

'She's Beautiful When She's Angry' salutes women's liberation

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Photo: Liz Hafalia / The Chronicle

Linda Burnham (left), Trina Robbins, Susan Griffin, Alta and Ruth Rosen discussed their late '60s-early '70s activism.

There is a close-up shot of a help-wanted ad from a mid-1960s newspaper in [Mary Dore's](#) new documentary, "She's Beautiful When She's Angry," about the early years (1967-71) of the women's liberation movement. The ad reads: "Wanted: Good Looking Female Secretary."

It is just one of hundreds of eye-popping archival images throughout the film that drive home the essential fact that before the modern women's movement successfully upended age-old gender constrictions, "something was fundamentally wrong with the world as we knew it," says Dore. "Women couldn't get birth control without being married, couldn't get credit without their husband's signature. The grassroots efforts of these brave women who dared to question and contradict the culture, they changed all that."

Exhaustively researched, "She's Beautiful" is a whirlwind tour through the movement's marches, protests, poetry readings, consciousness-raising groups and the spirited discussions — that we're still having — about work, child care, compensation and rape.

Five Bay Area women, now in their 60s and early 70s, who figure prominently in the film reflected on being young activists during the movement's heyday and the extraordinary social changes they helped set in motion: Historian (and former Chronicle columnist) [Ruth Rosen](#), who taught the first course in women's history at UC Berkeley; eco-feminist poet and playwright [Susan Griffin](#); cartoonist [Trina Robbins](#), who was a staff artist on the women's liberation newspaper *It Ain't Me, Babe*; [Linda Burnham](#), who started Black Sisters United; and Alta (who uses one name), who founded [Shameless Hussy Press](#) in 1969. Alta hosted the lively interview in her Oakland apartment.

Q: Do you remember any specific experiences in your lives that inspired you to join the women's movement?

Susan Griffin: There wasn't just one click, there were many. I was active in the civil rights and antiwar movements and had experienced discrimination within them. Here we were in these radical organizations like Slate, which laid the groundwork for the Free Speech Movement, and men ridiculed us.

Ruth Rosen: That parallels [Marilyn Webb's](#) story in the film, which is so horrifying. (Archival footage shows activist Webb trying to address a large antiwar demonstration and being viciously shouted down by men in the crowd.)

Trina Robbins: I was an artist and hippie in the '60s, and was one of a small number of underground cartoonists on the Lower East Side in New York. I noticed this misogyny creeping into the scene. The male cartoonists humiliated women, drew them being raped and tortured, and I didn't think it was funny. They said, "Oh, you have no sense of humor."

In 1969, I read something in an underground newspaper about how the guys think we're good enough to have their babies and wash their socks and make their brown rice, but they won't let us talk in political movement meetings. They won't take us seriously. That may have been the first time I heard the term "women's liberation." That usually meant sexually liberated, that you'd sleep with the guy. (laugh) So that was the big lightbulb moment for me.

Linda Burnham: I come out of a family that was on the left and talked a lot about politics, so I was very attuned at an early age to issues of inequality. The slights I experienced were around race and trying to get a job in New York as a young black woman. When I came to San Francisco, I had the good fortune of encountering a group of African American women who were interested in being in conversation with each other about what it felt like to be a woman and black at the same time.

R.R.: I got to Berkeley in '67 and was in the history department, but I remember talking in my consciousness-raising group about the fact that we didn't know anything about women in the past. I had a professor say, "Why would you want to study women? They're not important."

As I went through academic life, the unbelievable kinds of misogyny and disrespect I experienced could fill volumes. We were always the first woman in every department, so people either treated us like little girls who should be patted on the heads or as threatening maniacs.

Q: Do you remember women being conflicted about joining the movement, fearful of shaking up the status quo or even questioning what they needed liberating from?

T.R.: Yes! A woman would say, "Oh no, I'm not a feminist. Not interested." And then the next week they're at a march.

R.R.: Many women really did feel threatened because we were questioning everything — racial supremacy, government authority, women's roles in the family, sexuality, marriage, orientation. There was hardly anything we weren't rethinking.

Q: The film makes the women's movement look like a lot of hard work against some formidable obstacles, but also a lot of fun. Was it?

R.R.: It was exhilarating. People who were frightened by it said we were humorless, but I really want people to know how much fun we had. We laughed at all the stupid things that were done to us.

S.G.: We'd say things that weren't supposed to be said. It's like that [Muriel Rukeyser](#) quote, "What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life? The world would split open."

Q: Did you have an awareness at the time, or only with hindsight, that you were involved in something historically significant?

Alta: I knew it was a big deal, and that the '60s in general were. During People's Park I would say, "When we're older, people are going to say, 'Wow, were you here in the '60s?'" And everyone would say, "Alta, you're so full of it." So, when two young French students came to me in the '70s and said, "Can you tell us about the '60s?" I said, "Ha! See!"

Q: What do you make of the recent threats to women's reproductive rights, and that the word "feminist" is still divisive?

L.B.: It's part of the generalized backlash that every movement faces. After the hard work, much of the progress gets institutionalized and then people take for granted that they can vote, or that there aren't men's and women's employment ads in the newspaper or other crazy, egregious examples of discrimination.

But every generation has to ask, What still needs to change?

Q: What do you say to young women who wonder what is left to accomplish?

R.R.: I love when (Virginia Whitehill, then 84, the daughter of a suffragist) says in the film, "You can never retire from women's issues."

And the same goes for other issues — war, climate change, race. You can't just decide they're over.

There is an unfinished legacy. We didn't do it all — not for lack of trying.

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She's Beautiful When She's Angry: Not rated. Opens Friday, Feb. 6, at Bay Area theaters. To see a trailer, go to www.shesbeautifulwhenshesangry.com.