

Interview between Lizzie Borden [LB] and Kaisa Lassinaro [KL], May 2011

KL

What triggered you to make *Born in Flames*?

LB

I realised that there was big divide between feminists, white feminists and black women who would not call themselves feminists. So there was no dialogue among women and there was a lot of separation between, even socially, Blacks, Hispanics, and white women. So I decided that I wanted to create a situation, a film, in which I would bring all of these different women together and try to see if there was common cause. And I created a ... in order to do that I, I wanted to make it a kind of a science fiction context because it wasn't happening in the moment, so I wanted to create a world in which it was possible. Because I wanted to see it myself.

KL

The music's very prominent in the film; can you tell us about its role?

LB

I wanted the music to be part of the different voices that all of the women speak, use. Because each of them have a different way of speaking and each of them has a different style of music, and I wanted there to be a clash and an energy coming from the music that we played. Some of the groups like Phoenix Radio for example, used a kind of music that was, and used a kind of rhetoric that was part of the music, so that when Honey broadcast, she would have her messages couched in the music and the music would be what people listen to, that's how they would hear her view. I wanted there to be music and dialogue at the same time because I wanted there to be a cacophony of voices. So, because there never is one voice to listen to, there never is one unified voice. Because, kind of what Flo Kennedy says, you know as Zella Wylie, when she says who would you rather come through the door, one lion or four or five hundred mice, or however many mice. So I wanted the women to be that many mice coming through the door which would have meant that there was strength in numbers. But there was a way of coming through the door with a multiple of voices, meaning all of the voices were significant and all of the women were after the same thing even if they spoke about it differently and even if their music was different.

KL

How did you end up getting *Red Crayola's* and *The Bloods'* tracks in the film? Were you involved in the music scene in New York?

LB

In New York at the time everybody was working together, you know, there were, there were people in the art world like for example Mayo Thompson who was part of Art and Language which was, you know an art group, a conceptual art group, so I knew him and he was also part of a band and I thought about *The Red Crayola*. And Becky Johnston who plays one of the three women, along with Kathryn Bigelow [Socialist Youth Review editors], she was living in the building across the hall from Adele Bertei, this is how I met Adele and got involved with *The Bloods* and got Adele to be part of the music, and that's how I got Pat Place. In New York at the time everybody was ... it was a small world, it was like the Wild West downtown, there was still, there was still sand on the borders so that's why I thought of the Algeria stuff, it's really just downtown Manhattan and the World Trade Center was ... we all hated it because it was such a big phallic symbol, you know I really never meant for it to really come down because I did love it, you know, I am so filled with grief that it came down but it was the phallic symbol that was open for, for attack. But everyone who was in the film's music track, were also involved in the film world down there - you know

Scott and Beth B, Jarmusch - they were all part of the same Downtown scene. So if you went into certain places like the Mudd Club, you'd run into these people and they would either be part of the movie, as, you know as an actor or they would give you a shot or whatever. Pat Place for example was in some other movies, Adele was in Scott and Beth B's movies. So really there was such a great synergy and so much activity, so we all helped each other. And I know when Kathryn Bigelow did her first little movie, of two guys beating each other up, she borrowed my big old car for the scene. So you know, cameras were cheap, cinedecks were cheap, we just all helped each other, and the music scene was part of it.

KL

It took five years to make the film; can you tell about its making and how you got people involved in it?

LB

Yes, the film took five years because of the way I made it. I had this premise which was, where are the women who should be involved with each other? I did not know them. I didn't have any black friends, I didn't know any and there were none in the art world, maybe two. And so I found them, I went to lesbian bars, I sought women out, I asked if they wanted to be in the movie, I found women playing basketball at the local fraternity YMCA, I asked them if they'd be in the movie. I just ... There were so many women I asked, and some came and some stayed. And the ones who stayed ended up being characters in the movie. But there are two ways of making a movie - inductive and deductive. A deductive movie is where you might have a script and then you follow the script. Inductive is when you don't have a script, you start with an idea and that was the way *Born in Flames* happened, which is that it started with an idea and also because I had no money, and I could you know, probably never pay more than \$100 for a shot. So we would go out and we'd shoot a scene and that would serve as the basis or the foundation for the next scene to come. And sometimes I would re-shoot a scene in a fictional way with characters, after having gone out and improvised a scene, I would find a way to create it as a script and then we would sort of go out... And that's what somebody asked me and it's kind of funky because these are all non-actors who are playing characters who are really themselves for the most part. But the fictional part is that they are armed, they steal trucks, which they would never do in real life but in other aspects they play themselves.

KL

What was the relationship between feminist groups and gay and lesbian groups at the time?

LB

The important thing about the feminist movement at that time in New York was that there was a big conflict with the, with the, I would say mainstream feminists, like Gloria Steinem, that they felt that to be too close to lesbian groups would alienate women across the country from trying to go after their equal rights and [inaudible] or the things that mainstream women wanted. So they distanced themselves from lesbian groups and that created a lot of controversy. They didn't say they were distancing themselves but they did. And so it was hard for me to actually work with mainstream feminists because, as represented by *Ms.* magazine, which was a great magazine but it didn't address everyone's issues. So they're kind of represented by the three women who run the socialist newspaper in my film. But what I found was that the lesbian contingent was the most marginalized and that's why I made them the center, the center-point of the movie, and the ones who were the most daring, because they had the most to gain and the most to lose. And so, and the most energy because they have been kept on the outside and they needed to be heard. And so that's, that was one of

the problems, there were two major issues in the feminist world at that time, one was the relationship to gay women, and the second one that came later was the relationship to pornography, and that I did not address in *Born in Flames*, that I addressed later in *Working Girls*.

KL

How do you see *Born in Flames* today? Do you find it still relevant?

LB

The same issues that existed back then have not gone away. I still have so many of those same issues and I, some of these things still make me as angry as they made me back then. And I think anger and frustration is what fueled my making of the film and the genesis of the film and in regard to the music and the pace of the film and the word agitation (that you used), that's actually interesting because my choice of music was really about agitation, agit-prop, you know, that to actually push on one's prop, you know to actually do something. And that's why I think I pushed it to the point of...of armed...armed reaction to problems that would not change. You know I wanted to present a whole range of possibilities - peaceful revolution, trying to convince through the printed the word, trying to convince through the spoken or sung word, and when all of that failed, what *IF* one had to use force, that had to be considered as a possibility, not that I myself would ever do that but I had to consider it in my head. And now I'm as angry about certain things and when I see the film again, which I did see after reading the graphic novel, it made me as angry as back then that certain things hadn't changed. And of course it's really difficult for me to see anything that I've done because I think of ways that I could make it better, I think of things that I could have done, I think of things that I left out that I wish were in there, I see bits of acting or the delivery of lines and I think 'oh my god that could've been better', but all in all I'm amazed at the creativity of the women in it, and the creativity of some of the music and that wasn't me, that was just me being an anthropologist, going out into the world and bringing women together. And it was that collective energy that created the film. And so it was bigger than the sum of its parts. I couldn't have done it, it was these women who came together and in some ways they became friends.

LB

Y'know what's so interesting is that, there has been a documentary about, it's called *Blank City*, about the relationship between music and film in that period of time in downtown New York, and what it's about really is the, is the interaction between the film world, the music world and the art world. And we all did come together because we all drew from each other's talents. And there were a lot of people making some great movies, and everyone was in everything and everybody had a band. And so it was really a very, very rich time and a time when one could live very inexpensively in New York, and that's one of the reasons why there were so many films, so many little films that came out at that point - Bette Gordon, her film *Variety*, Jim Jarmusch came out of that scene, and everybody was using music. And John Lurie was in everything and Adele was in many things. And so it was a time where we could come together and *Born in Flames* was possible. Now it would not be possible to do that because the wealthy have taken over downtown New York and it's all built up, you know there were derelict places, everything was free, we could go anywhere and shoot.