Snap Shots: Joe Westmoreland

The punk rocker-turned-writer has a debut novel, Tramps Like Us, and a new clutter-free life.

August 1, 2001 By Angelo Ragaza

Tramps [Painted leaf press, $17.95] **is a thinly veiled autobiography**. People say it's all about sex and drugs. It's actually about looking for a sense of home, and the trouble I got into on the way. O I tried to capture a time in New Orleans and San Francisco in the '70s and '80s. It was wonderful but got overshadowed by AIDS and everybody dying. I crammed everybody into the book. All my friends who died. My father, who sexually abused my sister. I would streamline it now. O Most readers seem deeply moved and thank me for being so honest. My brothers and sisters are anxious but remind me that "we did nothing wrong" when we were kids. People relate and even imagine I've written about them. Some are demanding a sequel!

Writing it was very zen. When I hit my stride, I would forget where I was. Being in the moment gave me incredible energy. O I had been very sick and was on disability. But taking care of yourself when you're sick is a full-time job. Writing was part time.

There was the constant fear that I wouldn't get the story down on paper before I died. The only way to get over that was to write. I pared back my social life to focus—every night from 8 to 11.

Music is important to Tramps: the disco song "Do It Any Way You Wanna Do It.Patti Smith. "Born To Run," of course.

I l*oved* punk! The Ramones, the Talking Heads, Blondie before "Heart of Glass." My friend and I were anti-disco. It was the big divise gay thing.

When Joey Ramone died last spring, I went to the CBGB memorial. I got my first twinge of "getting older." Of all the things I've had to prepare myself for with AIDS, aging wasn't one.

My wild youth taught me that Quaaludes take the edge off LSD, sex is better with someone you care about, and drugs and sex only numb the pain temporarily. Tramps ends when I tested positive. But at 44, I'm still a tramp at heart.

It freaks me out that kids today are getting HIV and thinking it's OK because all they have to do is get on the drugs. I want to scream, "No, no, no!" O The whole thing about Andrew Sullivan barebacking freaked me out. He's this big public person, a gay role model. What is he thinking?

The other day I heard “I left my Heart in San Francisco” on the radio. And I was like, “Oh, I did too!” My friends asked how I could leave California, the climate is so beautiful. Yes, but the intellectual climate is so much better here in New York. And you don’t have to drive. O I’m reading Clear Your Clutter With Feng Shui. I have this work area where I do all my medical stuff. It’s piled up with all these old bills and records from when I was sick. I’ve got to go through and throw out as much as I possibly can, because that time is over now

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