

Helen L. Reddington. “Détournement and Female Punk Bands of the 1970s.”

In this chapter I will reexamine the punk moment in Britain in the 1970s from the perspective of gender resistance and difference, informing my discussion with original research material and interviews from women band members undertaken between 2001 and 2010. I will revisit the response by the music press to the female-focused punk bands, discussing their activities and music in the context of more recent writing on queerness and subcultures, and explore the *détournement* they undertook within the already-subversive punk subculture. *Détournement* is the questioning of what can appear to be the “natural order” of culture and politics through using “normal” objects or behavior in apparently radically different ways. In the words of the Situationist writer Guy Debord, “The device of *détournement* restores all their subversive qualities to past critical judgements that have congealed into respectable truths...”¹

As a former punk, my own subjectivity positions me within a hierarchy that is fluid and constantly revised; the methodologies that we use to discuss (what becomes) myth are constantly shifting, and biased according to the context of the commentator.² Yet though I concluded that the women musicians in punk rather than the men were undertaking a much more effective, questioning version of punk from their position at the *margins of the margins* of youth subculture, British punk of the 1970s is still to this day largely identified as male, because it was the male groups that sold most records and more men have documented its history. Kurt Cobain revived interest in The Raincoats and The Slits before his suicide in 1994, the riot grrrl movement was rooted in a similar joy in defiant amateurism, and Pussy Riot’s seriously disruptive acts were punk acts: as a blueprint for female subversive activity, punk still has validity.

A redefinition of girlhood and womanhood was articulated by punk's female musicians and was (and is) an important commentary not only on women and girl's engagement with subcultures³, but also more broadly on gender definitions during the late 1970s. The general "noise" created by punk's "moral panic" effects obscured the questioning of what it meant to be female, and the undercurrent of gender dissent that was stirred up. There was a parallel specifically *women's* music making scene based around women's centers during this time period,⁴ but here I shall be concentrating on those women band members who specifically aligned themselves with punk in collaboration with, or in contrast to, male punks.

Challenges to hegemonic culture and political authority were familiar in postwar Britain; the Teddy Boys in the 1950s⁵ and the Mods in the 1960s⁶ had instigated moral panic. Bikers and Hippies in the 1960s⁷ had also caused social concern; UK hippies had looked to the USA for inspiration and had closely tied cultural production to their ethos in order to create their own underground.⁸ By the time punk surfaced as a subculture, hippy culture had been visibly recuperated (reabsorbed into society, largely through commercialization) and no longer had countercultural agency. During the British recession in the 1970s, it became apparent that it was the younger generation who were going to suffer most as a consequence; Hansard reported a 42% increase in unemployment for school-leavers by the end of 1976.⁹ Their parents generally had conservative values; their aspirations for their children were fixed and unimaginative. The older generation had experienced full employment, were filled with gratitude for the stability that post-war Britain had provided for them, and were not prepared for the collapse of the country's industrial base that challenged "the capacity of unilateral control implied through male conceptualizations of people decontextualized from social relations..."¹⁰ If both

young men and young women are excluded from work in a society where gender roles are articulated along the binary of “men work/women make homes after giving up work and marrying”, this disruption challenges hegemonic assumptions about gender roles.

The cultural revolution of the 1960s had encouraged both women and men to redefine themselves. However, as Germaine Greer and others noted, this benefited men more than women; men’s interpretation of women’s liberation tended to favor the availability of young attractive women for sex, and the mediation of the underground was exclusively controlled by men.¹¹ Given a boost of confidence by the UK 1975 Sex Discrimination Act, women leaving schools and colleges in the mid-1970s for non-existent jobs had high expectations of themselves as autonomous individuals, although they soon became disappointed; it is not surprising that the enabling ethos of punk drew many of them into the subculture. Punk’s acts of détournement were being played out parallel to a hegemonic music scene that was determined to recoup its marketable aspects (notably the ironically sexualized personae of more mainstream female rock artists).

Musically, punk introduced fresh approaches to instrumentation and gender. There was time to learn: boredom could be alleviated by rehearsals and writing, and there were small and unusual to play as soon as the basic rudiments of a band and songs had been pieced together. The anti-professionalism and anti-industry stance of punk (which was soon abandoned by The Sex Pistols and The Clash as they engaged with major record labels) facilitated the flow of female musicians into bands and onto stages, forcing audiences to rethink attitudes to skill, rock music roles and aesthetics. As John Savage noted, these female groups had worked out “...how to translate an often obnoxious but proud attitude into a new form of music. No woman had made

these noises before”.¹² Public hostility relegated them to the edges of society where safety could only be found in the underground, or the underworld, and unemployment was trapping them in a state of perpetual childhood or adolescence. In this respect, the punk moment in the 1970s had much in common with Judith Halberstam’s “queer temporality” with “stretched-out adolescences”¹³ that often transcended age barriers. For example, Vi Subversa, lead singer and guitarist with the band Poison Girls, was 40 years old. There was no reason to “grow up” because the normal straight rites of passage of school-job-family had ceased to be available for many women. Indeed, Vi carried on playing right up to the end of her life, playing her last gig in Brighton in 2015 at the age of 80.¹⁴

Appearance: ‘Camp Is A Woman Walking Around In A Dress Made Of Three Million Feathers’¹⁵

Since the 1960s young women had mostly been represented in pop and rock music in supporting roles to men. They were often sung about as whores, temptresses or angels waiting to be defiled; in their own songs they defined themselves in binary relation to ‘him’ and were rarely heard to voice anything other than romantic dreams and disappointments. There were some exceptions: progressive rock singer Sonja Kristina of Curved Air charted in 1971 with a song about a prostitute, *Back Street Luv*. In pop, the guitar-playing black artist Joan Armatrading defied categorization by refusing to align herself with feminism, or gender and race politics. In the mid-70s, a TV series called *Rock Follies*¹⁶ told a fictitious story about three female rock’n’roll singers as protagonists, with their own musical careers. Generally though, British female artists in 1970s popular music conformed to stereotyped gentle and

unchallenging ‘potential girlfriends’, reflecting Judith Butler’s definition of “...an identity tenuously constituted in time- an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*”.¹⁷

This reassuring presentation of “normal” gender delineations in popular culture was first interrupted in the early 1970s by glam rock; artists such as David Bowie and Marc Bolan introduced pop music audiences to cross-dressing and the blurring of gender boundaries. Yet glam rock demonstrated that: “Gender, it seems, is reversible only in one direction, and this must surely be to do with the immense social power that accumulates around masculinity”.¹⁸ It was the *men* in 1970s pop and rock that explored the boundaries of gender, and this was often through co-opting (and sometimes parodying) either femininity-as-clothes-and-makeup, or even apparently in the case of the band The Sweet, transvestism itself.¹⁹ Glam “became progressively disengaged from the mundane concerns of everyday life and adolescence”²⁰ and emphasized subversive physical appearance over political activism in its engagement with gender definition.

Historically, the British public had been quite comfortable with cross-dressing on theatre and variety stages. Even in Victorian music hall, performers such as Vesta Tilley could address social problems such as male drunkenness and womanizing safely from the stage in character as a male.²¹ Using her observational skills and “magical translation”²² of the habits of the male characters she inhabited, she became immensely popular with British working class women,. Traditional pantomimes featured female leads in “serious” male parts and male leads in comic female parts, and there were “breeches roles” for women in formal opera and theatre. Then from 1958 onwards, the popular *Carry On* films, humorous and smutty British films, featured camp, gay actors Kenneth Williams and Charles Hawtrey. However,

androgyny and cross-dressing were only tolerated in controlled and mediated environments, and not on the street. To cite Butler again:

On the street or in the bus, the act becomes dangerous... precisely because there are no theatrical conventions to delimit the purely imaginary character of the act, indeed, on the street or on the bus, there is no presumption that the act is distinct from reality; the disquieting effect of the act is that there are no conventions that facilitate making this separation.²³

Punk was a street subculture; punks congregated in gay and lesbian bars in metropolitan areas (such as Louise's in Soho (where Siouxsie Sue and many of the 'first wave' punks hung out), and Dickens in Salford (which provided a safe haven for musician and artist Linder Sterling), community centers where anarchist organizations met, shebeens (illegal late-night drinking dens) and street corners in run-down urban areas. Most punk scenes overlapped with other behaviors deemed to be socially deviant: male and female prostitution,²⁴ delinquency, anarchy and homosexuality. Detournement was articulated through clothing that was often influenced by ironic references to S&M and taboo political symbolism, in particular Nazism. Inspiration came from a sequence of deviant or apocalyptic films such as Joseph Losey's *The Servant* (1963) and Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971). Bob Fosse's film version of *Cabaret* (1972) was an obvious influence as was the Berlin cabaret music of Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht. Jim Sharman's 1975 film *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* featured the actor Little Nell, who had been an aficionado of McClaren and Westwood's shop *Sex* before it was rechristened *Seditionaries* in 1976. The polymorphous perversity of the artists and musicians of Andy Warhol's Factory

travelled to Britain via his films and additionally, the music of The Velvet Underground featured Nico and Mo Tucker as female role models; another woman artist from New York's underground nightclub CBGBs, Patti Smith, brought distinctly unfeminine anger in her music and physical androgyny through the Mapplethorpe photograph on the cover of her 1975 album *Horses*.

Dave Laing notes that punk women's clothing varied from the male rock uniform (as worn by Gaye Back of The Adverts and Chrissie Hynde of The Pretenders), through "determinedly asexual" clothing (as worn by Fay Fife of The Rezillos and Poly Styrene), to confrontational clothing (as worn by Siouxsie and Ari Up). He compares the "glamorous" with the "forbidden", the former worn in pre-punk days by rock chicks and "accepted into a public discourse of showbusiness sexuality"²⁵ and the latter "...thwarting the fetishistic gaze [that] seem[s] to rest on the displacement of the fetishized garment from its customary relationship with the body."²⁶ For example, Siouxsie's appropriation of dog collars and the wearing of plastic macs over fetishistic underwear and, more humorously, Ari's wearing of knickers over her trousers, more reminiscent of the *St Trinian's* films than *A Clockwork Orange*. Siouxsie (alongside Jordan and Soo Catwoman) forefronted taboo elements of Britain in the standard punk style described by Dick Hebdige as "dramatizing what had come to be called 'Britain's decline' by constructing a language which was, in contrast to the prevailing rhetoric of the Rock Establishment, unmistakably relevant and down to earth".²⁷ The separation between active and passive appearance was key to the provocative nature of punk. As Susan Sontag writes: "The difference... between "style" and "stylization" might be analogous to the difference between will and willfulness."²⁸ There was *force* in Siouxsie's sexualized attire; it actively served to deliver her and her band's messages of discontent and

subversion. This street-camp was often misread simply because members of the public could not, or refused to, read its ironic message.

Straight pornography itself was disrupted by the artists/musician Linder Sterling, whose decoupage style became part of the Manchester record label New Hormones' identity.²⁹ Linder describes taking her completed images, culled from a combination of soft porn magazines (such as Playboy and Fiesta), and home-ware catalogues, to Xerox to be photocopied, only to have the staff refuse because they did not approve; yet on their wall, they were displaying photographs of topless women from *The Sun* newspaper. Even left wing printers objected to her work.³⁰ Later, when Manchester's Hacienda Club opened in 1982, Linder was disturbed by "too many nights... with its repetitive reels of pornography presiding over the dance floor. Pornography can never be casual and without consequence, at least not in my world".³¹ Using thrown-away meat from restaurants, she sewed chicken pieces on to black net to make a dress³², with a chicken-claw hairdo and a black dildo under her skirt. As she sang with her band Ludus, two friends, Liz Naylor and Cath Carroll, distributed "chicken innards wrapped in pornography" to the audience. This was an overt disruption to the masculine "cool" of the Hacienda and was deeply objected to by the owner of the club, Tony Wilson; it was the last performance that Ludus did there. Liz herself had formed a punk band with two other women and describes the ethos of the scene: "It was just an experience and we were *there*... Our band was there to annoy people, which is why we called ourselves The Gay Animals and were overtly lesbian, or queer".³³

The desire to "annoy people" was typical of oppositional nature of punk; many were against monetization of their subculture and felt betrayed when The Sex Pistols and The Clash signed to major labels. At the time, the sense of having "no future"

was palpable; the collapse of apparently simple everyday services like refuse collection, ambulance provision and other frameworks of civilized life, combined with accelerating inflation, meant that they were driven by a sense of desperation and a need to occupy their waking hours with constant subversive activity. Even the weather seemed to reflect the sense of impending doom that the backwards-running clock at punk shop *Seditionaries* and the Sex Pistols' "No Future" slogan, appeared to herald. In 1976, there was a summer heat wave that lasted for months, bringing severe drought to the UK. An "end-times" mentality contributed to punks' disengagement from the established rules of the mainstream music industry, whose more escapist product spoke an entirely different, escapist language.

To summarize, in contrast to the superficially subversive, approach of glam rock, punk rock appeared more active, with disruptive content that provided meaning and agency to its participants. Yet glam, while not representing women as creative protagonists, *had* encouraged the questioning of the status quo by young women of that generation. The femininity of male rock stars like Marc Bolan and David Bowie was cited by Viv Albertine as a turning point, because, as she said,

I, like very many young girls, [was] drawn to very female-ish boys; you don't get drawn to hairy he-men. You want control. Your sexuality is halfway between boy/girl anyway... I realized they were all girly boys. Marc Bolan wore girl's shoes, Bowie was feminine... It was quite exciting really; you could almost be kissing a girl. I used to kiss the posters. But there were no girls that turned me on until Patti Smith.³⁴

Gender Redefinition in the Music of Punk: ‘I never felt that I was going to turn into a lady’.³⁵

Punk music itself avoided lyrical cliché and he/she lyrics,³⁶ preferring to critique advertising (X-Ray Spex, *My Mind Is Like A Plastic Bag*), dramatize mundane locations (The Raincoats, *Fairytale in the Supermarket*) or describe the everyday minor criminal activities that were part of survival (The Slits, *Shoplifting*). It was neither essential nor desirable to relegate oneself lyrically to the role of ‘she’ in binary opposition to the heroic “he”. For women performers, this in itself was a liberation from gender tyranny. Even romantic feelings could be disconnected from an imagined recipient of love for instance, in The Raincoats’ song *In Love*, which ‘never discusses an object of desire.’³⁷ This refusal of normal gendered dialogue in songs was another manifestation of détournement in punk, supported by the fact that vocal delivery was also reinvented. Different female vocal styles developed under the umbrella of punk, none of them “singerly”. Often, the singing style was declamatory (Poly, Siouxsie), rejecting overt sexuality and femininity, preferring to deliver the message (usually angry), rather than being aesthetically pleasing. The closest precedents were female rockers like Janis Joplin. John Shepherd had found Joplin’s “stridency” and “total closure” uncomfortable to listen to, and there is a similarity to be found in the declamatory style of women punks.³⁸ He compares Joplin to early blues singers such as Memphis Minnie, who were empowered by the fact that in large urban areas in the US, it was they, rather than their male counterparts, who were likely to be able to find work. Shepherd links this comparative power to their use of their “hard vocal tones”.³⁹ Ironically, this tallies with the equality conferred by equal

unemployment for women and men in the 1970s. Without traditional roles in the workplace, there was a shift in perception of traditional roles *outside* it.

Not all vocal tones were strident and hard; some singers sounded boyish rather than bratty or declamatory, and these boy-voices added to the disruption of gender perception, resisting both the post-adolescent sexualized tones of many chart acts at the time and the rock-male-identifying stridency of artists such as Suzy Quatro (who we will return to later). The Slits, the Raincoats and The Mo-Dettes used these more androgynous, pre-adolescent styles of singing in order to prioritize the lyrical message, disrupting established aesthetic values that would encourage them to be categorized and thus recuperated. The effect of the vocal style of The Slits' song *Typical Girls* is of being "sung at" (rather than "sung to") by stropic teenagers in a deliberately amateur and unpretentious style.⁴⁰

The simultaneous withdrawal of overt sexualisation from both lyrics and vocal timbres and the creation of alternative ways of sounding, pulled the women performers into gender neutral territory, which was an entirely new female aesthetic zone that had not previously been explored by British popular music. As Angela McRobbie observed, the UK music industry habitually disempowered its female performers by turning them into "family entertainers" and "charming hostesses".⁴¹ Siouxsie had set the tone for resistance to this hegemonic channeling of femininity when she appeared alongside the Sex Pistols on Bill Grundy's ITV show in 1976, and the sheer antagonism of the women punk bands shut them out of mainstream culture even when they later tried to engage with it. The Slits wanted to appear on a children's TV show called *Tiswas* which was supposedly subversive and anarchic, but they were blocked from mainstream TV and radio by fearful male gatekeepers. It was only DJ John Peel who would give them an outlet in the UK.⁴²

‘Nursery Rhyme Gothic’⁴³: finding a noise

Opposition by women from within the opposition that was already being played out in punk, meant that for women musicians looking at mainstream rock from the outside, “oedipal frisson”⁴⁴ in lyrics and bodily presentation was of no relevance. Detached from familial constraints, they were reinventing themselves using a palette of different moods, attitudes, subversions and noises. Often, despite the use of rock instruments, the music was not typically rock in style. Their “not-rock”, experimented with the sounds of their instruments in a song format that bypassed simple binary opposition to rock. Even those who successfully made music that *could* be read as part of the general flow of punk rock music (for instance Siouxsie and the Banshees and The Au Pairs) had a critical approach to the canon. The Au Pairs, more overtly political than The Banshees, expressed concern with the retrogressive names of the male punk bands, deliberately resisting gender assumptions in their own choice of nomenclature. Guitarist and singer Lesley commented:

The Stranglers, the Sex Pistols... that's menacing! Where did these names come from? It's still steeped in Hell's Angels male pathology. In a sense it's a political statement in itself. Just choosing a name like [the Au Pairs]... if it has any connotations it has very neutral connotations that are completely neutral from a gender, sexuality, color, or nationality [point of view].⁴⁵

The female punk musicians that I interviewed cited many different role models, including men, and it was difficult to find a common thread between them. Some cited bass-playing Suzi Quatro as an influence. She had charted in the mid 1970s, although she did not write her own songs. Quatro wore a black leather jacket, normally associated with male rockers, on the BBC's *Top of the Pops*, played a bass guitar, hollered at the top of her voice, and had a defiant persona. She was unusual for her time because many female musicians on the show were either acoustic-guitar-toting Joni Mitchell sound-alikes, or piano-playing, and obviously classically trained, chanteuses. Many of her performances involved what Philip Auslander describes as "dual signification" where she sang cover versions previously delivered by a male to a female, without changing the gender of the lyrics.⁴⁶

Issues raised by Quatro's "paradoxical position"⁴⁷ of being a *female* cock rocker, were later echoed in Patti Smith's cover of the song *Gloria* in 1975, and also The Raincoats' cover version of *Lola* in 1979. The Raincoats' music and vocals were more "grown up" than that of The Slits, though definitely not sonically "maternal"⁴⁸: they still embraced untrained-sounding singing and shared lead vocals, so that the tradition of having a diva-like front person was also disrupted. Caroline O'Meara compares the "vocal instability" of Ana Da Silva's singing style in the Raincoats' song *Fairytale in the Supermarket* to Johnny Rotten's phrase endings and accentuation of "important words" but she "diffuses [the technique], making it the primary mode of signification... Da Silva's punchy slides and her inexpert vocal technique fractures the musical surface, drawing the listener in without providing an opportunity for identification".⁴⁹

Lola was originally written by Ray Davies and released by his band The Kinks in 1970. The act of covering it was effectively a double détournement. The woman

described by the narrator in the song, who “talked like a woman and walked like a man” is a transgender woman encountered by a straight man. The Raincoats’ version, performed by a female band that deliberately resisted gender categorization, reiterated the disruptive nature of the song that had led to the original being banned by some mainstream radio stations, with an additional layer of subversion.⁵⁰ As Gina Birch, founder member of the band, says:

Ana [co-singer, co-guitarist] was interested in the idea of gender being confused, and not being labeled specifically but everything kind of being back to front and upside down and not necessarily what it seems. It seemed interesting for a female to do a song about a male being female, just the whole thing of subverting the subversion, turning it all upside down and shaking it up.⁵¹

This is a perfect example of punk’s recuperation of mainstream culture. By pulling what had been a chart hit in 1970 into the détournement of punk, the Kinks’ gently risqué song was redefined and redirected. This was a different type of commentary on mainstream pop music than Siouxsie’s camp dramatization. The Raincoats were adopting a similar attitude to Patti Smith, who was “distancing the feminine through an assumed persona that denaturalized sexual difference”.⁵² *Lola* was a case of the rock establishment being parodied through its *own* language, and the song actually dramatized The Raincoats’ opposition to the assumptions of rock music that had previously spoken to adolescent males, creating male-defined territory that was set against women and girls. As Gina remembers, “I think one of the things I hated about being a teenager were these self-assured, arrogant boys. I found the kind of boy culture thing, the rock bands, so hideous, so alienating”.⁵³ In addition, by “dragging”

the song, performing words originally intended for the opposite sex, thus indicating a sexual identity as *anders* (other) or gay [and] using certain vocal mannerisms such as feminization of expression, shifting the emphasis from straight to gay,” the Raincoats are participating in a European tradition of “Queering the Song” that has a history rooted in German cabaret in the 1930s.⁵⁴

Auslander applied Simon Reynolds and Joy Press’ phrase, “female machismo”⁵⁵ to Quatro’s persona, yet not all punk women were “one of the boys.” They just weren’t “Typical Girls” (the title of the Slits’ song was a common insult targeted at girls in the 1970s). They were not competing against male punks in an attempt to “beat them at their own game” in the way that Quatro competed with male rockers,⁵⁶ but were *joining* them in their game, parodying the music industry definition of femininity and the female, thus foregrounding a gender element in punk’s subversion. The cover of *Lola* has had no “sex change operation”⁵⁷ but instead is de-gendered by the lack of acting, by the authenticity of The Raincoats’ decidedly natural and non-showbiz personae.

Reggae

Reggae was one of the most potentially surprising influences on all-female, or predominantly female, punk bands. This was an interesting phenomenon, because roots reggae in particular was music affiliated with Rastafarianism, a belief system that discouraged female freedom and autonomy. This stylistic influence could be interpreted as an act of active cultural appropriation, though at the time reggae was “in the air”, in particular in west London where many of the bands lived and played.

DJs such as Don Letts, and BBC Radio 1's John Peel also positively promoted reggae.⁵⁸

Gina Birch, Tessa Pollitt and Jane Woodgate (from the Mo-dettes) had all learned to play the bass, facilitated by listening to dub reggae's clarity of production, and The Slits' album *Cut* was produced by reggae musician Dennis Bovell. The all-female ska-punk band The Bodysnatchers played covers in their live set to augment their own compositions. Journalist Adrian Thrills addressed the misogynistic lyrics of the genre with the band in an interview. Their response is interesting:

Stella: "The links we do have with ska music are through the things in it that we can use to our advantage. It's the music that we are using, not the lyrics. I mean stuff like Prince Buster's 'Ten Commandments' is so ridiculously sexist that it's hysterical. It must be tongue-in-cheek".

Lead singer Rhoda Dakar goes on to dispute the latter remark, probably correctly..⁵⁹ The Bodysnatchers tried to recuperate ska by selectively ignoring the sexism of the lyrics. The recuperation of misogyny, however, is a much larger project than punk (or any of its offshoots) could take on. Although white female punk and ska musicians felt "an affinity", as Tessa Pollitt told me, with the oppression of black reggae artists, this affinity was only very occasionally reciprocated.⁶⁰ ; working within existing male-coded music genres started a musical conversation with the overarching gender politics within those genres, but this was a complex and ultimately unresolved communication.

Reactions

It was the violent and spectacular features of punk that were focused on by the British tabloid press, though the thriving fanzine culture of the moment took a more measured approach. In the mainstream music press, the punk generation of male rock journalists rarely knew how to write about the determined individualism of female punk musicians. Every musician “played themselves” differently, transcending the categorizations that pre-punk music had depended upon. Lora Logic, the original saxophone player with X-Ray Spex, explained: “I felt to be a woman on stage without necessarily having a sexual stance definitely felt different, and it *was* different, and it was a conscious image projection”.⁶¹ The BBC DJ John Peel, who boosted the careers of many of the punk bands through his late night Radio 1 show, described his feelings on meeting The Slits:

They were quite frightening because... I was going to say they were like blokes, but obviously they weren't like blokes, but they weren't like women either, at least not women as I'd understood them up to that moment. They were just so kind of *direct*, and not flirtatious, not playing up to being feminine, they were just themselves...⁶²

Projecting the state of *be-ing* was an integral part of the performance of these women; this is what all of the female punk bands had in common, however their gender was (or was not) articulated. The Mo-Dettes,⁶³ while denying the label “women in rock” and embracing femininity, felt that being feminine was their right; their guitarist Kate Korris said: “When we started people used to say, ‘You’re too feminine, you ought to be more butch, then people won’t accuse you of being girly’. But as far as I’m concerned, if I have to do that to get past the fact that I’m a girl then there’s no point”. In having the potentiality to opt out of typical womanhood, and by

making this opt-out knowing and deliberate, they were “doing” their bodies⁶⁴ in a very different way.

Generally, women journalists understood what was happening, but writing by male journalists at the time was often crude and misogynistic. demonstrating unease that these female performers were not performing *for them* and their male readers, or trying to impress them. The more sympathetic US critic Greil Marcus wrote of the collective nature of The Raincoats: “There’s something wonderfully anonymous about these women and their music: as four women appearing as nothing but themselves, they demystify each other”⁶⁵; they are

...not exactly singing “as themselves”, not in the way rock’n’roll has led us to understand the idea. They are not, as would Joni Mitchell or John Lennon, singing to refine an individual sensibility or to project a personality or a persona onto the world. Rather, they are singing as factors in the situations they are trying to construct.⁶⁶

As O’Meara notes, male band-members in The Raincoats were the ones written out of history, in a reversal of the norm,⁶⁷ yet “... the presence of male musicians in The Raincoats may have seemed that much more ‘normal’ to the almost exclusively male writers” of the rock press. This possibly insulated them against some of the anger directed at other bands, particularly The Slits, until they too included men in their line-up.

The women musicians’ differences *from each other* were highlighted in 1980 Deanne Pearson’s *New Musical Express* article “Women in Rock”, where members of The Raincoats, The Passions and the Au Pairs were gathered to talk about themselves and their relationship to feminism (Viv Albertine and The Mo-Dettes were

interviewed separately). Again, the rejection of categorization is brought to the forefront, with only Barbara Grogan from *The Passions* defining herself as a feminist. Shepherding all the groups together under the banner of feminism must have seemed like an effective press strategy for bringing the situation back under their control, but it was the co-option of reggae that the white, male rock critics found hardest to comprehend. Some of the reviews of *The Slits* were merciless in their contempt. Ian Penman in particular refers to “flickety flak guitars and servant’s bass... Ari’s vintage whine... bullshitting, imitating West Indian religions and patois, and generally being a precious, artsy fartsy pain in the pants”⁶⁸

The End

According to Debord, ‘*Détournement*... occurs within a type of communication aware of its inability to enshrine any inherent and definitive certainty’⁶⁹. For women artists, musicians and subculturalists in punk, the act of *détournement* encouraged and articulated resistance through appearance, lyrical approach and sound, not only to the mainstream but also sometimes to each other, for as Butler says:

...one ought to consider the futility of a political program which seeks radically to transform the social situation of women without first determining whether the category of woman is socially constructed in such a way that to be a woman is, by definition, to be in an oppressed situation.⁷⁰

Butler’s observation explains why so many of the female punk bands rejected the pressure into being co-opted by second wave feminism and its apparent essentialism ,

while simultaneously rejecting the cock rock stance of male punk music. In the refusal of constructed gender, both feminism and punk became fragile, yet to acknowledge being “the weaker sex” in need of the political community offered by feminism, would not have supported their feelings of individual empowerment and freedom.

After 40 years, the memories of the meaning of punk to women are colored by nostalgia and contemporary readings that ignore some of the most vital social issues that the punk women struggled with. To return to Butler, “Performing one’s gender wrong initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect, and performing it well provides the reassurance that there is an essentialism of gender identity after all.”⁷¹ The punishments meted out to the women in my original study were severe. In addition to other routine violence, I later found out about five rapes that had not been reported at the time of the interviews. Even though “[p]opular music performances are always double-coded with respect to gender identity and sexuality since they refer both to general social codes and to genre-specific codes that signify within particular musical and cultural categories.”⁷² Auslander is skeptical of popular culture’s ability to “undermine deep-seated social norms” and this brutality is testament to that.

The major recuperation of punk’s message of individual autonomy for women by Madonna, who reintroduced sexuality-as-power to the world of popular music in the 1980s⁷³ had a negative impact on the ability of women’s punk bands to develop and survive. Gender fluidity once more became the prerogative of male pop stars as New Romanticism foregrounded male femininity in artists such as Boy George, who became a queer role model for the next generation, with the lone female androgynous figure of Annie Lennox appearing in a suit in 1983 for the video of the Eurhythmics’ song *Sweet Dreams are Made of This*. Ironically, it was the female punk bands that had provided the bridge between glam rock and New Romanticism; Boy George’s

dreadlocks echoed Ari's, and the reggae influence on Culture Club is unmistakable, yet more pleasing to the "mainstream ear" in the longer term than any music made by the bands discussed in this chapter.

The feminist writer Catherine MacKinnon had, after the 1970s, "imagined that feminists would retheorize life in the concrete rather than spend the next three decades on metatheory, talking *about* theory, rehashing over and over in this disconnected way how theory should be done, leaving women's lives twisting in the wind".⁷⁴ Yet as well as inspiring behaviors and affirming *différance*, the cultural legacy of punk has created iconic figures. Withers cites Rachael House's *Feminist Disco* installation, created in 2011 as a series of "islands" inhabited by statuettes of The Slits, Jayne County and Poly Styrene.⁷⁵ This installation illustrates what should not be forgotten about punk, and female punk in particular: it's humor. And for queer women, punk music provides a rich source of affirmation, in spite of and because of its marginal nature; from the turbulent challenging of gender roles in the 1970s onwards when it demonstrated

the importance of queering to the politics of popular music and the particular "pull" it exerts on both the individual and collective imagination. This has largely depended on the queer audience being able to discern sympathetic attributes in periods when homosexuality remained for the most part legally and socially proscribed...⁷⁶

¹ From Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1995) 144-145. The Situationist International was a group of anti-capitalist artists, writers

and political activists. The movement was active between 1957 and 1972, and critiqued accepted political doctrines and social practices, often by parodying the acceptance of existing social, political, and cultural structures.

² See for instance, Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana, 1977) 165-169, and Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge* (London and New York, Routledge, 1989).

³ this had previously been acted out and chronicled as an alternative bedroom culture subservient to the activities of their male counterparts, see Angela McRobbie, *Feminism and Youth Culture*, Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1991, 2000)

⁴ An archive of this music can be found at <http://womensliberationmusicarchive.co.uk>

⁵ See Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: the meaning of style* (London and New York: Routledge, 1979)

⁶ See Stan Cohen *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: the creation of the mods and rockers* (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1993)

⁷ See Paul Willis, *Profane Culture* (London and Boston: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1978)

⁸ See Sheila Whiteley, *The Space Between The Notes* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).

⁹ <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1976/jul/20/unemployment>

¹⁰ John Shepherd, *Music As Social Text* (London: Polity, 1991), 157

¹¹ See Lucy O'Brien, 1999, "The Woman Punk Made Me" in Roger Sabin (ed.) (1999) *Punk Rock: So What? The cultural legacy of punk* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999): 186-189

¹² Jon Savage *England's Dreaming: Sex Pistols and punk rock* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), 418.

¹³ Judith Halberstam “*What’s That Smell? Queer Temporalities and Subcultural Lives*” in Sheila Whiteley and Jennifer Rycenga, (eds.) *Queering the Popular Pitch* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge 2006): 3.

¹⁴ Vi died in January 2016

¹⁵ Susan Sontag *A Susan Sontag Reader* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982), 112

¹⁶ ITV, first broadcast February 1976

¹⁷ Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: an Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory” in *Theatre Journal* Vol. 40.4 (December 1985): 519-531. 519

¹⁸ Op.cit. Halberstam, 269.

¹⁹ Hebdige describes androgynous Bowie clones in Coventry in the early 1970s. According to Simon Frith, these young people were called ‘Bowie Boys’ and even had their own fanzine. The author came across similar young people in a bar in Wakefield, although several of the ‘boys’ were in fact young women dressed in drag were trousers and braces (suspenders); all had the distinctive shock of red spiky hair that Bowie sported at the time.

The author visited a pub in 1975 in a small Yorkshire town far from large metropolitan influences and came upon a room full of young men and women dressed as David Bowie circa 1975. Hebdige Dick “*Subculture: the meaning of style*” (London and New York: Routledge,1979) 60

²⁰ Ibid., 11.

²¹ Sarah Maitland *Vesta Tilley* (London: Virago,1986) 111-114.

²² Ibid., 121

²³ op. cit. Butler 527.

²⁴ See Stephen Colegrave and Chris Sullivan *Punk: a life apart* (London: Cassell, 2001)

²⁵ Dave Laing *One Chord Wonders: power and meaning in punk rock* (Oakland: PM Press 2015) 116.

²⁶ *Ibid.*,117.

²⁷ *Op. cit.* Hebdige .87.

²⁸ *Op. cit.* Sontag 153.

²⁹ See for instance the sleeve of the Buzzcocks' 1977 single *Orgasm Addict*, which featured a naked woman's body with smiling mouths replacing her nipples, and an iron replacing her head

³⁰ Talk at The Zabludowicz Collection, London, 7th February 2016

³¹ By email, from interview for Tate Magazine and Uncut, 1/05/2002

³² This was probably an influence on Lady Gaga's meat dress , 2010

³³ Interview with author 7/9/2000

³⁴ Interview with author,26/3/2010. Both Patti Smith and the budding guitarist Chrissie Hynde of The Pretenders were also inspirational figures for Viv, who although she admired Suzi Quatro, was fully aware that she was under the songwriting and production control of Chinn and Chapman.

³⁵ Interview with author 23/6/2000

³⁶ *Op. cit.* Laing, 87-92,

³⁷ Caroline O'Meara (2003) "The Raincoats: Breaking down Punk Rock's Masculinities" in *Popular Music*, Vol. 22, No. 3, Cambridge University Press, 2003) 299-313: 309.

³⁸ He applies Frith and McRobbie's description of this type of singing style as 'one of the boys', from Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie, (1979) "Rock and Sexuality" in *Screen Education*, no.29: 3-19: 9, in op. cit. Shepherd 171.

³⁹ Citing Paul Oliver, *The Story of the Blues* London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1979) 9

⁴⁰ Op. cit. Shepherd

⁴¹ Angela McRobbie *Feminism and Youth Culture* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 2000) 143.

⁴² Helen Reddington *The Lost Women of Rock Music: female musicians of the punk era* (Sheffield: Equinox 2012) 180.

⁴³ Title of a review by Paul Morley of *Cut* by The Slits and *Join Hands* by Siouxsie and the Banshees, NME, 1/09/97, 27.

⁴⁴ Richard Middleton "Mum's the Word: Men's Singing and Maternal Law" in Freya Jarman-Ivens, *Oh Boy! Masculinities and Popular Music* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge 2007) 111.

⁴⁵ Interview with author 30/7/2010

⁴⁶ Philip Auslander "I Wanna Be Your Man: Suzi Quatro's Musical Androgyny".

Popular Music 23 (1). Cambridge University Press (2004) 1–16

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3877622>. 11.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 7,

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Op.cit. O'Meara 308.

⁵⁰ . According to Gina Birch, Davies later remarked that the band had taken a hit and made it into an album track, rather than taking an album track and making it into a hit; he was not impressed by their cover version (personal communication, 18/02/2016)

⁵¹ Interview with author 23/6/2000

⁵² Op. cit. Whiteley, 2006 256.

⁵³ Interview with author 23/6/2000

⁵⁴ Whiteley and Rycenga citing Anno Mungen ““Anders als die Anderen,” or Queering the Song: construction and representation of homosexuality in German cabaret song recordings before 1933” in Sheila Whiteley and Jennifer Rycenga, (eds) *Queering the Popular Pitch* New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2006). Mungen extracts a line from one of the songs: ‘*Wir sind nun einmal anders als die anderen* (We are in fact other than the others’ (ibid.).

⁵⁵ Simon Reynolds and Joy Press *The Sex Revolts* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1995)

⁵⁶ Op. cit. Auslander, 9

⁵⁷ ibid., 10

⁵⁸ Peel was allowed to play any music so long as it was not commercial; he was the justification for the BBC’s radio license, which forbade commercialization of any kind. His blend of punk, reggae, experimental and folk music earned him a large, loyal national following, and introduced both artists and their audiences to marginal music forms that they might not otherwise have heard.

⁵⁹ Adrian “Rude Girls and Dirty Phone Calls”, interview with Adrian Thrills in the NME, 26/01/1980 19.

⁶⁰ Interview with author, 30/1/2006

⁶¹ Interview with author 18/10/2001

⁶² Interview with author, 20/10/2001

⁶³ The Mo-Dettes played traditional rock instruments apart from their singer, Ramona, and stressed their musicianship in interviews.

⁶⁴ Op. cit. Butler, 521.

⁶⁵ Greil Marcus *Ranters and Crowd Pleasers: punk in pop music 1977-92* (New York and London: Doubleday, 1993) 113.

⁶⁶ Op. cit. Marcus 178.

⁶⁷ Op. cit. O'Meara 306,

⁶⁸ Ian Penman. Review of The Slits: *In the Beginning there was rhythm*/The Pop Group *Where there's a will there's a way* (Rough Trade) in *The New Musical Express*, 15th March 1980 21.

⁶⁹ Debord, Guy *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1994) 146.

⁷⁰ Op. cit. Butler 523.

⁷¹ Ibid., 528.

⁷² Op. cit. Auslander 6.

⁷³ Madonna had been at The Slits gigs in New York, but has never acknowledged their influence on her style and attitude.

⁷⁴ Catherine MacKinnon

⁷⁵ Op.cit Withers 80.

⁷⁶ Op. cit. Whiteley and Rycenga xiv

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