



He's a formerly homeless graffiti superstar. She's an ex-80s pop star who lost her voice and turned to self-help. So how did Monsoon's Sheila Chandra teach Stik how to defeat disorder and make great art? They talk to **Dorian Lynskey**

## 'Artists feel like impostors if they're not chaotic'

**W**hen the singer Sheila Chandra and the street artist Stik first met, they didn't say a word. It was at a club night at Glastonbury Assembly Rooms in 2008. Chandra had a concert the next day and needed to preserve her voice so she communicated with handwritten notes, which most people found uncomfortable. Stik, however, was happy to reply with drawings of his trademark stick men. When they next met, they were able to actually talk. Nine years later, their conversations have led to a book.

Organizing for Creative People is a brisk and bracing handbook for people who want to become professional artists, covering everything from tidying your workspace to understanding contracts. There is even a section on



releasing eight albums on Indipop and Peter Gabriel's Real World label.

In 1992 she was involved in a serious car accident. During an operation to save her sight she was clumsily intubated, resulting in a twisted larynx. She managed to perform for another 16 years but only by taking drastic measures to protect her voice. "I used to have practice for an hour a day for a week before a concert, which meant not talking to anyone," she says. "That was all the vocal time I had without pain: two or three hours of talking or one hour of practice. I would go whole summers when I wouldn't talk to anyone, which was very bad for my mental and emotional health. It was killing me."

In 2009 Chandra developed a rare condition called Burning Mouth syndrome, which made singing intolerably painful and forced her to retire. She has to ration her conversation, too. "I already have burning in my tongue," she explains matter-of-factly. "That will get worse and worse. Then the strain in my throat will start, and eventually I'll be in agony." She smiles reassuringly. "But I've got an hour or so."

That same year, she became an author. Chandra grew up in a chaotic household ("I liked order but I had no way of creating it") but gradually developed practical systems that enabled her to get a grip on the spaces in which she lived and worked. She passed on tips to her friends, who eventually suggested she turn her advice into a book: *Banish Clutter Forever*.

Writing became not just a new outlet but a new identity to replace the one she had lost. "When you're a singer it's what everyone wants you for; it becomes an integral part of your identity. So if something goes wrong with your voice there's a huge grieving process

where you almost have to rediscover yourself as another person." Mentors like Stik was another part of that process. "I thought, OK, I can't do art, but I can empower other artists to do art."

Like her first book, *Organizing for Creative People* evolved organically. Chandra and Stik would regularly meet to discuss their respective projects. She would offer him advice on how to become a professional artist. The next time she saw him, he had already acted on it. "She made me feel like a superhero simply by treating me as equal," he says. After three years she wrote down everything she wanted to tell him in a 16,000 word manuscript that became the blueprint for the book.

**C**handra thinks young artists often need permission to be organised before they can start to do anything about it. "I blame it on the

Van Gogh biopic. Everyone has seen this trope of the dysfunctional genius so they almost feel like an impostor: they're not chaotic. I think people feel that if they organise too much they're going to lose the creative magic, but it's like a snow globe. It's contained. It's swirling around the globe but it's not swirling around your house. I've met people who say, 'Crikey, you're ruthless. I thought you were so spiritual.' You used to sit on stage at Womad and take us to ethereal worlds." She pulls her face. "How do you think I got there? You think I just floated up there?"

Stik has seen the myth of creative chaos in action. He remembers talking to another artist who worked in a squat studio. "It was completely cluttered with plastic dolls, broken tennis rackets, pallets and all sorts. He was like, 'Hey man, out of creative chaos comes art. I can take this thing' - he reached across the room - 'and this' - he reached over to other corner of the room - 'and stick them together and make a third thing. Isn't that great?' And I said, 'But where's the glue?' And he said, 'Aw shit, you got me, man.'"

Where is that artist now? Stik shrugs. "Who knows?" He says it took a while for him to act on all of Chandra's advice, especially the long-term variety. When they met he had a cult following in east London but was still living a precarious

lifestyle, sleeping in squats and hostels and scraping a living by sweeping the streets or cleaning toilets.

"If you're borderline homeless, it's very hard to create order," he says. "Sheila would say, 'There should be a room for the painting and a

how to prepare for interviews. Have they done their homework? "Let me grill you," says Chandra. "Length of piece? Angle? Tone?"

Sitting in her publisher's office, they make an odd couple. Chandra has teacherly gravitas and a sly sense of humour while Stik, who keeps secret his real name, age and birthplace, is a skinny livewire, compulsively popping strawberries into his mouth, but their mutual affection is obvious.

Chandra found a new career as an author because she could no longer sing. After a three-year stint in Grange Hill she joined the world-pop trio Monsoon in 1981, when she was just 16, and reached the top 20 with *Ever So Lonely* a year later. When Monsoon split up after their record label urged them to drop the Asian influences, Chandra was "bounced into a solo career",



**Out of chaos ...**  
Sheela Chandra and Stik; (right) Chandra in her Monsoon days



room to store the canvases,' and I would say, 'I don't even have a room!' I was working my way up from extreme poverty so it took me about five years to get everything into my head and then another five years to implement it. When you've got £5 in your bank account and you have to sell a print to put money on your Oyster card to get to your print launch across town, these long-term things are outside the box. Sometimes I wasn't at all mentally stable, I was losing my shit, and I needed to put a show on in a week. I don't know how I did it."

Chandra nods sympathetically. "If I was in the situation Stik was in I would not survive three weeks. I don't know how he managed to crawl his way out despite all the things that were pushing him back into the pit at every stage. It was a huge learning process for me. It was only when I was with Stik at the benefits office or when he was being treated rudely that I started to see that underworld. We should have much more empathy than we do."

They both insist that maintaining an artistic career is extraordinarily

hard work, and getting harder all the time. Even squatting, says Stik, was easier a decade ago than it is now. They portray the music industry and art world as viper pits in which young artists are just one signature away from being ripped off for years to come and there is no mercy for the flaky. Chandra proudly recalls how she personally pursued a German dance act who had sampled her solo recording *Ever So Lonely/Eyes/Ocean* without permission, and got her money. "People assume that Asian artists don't understand copyright. Really racist." Stik says Chandra helped him draft his first contract with a gallery. "I'm a manager, I'm an administrator, I'm a PR company. I do all of that. Sheila taught me how to make databases and spreadsheets." He grins at how unsexy that sounds. "I love spreadsheets."

None of this is glamorous or fun but it's essential if you don't want your talent to go to waste, says Chandra: "You have to pedal very hard up a steep hill to get to the plateau, but if you put a system in place you will get to the plateau rather than pedalling up

**Cleaning up ... Stik applies the finishing touches to his work *Past, Present and Future in Old Street*, east London**



#### THE DETAILS

Organizing for Creative People by Sheila Chandra, with a foreword by Stik, is published by Watkins (£10.99). To order a copy for £9.34 go to bookshop.theguardian.com or call 0330 333 6846.

more steep hills and then crashing." Chandra is thinking of writing a book about creativity itself. "It feels to me like the word creativity has been hijacked," she says. "A lot of books on 'creativity' are actually soft business books trying to motivate managers to be more creative about making a profit. I'd like to write a book about creativity for actual creative people."

Stik is working on some major commissions in the US and Asia but the project he's most excited about is one he hasn't tried before. It's called having a life. "The key to longevity is something that I failed miserably at for a long time," he says. "Unless you have supportive friends who are looking after your emotional health you will crash inside. I'm just clawing back the remnants of my social circle now. I have neglected my friendship with Sheila to the point where I'm just an arsehole basically." Chandra smiles indulgently.

"So do you know what I'm trying to do?" he continues. "Enjoy my life. The biggest part of being successful is having time to actually stop and smell the flowers."

PHOTOGRAPH DAVID LEVINE FOR THE GUARDIAN

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