

What they do. I don't think I ever know why people do things. I just like to know what they do. I love watching other people. It's a story unfolding. I might write down something people said, and never use it. It just sets you off. I think people are very underrated by writers. Ordinary people. People on the whole express themselves very well, and they don't have the limited vocabulary that most writers give them credit for.

Do you think that political people don't give ordinary people enough credit?

I don't know. I can't understand anybody wanting to go into politics. Local politics, I can understand a bit, because it's to do with normal things. But I can't understand anybody wanting to go into parliament. I think they must be barmy.

Do you think it's anything to do with them wanting power?

Yes. And a certain kind of life as well. I think it's awful that people are making decisions who don't have any home life, never watch television, never go for a walk, and live on black coffee. I think it's all slightly deranged.

Are there any new characters in your new show?

Yes. Kelly Marie Tunstall. She wears fish-net tights, and shirts shorter than her jackets. She stands at the bus stop talking. That's my new person. That's me, and I have a side kick called Mary.

Is this the first time we've seen your legs?

Yes. Shocked the cameramen. They were taken aback by them.

What shoes are you wearing?

High heels, very, as high as I can manage. It's all right because I just stand there, I don't have to walk about. Made me walk like Barbara Windsor, which made me laugh.

And after the tv shows?

I'd like to do a film. I've got a few things at the back of my mind. But I'm not really thinking about anything except this series. Then I'll have a bit of a rest. I can't do any big jobs, I'm too tired. I've been working non-stop since January, I need a holiday, a break. ●



Pat Phoenix: Flamboyant effect

Going Out In Style

From the announcement of lung cancer, until her funeral a month later, actress Pat Phoenix was seldom out of the tabloid headlines. But the intensity of the late summer press coverage and the enormous public interest it generated cannot be explained only in terms of cynical exploitation and ghoulish voyeurism – though those elements were present, particularly in the *Sun* and *The News of the World* with their tacky 'open letters' and 'deathbed' pictures.

For a start, Pat Phoenix herself, despite her increasing debilitation, was no passive

victim of media manipulation. In a sense, she 'produced' her own dying in as stylish and courageous a fashion as anyone in her situation could muster. From the press conference dressed up to the nines – 'tra-ra loves' – to the last rites, followed immediately by the wedding – 'hurry up, I'm dying' – to the razzmatazz funeral with New Orleans jazz band and black gospel choir, and then being cremated to Christina Rossetti and Lionel Richie with the showbiz wake after: she planned it all for maximum flamboyant effect.

The press obituaries called her 'The People's Star'. The fans at the funeral described her as 'belonging to us' or 'like one of us'. In terms of the resources that provided private hospitalisation, daily

hairdresser and negligees, she clearly wasn't. But as someone widely known to have had a troubled life both as 'herself' and as the character, Elsie Tanner in *Coronation Street*, she was. And the identification was all the stronger because she came through, in both roles, as 'a fighter': resilient, optimistic, down-to-earth.

When she left *Coronation Street* in 1983 she said it was because she wasn't prepared to 'grow old gracefully', quietly gin-drinking at the Rover's. I think she perceived, correctly, that while her own character, and subsequently those of Bet, Rita, Audrey, had done much to promote the possibility of middle-aged women being both strong and sexy, you couldn't yet portray a 'disgraceful' old woman without making her ridiculous. You could still be powerful when old, but, minus the eroticism, the choice was meddlesome battle-axe (Ena Sharples) or genteel regality (Annie Walker). So Elsie retired with lover to Spain, leaving Pat Phoenix in a subsequent career of advertising, chat-shows and new drama roles, to resolve, on a theatrical fantasy level at least, and right up to her death, the real-life tension of being both OAP and sex-symbol.

Hence the manner of her dying appeared a 'fitting' final performance for her public. But given the lack of open discussion about death, there's a sense in which the stars always do our dying for us through media coverage. The widely-quoted announce ment that Pat Phoenix died with dignity, pain-free and not alone spoke directly to the strongest private fears about our own deaths and offered consolations similar to those other recent deaths from cancer of Diana Dors and Noele Gordon. Having 'a good death', 'a magnificent send-off', 'going out in style' may reflect the sort of idealism that has nothing to say to the materialist belief that there's no heaven and all flesh is grass, but it still holds more powerful appeal ●

Rosalind Brunt

The Party Is Over Sweet Inspirations

In the autumn of 1981, Pluto Press, the most successful of the new breed of radical book publishers which emerged in Britain in the 1970s, held a party in a North London nightclub to celebrate '10 Years in the Red'. The mood of the party was upbeat and stylish; its message was that the new decade would be the time when the radical book trade came 'out of the ghetto' and into the mainstream of the British book business. Pluto, with their new list of diaries and cookbooks, instant books by journalists on topical events, and cooperation with mass-market publishers like Pan with *The State of the World Atlas*, intended to lead the way.

Five years on, it all looks very different. Instead of expansion, several of the then most promising radical publishers and bookshops have collapsed; others have contracted. Pluto themselves are now in the hands of the receivers. The party is well and truly over.

For each individual radical publisher or bookseller that has gone under, there is a straightforward explanation, usually connected, as in Pluto's case, with trying to expand with too little capital: the classic dilemma of small successful firms in a market economy. What is more difficult to explain is why one of the great achievements of the Left in the 1970s, the creation of the most extensive network of radical publishers and booksellers since the late 1930s, now seems like some misplaced dream.

It is too easy to blame all this on a downturn in the overall book trade, for there have been downturns before, particularly in the late 1970s when radical firms did well. Too simple, also, to attribute it to seven years of Thatcherism: there is often an increase in the demand for radical literature in times of recession or under Tory governments.

What many of us involved in the radical book business in the 1970 misunderstood was that that decade was a very

unusual one for publishing and bookselling.

In bookselling, there was an absence of lively city-centre bookshops which could market and sell books on the new social issues of the time: feminism, ecology and nuclear power, political action outside the traditional parties. In publishing, there were few commercial firms adventurous enough to recognise a demand for something in between the conventional hardback and the mass-market paperback, what became known as the 'trade' paperback. For a few years in the mid-1970s, the new radical publishers and booksellers had an audience which was not being reached by anyone else, the college-educated, radically-inclined middle class.

When the new chain bookstores started emerging in the early 1980s, they quickly became known as more efficient places to buy radical books than most radical bookshops. When the amalgamations which took place in British publishing in the 1970s produced new 'trade' paperback imprints, the result was a stream of radical texts often cheaper than their equivalents from radical publishers.

The parts of the 1970s' radical book trade that have survived are those which chose to specialise in particular topics and make one part of the radical book market their own, publishers like the feminist presses, Comedia, Gay Men's Press (GMP), Zed (on the Third World); booksellers like Central Books and Bookmarks with clear party allegiances or Compendium with 'contemporary' books.

Those parts of the radical trade who, like Pluto, tried to use their 1970s success to continue to operate across the range could not compete. Because it had been relatively easy to sell radical books in the 1970s with little commercial competition, they had not developed the hard business skills to survive. ● David Berry

There's a small suburban house diagonally opposite the local McDonald's in East Orange, New Jersey. From the outside it's an unremarkable white bungalow, just another family home in commuting distance from New York, but over the last ten years it has housed a triumvirate of female soul singers whose reputations are as important to black female creativity as the novels of Zora Neale Hurston or Alice Walker.

The house belongs to Cissy Houston, one time vocalist of the 60s' soul choir The Sweet Inspirations, and the mother of black America's most famous new star, Whitney Houston. The expensive car in the driveway, parked beneath the basketball net, belongs to their cousin Dionne Warwick, a frequent visitor to the house and the motivating force behind some of the most public statements that popular feminism has made in the 80s.

Dionne Warwick and Cissy Houston have been at the forefront of several sister-sing projects that have included charity shows, benefit appearances, a musical campaign to support research into AIDS and strident support for Artists Against Apartheid. Meanwhile, with manipulative care, they have guided Whitney Houston's career to unprecedented heights.

Soul music is currently producing more affirmative images of women than any other area of cultural activity. Despite the pouting gloss and designer dross of so much modern soul music, black American music has produced Whitney Houston, Janet Jackson, a teenager who out-manoeuvred her father to produce *Control*, one of the most positive albums of the year; and from rap music – the terrain of the boasting male – came the Real Roxanne, an irrepressible fly girl from the housing projects:

In America sister-sing is big business. The most recent success united Dionne

Warwick, Gladys Knight and Patti Labelle in a tour and tv special called *Sisters In The Name Of Love*, described by critics as a 'hymn to girl-ism' and seen by the participants as a public pronouncement of a camaraderie that stretches back to the 60s.

Sisters In The Name Of Love was also a celebration of three heroines. Dionne, the campaigning liberal whose career stretches from



Chaka Khan: Inspired tragedy

the pop hit *Walk On By* to the recent AIDS research song *That's What Friends Are For*; Gladys, who stole the show from any man that dared to share the same stage at Harlem's Apollo Theatre; and Patti, the epitome of the roots vocalist, who once fronted Labelle, probably the best feminist soul group ever.

Labelle, all decked out in space-age costumes and boa feathers, and fortified by Patti's voice and the sexually ambivalent style of Nona Hendryx, offered an image of the female singer that dispensed with the pretty sensuality of most pop. They were part of a strutting extravagance that runs counter to another persistent image of the black female vocalist, a lady singing the blues, and living a life of inspired