SUMMER BURKES

Summer Burkes has been an active figure in San Francisco's counterculture and alternative scenes since the late 1990s. She joined the Cacophony Society and Cyclecide in 1996 and has been part of Burning Man's Department of Public Works (DPW) since 1998, including roles with DPW Dispatch. A dedicated writer and journalist, she has contributed to the San Francisco Bay Guardian and writes for the Burning Man Journal.

This interview was conducted by "Flo", Flore Muguet, a French anthropologist, in 2016. Flo's questions have been omitted to improve reading flow. Summer carefully edited the text.

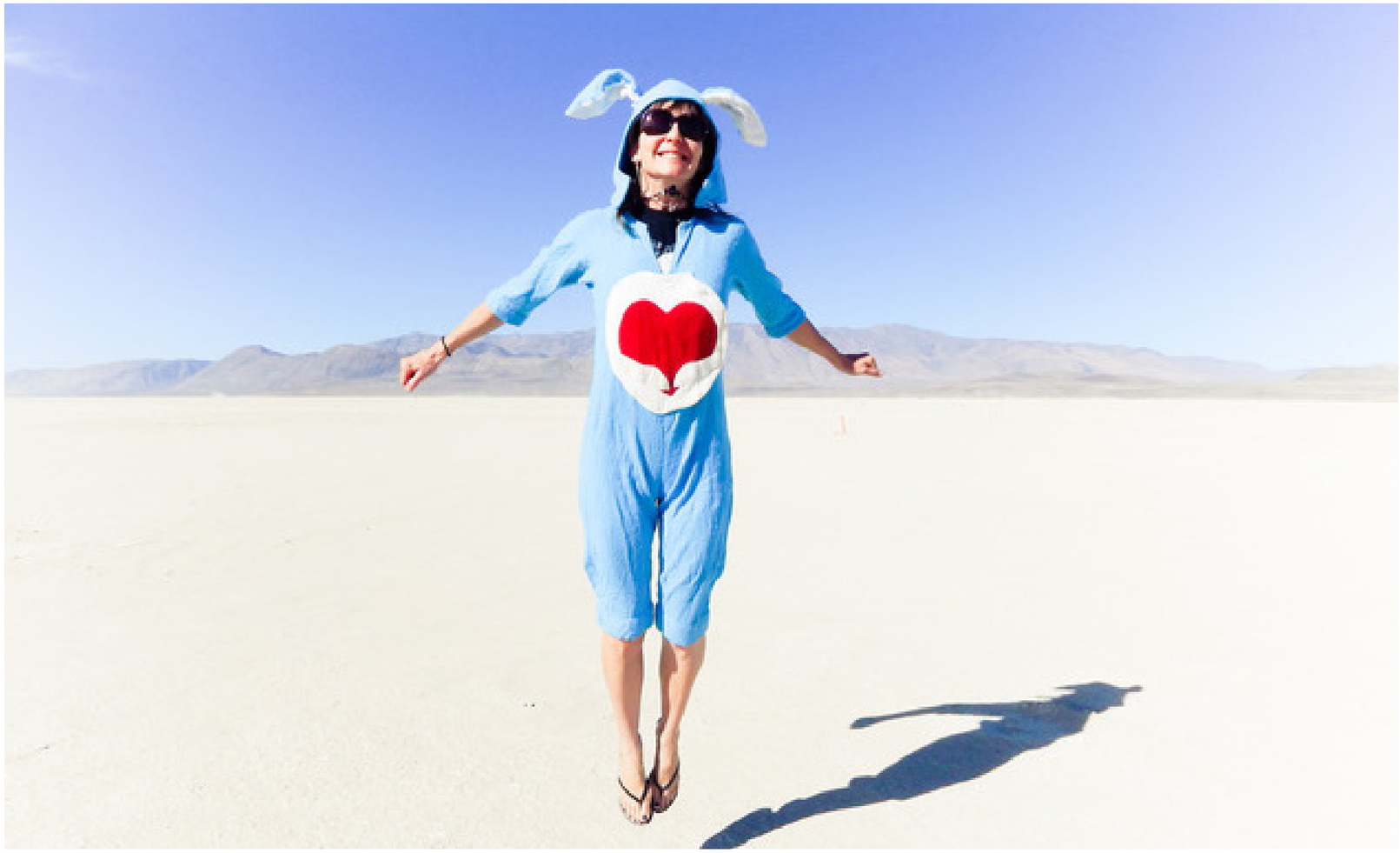

Photo credit: JH Fearless, 2016.

"I knew I was watching something new unfold…"

I moved to San Francisco in 1996 from the American South, where I'd lived my whole life. I wanted to be associated with the next great subculture, ever since I was a little kid. I'd read Hunter S. Thompson, and Jack Kerouac, and Tom Wolfe. And I knew that there was gonna be another great subculture in our generation. I just didn't know what it was yet. Even when I got to San Francisco, I didn't know. But I knew that I wanted to write for a paper.
So, I got a job at the San Francisco Bay Guardian. I've always been a music writer. I studied music my whole life. Back in the days when you couldn't hear music before you bought the CD, you had to have someone tell you what it sounded like. To tell you whether it was worth buying or not. So, that's what I did.

1998 is when I got a job with the paper. My job quickly… I wriggled my way into being one of the first nightlife, online columnists—at the beginning of 'online.' You know? [I was] 26...27? Yeah, they call our generation Cacophony 2.0. That was back when I was writing in San Francisco. So, I wriggled my way into the online nightlife column position, and only after a few columns they gave me front page of the arts and entertainment section of the actual paper. It was partially because of the rich material I had, because every week the Cacophony Society would invite me to brunch in the junkyard, or the haunted barn, or a pie fight.

You know, just crazy stuff. I was like, "well screw writing about music when I could be hanging out with these people all the time." And… I mean, the parties in San Francisco… I think Burning Man has sucked a lot of air out of the room as far as Cacophony goes. Cacophony was a big thing for people to do that wasn't just standing around drinking at a bar, or consuming. You know, you're actually part of the entertainment.

So, I knew I was watching something new unfold. I was in close contact with a lot of the founders: John Law and Danger Ranger. And… I eventually went to Burning Man and then saw the DPW on the back of the Bucket, which was the first art car, and… well, it was the first DPW art car. And I just knew that was my family by the end of the event. I had… my roommate that I came with and I, we were volunteering, and we were Collexodus. That was it. Me and her and the Bucket. And a megaphone, going around asking people, "folks who are going to be here for the next two months cleaning up, can we please have some food and water?" Stuff like that. [chuckles] So, that was my first-year volunteering with DPW. My

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first year of Burning Man, and I've never not been DPW. [That was in] '98.

Back then [Collexodus] wasn't called anything. Nothing was called anything yet! It was the first year of the DPW supposedly, but my story doesn't match with the story you hear. I think the DPW started when the event started. It used to just be John Law and some other people whose names I don't even know because I've never met them. Then, around '95 or '96, there started being the help of Circus Redickuless and Cyclecide, and the Know Nothing Circus. I'm also a member of Cyclecide. But I joined Cyclecide maybe in 2002 or 2003. It's the world's only pedal-powered carnival midway and punk rock circus sideshow that revolves around bicycles. Mutant bicycles. Which are all over the world now! That's another thing.

I used to break up a lot of fights. People were also unnecessarily hostile sometimes because we were exhausted, starving, overworked, sun stroked. We didn't have fluffers. We didn't have showers. We didn't have proper housing. We lived in tents on the Ranch, and we showered in a converted horse trailer under a

hose, with who knows who watching. And just… you know, I don't wanna say too much stuff about the old, bad times. But they were bad, and… it really taught me that the tribe behaves the way the leader behaves.

So, now I couldn't be prouder to work with more level-headed, mellow, non-sparkle-pony, punk rock groups of individuals who are just really nice. And our aggression now is comical, because it's funny. But some people are still really scared of us, which is ok. Because the way I like to see it is if you go to a nightclub and there's a big, mean, scary bouncer in the front, you're going to be so much nicer when you get into the club. If you walk into that club and there's no bouncer at the front and you're an asshole, you're gonna be an asshole inside the club. So, if they're a little bit scared of us, that's ok.

By the year 2000, I'd been laid off because media was dying, and our paper suffered budget cuts. Even though they said, "oh, you're the most read thing in the paper besides the sex column, we can't keep the girl on staff who parties for a living. So, we have to get rid of your position."

[I was writing about] anything! Iggy pop. World wrestling. Opera. Monster trucks. Whatever was happening that week in the city, I'd just be like "hey, can I get two tickets?" They'd be like, "sure, do you

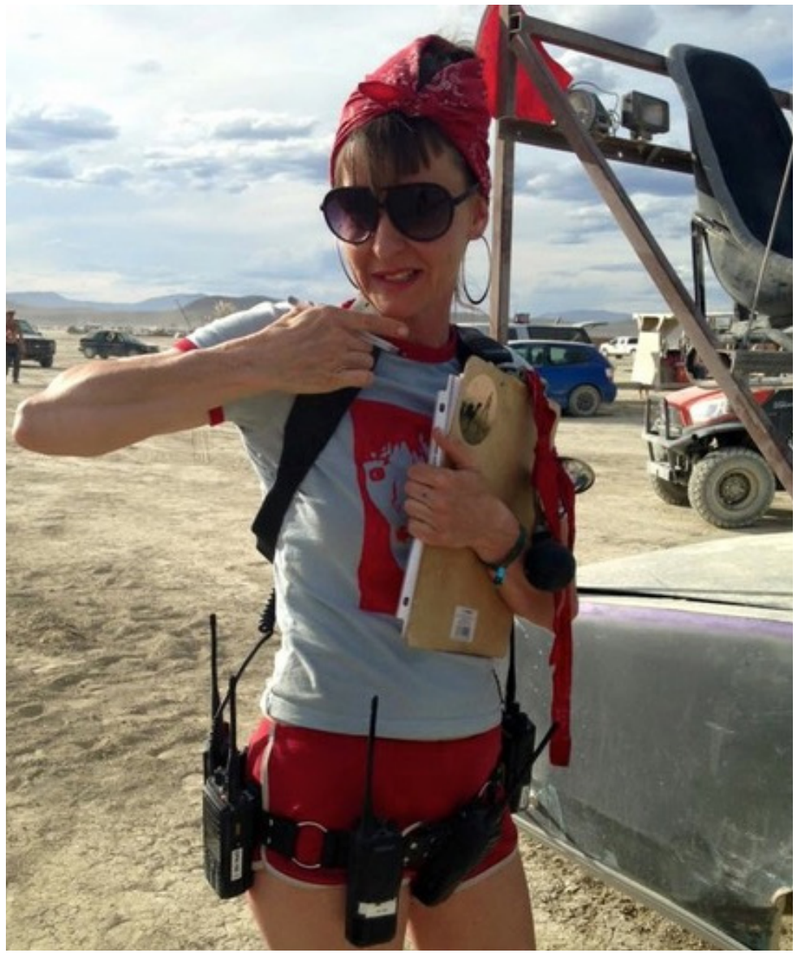

Photo credit: Detour Ginger, 2016.

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want VIP?" Yeah, I used to have a million readers a week. But that was back when weekly papers sustained the art scene. Now that there's no weekly paper, that art scene in a lot of major cities doesn't have a center that holds anymore. Because if you're not gonna see yourself in the paper next week, then a lot of people just give up. I don't know. That's just one phenomenon that I've noticed.

There is a structure [to DPW] definitely. People that have more power than other people, and Chaos is our leader. That right there says everything. Chaos is our leader. I mean, there used to be an old saying in Cacophony — "chaos provides." And we didn't mean him, we meant chaos. And chaos does provide. If you let go of the sails, the boat will get somewhere. Frantically try and hold onto the sails and you're not going to get anywhere. … Yeah, I guess… chaos would be my answer. There's a lot more allowance for chaos in a meritocracy.

It's not like, "oh, we're not supposed to do it this way! So and so says we can't! It's always been done this other way." In a meritocracy it's like, "look, I made this thing, and it rolls up the fence ten times faster than anything else." And everyone else goes, "that's amazing! That's your job now."

"Ladies' Nite" began with the very few girls who were out here at the time. Maybe 2000ish. There were just so many boys, and it was DPW set-up pre-season, and all these boys were around. *Growling sound effect* Everything was just so masculine. We said, "let's go to the commissary and just put makeup on each other, and have a ladies' nite, and do facials and manicures and girly things, and get away from these boys." [laughs] And so, we started to do all that, then some DPW dudes come to the edge of the commissary dressed in dresses and wigs and they're like "can we come in?" So, next year, we had a full-blown Ladies' Nite.

All the men, all the women took great pleasure—still take great pleasure in dressing the men up as ladies. It's a great equalizer as far as, you know, men get to see what it's like to walk around in high heels and a skirt and feel vulnerable. They get to see what it feels like to feel vulnerable just walking around in your normal day to day.

We don't have it anymore technically, because it got too big and too crowded, and there were food fights at the Commissary and the Commissary was like, "F you guys." Yeah. Because we just trashed the Commissary and then nobody was there to clean it up. So. But it was a super fun party and, getting back to the politics of gender, because it was so many men back then, I think that… speeded up their mental evolution to the new man type that they are now. Because instead of, "let's perpetuate femininity" it was "wow, this is ridiculous. I can see why none of you girls ever subscribed to that and wore high heels and makeup and short skirts and garters, and you'd rather be in your work pants like we are. And furthermore, this footbath stuff feels really nice, and I am into it."

You know, these guys don't know that they need pampering too. So, it was equalizing in a lot of ways. And then, you know, first year there were only a few guys that were doing it. Everyone else was just like "screw that, I'm not a lady, I'm a cowboy." You know what I mean?
But then they see the guys who were getting dressed up, all the girls are just "*voice high pitched* ooh" and just fawning all over them because all of a sudden they're not intimidating anymore. They're one of us. And so then, the next year every guy had on a dress. [laughs] And the night is just a… my feeling from Ladies' Nite is always "check out how ridiculous it is to be a woman sometimes." All the stupid stuff we have to do.

…[Thunderdome] is a good way to resolve conflicts. It's also a lot of fun. A fun way to let off steam or to bond with a good friend of yours. But, I think, one of the most important thing the Cacophony Society and Burning Man has to teach to the larger world is conflict resolution for law enforcement. Whether it's having a Thunderdome or rangers before cops. Imagine if you had to call the cops every time you needed a ranger out here. There'd be dead people everywhere. SWAT teams everywhere.

So, what we need in the real world is a Ranger force, and then the Rangers decide if you call the cops. You do public service, and then conflict resolution, and then law enforcement. Thunderdome isn't used too much anymore for grudges. But it's really helpful, because the grudge is over when the match is over. And that's tribal culture. You see that all the time.

I mean, even in, you watch that Rize documentary about those dancers in Los Angeles. You have krumping. And they krump at each

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other, and they have a competition, or some sort of krump-off, and then they're hugging at the end. They're done. They've said everything they needed to say. You know? There's a lot of nonverbal communication that goes on here. It's hard to put into words, obviously.

I feel like I'm a good person to give out the information. I don't know how long I want to do this, but I hope whoever takes the reins from me is a Cacophonist. Not an art school student. We need this window into Resto so people can see we're doing the most we can in really harsh conditions, with limited resources and supplies. I want them to understand the only reason we get to eat anything besides three square meals a day out here, and what the ranch crew is gonna live on all winter, is Collexodus that we get from Burning Man.

It's just this huge food and liquor collection effort that allows us to do what we do, and I wanna thank everybody for giving their food and liquor to us, because it would make it a lot harder if we didn't have any resources. I want people to understand that we still have limited resources. We are not so corporate that we cannot afford to buy kombucha for everyone. We have to beg for food literally at the end of Burning Man. It's still a punk rock affair. We still break ourselves mentally and physically to come out here and do this.