the littlest, most weather proof room and just huddle in sleeping bags. And we would go to restaurants to wash up. And you know, eventually, as you know, we started, you know, getting jobs and

stuff. We would go, go to, like, public showers and stuff like that. But we went 17 years without heat. And I would say about 10 years without water, maybe a little less than that. I can't remember when we exactly we put the sewer line in, but we did that ourselves too, and that was quite a project, because we were still technically illegal when we decided to put the sewer line in. And so we hired a plumber. He got the permit, and we started digging in the sidewalk, the 12 foot hole to get to the main line in the middle of Avenue C, when the city came - The super next door hated us so much. He just called the city right away, and so they came over and shut it down. So fortunately, it was a Friday evening, so we just made like, "okay," and we put- covered the hole with plywood and stuff, and said, "yes, we'll be filling that in". And then we went down in the basement. We broke through the wall where the main sewer line goes. We broke through the brick wall. And we had to, we had to like, we used police barricades to build like, you know, a little tunnel with supports, because every time a bus or heavy vehicle went down Avenue C, it would cause a cave in. So we dug our way all the way to the middle of Avenue C. Tapped into the - it was brick, the sewer line at the time - tapped into there, put in our sewer main, patched up the hole, started filling in the big hole we dug. And it took us, like, a full three days, 24 hours a day, working in shifts, but we did it, you know, with a chain of people with buckets, you know. And like, one guy would be in a tunnel, filling up buckets and then passing them out, and we'd dump them in the back of basement here. It was amazing. I'm just amazed nobody got killed, because it was so incredibly dangerous what we were doing. But we didn't care. We were like, we're gonna do it.

Silverman: And what kinds of things were people up to in the squat?

Meow: Huh?

Silverman: What kinds of things were people up to in the squat, like, what were they doing outside, or were they artists or musicians?

Meow: Yeah, mostly artists. We were mostly artists who opened it. It's not that way anymore. It's more of a. More of a like, I don't know. People have to have jobs to move - now that we're Co Op like... this is what I don't like about what happened, is that once we became a co op, it's like, you couldn't just like, do sweat equity. Now people have to take out a mortgage to purchase the space for - even though it's really low price. I mean, it's not like, stuck goes like, we have to keep it at a income level where it's like, maybe like 150 a unit, kind of 150,000..

Silverman: Is it part of HD, HDF housing?

Meow: Yeah, HDFC yeah, we went through UHAB [SP?] okay, but, see, I was always opposed to that. But, you know, we had to do it, otherwise, you know, we'd always be in threat of the city just taking it from us. Yeah, so,

Silverman: And were there other squats that you guys were in communication with at that time?

Meow: Yes, yes, there was a bunch of them. There's bullet space. There was Seventh Street. There was a bunch of them on 13th Street. Yeah, they were all scattered around the neighborhood, and we were all like a coalition, like whenever, when we were actually still squats, if anybody was threatened with eviction, we had a hotline, and we call, and then we'd all show up and demonstrate and stuff. And it happened here, like, within the first year of when we opened the building, it was like, I think it was '89. it was like we were using this abandoned building next to us, because this house, it was called a cross subsidy. The city had put aside two abandoned buildings where one would be developed for, you know, regular market housing, and the other one would be developed for low income housing. But city never did that. They did it like the Marat. And so we came in. This one was sturdier, like structurally in better condition than the one next door. The one next door was more of a flimsy one. This one was on this block way before a lot of the other tenements came up. You know, this is a pretty old building, and it was built really well, so, but the other one was kind of all messed up. So we were using that as a dumpster, because when we came in this building, this floor, in the front areas, was like two feet from the ceiling filled with appliances and rubbish and rubble and all kinds of stuff we had to dig out. And then on every other floor up the building, it was the same. We were digging rubble for almost a year, you know. And so we were putting it all in this building, and we were doing it like the proper way - You do it towards the walls, you know, you don't just put it in the center, but you do gradually work towards the center, and then eventually the weight just collapsed the building inward, down the floors. Because, like I said, it had a wooden staircase where ours is, is cast iron and stone. So it just went WHOOSH and it made such a noise that everybody called the fire department. And so they came, and they first, like, evicted everybody. I was at work. I was working with Scenic companies in New Jersey, just as a - they called us "gumbys." We just go do load ins and stuff, you know, whatever job they needed us to do. And I came back and I was like "what the fuck?" So I had some friends from Missing Foundation, and I told them, You guys got to help us. Did you ever hear of Missing Foundation? Peter Missing?

Silverman: No I haven't.

Meow: Oh, they were this really intense, like industrial noise band from the 90s. But I told them, we need help. And so we came in the back and

Silverman: They were called Missing Foundation?

Meow: Yeah

Silverman: And you needed help with the floor falling in?

Meow: Yeah. But more, no, no, they were more like kind of thuggish. So that's, that's what I was asking them about. So so we went in the back here and climbed up the fire escape, and I got back into my space and barricaded myself in there. And then, of course, they bring the demolition crew to take down the building that collapsed, and they had every intention of taking this one down too. So in order to prevent that, we were standing in the empty windows on that side, so the guy, if he wanted to hit our building, he'd have to hit us. And he wouldn't do it. He got out of the derrick and, you know, said, I can't do this. And then that's how we survived that one. It was like putting our lives on the line for - Well, at least, I did. And there was this other guy, Lawrence, did too. Lawrence was was in his room doing it. And there were a couple other people.

Silverman: Are people that started it with you, still living here?

Meow: There's only one, and that's Steve, the guy who went to school with Hirta,

Silverman: Are you in touch with anyone else from that era? Or did they all...

Meow: No, everybody dispersed. It was like, kind of like, most people are pretty transient, you know, when they come into the city, like, especially, like, the Europeans and stuff. But we got a lot of Colombians who wanted to stay, and most of them stayed.

Silverman: What other kinds of scenes were you a part of in the 80s when you were living here?

Meow: All right? Well, there is the art and music scene, and it's like, I first, first person I met when I ventured into this neighborhood, because, like, I was born in Brooklyn, parents moved us to Long Island and then to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, where I lived from age seven to like 20.

Silverman: And what was that like, to be in Pennsylvania?

Meow: I never liked it. I was I like New York. I like the smell of New York. I like everything about New York. I didn't like anything about Harrisburg. And yeah, even though I kept going back there, because that's where, like, my parents were, even though, why did I do that? Because they hated me. But anyway, that's that's all kind of complicated. I ended up getting married - I came back here to go to school, I went to Pratt, and then I went back and like an idiot, I got married.

Silverman: How old were you?

Meow: 21? Too young? Too young, but it was because of the pressure from my parents.

Silverman: Were they very religious or what?

Meow: Stupid... religious Irish, Catholic Republicans. My mother made us wear Barry Goldwater buttons when we were little kids in grade school and anti abortion fucking bracelets. I hated her for that, even back then, so...

Silverman: Was your childhood... Did you have other people to connect to during that time or?

Meow: Not, no, not till I got to high school, not till I started working at this pet store, and I was hanging out with people who worked there who were more of my political sensibilities.

Silverman: So what were your politics at that time?

Meow: Just against the whole Republican fucking... like, remember Jack Webb's drag net, that kind of fucking stupid. Just think of the mise en scene of that, okay, and that's what, there was a lot of that in Pennsylvania, and there still is. Now there's a rebirth of it. So no, I was like, more like, into hippie movement, anti war and all that stuff, and anti authority, basically, because that's all I had been having trouble with authority, like, my whole life because of being trans, you know, it's like, I knew when I was seven years old, but I couldn't even talk about it, because I'd get punished, you know. And it's like, you know, you don't - it really messed me up. I think that's one - part of how I got so multiple is like I had to be all these different personas just to deal with the trauma coming from people who shouldn't be even traumatizing me at all. You know?

Silverman: Totally. And do you want to describe what being multiple means?

Meow: Yeah, it's, it comes from dissociative identity disorder. It's one of the processes, I should say that's a good way to describe it, one of the processes of dissociative identity disorder, which is a defense mechanism for extreme traumatic stress, okay? Like my mother was psycho. I mean, I remember when I was five years old, living in Long Island in Minton- in Williston Park, five years old, she would make us all go to bed at something like four or five in the afternoon, and we couldn't understand that. But she, she'd be so - she wouldn't talk to us for like three days. And when she, when she a lot of times, she would do really bad, nasty, bad, like one time she set my brother's fingers on fire because he was sucking them, you know. Suppose - supposedly I fell down the basement steps when I was a toddler, but then I saw how she would kick the dogs down the basement steps, and kind of put it together, like in my head, that maybe that's what happened, because of the the kind of psychic damage I suffered from that. So, yeah, my, my limbic system is just a crater. So, so you're trying to determine,

like, what used to be there from studying the crater. But anyway, so, yeah, I whoever I was when I was born, that person died, and so I had to reassemble - for my entire life without having any fucking game plan or understanding about it. I had to assemble a persona, and it ended up being persona... ne-personas, you know, because I had to do it to survive. So I became really good at mirroring people. You know, that's how I learned how to act in society. And it worked mostly until, like, I started doing it too much, and it became like, kind of almost like a really creepy vampirization of the person, you know, I take their entire personality into me and become that person, you know, which is flattering at first to them, but after a while, it's really creepy.

Silverman: Can you remember a particular time that you were doing that...

Meow: That would be from college through the marriage? You know? It's weird, because it's like, I have so many different people, even when I was in grade school and coming up, I remember, like, in seventh grade, I was really, like, on it with, like, school work, writing for the newspaper, school newspaper, you know, doing all these things and being really together, and then, like, I remember, like, going to college and just going almost fucking catatonic, like, like, just dissociation. "disassociation" I like, I describe it this way: it's when you see something that should strike you blind, but the message doesn't get to your brain in time, so you just leave your body and you're literally on the ceiling looking at what's going on. Okay? You're not You're watching yourself, watching the trauma. Okay? So it's like, yeah, there's stuff like that. But then it really developed into, like, full blown, like, multiple personality, because even though, see, it's not like the Hollywood version, where there's this big amnesia and all that. No, there's usually a manager who's keeping track of everything, although not always present acting, you know, but at least with me, it's that way. I remember one time I was out with a friend. This is when I was - the marriage was breaking apart. I was out with this male friend of mine drinking. I got shit faced, literally staggering, and Darren was his name, he's going, you shouldn't drive home, give me your keys. And I said, No, I'm okay. And immediately, boom, stone cold sober. It was like the driver persona took over, was totally sober. I don't know how that happens physically, but that's what - It blew him away. He was like, he couldn't believe it. He couldn't understand it at all.

Silverman: It's an amazing survivalism to suddenly be sober.

Meow: Yeah. So and there were other examples, like later, when I finally got to the point of I had to transition or die, and that was Melody versus the male persona that I was supposed to be, but really never was. So that was a war, but she won, thank goodness, because...

Silverman: What did the war look like?

Meow: Huh?

Silverman: What did the war look like?

Meow: It was like a lot of sensation - inner body sensation, that like there was someone in me that was literally transforming my body, even without hormones, just saying, fuck this. We're not doing this anymore. We're not doing this stupid male shit anymore. We can't take it. We even were allergic. See, I'm using the plural, but I'm talking about multiples. I was even allergic to the testosterone my body was producing. I literally, I couldn't go to a gym and just like lift weights, because I go into a roid rage and get really violent and stuff. So you know, that was one sign you know that something was wrong.

Silverman: And so what age were you when you were at that point of wanting to lean in?

Meow: It happened in a couple different stages, because it was like '85, '86 is when marriage was crashing and burning, and that was traumatic, because I got I was sitting with a shotgun in my mouth, and there were a lot of suicidal gestures, and then finally, a more serious one that got me locked up in a State Hospital against my will. And then there was coming, you know, coming back. And same thing is still going on, and we're still cohabitating. And I came home one night and caught her with the guy she was with, and that's when I really dissociated. I left my body. I'm watching all that shit. And it just kept getting worse and worse, until like I like I said I was institutionalized, and then, like, I finally came out of that, got a room in this little town by the river, a really nice room, actually, in the Doyle hotel in Duncan, and I was writing a letter to a friend, and I go, You know what Bill's problem is, is he's a girl. And that's when it like, boom, because I had been going through this all my life. It was like when I was seven, I had a crush on this cute guy in my class, got the shit smacked out of me for it. And then, you know, then I read about Christine Jorgensen and go, Wow. And then I'd read, I'd see, like, the three faces of Eve and go to the library. I think I was in seventh grade when I got the actual big fat book with all the jargon in it, and read that cover to cover, because I was interested, you know, what's that going on with me? But other than that, there really wasn't that much, I mean, to look, to read up on or anything like that. So you're just kind of like floundering. So naturally, you're going - I'm trying to be normal, to get my parents approval and shit and get married and have a kid and all that stuff. But it was just.. how wrong was it to get married? On the wedding day, my entire face broke out in boils, okay? I should have, I should have paid attention. But no, that's dissociate - the bad part of dissociation is that you don't pay attention to the pain when you should be. But anyway, finally, like, it finally hit me like because I was writing it down, and then I decided I have to get out of here. First I start trying to transition in the boondocks of Pennsylvania, which was like, really scary, because they are still KKK people in this particular county. I mean, so I would say, like, I would be wearing makeup and kind of girly clothes, but I'd say, "Oh, I'm into Twisted Sister, you know?" And that would be okay then. But then that started wearing thin, and I had to leave. Plus there were no, there were no psychiatrists, or anybody who knew what I was going through or what what to do about it. In that area, there's no place to go. So it was

either going to be Philly, which I hate Philly, disgusting city full of fascists, cops, you know? Or back to my home, New York. So I decided to come back here, and that's when, like, I did my first thing, my first try. And this was all the underground way where you're not really going to regular doctors. You're going to these kind of, like, iffy doctors that they're doing it and you're paying them cash, and it's like

Silverman: What kinds of things were you going to them for?

Meow: I was going to one woman for hormone injections, and I was going to this other doctor for plastic surgery on my nose and my cheeks.

Silverman: How much money was that at the time?

Meow: It was lots. It was 1000s, then, then, when you get into the electrolysis that was, that was in the later stage. I mean, I was doing it - at all times, I was trying. But it takes forever, and it's not always like that that beneficial to your face, but, yeah, this is why I'm so worried about them stopping children from taking the puberty blockers, because I don't want any kid to go through what I went through. It's a horror. And if you're a lucky enough kid to have parents that understand and listen to you and know what's going on with you and take you to the right doctors and everything to see to it that you get through it in one piece and healthy - nobody has a right to stand in front of that, you know, and stop it. So anyway,

Silverman: Yeah, so you came to the city and you found these doctors that were...

Meow: Yeah, yeah. So I did that that way, because it was like, you know, I didn't even know about welfare stuff, because I just come out of Pennsylvania and they, they let you starve to death there. They don't give a shit. So I didn't know anything about the great, you know, social net here. But anyway, so I went through that, worked this, this minimum wage job, lived in Brooklyn for a while, wrote a letter - found - discovered the Howard Stern Show on the radio I had in Brooklyn, and I was just laughing my ass off like for weeks listening to this in the morning. So I eventually they had this, they had this thing called dial a date, and they couldn't find anybody to be in it for this particular episode they were doing. So I quick dashed off a letter to them. Said, I'm a transsexual. I'll be dial a date. And then ran down to Coney Island, took a picture in one of those booths, you know, sent that in with it, and they called me in, and it went, it went really good. It was like they liked me. And they actually had me do a show with them at Madison Square Garden for New Year's Eve, 1986 or 1987 What did the show entail? Huh?

Silverman: What did the show entail?

Meow: It was a beauty pageant, Miss Howard Stern. And of course, I won it. But I really just, I went nuts, I went, I went, got this old bought a used wedding dress, cut it off, real nice. And, you know, did this performance where I play tequila on a saxophone and dance along the stage. And I did the bathing suit competition where I had a salami in my, you know, bathing suit, and I had this hunting knife, and I start chopping it up and throwing it at Lisa Sliwa and, you know, slipped on a watermelon somebody threw on the stage, which was, I did this incredible dance, and yeah, so I won that. Leslie West was playing and all this stuff. And it was great. And the show sold out, like in an hour, within announcement that tickets were on sale. So it was a pretty big thing, but I can't find a recording of it anywhere.

Silverman: So sad.

Meow: I know, isn't that all the effort I put into that. So anyway, I did this process where I'm coming out on this really big radio show, and I'm taking shitloads of abuse on the show, but that was okay, because it was like creating a sympathy in the audience, which actually saved my life, because I was in a section - living in the section of Brooklyn where people get lynched, you know, when they're they're too different, and the neighbors don't like you.

Silverman: What part of Brooklyn was that?

Meow: Huh?

Silverman: What part of Brooklyn was that?

Meow: Gravesend so but anyway, it's like everybody knew me from the show. So nobody would touch me, nobody would harm me. There would be people who would actually come to my rescue, you know, and that was all because of the show. That was a benefit that I got from that, because my transition was really ugly. It was like I wasn't like, I had met some, like, girls who were like, Whoa. It's like Barbara Eden with a cock, you know, like, I'm going like, whoa. How did you do that? But I was not never gonna be that.

Silverman: What do you mean by ugly?

Meow: Huh?

Silverman: What did you mean by ugly when you said?

Meow: I'm not, like, being the perfect girl. I mean, like, I would used to walk. I like, I remember, like one time my daughter came to visit me and go and we're walking down the street and I'm going see that

girl there. She's got my body. She got my body. And it's like, that's how I felt I see someone who...it's from the mirroring too that I used to do. It's like I used to like mirror women, a lot, like women who I thought were attractive. Now, my standards are not the same as everybody else's, you know, but

Silverman: Were there particular kinds?

Meow: There were qualities that I saw in them that I wanted I thought were really cool. You know?

Silverman: What kind of qualities?

Meow: Oh, androgyny was a big one... like Kembra, who I fell head over - that's later, I fell head over heels in love with Kembra Phahler, because the first time we met was at ABC no Rio at a HEAL benefit. I was sitting there trying to do caricatures to raise money. And so the last night of the benefit, she suddenly appears, and it's like she comes to me and says, draw my picture. And I go, "I've seen Satan and she is a woman." Kembra is, like, so cool looking. I mean, like, totally has this masculine aura that's amazing. And I have a good picture of her on my phone. I'll show that to you later. You know where it's, like, pretty close to what I saw when I first saw her. So I really felt, and of course, we ended up, you know, for two weeks, you know, messing around and stuff. And I went even further deeply into a head over heels thing with her, like, literally, like, the first night I spent with her, the day after, I was like, walking - the sidewalk was like marshmallow. It was like - but anyway, that's pheromones, and I still had, you know, the gonads to create and the reactions, like, you know, the thing about pheromones is you got to be really careful with them, because they can really lead you down the wrong path. Like that was my first marriage, but with Kembra, we ended up being friends, you know, and stuff, and it's a really good relationship. But anyway, back to where I was.

Silverman: Yeah, you were talking about surgeries and kind of like modeling yourself after people on the street.

Meow : Oh, right, right, with, with Weser the Messer. That was the surgeons nickname in the community.

Silverman: What were they called?

Meow: Weser the Messer. So anyway, I survived that. And, yeah, it was all like the black market drug I don't know... There was no uh, no other way to go. I mean, I couldn't afford, like the real doctors. I didn't have any money, especially after electrolysis, you know, so and rent and all that other shit. So, yes, so, like, I ended up homeless basically. I moved up to I moved up to Manhattan to be near the radio station on Madison Avenue East side. I was up on uh 89th and Broadway, an SRO called the Bel Nord

and. Uh, that was pretty gruesome. There was this guy who was terrorizing everybody on my floor who was late with their rent. They hired this goon to terrorize people who were late with their rent, and so he started in with me, and we get into these real brawls, and I actually was the first, after the first Brawl we had, I was the first one to call the police. So the police were talking to me. I got my story in first, so they took him downtown, and I went downtown too to talk to the ADA to make sure they prosecuted him. But then I'm walking back, and I used to walk, you know, that far a lot in the city, but I would be walking back, and I was like, really going like, that isn't enough. He's gonna get out and he's gonna be up to the same shit again. So I got back to the Belle Nord, I opened - there was a window in the hallway that was right next to the window to his room. His door was locked, so I went in the window to his room, opened the door, called everybody on the floor. I said, let's throw all his shit out, because he had a lot of shit that he stole from people that got evicted and shit. So we took everything he owned, his ID, everything, threw it in garbage bags. It just so happened to be trash night that night. Threw it all out, and he got out of jail. He was fucking insane. So I couldn't stay at Belle Nord anymore, which I was ready to leave anyway. So that's when I ended up homeless. I ended up sleeping in the basement of ABC no Rio, and that's where I met Hirta She was modeling for a drawing session there and Hirta wanted to do a squat too. Like - one thing I gotta say, when I first met Kimbra, it was like lightning bolts. Okay, when I first met Hirta same thing. I was shaking while I was drawing. It's just, I just knew I had to go talk to her. And we ended up opening this building, which I opened here, because it's around the corner from Kimbra. Okay, so you can see how -

Silverman: How everything, yeah.

Meow: So anyway, squatting, I had to go be a guy again. I didn't have any money for any hormone, nothing, you know, so I just fell back into- it was disappointing, you know, because I still couldn't I still - I was like, kind of crazy too. I even went to like NA to try to deal with it that way, you know. And no, you can't go to NA to deal with being trans, all right? So I learned that. Then finally, 9/11 came and, like, I really, that really smacked me, and I go, like, if I don't do it now, I'm never gonna do it. I can't believe how many, like people who transitioned at my age - at the age I did, when I see docs on them, it's like the same thing. It's like they reach this point "I'm going to kill myself." It's like I actually ended up - My brother gave me a Colt Python for protection, because he was afraid I was going to get killed up here. But I ended up playing Russian roulette with it, and I told him, "here you have to take the gun back," you know, because it's it's not safe. And he helped me pay for the surgery.

Silverman: That's amazing. Such a loving thing to do.

Meow: Yeah I know he's a good guy. He's the one my mother set his fingers on fire, so... and so.... Anyway, then now I'm going to, like a really good guy, Toby Meltzer in Arizona, did a beautiful job, beautiful job. But, you know, I was actually there. I can't believe he - I said, Hey, can you like, break my

rib cage and reset it? Can you like, cut, like, so much out of my legs and re make them shorter, you know, because I wanted to get like the image I had of myself the whole time, like if I hadn't gone through puberty as a male. But that was, see, that's how bad my body dysphoria was at the time. It's like...

Silverman: And did you have other people to talk to about this?

Meow: No, no, are you kidding me? Yeah, I started going to the Center, but that was really late. After the actual, where first it was, I was cat sitting. I was cat - here's how, I was cat sitting at a person who had cable TV, and I had seen, I was watching the movie, Welcome to the Dollhouse, Ginger Snaps. And, yeah, I think it was those two. There might have been a third one, but it just like, wowed me. And it's like, it's like, you know, both about puberty, which I never got to really do right, you know. And I love Ginger Snaps, because the one girl like for her puberty, she turns into this werewolf, you know? And it's like, you know, I felt just like that. So it's like that helped give Melody the power to start taking over. And like I said, it was this internal fight that, you know was like, kind of ripping me apart, but I knew that she would win, and we just stuffed the boy down because he wasn't real, he wasn't the real one. So then, you know, then it went through those other things. Like, I remember getting my whole beard waxed off and having someone film it, you know, like, that was fun. But, you know, then we got the surgery, and it was so much better afterwards, so much fucking better. Like, better better than fucking hormones. The first time I did hormones, that was great, because you're seeing things totally you're seeing colors that you never saw before. It's like, you know,

Silverman: I never heard someone describe that before.

Meow: Yeah, that's what it was for me. It was, like, the... it was... getting my first bra. That was, like, really fun. I'm just this little kid, this little girl who has no parents, nobody to guide her, you know, she wakes up and she's like, you know 30, and she doesn't know what 30 is. She's still 14. And then, like, so, so now, like, my age now is more like 20 to 30, but I'm in the body of a crone, so I missed girlhood, I missed maidenhood. I missed motherhood. I went directly to crone hood, you know?

Silverman: But you mentioned you have a child or...?

Meow: But as much as I wanted to be their mother, I wasn't. No, I stayed home with the kids while she worked, but she didn't like that.

Silverman: Who's she?

Meow: I'm not gonna judge with... my ex wife. It was horrible. it was hard. She didn't want to be a lesbian. I remember. I remember the first time I approached the subject, I didn't even want to mention trans. I said, Would you have married me if I was black? And she said, No way. And I knew then, okay, yes, this shit's over. It's going downhill, but because of the kids you're hanging on ...with, terrible... I had, I had to just leave and leave the kids with her, even though she wanted me to take the kids, I had to leave them with her, because they would have been put in social services. You know, being homeless.

Silverman: Do you have any relationship to them now?

Siobhan Meow 48:59

No, the younger one, Helene, came up and lived with me for a couple years after I got right after I got surgery, but I had to do the parent thing and push her, because I don't want to become really dependent have this co-dependent thing start happening between us. I wanted her to live on her own, because you have to do that with kids, you know, and so that got kind of fucked up. But, you know, I still I love her. I tell them, I love them, but, you know, they never call her anything. The older one is really pissed because I killed her dad, and I wasn't really too like sensitive about explaining it to her, because I had such antipathy towards that whole experience of being male, that I was happy that he was dead, and it's like POOF. but she didn't she, she didn't take it right. You know, of course, you know she loved her dad. You know she - the younger one didn't really know me that well, because she was only about two, I think when I left.

Silverman: Yeah, and then while living here throughout the years. What - What types of jobs did you have?

Meow: Mostly labor, manual labor, which I grew to love, because it's like, not only are you exercising every day, you're getting paid to exercise. So I like working the set companies. I worked moving companies, anything where I could also glean materials to work on the house with for free. That's where the set companies - plywood out the ass. You know, every time you struck a set there was all this plywood and stuff they would throw out and you just take that home. There is a, I mean, I've done, I've done short order cook, like at a Bob's Big Boy type of restaurant. Never thought I'd do that, but I got really good at it, donuts, making donuts on the grave, graveyard shift, you know, that was a horrible job, all kinds of, all kinds whatever, crummy job, demolition, you know that - I always did that. Then I would do cartoons for screw magazines. Sometimes get get a little extra money that way. But no, I was never rich. My art never really sold for lots of money. So I stopped and

Silverman: Your art was mostly cartoons, or?

Meow: No, it was all kinds of stuff, but - cartoons paid actually. And then I got into cat sitting when I started rescuing cats. And then I kind of became a cat expert from rescuing all those cats. And so people started calling me to Cat sit more and more. And that became a really decent income until - and then I would do construction, like I would be painting, like I painted a house on Grove Street, and that's where I really, my back really went out. The original damage started when - many years before the actual having to go to the hospital. But it was like, we had found this giant column that we thought we could use to like for like support for for the floors where you don't want to have a dividing wall, you want to have like open space, but you need these columns with a beam. Just so we found this giant cast iron column in the rubble of a building that had just been demolished Avenue C. We took a shopping cart, we put this gigantic, heavy monster thing on it. We're wheeling it down Avenue C. There's something like six or seven of us all around it. I'm like, holding the handle and steering it. And then all of a sudden, things starts crushing, and the column is appearing, it's going to roll off and roll into somebody's car. So everybody runs away and leaves me holding the damn thing. And I'm there trying to, like, wrestle it to the ground so that it doesn't roll and get us all arrested. So that was the first thing that I knew. "Oh, man, I think I fucked something up." Okay? And this is, like, I mean, I'm talking the work I did, I would be carrying girders and joists, like 12 foot joists on my shoulder, 10 blocks from a dumpster, you know. So it's like, that's the kind of work, 100 pound bags of concrete. That's why I said I had to be the guy again, you know? So I'm doing that work, but then the real killer was, I'm painting in this house on Grove Street, and I'm doing a really good job, but I'm standing on a stoop one day, and I start to walk down a stoop, and it feels like someone pushed me, I swear to God, and I'm airborne. And I turn to right myself, to land on my feet, and that's when it went, ding, and I could - so still I didn't do anything about I'm going like, it'll heal itself, and I'm getting sciatica, and let's go, you know, and that's starting to hurt more and more and be more and more constant. And then all of a sudden, I'm getting dropped, but so I have to go to the doctor, and they go, Oh, we have to cut we have to do a disc-ectomy. And I say, Okay, let's just do it. And so they do it, and that goes fine. And pretty soon I'm up on my feet again, like and I'm doing work again. And then within a year, the same thing happens again in the same spot, and this time, their drop foot is really bad. And so they go, we have to do a laminectomy and a disc-ectomy. And what they never told me about the laminectomy is they take the spinal process completely out of your back. That's the fin, the fin that you can feel. They actually cut that out of the spinal column, remove it so that your actual spinal cord, well, it's in a sheath of myelin, or whatever that is, is exposed, though, and they can't put it back in, because it might get spurs if it tries to reattach. So I didn't know about this. I didn't know that the muscles that were attached to that spinal process are just cut and you have nothing support. I have nothing supporting my torso anymore. So like, I got this thing that happens in this exact type of scenario where you have two surgeries so close together, it's called Failed Back Syndrome, and it's just chronic pain for the rest of your life, plus gradual deterioration. So it's like, you know, I'm - I have to fight tooth and claw every day just to keep moving so that I don't just end up bedridden. Yeah, and I'm on, like, I'm on, like, serious pain meds, fentanyl transdermal patches and oxycodone, and without that, I can't walk. So, yeah, we just had a whole

bunch of horrible shit happen, where, for some reason, for like, four months, we couldn't get transdermal patches in the city. Even most legit doctors prescriptions, they just weren't giving them to the pharmacist. They weren't the manufacturers were not bringing them to the pharmacies. So I had to go - I didn't even, I didn't even have any kind of detox. I just went back to the back pain, the really bad stuff. You know, there's no such thing as like detox. It's just, oh, default to bad pain. I had a friend of mine named Chloe, another transgender person who she her back got wrecked by this AIDS, early AIDS drug that rotted the bones. And she was beyond even pain meds, beyond surgery, beyond pain meds. She threw herself in front of a subway car. Died, you know?

Silverman: Yeah, I was going to ask, what was it like to be here during the AIDS epidemic?

Meow: During the what?

Silverman: AIDS epidemic?

Meow: Oh, my God, so many people died. My brother got AIDS, the one who paid for my surgery, but he, he survived. He got the right medicine at the right time, and he it was touch and go sometimes. I remember seeing him really gone one time, it scared the shit out of me, but he's still going. He's like, what, three years, four years younger than me, and he's still working for, like, the PENN DOTS Environmental Protection Group, where he goes and like, to a site and determines the effect on the environment and whether they can do it or not. So he's like, got a really good job and shit, and he's, like, still active and everything. But I've seen, I knew a lot of people in this neighborhood that aren't here anymore, because, you know, and it was, it was really grim.

Silverman: How did it shape your social life?

Meow: Well, I did not really socialize that much like I was always... I was alienated from the word go, from just being trans, you know, and not,

Silverman: Were there any parties or social places?

Meow: Oh yeah, yeah. But it wasn't like I was like, close with anybody you know? No, it was always that kind of thing: "I know this person, but I don't, you know. I don't hang out with them."

Silverman: What places do you socialize at? What places did you socialize at when you were going out to hang with people? Were there clubs

Meow: I didn't have that. I didn't have that. No, there was not that for people like me back back that far.

Silverman: And did you do any things with music?

Meow: Yeah, yeah, I have a CD that I started working on in '94 that's on YouTube. It's called PEP G!RLZ, P, E, P, G, exclamation point, R, L, Z, and the title of the CD is "Down and Dirty." And this is another thing I was deprived of as a child. I always wanted to play bass. My parents wouldn't let me have a bass. They made me start with clarinet, and then I bought my own saxophone with my own hard earned paper route money, you know, because I hated the clarinet and but I didn't like the sax either. I wanted to play bass, and so finally, I got myself a bass and an amp and all that cool stuff. And this is Melody's realm, and I learned to play bass in one year well enough to write all the music for the CD, and then the lyrics I wrote, you know, too, and then what was left was like, we finally found a drummer - drummers are the hardest to find, this guy from Canada. I used to work for Mark Kostabe, I forgot to tell you that too. That was my art job. I was a studio assistant, but I hung out with his brother a lot, who had a punk rock band called You've Gone Mad. And we used to tour different states, like in this area, and I would play the pixie sax, which was just a mouthpiece, you know, because that's what I wanted to do. But once I got the bass and I wrote all these songs, Paul happens to be a brilliant fucking musician and engineer, so he did the sound. We got this drummer who - I don't know where Paul found - from Canada somewhere, and Jack Pedler was his name. I had this little beginner drum kit that I got for real cheap from a friend from Kembra's band. And so we did - laid the tracks, bass and the drum, all in one go. And by the time we were done. Peddler had beaten the rims of that drum kit oval. That's how good he was. And so we laid that. Then I went to all the friends of Kembra's, musician friends, and also some that I knew, like Simon Chardiet was one of the first people I met when I moved back to the city. Got all these different guitar players to do, oh, wait, Jeff from our house, did all the rhythm guitar on every track. But then I got all these individual like, kind of like, you know, really good lead guitar players like Samoa, Phil Caivano from Monster Magnet and Simon Chardiet, uhhh just a bunch of different people from different wildly different styles of music, each doing a song as lead guitar, and then we had to fly the whole thing to California to this vocalist, because I was at the time, had no confidence in my own ability to sing. So we had to get a woman who could sing all the songs we have Kembra on a couple songs on that CD too. So it turned out really good, actually. It turned out really, really, really good for a beginner project. And now I want to do another one before I die, where I sing on it. And I've been singing and dancing in the street. Ever since my last cat died, the last cat that died in my house, because when I grieve, I have to - see music I use now to combat the chronic pain, because it always worked. I remember when I was playing the bass and I would be leaning up against the cabinet, the vibration would go right into that little wound on in my spine, and go right up my to my brain, and just endorphin city, you know. So now I want to do like this album, that IS that. That will create endorphins in people's heads that will kill their chronic pain.

Silverman: I love that. Do you want to collaborate with anyone? Or ?

Meow: I want to, I don't know how to find people now, because, like, the first album was 30 years ago, and none of those people are around anymore. Yeah, and this is what I mean about socializing. You can't really socialize, because people have their own lives and they disappear eventually. So it's like, nobody's in it for life, you know? So it's yeah, I want, I need. I need a drummer. I need a bass player, preferably who've been playing together for a while and are really good with each other, and a lead guitar player, and also a sampler, a person who knows sampling and sound engineering, because there's things I want to, I want to like, make a rhythm out of the MRI. There's eight hours of MRI sounds. Some genius figured out how to record and put on YouTube, and I want to take that and and sample it, and break it down into all the different sounds, and then, like, tweak it, make it - tone them, and then compress them, and then create a drum machine with those sounds, but still have a Live drummer playing with it, you know. And then see whole things about the funk stick, you know, I got into like, Parliament really early in college, like George Clinton and the mothership connection and James Brown. And so there's the funk stick. It's like, I describe it. You got to watch this funny video of Grand Funk when Mark Farner, he's jamming this song they're playing in Hershey, Pennsylvania at the public television station there, back in the 70s, all of a sudden you see Mark Farner get hit with the funk stick. He just like hits the synchronization while he's playing and singing, and all of a sudden he just goes stupid. You know, you see it in his face. He's he's in ecstasy because he just got an endorphin burst. You know, that's what I'm talking about. If you can see it with Angus Young of AC/DC. I mean, when he was a kid, and he's, he can make his guitar talk, and he's like, that isn't - he's not faking that stuff. He's literally in an endorphin, like, frenzy, you know. He's stopping around. He's walking on his knees, you know. You gotta see it to believe and that's and, you know, anybody who, who's done it knows what I'm talking about. I had the, it really hit me when, when on the very last song on the PEP G! RLS girl CD, I did that with Tia Sprocket, she she played with Luscious Jackson and sex pod, and then she, she went west to try to do some country. But she's another, like, genius musician. She's a lesbian. I was still in my guy body. I had a huge crush on her. Nothing was ever going to happen that way. But what was better was it happened musically. It's like ...I was always playing rote, really stiff, what I memorized, okay, I couldn't really, like, ad lib it, or, you know, improvise that well. But when Tia played with me, something about her guitar and the way she way she was playing it, just like, whoa, all of a sudden I'm just loosened up completely and just rolling with it. So, so you have the first track of the bass I did, did with her on drum, which was really rote. But then the second one I did, because we did two, two bass tracks, second one I did was her playing lead guitar, is where I loosen up, finally. And that was like pure orgasm. You know? It was beautiful, better than any any sex or anything. So I, you know, I never really thought too much about sex after that. Yeah, that kind of experience was so far superior. And I want to get back to that again.

Silverman: I really hope you can,

Meow: Yeah, just got, I know I can sing. I've got so many covers now I can do like I can sing Zombie, you know, no problem. I never thought I'd be able to sing that song. But it's like, must be my Irish alleles, that can yodel like that.

Silverman: How does that go? How does Zombie go?

Meow: [singing] Slowly, child slowly taken when violence causes silence, we must be mistaken. Now you see, it's not me, it's not my family, in your head, in your head, they are fighting. with their tanks and their bombs and their bombs and their guns in your head in your head they are crying in your head, in your head, Zombie, zombie, zombie, what's in your head? in your head! zombie zombie zombieeeeeee Now the mother's breaking heart is taken over when violence causes silence. Who have we mistaken? Its the same old thing since 1916 in your head, in your head, they are fighting with their tanks and their bombs, with their bombs, and their guns, in your head, in your head, they are dying In your head. Zombie. zombie zombie zombie what's in your head? in your head. Zombie, zombie, zombie ee ee ee oo oo oo o oo oo

Silverman: Thank you. You sang that!

Meow: How'd it sound?

Silverman: You sounded good!

Meow: All right. There's three groups of people who can create incredibly, beautifully sad songs, African Americans, the Russians and the Irish. And I just happen to have like, alleles from all of them. So it's like, maybe that's why - I also do like, do you ever hear of Titty, Daisy and Lewis? They're a great band. I can do. They do a great cover of Going Up the Country, which is, like, that's a totally different mood though.

Silverman: Yeah. I As soon as you started singing, I knew that song. I was like, Oh yeah, zombie. Got it.

Meow: Yeah? You know that?

Silverman: Yeah, of course, yeah.

Meow: I was watching Yellow Jackets, and in this really incredible scene, they used the song, and I go, Oh my god, I remember how much I love that song.

Silverman: I have just a few more questions for you.

Meow: Yeah, sure, yeah.

Silverman: So I was just wondering if you've ever felt part of like the LGBT I don't know - community?.

Meow: Oh yeah. I mean, I do. It, yes, yes, I do. I'm very, I'm very, very defended at all times, yeah, with my body, if I have to, it's just that, like I never been - because of the dissociate, dissociative disorder, never been a type that actually socializes or plays the politics and the drama and stuff like that. I just, I actually am very uncomfortable with it.

Silverman: And how did that play out when you were in the squat, since there were so many people?

Meow: I'm not best loved person here, even though I opened the building, it's like we've had our differences, but it's like I've learned to like, not let it go anywhere. it's like it's a... yeah, there are some pretty gnarly, nasty shit, like things written on the blackboard and stuff like that. You know, the word is "betrayal trauma." That's the other thing you know of which I have a lot of damage from, you know, mother, wife, people I work with. But how much do I contribute to that? Well, it's not always something I can - it's like being autistic, you know? It's like, yeah, okay, maybe you're scared of me because I'm throwing different genders in your face all the time, you know, like what I just did. I mean, I use my male voice combined with the female voice to do that song, and I think that's fucking incredible, even - I don't know how it sounds, because I don't. I'm just singing with the music, you know, but if I'm doing a punk band - the reason I figured this all out is because I realized, like, when I go to these, these gigs in the park, or a gig in a club where I'm in the audience, I can scream and sing louder than the loudest amplified band without a microphone, so I should be able to do this.

Silverman: Wow. Yeah, and I was wondering, you know, you told me when I first met you, that was really important to you to leave this record, and I wanted to know more about,

Meow: Yeah, because the most important thing is that I don't know how to des- I'm very upset at what's going on in this country. I never, even in my worst days, it wasn't this bad. I remember when I first started transitioning in the city, my friend got me a bus person's job at the Museum of Modern Art. How progressive do you think they are? I had to change in a broom closet. Okay? I never thought it would get - alright, that's kind of funny, you know, it's like, you know, I'm serving Buck Henry coffee and, you know, with sunglasses on and making a face because of that, all right, but not the type of hatred and directed at children. that's like, I mean, that's like, the worst of all the bullying I went through growing up as a girly boy, the beatings, all that shit is coming back to a flip a whole

generation of innocent kids, and I can't, I can't bear that, and I just want to let them know somehow that they'll get through it. And if they're not safe where they are, to get somewhere safe where they can be themselves as soon as they can, you know. So it's like, it shames me what's going on in this country. It's like, you know, I, like I said, when I was taking all the crap on the show, you know, doing it in good humor, because it's like it was bringing attention, because - and bringing sympathy, you know, because this is, you know, even though, I mean in real life, like, he wasn't really being mean, it was just a schtick, okay? But the thing was, it like brought attention that wasn't there before, and a different kind that wasn't there before, and then the next thing we had, Morton Downey? Do you remember that talk show guy smoking cigarettes all the time? He started having transsexuals on every show. It was like he was like a Maury Povich or Joey Springer type of guy, a predecessor to them. And he'd have transsexuals on all the time. Then it became this thing, you know, it just gathered its own like a snowball and and then you start - eventually you get to Ru Paul's show, and it's a beautiful thing. It's going on everywhere. Everybody's everybody's like, you know, hey, we finally made it. You know, we can get married. We can, we can change our gender and use the bathroom we're supposed to use. You know, we can change our names. It's like - now all of a sudden, you got these fucking psychopaths saying, No, you can't, you know? I mean, and because there's so few of us. We're a real minority. We don't got the numbers, you know, to actually knock these people out of their office through voting. I don't know. I don't know what to think about it anymore. I'm like gobsmacked to tell you the truth, I never thought I'd see this today. Never thought it. And it's like, I mean, how can anybody hate drag performers?

Silverman: Yeah, I mean, people that are Republican hate any kind of play with gender.

Meow: I just don't get it. I mean, I really don't understand it. But see, this is the thing. I didn't understand it when I was a little kid. Why people were so weirded out about it? Because I was just born that way. It's like, you know, I don't get it. I don't get it. [cough] Yeah, I just want, I don't want to ever hear about another transgender kid killing themselves. I want them to know that, you know, there are places in this country that are safer to be and that they should go there. You know, this is one of them, the city, and I sure as hell don't want to hear any more about any transgender person being murdered, you know? I mean, we're the we're the minority that still gets lynched, you know. I mean shit. I remember, during the demonstrations for housing, for the squate, you know, when we'd have demonstrations, there were riots in the park. I remember, like, I was still known for that radio show. I remember going to one completely dressed in like, you know, welding, welding clothing and and heavy work boots and big welder's gloves, like, dressed with a hard hat, dressed for a riot, okay, but when I got there, I had this idea, I'm just gonna scream like I'm being mutilated at the top of my lungs. And I started doing that, and it freaked the cops out so much that six of them came picked me up bodily, carried me over all the fences, those little railing fences in Tompkins Square Park, out. And then they were trying to get the handcuffs on me, but I had these big welder gloves, and I had my my hands, you

know, gripped like this, and they're trying and They can't get them, they can't get them on but they handled me with kid gloves. I mean, I it was I never was lifted so so gently and weightlessly by anything before, but nowadays, they're not that way. There's hatred in their actions and in their attitudes, like they want to kill you, and that's - how did we get there? What did we do? Did we do anything to them? Last thing I did there was a bunch of Christians doing a little demonstration in the park just recently, like, you know, with their little band, a band and everything, and and trying to get people to join, trying to convert people. And I start, I just started, while the band was fast, started screaming, screaming at the top of my lungs, singing at the top of my lungs, Glycerin Queen by Susie quatra, you know, over the band. You know, just to and then Suffragette City on top of that. And, yeah, it was just a one person protest against this religious group allowing itself to be politicized that way to attack other minorities. You know? What's going on?

Silverman: Is there anything you'd like to add before we end today?

Meow: Like what?

Silverman: If anything else comes to mind that you'd like to share?

Meow: Life is great. life is great. It's like you gotta find something to laugh at every day. You gotta sing and dance every day. And if you can get people to smile, then you've done a mitzvah. So the whole thing is, how many mitzvahs can you do in a day? And a mitzvah a day keeps mental illness at bay.