

WHERE

The first time I met Laura Albert, I had almost forgotten who she was. It was June 2014, at a pop-up kosher restaurant in SoMa. “Do you remember JT LeRoy?” our mutual acquaintance asked me before introducing us. “That was Laura.”

I remember thinking that Albert looked like no one else in the room: Dressed in a bustier, an ankle-length skirt, a floppy newsboy cap, and sleeves that went from her wrists to her upper arms, she was an island of Dickens Fair goth in a sea of casual linen. We chatted for a while: She was friendly, easy to talk to, slightly haunted. She gave me her business card and suggested that we take a bike ride sometime. It was a distinctly San Francisco experience: Of course I’d go to a kosher pop-up and talk about bikes with someone who used to be someone else.

When I got home that evening, I went online and began to reacquire myself with a period of time in the late 1990s and early aughts when JT LeRoy was seemingly everywhere. A transgender former child prostitute, the story went, he (his pronoun of choice) was born in West Virginia and abandoned by his mother on the streets of San Francisco. He published his autobiographical debut novel, *Sarah*, to great and bestselling acclaim in 2000. Only 19 years old, he quickly accrued exhaustive media coverage and a coven of celebrity fans from Winona Ryder, Courtney Love, and Lou Reed to Carrie Fisher, Bono, and Billy Corgan. There were pictures of JT everywhere: He was slight, androgynous, and usually obscured

by wigs and enormous sunglasses, bearing a passing resemblance to a late-stage Michael Jackson. Two more books followed his star-making debut, as did an associate producer credit for Gus Van Sant’s *Elephant* and a screenwriting gig for the HBO series *Deadwood*.

And then, in late 2005 and early 2006, articles in *New York* magazine and the *New York Times* brought it all crashing down: JT, it was revealed, wasn’t actually a living, breathing, writing human being. On the page and over the phone, he was instead a San Francisco writer named Laura Albert—who, as part of the ruse, had also posed as JT’s assistant, alternately called Speedie and Emily Frasier. Another woman, Savannah Knoop—who was the half sister of Albert’s boyfriend, Geoff—played the role of JT LeRoy during public appearances.

As I continued to search the web for details about Albert’s history, I found a few post-fall-from-grace articles about her; the backlash had come quickly, along with a fraud lawsuit centered on a movie contract that she’d signed as JT LeRoy. In one memorable 2007 *New York Times* story, a reporter accompanied Albert on a road trip from her home in San Francisco to Los Angeles and depicted her as a high-maintenance mess with veracity issues. I also found a 2010 photo from *Zoo* magazine of Albert flashing her boobs, which was most notable for the way she stared directly at the

camera with an expression that fell somewhere between defiant and sad.

The next day, when Albert sent me both an email and a Facebook friend request, I ignored them. Reading all of the stories had spooked me and suggested untold multitudes of drama. I didn’t understand what life experiences could produce someone like Laura Albert. I wasn’t sure I wanted to find out.

But at the Sundance Film Festival this January, it suddenly seemed that everyone wanted to find out who Laura Albert was. The festival marked the debut of *Author: The JT LeRoy Story*, a feature-length documentary that promised a definitive look at the JT saga. Directed by Jeff Feuerzeig—best known for another documentary about a poorly under-

Laura Albert, the writer behind the literary persona JT LeRoy.

opportunistic asshole (or, more simply, a journalist). But if she did, she didn’t show it: “So awesome to hear from you!” she wrote. “It’s been wild over here.”

When we finally meet up a few months later at a café not far from Albert’s home in Russian Hill, it’s July. Magnolia Pictures, which is releasing *Author* with Amazon Studios on September 9, has arranged for a publicist to accompany Albert to the interview. But she turns up at the café alone, wearing the same newsboy cap she wore when I met her two years earlier, a T-shirt that reads “Fuck Gucci,” black-and-white-striped arm warmers, a long, ruffled skirt, and rings on seven of her fingers. Around her neck hangs a typewriter pendant embossed with the words “Write Hard Die Free.” It dangles next to another necklace, this one strung with a silver raccoon penis bone. In *Sarah*, the raccoon penis bone is depicted as a protective amulet for the truck-stop prostitutes, or lot lizards, who also use it to stimulate the prostates of their clients. After the book was published, celebrity admirers like Rufus Wainwright and Michael Pitt were photographed wearing their own raccoon penis bones. Later in our interview, Albert would give me one, too, wrapped in tissue paper, tipped with silver, and signed “JT LeRoy.”

“It’s insane. It’s absolutely fucking crazy,” Albert says when I ask her if it’s strange, after spending so many years assuming the identity of someone else, to be starring in a movie about herself. “When I meet somebody and they say, ‘Oh, she was doing this for fame,’ it’s like, ‘Dumbass, I was hiding.’ I mean, John Waters said

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stood outsider artist, *The Devil and Daniel Johnston*—and bankrolled by *Vice* and A&E, *Author* is told almost solely from Albert’s perspective, drawing on her vast archive of home videos, drawings, writings, and the telephone conversations she began recording as a teenager. The film, as an early *Variety* review pointed out, is essentially a podium for Albert to air her side of the story—and nobody else’s. And, as the review also noted, it’s actually the second documentary about Albert: The first, Marjorie Sturm’s *The Cult of JT LeRoy*, was released last year and takes a much more critical view of its subject.

And so, spurred by all of this renewed interest in a woman who presented an admittedly fascinating picture, I finally emailed Albert back. I figured she’d think I was being an

HAVE

GONE

JT LEROY?

The woman who invented the boy who seduced the literary world a decade ago is still searching for answers.

By REBECCA FLINT MARX

PHOTOGRAPH BY Justin Kaneps



to me—said to JT—that the most un-American thing you can do is reject fame. It's like, dude, you had to drag me out, how can you say that I did this to get attention? But I also feel that I've been made ready, and I know what my intention is. I didn't do the reality show. I've proven myself. I've proven you can't buy me, and I think that makes it very frustrating to people. I've maintained my integrity." But, she adds, "I don't feel proud of that, because there was no other option."

The question of Albert's intention and integrity has for the past decade been central to what people talk about when they talk about JT LeRoy. The saga wasn't simply a question of a pseudonymous writer duping readers and a bunch of celebrities. Using the persona of JT, Albert, who was then in her 30s, formed emotionally intimate telephone relationships with a number of people, writers like Dennis Cooper and Mary Gaitskill among them, who believed they were helping an abused HIV-positive transgender street kid by offering him both their time and their lit-world connections. In *The Cult of JT LeRoy*, one of JT's former admirers gets choked up as he recalls how he sent JT a birthday present for every year of his life after JT told him he'd never had any birthdays growing up. Later in the film, the writer Bruce Benderson likens his experience with JT to being "caught in a terrible nightmare...one of the most sadistic manipulations of myself that I've ever experienced."

The subsequent fraud trial, at the end of which Albert was ordered to pay almost \$500,000 in damages and legal fees, brought to light Albert's own history, which included her sexual and physical abuse as a child, institutionalizations as a teen, and years spent in a group home as a ward of the state—a time during which she began calling crisis hotlines in the persona of a blond-haired, blue-eyed boy. So it became possible to argue, as Albert has, that JT wasn't a persona so much as a mechanism for coping with her past trauma. In a video Albert sent me, she tells an audience of fellow group-home survivors that donning the persona of JT LeRoy was like putting on "asbestos gloves" in order to handle the toxicity of her past. Whether or not you believe her seems to depend on whether you felt manipulated by her—or whether you believe she was the victim of a

Even a decade later, attempting to make sense of JT LeRoy—let alone Laura Albert—requires not so much a flowchart as a suspension of disbelief: It's like a Möbius strip tied into a Gordian knot.

white-male literary establishment more inclined to love a pretty young boy than a thirtysomething woman. And your level of personal offense over the whole affair seems roughly proportional to your ability to laugh it off as some kind of postmodern cultural critique. In a prophetic 2001 interview with the *Independent*, Gaitskill said that if JT was a hoax, "it's a very enjoyable one...a hoax that exposes things about other people, the confusion between love and art and publicity. A hoax that would be delightful, and, if people are made fools of, it would be OK—in fact, it would be useful."

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Even a decade later, attempting to make sense of JT LeRoy—let alone Laura Albert—requires not so much

a flowchart as a suspension of disbelief: It's like a Möbius strip tied into a Gordian knot. So it's unsurprising that not one but two documentaries are now trying to unravel the story—or that they have such wildly divergent points of view. And perhaps it's also predictable that enough time has passed to warrant a reappraisal, particularly given the backdrop of our evolving cultural conversation about the fluidity of gender and identity. (If you think a 33-year-old woman posing as a teenage boy is crazy, then try Rachel Dolezal on for size.) This—not to mention America's love of a good redemption story—may be part of why JT and Albert are having a "moment"; in addition to the documentaries, a feature film based on Savannah Knoop's own account of the saga is in the works, with James Franco (naturally) attached; Helena Bonham Carter has signed on to play Albert. And in August, HarperCollins released new editions of *Sarah* and *The Heart Is Deceitful Above All Things*—with a photo of Albert on their back covers, accompanied by an explanation that "JT LeRoy is a literary persona created by Laura Albert." "Look how long it took for Marie

Antoinette to get a rewrite, you know?" Albert says after I comment on this resurgence of interest in her story. She's thrilled with the Feuerzeig documentary, which she's seen four or five times now; telling her story is "the process whereby the pain of the past in its pastness may be converted to the future tense of joy," she says, quoting Robert Penn Warren.

Over the course of our four-hour interview, Albert talks a lot about the pain of the past—hers, mostly, but also that of the JT fans who she says approach her after readings to share their own stories of abuse. She talks about the time her mother tried to set her on fire; about how *Deadwood* creator David Milch gave her a piece of Franz Kafka's house to carry with her during the fraud trial; about how, after the trial, when she felt the "gate of writing shut," people told her that no one would care about her in seven months, that everyone else would tell her story. She was offered reality television shows, book deals, countless talk show interviews, she says. But she turned it all down: "That would have been a profound betrayal of what [JT] was all about," she explains. "You can't buy me. I know the rules to your game, and you don't know the rules to mine."

Talking with Laura Albert is less like having a conversation than like being flattened by a runaway train of thought. Ask a question about why she felt she couldn't apologize for fooling people and you will get a winding anecdote involving the group home that she lived in as a teen and Barbara Barrie, the actress best known as the mother in the 1979 film *Breaking Away*, who (according to Albert) led a petition to try to get the home kicked out of the tony Upper West Side building where it was located. Alternately angry, regretful, defiant, and introspective, Albert cries, laughs, and makes points with such force that spit flies out of her mouth and speckles my recorder.

There's a thread of defensive pride that stitches her words together. "I built this thing popsicle stick by popsicle stick," she says at one point of JT, "and people saw the Taj Mahal." Over and over again, she emphasizes that JT wasn't a choice but a necessity. After he was taken away from her, she says, she felt as if she were lost in the fog of war after a battle: "It's like you don't even want to know who's alive



and who's not. It's like, are you there?" Her relationship with Geoff ended (the two have a son, Trevor, who is now 18); her livelihood was curtailed; and most of her celebrity connections were cut off. And so all she could do was try to survive from day to day.

"Sometimes," Albert recalls, "I'd be like, I'm going to ride my bike and I'm either going to get a vegan cupcake or jump off the Golden Gate Bridge." She was certain of only one thing: "The work," she says, "wasn't a joke. That's why *hoax* is really the n-word for me. It really is. Because it's insulting for people who have the experience of the work and who have gone through physical and sexual abuse."

Feuerzeig hadn't read any of Albert's books when he approached her about doing a documentary in 2011. But he had read all of the news about the scandal. "It was being labeled the biggest literary hoax of our time, and that was the hook for me," he says. "My whole trip is New Journalism, and I'm all about the story." He remembers thinking that "the one voice glaringly missing" from the story was Albert's. "I said to myself, 'Wow, that is a voice I would love to hear.'"

It's not exactly true that Albert's voice had gone unheard: In the wake

of the scandal, she did several interviews and even a 2010 monologue at the Moth storytelling series (its title: "My Avatar and Me"). But Feuerzeig thought she deserved her own cinematic platform. Albert decided to trust him, he says, because she had seen *The Devil and Daniel Johnston*, his 2005 documentary about a schizophrenic musician. It also helped that Feuerzeig, like Albert, is Jewish and has a background in East Coast punk; as Albert explains, "someone needed to get that paradigm."

Feuerzeig happily admits that his film, which was built around an eight-day interview with Albert, is "totally subjective." Rather than "moralize or give you a happy ending or take someone to task, it's more interesting to explore all of this and come out with

your own opinion," he says. "What I hope I've done is create the most immersive experience I can deliver within a three-act structure, and deliver hopefully the ecstatic truth. That's my goal."

I ask Feuerzeig if he's seen *The Cult of JT LeRoy*. "I 100 percent have not seen it, so have no thoughts on it," he says. "I wasn't interested. One of my assistants saw it, and that's all I know."

But as with everything else related to Laura Albert, it's not quite that simple. Sturm, the director of *The Cult of JT LeRoy*, first met Albert during the height of the JT craze. At the time a social worker in the Tenderloin, Sturm was invited by a photographer who was working with LeRoy to film behind-the-scenes footage during various photo shoots and interviews—the understanding, Sturm says, was that she would be making a documentary about JT's redemption. Sturm eventually incurred Albert's wrath when one of her crew members ran into Savannah Knoop (dressed as JT) one evening and said hello to her; one of Albert's cardinal rules, Sturm says (but Albert denies), was that you couldn't talk to JT in public. Sturm parted ways with Albert, footage in tow, and began making her documentary in 2002. When Albert found out, "she called me up," Sturm says. "She was bullying, crazy, extremely aggressive, like, 'Kiss your children's college education goodbye.'" (While Albert doesn't deny the phone call, she says her words were taken out of context.) When Sturm later called her to "make peace," she claims, Albert was again "really vicious and aggressive. But by then I had heard other people's stories and I was like, 'I'm going to make this with or without your blessing.'"

Through her lawyer, Albert sent Sturm cease-and-desist letters stating that Sturm couldn't use the footage because Albert hadn't signed a release. And then things got even dicier: In 2008, Sturm says, A&E promised funding for the film, only to pull out a couple months later when she refused the cable network's demand that she take on a codirector. (The company eventually put its money behind the Feuerzeig film.) A few years later, while Sturm was continuing to drum up funding, one of her producers learned about the Feuerzeig film and insisted that Sturm join forces with him. When Sturm met with Feuerzeig, she says (and Feuerzeig later confirms), he claimed that he wanted to produce her documentary and "mentor" her—and also wanted to

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Top: Rocker Courtney Love, left, hangs in 2003 with the man she thought was JT LeRoy (actually Savannah Knoop) and the woman who claimed to be LeRoy's assistant, Speedie (in reality, Laura Albert). Below: Actress Winona Ryder with Knoop.



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JT LeRoy

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option her footage. In exchange, he said, he'd get her a letter from Albert's lawyer saying that Albert wouldn't pursue further legal action against her. Sturm declined; her film eventually made it to the festival circuit and is now available on iTunes. Unsurprisingly, it takes a much less flattering view of Albert than Feuerzeig's documentary, presenting her essentially as an expert manipulator who took advantage of people's time, interest, and capacity for compassion.

Sturm doesn't mince words about Albert. "She's a good con artist," she says flatly. In her eyes, presenting Albert as a tortured soul just trying to express herself misses the point. "Your art doesn't give you permission to abuse other people. Your therapy doesn't give you the right to abuse other people," Sturm says. "Art and science doesn't transcend ethics; that's fascism. So the idea that her writing is so brilliant it would transcend abusing and lying to people, it's fascism in a sense. It's not deep thinking or clear thinking or ethical thinking."

To be fair, it can be exceptionally hard to think clearly about Laura Albert. For every person who wants to tell me how smart and sensitive she is, there's another who rips her as vengeful and opportunistic. When I talk to Stephen Beachy, the writer whose *New York* story first revealed that JT LeRoy was actually Albert, he recalls one conversation prior to the story's publication where Albert "veered from a threatening tone to a seductive tone, like, 'Maybe you could climb aboard the bandwagon,' to insulting me and suggesting I'm jealous and horrible and mean." In his eyes, Albert is "just this kind of pathological liar and sociopath who did something really extreme and interesting but who is not fundamentally that interesting as a person." Not long after I talk to Beachy, I call up Lauren Stauber, one of Albert's oldest friends, who describes Albert as a brilliant

but vulnerable woman doing her best to survive the lasting scars of an awful childhood. The two were at the group home together; Stauber remembers standing outside phone booths as her friend, who she says suffered from agoraphobia and an eating disorder, made calls in various personae. "She often found different voices other than her own to transmit something that was inside her that she couldn't really transmit in her own voice," Stauber says. Watching Albert go through the post-JT fallout was tough, she adds. "People were wanting her to just die and totally dehumanized her and in many ways took her story away," Stauber says. "I can't imagine what that's like, to have your life rewritten in the public domain by the media [in a way] that's so not true."

Everyone I speak to obviously has an agenda, whether it's to protect a friend or to promote a film. But it's easy to understand how Albert can project any number of qualities during the course of a single transaction. Before this story's photo shoot is to take place in late July, she emails me to request that I, too, attend; she needs me there, she explains, to act as a sort of doula to help deliver her into this new world where she's "the person that puts on makeup and dresses up and is in front of people."

When I arrive at the shoot, Albert greets me warmly—and then has me talk to both her lawyer and her friend and longtime collaborator Nicole Gagné. As Albert poses for photographs, Gagné spends the better part of an hour telling me how wronged her friend has been, and what a brilliant artist she is, and that Albert's detractors are jealous and bitter and don't truly love art. "When the sage points, the fool looks at the finger," Gagné says. "All of those fools got angry because the finger was taken away." As she talks, I think of something Geoff Knoop, Albert's ex-boyfriend, told me about their early days together, back in the late '80s, when they were writing acoustic folk rock together in San Francisco. Not long after they started perform- ➤

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JT LeRoy

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ing, Albert got them a full-page spread in *SF Weekly* with a photo of the band captioned, in reference to Albert, “Sweetness in the Flesh.” “I was like, this woman can make something fucking happen,” Knoop said.

One thing everyone seems to agree on is that Albert was, and still is, troubled. Feuerzeig deems her “on the spectrum,” while Sturm is of the opinion that she has “some kind of unchecked insane narcissistic personality disorder.” In his court deposition for the fraud trial, Dr. Terrence Owens, the therapist who began treating Albert when she first contacted him as Terminator, JT’s early incarnation, told his interviewer that he didn’t think Albert was putting on a hoax. “I think it’s a superficial understanding of her psychopathology,” he said. “I think it really misunderstands her.... She’s a lot sicker individual than I think is obvious on a superficial contact with her.”

The enduring question—and criticism—underlying any discussion of Albert’s mental state, of course, is whether it excuses her deceit. After the crash and burn, she didn’t make any kind of public apology or acknowledgment of her actions, which only deepened the popular assumption that she’d been up to something, none of it any good. But the reason she didn’t apologize, Albert says, is simply that she couldn’t, “because to me, it wasn’t a joke or hoax.”

“I know it caused pain for people, and it’s not like I’m saying you shouldn’t feel what you felt,” she says. “All I can do is share my experience of what it was and say I’m grateful that you gave him [JT] time. You did save my life, and this art came out of it, if that’s any consolation. And if you want to stay angry and furious, that’s your right. I can just say I apologize. My behavior damaged people. All I can do is say my truth.” In retrospect, she adds, “it was a pretty intense thing, it was pretty crazy. Yes, there was deceit. I deceived people. I did.” But there’s only so much she can do about it a

decade after the fact. “I can’t give them back their time,” she says. “All I can tell them is we’re paying it forward.”

What matters now is the work, she tells me. And even more important are the people whose lives the work has touched, like the nervous, shaking girl who, Albert says, approached her at a reading in Brazil and proceeded to tell her she was being sexually abused by her uncle. Or the young German woman who came to a reading in England with self-inflicted cuts covering every inch of her arms, and who gave Albert her diary to sign. (The woman has since stopped cutting, Albert tells me; they stay in touch on Facebook.) “These are the moments when I feel everything makes sense,” she says. “Everything that I’ve gone through, it’s all that fucking matters and it’s all fucking worth it.” She starts to cry. “That’s what I’ve instilled in my son. You know, if someone wants to be cynical, whatever, God bless ‘em. Go look. It’s in the work, you know?”

I ask Albert how she’s feeling these days, now that her story is being told the way she wants it to be told. Now that she’s working on a memoir, now that she’s represented by Bill Clegg, the star New York literary agent who has himself written openly about his personal demons. “I don’t know that I can feel happy,” she says. “The best I feel is when I connect with someone, when I get out of myself, where I have that connection, when I write.” She tries to keep in mind what David Milch once told her: that “you have to keep coming in faith to the process of life.”

More than a decade after he was taken from her, Albert still grieves for JT. She feels him sometimes when she hangs out with Billy Corgan, the Smashing Pumpkins frontman, who somehow brings JT out of her. But the last time it happened, Albert says, she was “fucked up for a couple of weeks.” As much as everyone else loved JT, she tells me, she loved him more. “I miss it, man. Showing up in life as me is never as good as showing up in life as him.” She shrugs. “I’m sorry, but it’s true.” ■