



THE AESTHETIC OF OUR ANGER

Anarcho-Punk, Politics and Music

EDITED BY MIKE DINES & MATTHEW WORLEY



PUNK IS ONE OF THE MOST FIERCELY DEBATED POST-WAR SUBCULTURES. DESPITE THE ATTENTION SURROUNDING THE MOVEMENT'S ORIGINS, ANALYSES OF PUNK HAVE BEEN DRAWN PREDOMINANTLY FROM A NOW WELL-TRODDEN HISTORICAL NARRATIVE. THIS SIMPLIFICATION OF PUNK'S HISTORIES ERASES ITS BREADTH AND VIBRANCY, LEAVING OUT BANDS FROM CRASS TO THE SUBHUMANS WHO TOOK THE CALL FOR ANARCHY IN THE UK SERIOUSLY.

DISILLUSIONED BY THE COMMERCIALIZATION OF PUNK, THE ANARCHO-PUNK SCENE FOUGHT AGAINST DEPENDENCE ON LARGE RECORD LABELS. ANARCHO-PUNK RE-IGNITED THE PUNK ETHOS, INCLUDING A RETURN TO AN 'ANYONE-CAN-DO-IT' CULTURE OF MUSIC PRODUCTION AND PERFORMANCE. ANARCHO-PUNK ENCOURAGED FOCUSED POLITICAL DEBATE AND SELF-ORGANISED SUBVERSIVE ACTIVITIES, FROM A HEIGHTENED AWARENESS TO ISSUES OF PERSONAL FREEDOM AND ANIMAL RIGHTS TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF LOCAL COOPERATIVES WHERE MUSICIANS, ARTISTS AND LIKE-MINDED PEOPLE COULD MEET.

THE ANARCHO-PUNK MOVEMENT HELPED TO REIGNITE A SERIOUS ANARCHIST MOVEMENT IN THE UK AND INSPIRED ACTIONS CHALLENGING THE THATCHER-REAGAN AXIS. THE AESTHETIC OF OUR ANGER EXPLORES THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ANARCHO-PUNK SCENE FROM THE LATE 1970S, RAISING QUESTIONS OVER THE ORIGINS OF THE SCENE, ITS FORM, STRUCTURE AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE EXAMINING HOW ANARCHO-PUNK MOVED AWAY FROM USING 'ANARCHY' AS MERE CONNOTATION AND SHOCK VALUE TOWARDS AN APPROACH THAT SERVED TO MAKE PUNK A THREAT AGAIN

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Anarcho-Punk, Politics and Music

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MINOR COMPOSITIONS 2016

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For Sheila Whiteley (1941–2015)

HELEN REDDINGTON

THE POLITICAL PIONEERS OF PUNK (JUST DON'T MENTION THE F-WORD!)

WRITING ABOUT PUNK has always been a risky business, especially when one is approaching it from an academic perspective. Punk is anti-academic, and supposedly anti-formal; it prioritises the lived experience over both scholarly theory and mediated opinion and later in this chapter I will underline the importance of being real as opposed to following theoretical directions, both in the living of a subcultural life itself and also in the approach to writing history.

It is a complicated path one must follow in order to negotiate potential accusations of hypocrisy in one's writing. Indeed, Furness notes the irritation expressed by Penny Rimbaud, initiator of the Crass collective, at the *No Future* punk conference which was organized by David Muggleton in 2001. Rimbaud declared the concept of a scholarly approach to punk as 'absurd... academics sitting round talking about something so anti-academic.'¹ I was there, having overcome my

1 Zak Furness, *Punkademics: The Basement Show in the Ivory Tower* (Wivenhoe)

own misgivings about exactly the same issue, but found the conference to be hilariously affirming. As far as I know, Rimbaud didn't actually attend any of the sessions where academics supposedly sat round 'talking about something so anti-academic', but he did attend to make his own keynote speech, alongside Caroline Coon and Gary Valentine. Both he and Caroline were remarkably helpful to me as I sought to find women to interview for the book which I later published. So this chapter is written with the awareness that (after the writing of McRobbie²) firstly, I am a subjective writer, and secondly, that there are those who believe that anarchic music making should be excluded from academic discourse. Furness, of course, robustly defends those of us in particular who were actively engaged with punk as musicians during the 1970s and who now find ourselves as lecturers and researchers from a destination we had never envisaged, Higher Education.

From this position we have been able to insert our empirical experiences into more high-falutin' historical discourses, sometimes interrupting their flow with an insistence on revision based on our own experience of participation in a multi-stranded subculture; in my own case, this meant collecting the experiences of women who played rock instruments in punk bands and beginning to contextualize these within the greater punk, gender, political, and historical discourses.

There are several reasons for writing this chapter. In my earlier research, I was aware that I could only scratch the surface of the areas of punk and women's music-making that I was investigating; I had not documented the actual music,³ I had not addressed race or LGBT issues, and I had not explored the connection between the women in anarcho-punk bands and feminist practice. Here, I hope to begin to discuss the importance of the women musicians of anarcho-punk and the way their feminism was and is embedded within their musical praxis.

The women in the punk subculture were visible and vocal, making their presence felt on the street, as artists (Vivienne Westwood,

Brooklyn/Port Watson: Minor Compositions, 2012), p15.

2 Angela McRobbie, "Settling Accounts with Subcultures: A Feminist Critique," in *On Record: Rock, Pop and the Written Word*, ed. Simon Frith et al. (London and New York: Routledge 1990).

3 Reddington, forthcoming in *Popular Music History*.

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Gee Vaucher, Linder Sterling), and as writers (Julie Burchill, Lucy Toothpaste) as well as musicians. This was of great importance: they were audible for the first time as rock beings, not only following in the footsteps of ‘hollers’ like Janis Joplin, Tina Turner, and the other strong female vocal role models who had come before them, but also appearing on stage playing electric guitars, electric basses, drums, and keyboards and making ‘boy-noise’, redefining it as aesthetically and technically their own. This chapter focuses on a subculture within a subculture: the explicitly pacifist and feminist (amongst many other things) subgenre of anarcho-punk, which stubbornly celebrated its subculture-ness even as the Birmingham School definitions of subcultures began to be deconstructed with the onset of Thatcherism and the beginnings of the 20th century *fin-de-siecle* philosophy, postmodernism.

I will be focussing on the period in the UK between roughly 1978 and 1984; this is because during this period the political changes in the British social landscape were tumultuous and made a transition from entropy to proactive monetarism, and the most influential of the anarcho-punk bands, Crass, dissolved in 1984. Using the context of moral authority, anger, anarchy, and uniformity (all issues that beset discourse on punk), I will discuss some of the women-focused bands of anarcho-punk and some of the ways they encouraged more participation in their activities.

MORAL AUTHORITY AND PUNK SUBCULTURAL AUTHENTICITY: A CONTEXT

At the beginning, punk’s rules were set out by men. Johnny Rotten’s ‘moral authority’⁴ was a strong foil for the hypocritical moral stance of the mainstream British media, which had been intent on demonizing the current generation of young people. Hebdige describes the historic friction between the mainstream and perceived threats to established culture, citing Williams’s ‘aesthetic and moral criteria for distinguishing the worthwhile products from the “trash,”’⁵ the ‘moral conviction’ of Barthes’ beliefs⁶ and Gramsci’s critique of the social authority of the

4 Peter York, *Style Wars* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1980), p48.

5 Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979), p8.

6 Ibid., p10.

mainstream.⁷ It is no wonder that punk, with its celebration of its own trash aesthetic, excited academia. The hippy project had apparently failed, its alternative approach quickly appearing to become commercialized and its libertarian politics leading to, for instance, the *Oz* trial that revealed a darker side to the peace and free love message.⁸

Although Johnny Rotten was savvy enough to abandon punk just as it was being consolidated and fought over, he and others who instigated the phenomenon left a powerful legacy of self-empowerment.

It was disappointment at the apparent success of the record industry in commodifying, or co-opting, the music and political stance of The Sex Pistols and The Clash, that splintered the punk subculture. Clark summarises the odd polarity that had happened: ‘... when the mainstream proved that it needed punk, punk’s equation was reversed: its negativity became positively commercial.’⁹

Hebdige enlarges on this recuperation process and quotes Sir John Read, then Chairman of EMI, who was delighted that money appeared to be more important than the message to a selection of traditional ‘brilliant nonconformists’¹⁰ who ‘became in the fullness of time, wholly acceptable and can (*sic*) contribute greatly to the development of modern music.’¹¹ Poison Girls’ 1984 lyric: ‘Made a bomb out of music/ Made a hit with a record’ could not have been more apt.¹² However, the ‘selling out’ and consequent opportunity to communicate challenges to the opinions of a wider audience had a positive effect, according to Laing:

...the example of The Clash in developing a dialect of political comment within the rock mainstream

7 Ibid., p16.

8 Despite this Geoff Travis (who set up Rough Trade and The Cartel which distributed punk records all over the UK and Europe), Penny Rimbaud and many more who formed the framework for branches of punk and post-punk activity were firmly rooted in hippy ideals and aesthetics.

9 Dylan Clark, “The Death and Life of Punk, the Last Subculture”, in *The Post-Subcultures Reader*, ed. David Muggleton and Rupert Weinzierl (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2003), p233.

10 Hebdige, *Subculture*, p 99.

11 Ibid.

12 The Poison Girls, “Take the Toys,” *Their Finest Moments*, Reactive Records, 1998.

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should not be underestimated. Without that example (as well as punk's general impact) it is unlikely that the songs of UB40 and of 'Two Tone' groups like The Specials would have found the general popularity they enjoyed from 1979 onwards.¹³

Even Cogan, who dismisses the politics of The Clash as 'vague political leanings', admits that '... the more commercialized bands could be seen as a gateway to the more ideologically involved bands.'¹⁴ As it became apparent, however, that being in a punk band could set musicians en route to mainstream success, The Clash template (a rock band becomes a punk band becomes a rock band again) began to function for other artists. Moral authority passed on to those punks who embedded moral issues into their music and who eschewed commercialization by taking on board the *idea* of anarchy espoused by The Sex Pistols and the overt political sloganeering of The Clash, but opted out of the drive to become wealthy. The vacuum left by the transition of The Clash and The Sex Pistols into the formal music industry was filled by amongst other subgenres, anarcho-punk, and the 'dialect of political comment within the rock mainstream' described above by Laing encouraged bands to approach not only lyric writing but also rock music in general with a refreshed and refreshing activist vigour.

It is in the nature of innovative creative activities that as they become more widespread, and inspirational beyond their central core, new 'rules' are created, and ironically the group of people who created anarcho-punk (which included Crass and Poison Girls), as an authentic political resistance to the commercialization of the music genre spawned a style template of their own. Allan Whalley from Chumbawumba observed much later on: '... it quickly became obvious that they were setting up a kind of blueprint, and a lot of people just followed that blueprint blindly.'¹⁵ This contributed to a conflict

13 Dave Laing, *One Chord Wonders: Power and Meaning in Punk Rock* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1985), p117.

14 Brian Cogan, "'Do They Owe Us a Living? Of Course They Do!' Crass, Throbbing Gristle, and Anarchy and Radicalism in Early English Punk Rock," *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 1:2 (Summer 2007), p87.

15 Ian Glasper, *The Day the Country Died: A History of Anarcho-Punk 1980-1984*

within the greater punk community itself about exactly what punk was; was it a London-centric fashion phenomenon based on Chelsea's King's Road that finished almost as soon as it started; or was it intended as a blueprint for subcultural activities in hotspots all over the UK? Was it a return to working class roots (the journalist Gary Bushell's 'Oi' vision), was it a corruptible concept that exposed weaknesses in the British Record Industry, or was it the missing link between politics and music making for a dispossessed generation?

In reality, it could be any of these things; as Laing says above, the environment created by even those bands that had 'sold out' enabled those who were more purist or even obscurantist to thrive. Lyrically, punk's discourse could be said to be an expression of the concerns of a generation who felt forgotten; sonically, the intention was still to assault the mainstream aesthetic. To those who are outside the subculture, it probably all sounded the same; to those within it, it was nuanced by a multitude of delineations.

AUTHENTIC ANGER

Within this forgotten generation was a forgotten gender. The women who experienced the loss of identity stimulated by the readjustment of post-60s society struggled to assert their diverse agendas within the open format of punk¹⁶ We too felt anger, and we too wanted to express this alongside our contemporaries. With regard to women in bands, active engagement in music making alongside male peers, *being punks* through *doing the music*, and visibility were factors that consolidated a realist feminism at the time, far from theoretical discourses that sought to ignore the lived experiences of women by setting their sights on grander and more abstract horizons; it appeared to be natural, which was one of its strengths. To some women punks, 1970s feminism seemed to be yet another set of rules, '...seen as excluding other things', according to The Raincoats's guitarist Ana Da Silva, who remembers that it was only later that she understood that the 'anyone can do it mentality' applied to both feminism *and* punk¹⁷. Some of those in the anarcho-punk community had made a transition from the hippy subculture and its

(London: Cherry Red, 2006), p 379.

16 See Helen Reddington (2012) *The Lost Women of Rock Music: female musicians of the punk era*, Sheffield: Equinox

17 Ana Da Silva, unpublished interview with Gina Birch, 2009

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free festival ethos into punk; this development included many of the principles of access and sharing that had been articulated in, for instance, the free festival movement in Britain which gained momentum after the first Glastonbury Fayre in 1971 and which led to free festivals being held at Windsor and Stonehenge in following years. For the older members of the anarcho community, Penny Rimbaud and Vi Subversa, punk probably provided a platform for making a better version of the hippy ideal that could include greater respect for women and a more active and engaged approach to politics in general; lack of consideration for 'Women's Lib' had been a major problem in the countercultural movements in the 1960s.¹⁸

ANARCHY

Because punk, unlike previous British subcultures, had the creation of music at its heart from the outset, it had developed 'inescapable links' with the music industry, as Laing noted. It had begun as an

...outlawed shadow of the music industry and its fate depended equally on the response to it of the industry. And while punk as a life-style developed a certain distance from the fate of punk rock, it remained dependent on the existence of a musical focus to give its own identity a stability.¹⁹

Disentangling these links and putting an alternative in place was an act of great ambition; punk bands sought out new venues to play and new ways of performing where accessibility came to the forefront; this benefited potential women punks who wanted to participate in music making because they did not have to negotiate traditional gate-keeping barriers. Zillah Minx, founder member of Rubella Ballet, says that in spite of the idea of anarchy being introduced by The Sex Pistols, the practical political application came later:

I believed I was part of the whole creating of punk.
The music then was what was being created by artistic

18 See Sheila Rowbotham, (1973) *Women's Consciousness, Man's World* Harmondsworth: Penguin

19 Laing, *One Chord Wonders*, p xi.

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people to do whatever they thought was weird and different. It wasn't until Crass came along that it seemed [overtly] political. Previous to that The Sex Pistols and X Ray Spex didn't seem anarchist [in the way they behaved]. We looked up the word anarchy, and that started to make us think politically.

Zillah describes the first contact that she had with the Crass collective at a gig with UK Subs at The crypt at North East London Polytechnic:

That's where I first met them. They were there in the audience talking to people, which was really different. Not only were they in the audience, they were sharing. So if you got there earlier and they were having a cup of tea, they would ask you if they wanted a cup of tea. They weren't being a 'famous band'. They were being part of the audience and part of the whole experience.²⁰

In London Crass played at political centres such as the Centro Iberico in West London that hosted Spanish anarchists from the Basque country; through doing this they underlined the message in their music in a way that seemed more genuinely anarchic than the interactions of some of the first wave bands that had been co-opted by the music industry:

I knew it was political... the police kept turning up and having fights with everybody, along with the skinheads, and the skinheads would object to what they were saying. And also Crass were known for playing strange places like the Anarchy Centres. So that's where we knew that the anarchy thing was happening. The difference was that people were actively being political, using anarchy as the framework. We took it as meaning 'do what you want' as well.²¹

20 Zillah Ashworth, interview with author, 2003.

21 Zillah Ashworth, interview with author, 2003. It should not be forgotten that

UNIFORMITY

The anarcho-punk bands struggled with the way that they presented their ideas; as McKay writes, their ‘...utopian politics [is] presented through dystopian cultural formations’²² and in their constant questioning of the status quo struggled against a phenomenon articulated by Plant:

Questions of where the revolution comes from must be joined by those which reveal the means by which revolutions are betrayed, an interrogation which might suggest that remnants of counter-revolutionary desire are invested in even the most radical of gestures.²³

Artists are often pursued by their own desire for the safety of consolidation, and petrified into stasis by being defined by the pronouncements which they make and the activities which they undertake that were originally intended to be fluid or transient. Radical art is terrifying and dangerous; a world without boundaries is much more difficult to negotiate than one with obvious and distasteful political, commercial and social parameters.

The brand of anarchy which was practiced by Crass encouraged bands that were associated with them (mainly by playing gigs with them but also for some recording on their self-titled label) to define themselves any way they wanted to. Unfortunately, the ‘blueprint’ identified earlier by Chumbawumba’s Whalley became a default setting for some of the bands who were originally inspired by Crass. Indeed, Kay Byatt from Youth in Asia remarks that although she remains committed

both Ana Da Silva, guitarist in the Raincoats, had become politicized in her native Portugal, and Palmolive, who drummed for both The Slits and The Raincoats, hailed from Spain, where in 1975 Franco’s death led to the gradual introduction of democracy through a difficult transition period. This is not to say that all of the women who played in punk bands were overtly politically active; it is undeniable, however, that amongst some of them there was a level of political consciousness that may have set them apart from their peers. This was not always overtly present in their music.

22 McKay, *Senseless Acts of Beauty*, p89.

23 Sadie Plant, *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in the Postmodern Age* (London: Routledge, 1992), p123.

right to the present day to the same non-conformist causes that she wrote lyrics about while an active band member, she eventually left the group because 'punk's formality' started to tire her:

[I had] thought the scene was about breaking rules, not making them. It became a very 'right on' movement, and maybe a little too puritanical for its own good, with Crass looked upon as virtual gods towards the end.²⁴

Although the aforementioned viewpoint is very personal in nature, the fact that Kay felt strongly enough about the formalization of some aspects of her former band's behavior indicates that perhaps not every band was flexible enough to embrace differences of opinion. From another perspective Zillah observes that audience safety was behind one of the dress-codes that might have looked to an outsider like a uniform; the bleakness of Crass's garb had practicality at its heart:

That's what happens, I think – you start off with all the interesting, arty people, and by arty people I mean people who do stuff for themselves, not necessarily art college, just people with imagination, and then as things get popular everyone seems to think they've got to join in with the popular look rather than their individual look. The whole Crass thing: they (the audience) all started dressing in black, they all had to have their hair a certain way, and for the macho bit what happened really was not that the people within the anarchy scene got macho, it was the opposition that came. The skinheads that came to beat you up, the normal people that came to beat you up. I think that got really scary and therefore the men and women in that scene would start to wear their Doctor Martins in case they had to have a fight, their black trousers in case they had to hide. People toned it down a bit more, wanted to hide a bit more.²⁵

24 Ibid., p164.

25 Zillah Ashworth.

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This was also affirmed by Vi Subversa, who cited the need to wear ‘fairly armoured clothes to feel safe’;²⁶ regardless of her comments above, Zillah’s band Rubella Ballet dressed in day-glo colours and indeed, Steve Ignorant himself refers to Rubella Ballet’s colourful rule-breaking as ‘a breath of fresh air’, a change from the uniformly dour and black-clad presentation that was favoured by Crass and other bands within the genre.²⁷ Rubella Ballet’s colour was an exception. In general, anarcho-punks rejected the more camp side of punk, for as Sontag says, ‘To emphasize style is to slight content.’²⁸ The first wave of punk had had layers of irony throughout it, and could be read as purely style (hence Hebdige’s focus). Those who historicize punk as following on from David Bowie’s short-haired glam image rightly saw a camp androgyny embedded within it, and this was simple to read. The ‘pervy’ clothing sold by Westwood and McClaren, and the slogans were easy to recuperate and commodify. This rapid absorption into the world of fashion threatened the validity of punk and contributed to the many heated authenticity debates of the time; there was a discourse of resistance to this, too, in anarcho-punk.

THE FEMALE PRESENCE IN ANARCHO PUNK BANDS: CRASS AND FEMINISM

Although creating an all-female rock band was a radical political act in itself²⁹ some of the male punks found this idea difficult to engage with; being an ‘out’ feminist could be seen as a risky option.³⁰ Isolated from each other largely by a 1970s ideology that can be explained by reference to Potter’s writing about tokenism³¹ many of the female

26 Sue Steward and Sheryl Garret, *Signed, Sealed and Delivered: True Life Stories of Women in Pop* (London and Sydney: Pluto Press, 1984), p37.

27 Glasper, *The Day the Country Died*, p58.

28 Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” in *The Susan Sontag Reader* (London: Penguin, 1982), p107.

29 This would possibly come as a surprise to all-female German skiffle band ‘Lucky Girls’ and British 1960s garage band ‘Mandy and the Girlfriends.’

30 Helen Reddington, *The Lost Women of Rock Music: Female Musicians of the Punk Era* (London: Equinox, 2012), pp 182-189.

31 Potter, Sally, (1997) ‘On Shows’, in Parker, Roszika, and Pollock, Griselda (eds) (1997) *Framing Feminism: Art and the Womens’ Movement 1970-1985* London: Pandora p 30

punk groups at the time were regarded by the media as being in competition with each other,³² although in reality their personnel had often collaborated musically in different configurations before their bands consolidated and made recordings. The feeling about the exclusionary nature of feminism articulated by Da Silva and shared by many other female focused bands led to a reluctance to identify with feminism much to journalist Caroline Coon's frustration.³³ In the music that emanated from Britain's Women's Centres during the mid-1970s, however, feminism could be regarded as of equal importance to the music that was created³⁴. Within the anarcho-punk movement that consolidated towards 1980, feminism was often integrated into the ethos of the bands, as part of the general force for change that was expressed in the lyrics; these lyrics explored themes of pacifism, vegetarianism, revolution, and acceptance of queerness (the A-heads' 'Isolated') amongst other issues³⁵.

This willingness to engage directly with feminism set the anarcho bands in general apart from some of the more feted women in punk bands. There were many bands under this umbrella that had female members; these included Dirt, Lost Cherees, and Hagar the Womb; I have chosen here to focus mainly on Poison Girls (originally formed in Brighton and later, based in Epping) Rubella Ballet (sometimes also labeled 'Positive Punks' because of their colourful visuals) and Crass. Poison Girls were particularly influential on feminist discourse and practice in anarcho-punk bands, partly because they were active from a relatively early date (1977) and toured with Crass from 1979 onwards building an audience alongside them. They introduced feminist ideas to, for instance, Dirt³⁶ who say they were inspired by them

32 Op cit. Reddington., p188.

33 Op cit. Reddington p183.

34 More details about this can be found at <http://womensliberationmusicarchive.co.uk/>

35 The free speech encouraged by the movement also led to some unfortunate pronouncements such as those made by 'Admit You're Shit's John Cato, who aligned his views with the racist British Movement. Found in Glasper, *The Day the Country Died*, 120. However, most anarcho-punk bands were anti-racist, although in common with other punk bands, predominantly consisting of white people.

36 Glasper, *The Day the Country Died*, p60.

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and other female-fronted bands; Youth in Asia, who celebrated their own 50/50 gender split³⁷ and who also cite Crass as an inspiration; and Flowers in the Dustbin (who also cite Patti Smith as being influential).³⁸ In anarcho-punk bands there appears to have been little fear from either male or female personnel of identifying with feminist politics. Steve Battershill, a founder member of Lost Cherrees (who started in 1981), recalls:

The feminist stance (sic) was struck very early on and has never wavered; equality in all walks of life is essential to us. The issue had already been raised by Crass and Poison Girls, so, although it wasn't that widespread, people were starting to seriously address such problems.³⁹

Between them, Poison Girls, Rubella Ballet, and Crass covered a broad area of feminist music making and performed to mixed audiences in a distinctive subcultural area which was carved out by the activities of Crass themselves, although both Rubella Ballet and Poison Girls had originally formed as a direct result of the catalyst effect of earlier punk activity in the UK. A feeling of agency was a vital element in the development of the genre as a whole. The music and atmosphere at live gigs continued to strike a chord long after punk's first burst of activity in west London had died away. Eve Libertine describes visiting the Dial House in Epping after being so 'moved by the raw energy' of their performances that she would sometimes be the only audience member left at the gig, as the band emptied venues with their uncompromising sound. She describes her feeling that '... there was a rather one-dimensional quality to what was then an all-male outfit. The onstage politics lacked a feminist angle, a problem that was easily solved by Joy and myself joining the band.'⁴⁰ Crass then embedded feminism into their ethos, according to Joy De Vivre,

37 Ibid., p160.

38 Ibid., p171. See also Sheila Whiteley, *Women and Popular Music: Sexuality, Identity and Subjectivity* (London: Routledge, 2000).

39 Ibid., p149.

40 Maria Raha, *Cinderella's Big Score: Women of the Punk Rock and Indie Underground* (Emeryville: Seal Press, 2005), p94.

who was able to state that: 'It is not easy to isolate feminist activities of the band, they're so tied in with the wider philosophy about compassion, respect, pacifism.'⁴¹ The 1981 Crass album *Penis Envy* brought to a head the willingness of the collective to invest time and energy into a specifically feminist approach to the art of making music. The decision by Crass to release this album, which was voiced entirely by Joy De Vivre and Eve Libertine, was a deliberate response to the perception of the band (and in particular their community of followers) as being unconcerned with the importance of gender politics. As Rimbaud explains,

An exclusively feminist album would be a challenge both to us and to our predominantly male audience... with the notable exception of the Poison Girls' stunning *Hex* (1979) album, no one had ever before set out to create an album dedicated solely to feminist issues⁴²

Prior to this, Raha describes De Vivre's song-poem 'Women' as being related from a 'nonacademic perspective' and thus appealing to everywoman (and man).⁴³ This simplicity of expression was also embedded into the language of male members of the anarcho-punk music community. Hence Crass member Steve Ignorant's name: he was, he says 'ignorant of politics'⁴⁴ when he first came to the collective. Delivering a direct anti-sexist message alongside the other concerns associated with anarcho-punk meant that the message was validated and communicated in a simple and uncompromising way, at a great distance from theoretical feminism that many of the protagonists in the subculture might have found indigestible or possibly even hostile. The affirmative impact of the male figurehead of what (according to Rimbaud) was becoming an increasingly male-dominated movement, in stepping aside and making way for women's creative voices should not be underestimated. The importance of his active pro-feminist decision can be contextualised by referring to the way Bayton underlines

41 Ibid.

42 Penny Rimbaud, sleeve notes to *Crass: Penis Envy The Crassical Collection*, Crass Records, 2010

43 Op Cit. Raha., p95.

44 Op Cit. Raha., p24.

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the importance of men's understanding of the support that women may need in music, saying that some '... may think the whole issue is irrelevant to themselves, but they are (unwitting) beneficiaries of a setup that is skewed in their favour, in terms of a whole range of material and cultural resources'⁴⁵.

One of Crass's more high profile pranks involved the duping of 'teeny romance' magazine *Loving* into releasing a white vinyl version of their track *Our Wedding*, which had been created in a spirit of sarcasm. Once the hoax had been discovered, the *News of the World* presented it as 'Band of Hate's Loving Message', quoting the obviously distressed editor of *Loving*, Pam Lyons's response to the 'sick joke.'⁴⁶ Whether this was a feminist act or an act of internalized sexism⁴⁷ is debatable; feminism involves choices and freedoms that are surely espoused by anarchists. It is possible that a teenage girl (especially during the dour 1970s) should be entitled to dream about whatever she wants to,⁴⁸ even if an anarchist collective that represents an older generation deeply disapproves.⁴⁹ This type of cross-generational moral friction continues to happen to the present day, with every party feeling that the other is simultaneously manipulated and manipulative, and at the time of writing is being played out predominantly in a relationship between the mainstream pop music industry, pornography and shock tactic.⁵⁰

Crass were creating a politically active framework-by-example for the punks around them who were disappointed by what they saw as

45 Bayton, Mavis (1998) *Frock Rock: Women Performing Popular Music* Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press .p 205

46 Crass, *Penis Envy*, (sleeve notes) Crass Records, 2010.

47 See Duguid, Michelle M. and Thomas-Hunt, Meilissa C (2015) *Condoning Stereotyping? How Awareness of Stereotyping Prevalence Impacts Expression of Stereotypes* Journal of Applied Psychology, 2015, Vol. 100, No. 2 343-359

48 See Valerie Walkerdine, *Daddy's Girl: Young Girls and Popular Culture* (London: Macmillan, 1997).

49 At the time, I remember a discussion with my peers who felt that although the idea behind this action was exemplary, the eventual target was a soft one that would probably be horrified at the thought of living in an anarchist collective

50 Oddly enough, this looks to the deviation popularized by the original London punks as an inspiration, as Linder Sterling could attest after seeing Lady Gaga's Meat Dress.

the petering out of the energy associated with the first burst of energy that The Sex Pistols had instigated; they were creating a different way of being. As Zillah remarks: 'We were all really gutted when The Sex Pistols split up. We wanted everyone to think our way.'⁵¹ Zillah cites Crass as showing her contemporaries 'how to *live* as anarchy', even if she and the other members of Rubella Ballet rejected the polemic and harsh visual style of their friends. The open-mindedness of the collective allowed them to examine gender roles to a point as we have seen.⁵² But anarcho-punk was not always a site of equality; in London, the predominantly female band Hagar the Womb were founded after: '...finding it hard to get ourselves heard or involved in any sense. Anarchy in Wapping or no, the battle of the sexes continues...'⁵³ As Ruth Elias, founder member of the band, says, "Pre Crass-invasion" the Wapping Anarchy Centre had been male-dominated, and out of anger, [our] "band of defiance" was set up to give women from the Centre a chance to participate actively in the scene."⁵⁴

Women in marginal political groupings had often found themselves in the position of handmaidens to the folk heroes, without agency and operating as a mirror image of those in the world outside their political sphere. This phenomenon was clearly articulated by Rowbotham in 1973⁵⁵ and had not been effectively addressed in previous political movements in the UK. Anarcho punk embedded into practice the mentoring of up and coming punk bands, importantly with integrated female personnel, and the facilitation of gigs and events for those bands to perform at. From Mark Perry's original instruction 'This is a chord, This is another, This is a third, Now form a band' to the sleeve notes on the Desperate Bicycles 1977 single 'The Medium was Tedium' b/w 'Don't Back the Front', 'It was easy, it was cheap, go and do it', there was a clearly-defined articulation of do-it-yourself empowerment that was as easy for young women to follow as young men. In punk, acquisition of instrumental expertise was not restricted to man-to-man peer

51 Zillah Ashworth.

52 Although within the nucleus of the collective itself, it was still the women who sang and the men who (mostly) played the loud instruments

53 Ibid.

54 Gasper, *The Day the Country Died*, pp154-155.

55 This has still not really been successfully counteracted in the present day, which is why the Pussy Riot Collective has had such a strong impact.

learning, and in this respect anarcho-punk took general punk musical practice a stage further by active mentoring of female musicians.

THE MENTORING ROLE OF WOMEN IN ANARCHO PUNK: VI SUBVERSA

Fronting the band Poison Girls at the age of 40, Vi was an older woman and a mother in a scene that was predominantly (although not exclusively) youth-based. If Vi felt that she could stand in front of an audience with a guitar and sing punk songs with her band, so should anyone else; the enabling factors of her example at the time should not be underestimated. All of the punk women who took to the stage were pioneers of their time⁵⁶ but in respect of being an older woman, Vi's pioneering activity was doubly inspiring. She challenged not only gender assumptions, but also assumptions about what a middle-aged parent ought to be doing, and thus caused many young male punks to question many more of their attitudes than simply those associated with the 'fun' aspect of punk. Unlike the Mom-rockers of Middle America⁵⁷ Vi was overtly political and fully understood the implications of living what was essentially a rock'n'roll lifestyle with her family both in tow and actively engaged in live events. As Bayton notes, Vi, with her daughter playing beside her, could inspire a three year old girl to want to play guitar in a band, and was one of the many '... women that I interviewed [who] were highly aware that they... were serving as role models for other women'. In response, Vi remarked: 'I feel really privileged to be part of that.'⁵⁸

During her years in Poison Girls, Vi was the embodiment of difference, the proof that subversion was happening and that the world that the young punks lived in was challengeable and could look very different. This type of discursive production put issues of performativity at the heart of the main stream of anarcho-punk, during the time that Poison Girls toured with Crass; she had developed this practice originally in Brighton at the very beginning of the punk moment.

56 Explored further in Reddington, *The Lost Women of Rock Music: Female Musicians of the Punk Era*. (London: Equinox, 2012).

57 Norma Coates, "Mom Rock? Media Representations of 'Women Who Rock,'" in *'Rock On': Women Ageing and Popular Music*, ed. Ros Jennings and Abigail Gardner. (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), pp87-101.

58 Bayton, *Frock Rock*, p62.

Vi put into place informal musical mentoring of both male and female musicians; this was common practice in the feminist music making circles that she was also part of.⁵⁹ Vi practised the blend of hippy and punk ideals that later contributed to anarcho-punk's feminist musical agenda when she relocated to Essex and contributed to the Crass collective. In Brighton's local music scene she encouraged many of the up-and-coming bands, in particular urging them to infuse their music with political consciousness. Her earlier involvement with the music for the 1975 theatrical production *The Body Show* led to a nucleus of musicians that included female bass-player Bella Donna, a friend of The Buzzcocks. Vi had been proactive in setting up a ramshackle rehearsal complex in the cellars of a Presbyterian Church in North Road in Brighton. This necessitated joining the management committee of a community group that included Church Elders, '...and because I was middle-aged, they trusted me.'⁶⁰ Poison Girls went on to lend equipment and even band members to start-up bands in the Brighton punk scene that subsequently developed, giving support and encouragement to scores of bands.⁶¹ This facilitation of music making by lending equipment, putting on gigs, and other forms of support was inherent to punk and was a major catalyst for encouraging people to perform who could not have done so otherwise; this practice was also common with feminist music circles of the time⁶². Even within the much more popular stream of pop punk music Siouxsie and the Banshees, for instance, had borrowed equipment from Johnny Thunders and the Heartbreakers when they first started.

ZILLAH ASHWORTH: APPRENTICESHIPS

Zillah's approach to Rubella Ballet, supported by her partner Sid, was also to embed mentorship into the ethos of her band by encouraging novice female instrumentalists to join the band and learn their

59 Mavis Bayton, *Frock Rock: Women Performing Popular Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p72.

60 Vi Subversa, letter to author, 2000

61 The extent of the activity centred around The Vault as a rehearsal and gigging space, and its significance to the Brighton punk scene can be seen at www.punkbrighton.co.uk, the website set up by ex-punk Phil Byford to archive the Brighton bands.

62 Bayton, *Frock Rock*, p72.

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playing skills onstage. Starting with female bass-player Gemma (Vi's daughter), who started with the band, she later employed her sister and other female players. 'I thought it made a statement', said Zillah,

I wanted as many girls as possible and sometimes that didn't really help when the girls weren't very good as musicians because they hadn't had the experience that the men had had. It was different for them as well, being that forward on bass at gigs with blokes jumping on you or spitting at you or whatever.⁶³

Later on, the band employed a very skilled young musician:

...Leda Baker, who was Ginger Baker's daughter, she'd been to one of our gigs and someone mentioned to her that we were looking for a guitarist; when she rang up and said that she was interested in coming over, I was thrilled, I thought, 'A girl guitarist, brilliant!' and when she came over, I couldn't believe it – she played like Jimi Hendrix. We didn't know who she was; and it was some time before she told us who her dad was. We couldn't believe it but it sort of went with what she was playing. And she was only 18.⁶⁴

Fluidity of line-up was part of the ethos of Rubella Ballet, who had no expectations of formal relationships with their personnel; because Zillah had been very taken by the fact that at an early Crass gig, the band had mingled with the audience and made them cups of tea:

With Rubella Ballet there was this whole thing of 'singers in and out, bass players in and out', so it was very fluid, who was playing what and who was singing what so for the first half dozen gigs there was different people in the band. Like the band being in the audience!⁶⁵

63 Zillah Ashworth.

64 Ibid.

65 Ibid.

**RE-BRANDING HISTORY:
FEMINISM VERSUS POSTMODERNISM**

The feminist writer MacKinnon had in the 1970s ‘imagined that feminists would retheorise 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.’⁶⁶ The revision of the meaning of the punk subculture seen through decades polluted by the concept of postmodernism downplays the importance of the active role of women during the punk moment. After punk, as anarcho-punk has widened its scope to a global perspective and slipped deeper underground only to materialize at Stop the City and other anti-capitalist events, the movement retains the gender awareness, that was developed at the outset, as Nicholas confirms:

Anarcho-punks concerned with deconstructing gender engage in specifically *feminist* poststructuralist tactics, which work from the assumption of a historicised, reified gender order and evade a simplistic, voluntaristic solution.... These deconstructive readings are ensured either through the tactics of exaggeration or literalization or through the fostering of a critical framework of perception for scene participants (via the wider cultural creations of punk) to be able to read gendered acts ironically and anti-foundational. This fostering of modes of perception stay true to the DIY anarchist ethos of autonomy and remains non-coercive and non-authoritarian by making these tactics ‘scrupulously visible’, relying on participants’ ethico-political choice that the post-gender ethos is indeed preferable.⁶⁷

In this, contemporary anarcho-punk arguably evades the fate of more (ironically) ‘mainstream’ subcultures; Clark writes that,

66 Catharine A. MacKinnon, “Points Against Postmodernism,” *Chicago-Kent Law Review* 75:3 (2000): 25.

67 Lucy Nicholas, “Approaches to Gender, Power and Authority in Contemporary Anarcho-Punk: Poststructuralist Anarchism?” *eSharp* 9 (2007): p18.

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...commodification and trivialization of subcultural style is becoming ever more rapid and, at the turn of the millennium, subcultures are losing certain powers of speech. Part of what has become the hegemonic discourse of subcultures is a misrepresentative depoliticization of subcultures; the notion that subcultures were and are little more than hairstyles, quaint slang, and pop songs. In the prism of nostalgia, the politics and ideologies of subcultures are often stripped from them.⁶⁸

The rebranding of subcultures as *only* variations of style, recuperated in selective nostalgia and inauthenticating by default, has culminated in a sneering dismissal of youth culture by writers such as Heath and Potter, who in their 2005 book *The Rebel Sell* distil a rationale for capitalism as a logocentric ideal, and to some extent fulfill MacKinnon's fears about the legacy of postmodern philosophy. MacKinnon derides the way that postmodern theorists swerve around reality, dealing in 'factish things';⁶⁹ their dismissal of social frameworks has retrospectively affected attitudes to the histories of young people, women and all of those not in the hegemonic layers of society. If we refer to Plant's observation, it is possible that such writers often simply do not possess the radar that enables them to register subversive activity; she talks of the '...networks of subversion which continue to arise even in the most postmodern pockets of the postmodern world...'⁷⁰ Plant continues: "That a great deal of cultural agitation is hidden from the public gaze is sometimes indicative of its tactics rather than its absence."⁷¹ This was apparent in the way that Riot Grrrl functioned in the 1990s. It is also entirely likely that in the 21st century, the public is simply gazing in the wrong direction, as Huq asserts, and as much as 1970s and 1980s punk is most often remembered as a male subculture, with its politics part of a left-anarchic historical discourse, it provided a practical and affirmative platform for the development of feminist practice on the street, that complemented its discussion within academia.

68 Clark, "The Death and Life of Punk," p231.

69 MacKinnon, "Points Against Postmodernism," p67.

70 Plant, *The Most Radical Gesture*, p176.

71 Ibid.

Looking back on punk, historians often struggle to define its meaning; Sabin discussed this problem as he tried to delineate the scope of his anthology on the cultural legacy of punk. As hard as it was to delineate at the time, it has been even harder to delineate in retrospect; it could seem destructive, but creativity was at its heart. Politically it was fluid and could/can appear to affirm whatever the writer or researcher looks for within it. In Young's utopian book, *Electric Eden*, he remarks that:

It's interesting to speculate what might have resulted had punk's musical cleansing spared some notion of folk – which was, after all, the culture of citizens, not aristocrats; a music for the leveled society... In Germany, France, Italy and elsewhere, punk was a way of life more associated with the peace movement, animal rights, squatting and environmentalism. In Britain, popular opinion was swift to cast such righteous communitarianism as the enemy within.⁷²

We need to add feminism to Young's list; as citizens with no space for their voices to be heard except within the narrow parameters of mainstream stereotypes that so rapidly re-established themselves as punk's opportunities were replaced by Thatcher's enterprise culture. Women with power are acknowledged as such only when they fit the template created by men with power, and are measured against it. As Nicholas writes:

Particularly relevant to feminist ideas has been the notion that discourses constitute us and thus both enable and limit us through the subject positions they make available to us. Thus the limits of discourses

72 Rob Young, *Electric Eden: Unearthing Britain's Visionary Music* (London: Faber & Faber, 2010), 535. According to Young, Crass were the only punk band to succeed in fusing the ethos of both, and he describes them as 'folk-punk-anarchist,' 535. But the Raincoats were also labeled as punk folk music, largely due to their willingness to experiment with non-amplified instruments associated with non-Western cultures.

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within which subjects can 'be' represent the limits to subjects' agency.⁷³

Feminism still operates in a limited environment. In parallel with the subculture of punk itself and matched against the affirmation of power of the mainstream that punk created by its very existence, feminism is and was necessary because misogyny and sexism exist; but just imagine what women could do with their energy if they were not expending time and energy being feminists. Resistance to male domination takes up space that could be used for better purposes; and because feminism has had as many definitions as punk, the whole idea of 'fourth generation feminism' at the time of writing seems risible; a comment on the anarchist collective CrimethInc's blog, quoted by Nicholas, sums this up perfectly: 'Thus we find the ironic but coherent corollary in anarcho-punk gender politics that 'feminists fight to put an end to gender.'⁷⁴ One of the struggles of feminism has been the impossibility of creating a shape that fits all women. Radstone talks of 'the void' as she attends a feminist conference in Glasgow in 1991 and becomes aware of the differences in articulation and experience between not only a very direct Women's Studies Network Conference the weekend before and the Feminist Theory Conference at which she was presenting a paper, but also the 'tough journey from the Gorbals' described in the speech of welcome by the female Lord Provost of Glasgow. Gender discourse does not belong exclusively to anyone, but it appears that it can best be articulated and tested in the margins of politics and the academy. In writing about feminism, gender, and punk there is always an underlying issue of whether the women that I write about are punks first, women first, or musicians first. Lest this seem simplistic, this was an issue that often came to the forefront *at* the time and it sometimes seemed, *all* the time (See Reddington, 2012, pp. 182-190)

In conclusion, it can be affirmed that anarcho-punk appears to have made a formal clearing within its practice for the discussion and articulation of feminism that was probably encouraged by the inter-generational nature of its protagonists. With Vi Subversa very much part of the subcultural group, Poison Girl's explicit lyrical issues

73 Nicolas, "Approaches to Gender," pp4-5.

74 Ibid., 8.

nailed feminist colours to the mast, as it were. It would have been difficult to avoid the frank and focused subjects that they sang about and the expectation that these subjects were important regardless of one's social background. Within anarcho-punk, feminism was out into practice by mentoring of female musicians, the assertive inclusion of feminist issues into song lyrics and an acceptance of age and gender deviations from the 'rock band' norm. Zillah describes very young anarcho-punks ('ten, eleven') and also 'the son and daughter of one of the mothers in another band' (Vi Subversa's son and daughter, Dan and Gemma, both in Rubella Ballet). The family aspect of anarcho-punk, I feel, was very much rooted in its hippy approach to living, and members of this extended family were encouraged to participate in every aspect of its activities. It was never the intention of anarcho-punk to become part of the mainstream of the music industry (although paradoxically it was defined in part by its very opposition to the industry as part of the capitalist structures that the movement critiqued and fought against); this made its relationship with feminism less risky. Bands such as The Slits and The Raincoats, while still at the margins of pop, seemed to be closer to the epicentre of punk music making and did not have the ideological context and support that the Crass provided; engaging with feminism became one of their biggest challenges. The anarcho-punks relished antagonizing mainstream women's magazines and were also prepared to risk alienating their male fans by focusing their music on women's experiences and voices. This was an efficient way of counteracting the controlling 'macho' element of the movement which was described by Zillah when she talked about the uniformity of the black-clad audiences at some of the Crass gigs. Belief in the political importance of anarchy authenticated their music and their art. Their position on the bridge between oppositional and alternative activity allowed them to incorporate feminism as a positive part of that action.

It is my belief that one of the most powerful things that we can do for our gender is to reinsert women into historical discourses and to understand the reasons for our omission. Nicholas (above) writes from the perspective of relatively contemporary anarcho-punk feminism, still alive and well, but hidden. Documentation of the moment still emerges, gradually: Zillah's film *She's a Punk Rocker* (2010) presents a series of very different women talking personally about the meaning of punk. Documentaries such as hers facilitate a feeling of

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authenticity that captures a moment between the camera starting and the end of filming: her subjects (who include Gee Vaucher and Eve Libertine from Crass, Poly Styrene from X-Ray Spex, Gaye Black from The Adverts, Hagar the Womb and others, are talking to a friend who understands them as much as to a camera. The conversation will continue, and perhaps Crass will make the tea.

