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An Interview with Diva Agostinelli, Anarchist

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Retrieved pm 15 August 2011 from www.theyliewedie.org

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Born in Jessup, PA, in 1921, to an Italian anarchist coal mining family, Diva Agostinelli is one extra-ordinary person. I hesitate to say that I think of Diva as role model because, even though she is a “part of history” she continues to teach and learn alongside of radicals, not above them. Diva often, in response to a question, says she doesn’t have an answer but then goes onto to relate an experience or situation that lends itself to understanding. Diva left Jessup when she was 16 and went to Philadelphia where she attended Temple University. Afterwards, she went to NYC and joined the *Why?* magazine group (later renamed *Resistance*). *Why?* was a group that split off from the *Vanguard* group and included Audrey Goodfriend, David Koven, and later, David Wieck, Diva’s lifelong companion. She worked with this group from 1942 to the mid-50’s and met many other people who came in and out of the circle, including John Cage, Paul Goodman, Paul Maddock, Robert Duncan and James Baldwin. It was at *Why?*’s weekly meeting, at SIA hall, in

NYC, (run by Spanish anarchists) where Baldwin first publicly read parts of “Go Tell it on the Mountain.” The first time Diva met Goodman, he was on the floor demonstrating a Reichian orgasm! But, the famous personalities dim in the face of Diva and her comrades’ life long dedication to anarchism. Whether she was on a speaking tour, writing pieces for the magazine, teaching history, or running a school library, Diva has never given in. Consider her mantra, of sorts, when things get rough: If you’ve succeeded in the real world, then you need to figure out how you failed.

What follows is more of a conversation than an interview. Diva’s life doesn’t lend itself to a structured session of questions and answers. I spoke with Diva in Troy, NY, (where she has lived for the past 40 years) on March 3, 2001.

Rebecca DeWitt

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I was never, after a certain point, I hate to say this but it’s true: after a certain point I stopped trying to be a “propagandist,” an advocate, a political activist. I was very disillusioned with the anarchist movement. I had to go through this period and ask myself what am I going to do. I really don’t have that much confidence in people who call themselves anarchists anymore. But I realized that I really couldn’t become part of the world because I so hated, despised, detested what the world was like that I couldn’t be part of it. I couldn’t sell out. I tried, I literally tried.

When was this, when did these feelings start? When I was young, I was convinced that I was going to be Voltarine de Cleyre, Louise Michel, Sofia Perovskaya. I was going to go out there and make the revolution. Ever since I was a kid, that’s the way I saw myself to the point that I would go to the grocery store and start making speeches to the women. And, I guess in a way I was almost a joke to the people in town and I didn’t realize it. The young men in town had a pool

hall called the Speedway and they would call me in — my mother said I was 6 or 7 then. They'd take my shoes off, put me up in my stocking feet on the pool table and say "Tell us about the revolution" or "Tell us about the strike" and I would make a speech. God knows what I said. They would put nickels on the pool table and say "What are you going to do with this money Diva?" and I would say "I'm going to bring it to Nena for the political victims." I would collect my money and run up to Nena's house. In school, they gave me a soapbox when I graduated. I was always making speeches, always in trouble. Although, being a small town, they knew me and never expelled me. I went to Philadelphia and, this is very hard to say, but I was so disillusioned with the rank and file of the anarchists. The anarchists I grew up with in Jessup, they never treated me as if I was one, a child, and two, a female child. I get to Philadelphia; it was a more traditional Italian culture and their attitude towards women stank. I was horrified and I was in a terrible, terrible bind because they were kind, they worked and sent money to the movement. They supported me in the sense that I didn't pay for room and board for four years. I realized that they were good people but they were ignorant about a lot of issues. They were all working class people but so was my family. Well, I came to NY and I met some really terrific people, David, Audrey, the *Why?* group. They saved my life in a sense; I mean it was the best thing that happened to me. We were naïve, we really didn't know as much as we thought we did but it was wonderful. I felt I belonged, I felt I was part of something important. We worked hard, we had meetings, we had discussions and we wrote the magazine. When the war came, I did not support the war effort.

It was a major issue that permanently divided the anarchists.

It divided the anarchist community. I understood that America's involvement in the war had absolutely nothing to do with getting rid of fascism, saving Jews, or any of that. It was to make America the center of the empire and we tried to tell people this. But it was very hard not to be pro-war. That's why I could never completely

identify with the pacifists because I could not say I would never fight, I would never kill anybody. I found myself helping people escape the draft and feeling very strange. For example, I helped a young person in the Midwest. I went there by bus and on the bus I met a Jewish refugee kid who told me about his experiences in Germany. Of course, he came from a well to do family and they had money and they got him out just before the death camps were full-blown. He's telling me these stories and I'm having this problem that I'm going to help this kid come east and get out of the country to avoid being drafted. I was never a hundred percent convinced that I was doing the right thing. So, I brought the kid back to NY and he got out of the country. Today, he's a solid citizen of America; he's a good Catholic. But at least he's not dead... When one of the *Why?* group people said he was being ostracized because he went into the army, it's a crock of shit. We supported you in your decision. If you felt that you had to go and fight, we supported you. We differed in propaganda style, either being publicly pro-war or against the war but once you said you went into the army, it was okay.

Was that unusual, were other anarchists groups that supportive?

No, no I wouldn't think so. Franz Flagler went into the merchant marines; he felt he had to do something. He was working on his ship, trying to get refugees Israel. David Koven joined the merchant marines. I mean people had to do. Cliff Bennet went on the lam before he was sent to jail. David [Wieck] went to jail. It was a hard time but of course post-war has shown that we were right in that that's what America wanted. It became the American century. I really hated so much of what America stood for. Part of that was what my father had inculcated in me. Here was this man with a second grade education who had told me about the treatment of American Indians, which I didn't hear about again until college. I don't know where he learned it. My father made sure that we understood how America treated blacks. I remember him telling us as children that

Where ere I am,
 There let me be.
 Be home to me,
 Where ere I be.
 Black diamond hills of Jessup coal,
 Flat barren streets of Philly,
 Raucous towers of New York's city
 Endlessness of Brooklyn and the Bronx,
 Or here, in Troy's decaying solitude.
 There I have been
 There have I lived.
 Always anticipating
 Lovely things to be.
 Sometimes fatigued
 Trying to be me
 And free.
 Now, in Beechwood's genteel boredom,
 I weave remembrance and desires
 Into threads of endless dreams.
 Surrounded once by eyes
 Of mostly amber tints,
 Now, I swim in a sea of boundless blue.
 What am I doing here?
 I often think.
 Certainly, not passively awaiting
 That legendary reaper sure to come.
 No, no. Not the idle weaving of remembrances
 But the active search that is never done.
 To find the me now.
 Like Wordsworth, let my heart leap
 When I behold
 Some rainbow in the sky
 Or let me die.
 But I am here.
 Where ere I be,
 Here I shall be,
 Still me.

the reason why Jack Johnson was forced to give up his title was not because he was black but because he used to date white women.

The story of the name your father gave you is also indicative of the kind of upbringing you had.

Well, that was true of all the Italian anarchists. They knew they had relatives who were religious and who would sneak the children off to church and baptize them. So they wanted to have a name that they were sure the priest wouldn't accept. They [the priests] sure as hell wouldn't accept some of the names of my friends. *Revolta*, *Volunta*, *Unico*, *Liberta*, *Diva*, that's the kind of names we had. Some named their children after famous people, like we had a *Sofia Perovskaya*... Oh Christ, they were good people. But anyway, there were certain things that my community seemed to have that the rest of the Italian anarchist movement didn't have, like acceptance of women... To make a long story short, [during and after the war] I used to make speeches, I used to go around to Boston, Detroit, Chicago. I can give speeches, I have the gift of gab. [One day] I'm making a speech and I realize I had a lot of young people in the audience, and that I was influencing them. I listened to myself and I felt that this was not what I wanted to be doing. I did not want to influence people by emotionally getting to them. What I wanted, what I saw as anarchism, was to help people think for themselves, make decisions themselves. I said to myself, how different, *Diva*, is this than when Mussolini harangues the crowd and gets them yelling "a la la". I could have gotten those kids to run out into the street and start demonstrating that day. I quit speaking and I never made another public speech again.

How do you feel about direct action these days, like in Seattle, where there's always someone getting the crowd going? Is it useful?

That's a hard one. The fact that the movement is spending months after Seattle explaining Seattle has not done a hell of a lot for anarchism. One of the reasons why I'm allowing this stupid piece to appear (an interview by the medical group who owns *Diva's* retirement community) is because of the sentence "Do you think of

an anarchist as a young radical? What would you say about a 79-year-old woman who bowls once a week?" I'm hoping that maybe people who read that will understand that anarchists are not just young hot-headed kids. I think that we sometimes do a disservice to young kids by getting them emotionally involved, which is necessary, but at some point they have to begin to think for themselves. Do I believe in leaders? Yes, but only to this extent. I think that David [Wieck] put it very nicely: that in any given situation there's going to be a person who by general knowledge is more expert in that situation, knows more, has more of take on it. So, that person will be the "leader" in this particular action. This does not make him or her a permanent leader. I'm not sure how I feel about Seattle since my first instinct is to join them!

What kind of ideals or goals does the anarchist movement need to address?

Well, there are two really basic changes that have to be made, without sounding like a Marxist. One, there has to be a real moral change to find your place as responsible individual but functioning within a group. And, two, the basic economic structure of society has to change. [In Seattle] they were trying to bring attention to the worldwide corporate structure of the economy that is happening, which may really lead to the science fiction world of one world. The Seattle movement is right in attacking that because that really has to change before anything significant happens. Because we're headed down a terrible road and I won't be here to see it. I'm sorry in a way but I'm also glad in a way because I think it's coming. Except for these people who are protesting, there's nobody who really takes it seriously. Of course, the irony will be is that if they finally have their multinational corporate world and there's no world to dominate. The pollution will destroy the world anyway.

When you were younger and active in the *Why?* Group, did you have a cynical worldview?

No, I still thought we could change the world. I expected that we would have an influence but I didn't think it would happen fast. I

ties, I doubt it. I'm still in the same position: the world is unlivable to a feeling, thinking person; it's unlivable so I have to not be part of it as much as I can.

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It's fundamentally what used to be called "nature vs. nurture." In a sense, what anarchists are trying to do is change the nature of the human beast. Humans developed in small groups so society is changing the nature of the human beast too. Small groups are, I think, a necessity in human life but with that goes the fear of the stranger, territorial rights, power within the group — those are all things that nurture, history, has to change. There's been a lot of change but now, of course, the corporate world might be changing human genes. Maybe they'll be able to create race of satisfied slaves. How much does history mean? I know that's what we repeat, knowledge of history is necessary. But, look at the killing. This is the part that I have difficulty with. We all know about the holocaust and it was horrifying but it was one of many. This human race has had one holocaust after another.

The wiping out of one race by another has gone on for a long time. Look at what's happening in Indonesia. Interestingly enough, people react to what's happening in Indonesia like they're a bunch of headhunters, but the literacy rate in Indonesia is one of the highest in the world. That's another one of the things that I used to believe, I was disillusioned by this pretty soon, but I really believed that the reason why everyone wasn't an anarchist was because they didn't know. If they knew, if they were told the history, they would change so I would go make speeches in these bars. Of course, I was a child, I was ridiculously naïve. But, it's true; education hasn't changed anything in a certain way.

What keeps you working towards a free society?

John Schumacher [colleague of David Wieck at RPI] used to say you just have to keep doing it because change will come dramatically and it's probably true because a lot of the change that happened in the world came dramatically. Women have been fighting for their rights since the 18th century. Did anyone expect that the feminism movement would come to a some kind of a peak in the mid to late 20th century? No, I think it took everyone by surprise. So, would it have happened without these two centuries of activi-

had the sense that we were laying the groundwork. It was okay if I didn't see it in my lifetime. Up until the end of the Second World War, I really expected that we would make a difference. What really was devastating was to see how the economic upturn of working class people in the US affected how they looked at issues. I was shaken by how readily people accepted the Levittown's, the cars, the fancy refrigerators, the stoves, all those trappings of middle class life. And, the dying of the community. There used to be communities in America, I used to live in a community wherever I lived. The anarchists in Jessup were like an extended family. Nena would write plays that my mother and I would act in and 400 people would come to see them. I saw the dying of the community when the economic upturn was happening. I remember thinking, isn't it sad, am I saying that there has to be poverty and misery for good things to happen? I knew that wasn't right but that's what I was feeling at the time, that people were not active when they were in better economic circumstances. So, the children of the anarchists were taken up with making the good life and they were no longer part of the movement. Very few children of the anarchists, whether it was the Jewish, Italian, Finnish, Spanish movement, were active. I did think we would make a difference up until the end of the Second World War. I remember telling people, in a very angry tone, that they were buying their comfortable life on the blood of the rest of the world. And they were. And we are.

You mentioned that your friend David Koven made you feel guilty about not wanting to be interviewed. What did he say to you that made you change your mind?

Well, he says to me, on the telephone a couple of weeks ago, that he meets a lot of young people who want to know about the movement and the past and he thinks that I'm depriving them of that knowledge if I don't tell them about my particular community, the kind of anarchists I grew up with, what our life was like. He makes me feel guilty and I think that maybe I should but do they really want to know? Is what happened to me of significance to some

young kid in downtown Troy who's trying to come to grips with a world that's so terrible? For example, I met a young kid who, just on the question on religion, had so much trouble in school because he declared himself an atheist. Teachers were ostracizing him and so forth. Now, what effect, to a kid like that, will my telling him that I grew up accepted produce? I was an atheist; if we had a school party on Friday I brought chicken sandwiches. But I was never ostracized. Why? Because my father and mother were part of the community. My grandparents had been in the community since 1890 or something. Everybody knew, so I wasn't ostracized. This poor kid, living in the non-communal society that we live in, is being treated like shit because he says he's an atheist. What good will telling him about my experience do to this kid? It's not him, it's the people who are treating him badly who need to be told what's it like. So, if it should have any affect, it should be on the people who are attacking him. [Tell them] that there were "good Catholics" who accepted the fact that some of us were atheist. How do I get to them, they're the ones I want to talk to. If I could write, that's whom I want to write to, not to the kids who are already aware what the world is like but for the people who think the world is fine. Who I would like to get to, because I think their impulses are generous, are all these kids that are running into born again Christian sects. They scare me, but I think that what's really scary is that very often their motivation is a good one, they want to help people. But they've fallen into the hands of these manipulators. So that's whom I want to talk to, if I talk to anybody.

Seeing as you are walking, living history, you have to admit that you are, how do you feel about historians?

I have a problem with historians. I refused to be interviewed by Avrich. I read some of those interviews — there are so many inaccuracies. I realized that history is a lie, in a sense, because it's a contemporary interpretation of something that happened in the past. I especially detest what I'm doing right now, which is a kind of oral history because memory is a very convenient thing. I can try

to be as objective as I can but I forget what I don't want to remember. So does everybody else. It was in one of [Avrich's] interviews that the guy said that we ostracized people who joined the army. Well, what he was doing was justifying the fact that he went into the army, loved being an officer, came out, stopped being a practicing anarchist, and enjoyed his middle class life. So he was justifying himself. If I were to write anything about my life I would not write it as history. I have in my head, and I may be too old to do it, an idea of writing short sketches, stories based on fact. That's the only way I can see it... [and then there's] Avrich's insistence on "accuracy" to show that some anarchists were involved in violence to the point that he thinks that either Sacco or Vanzetti were probably involved in the robbery. So, my question is, what good does that do? Of course, I leave out my absolute dismay at what was happening to people who were involved in direct action and how people were being sacrificed and dying for really not that much reward. I don't mean personally, but to the movement. I personally knew two people who were involved in bombings, anti-fascist bombings and they both got blown up by a bomb [including] my uncle who was 21 years old. It was devastating; especially since I felt that I was partially responsible in the sense that in the back of my mind was the idea that I might have helped him make the bomb. He had asked me for a piece of metal and I found it for him and later I realized what he was using it for. Am I being dishonest if I don't talk about the fact that my uncle and his friend were involved in "terrorist" activities? They were making bombs that killed people. And, yet, if I see my [uncle's friend] in my head, and after all I was only 11 when he died, I don't see a bomb-maker. I see this soft-spoken gentle man who had a bar to support himself, ostensibly. But the bar was full of homeless old men who had no pension and no way to live. He fed them and made them sleep there and took care of them. Never raised his voice, never angry. In his mind he was part of the war against the capitalist system and fascism.

What role does historical awareness play in social change?