The Forgotten Revolution of Female Punk Musicians in the 1970s

Helen Reddington

Perhaps it was naive of us to expect a revolution from our subculture, but it's rare for a young person to possess knowledge before the fact. The thing about youth subcultures is that regardless how many of their elders claim that the young person's subculture is "just like the hippies" or "just like the mods," to the committed subculturee nothing before could possibly have had the same intensity, importance, or all-absorbing life commitment as the subculture they belong to.

Punk in the late 1970s captured the essence of unemployed, bored youth; the older generation had no comprehension of our lack of job prospects and lack of hope. We were a restless generation, and the young women among us had been led to believe that a wonderful Land of Equality lay before us (the 1975 Equal Opportunities Act had raised our expectations), only to find that if we did enter the workplace, it was often to a deep-seated resentment that we were taking men's jobs and depriving them of their birthright as the family breadwinner.

Few young people were unaware of the angry sound of the Sex Pistols at this time—by 1977, a rash of punk bands was spreading across the U.K., whose aspirations covered every shade of the spectrum, from commercial success to political activism. The sheer volume of bands caused a skills shortage, which led to the cooption of young women as instrumentalists into punk rock bands, even in the absence of playing experience. But the general "why not?" attitude also led to the formation of bands by groups of young women who perhaps in other circumstances would have merely bought the records or, at most, become groupies on the scene.

In Britain, there has long been an association between lack of musical skill and street credibility—it's a test of authenticity in rock music. This proved a tremendous advantage for many female instrumentalists during this punk moment. Normally, young men acquire a guitar during their early teens, practicing and skill-swapping with their mates for several years before they emerge, confident, on to the stage. This was not the usual practice for girls; if anything, they would have learned Spanish guitar at school, or perhaps classical piano, neither of which is a rock and roll instrument. But the clumsy and shambolic nature of the punk subculture in general, where anger and volume were the characteristics most appreciated at live gigs, meant that these young women could learn while gigging.

There was no problem with saving money to buy instruments either, for not only were cheap or second-hand guitars used by nearly everybody (and some deliberately spoiled their instruments in an inversion of the aspirational attitudes of the prog-rock musicians who had preceded this musical movement), but there was also a culture of sharing: one bass guitar would appear on stage with several different bands. Indeed, at one gig I went to, the same drummer played for three different bands.

Because of the quantity of bands, it was also unnecessary to have written a full set of songs; a novice group could climb up on to the stage and play three songs, before making way for another group with a similarly short set. As for access, in many venues a group could turn up at sound-check time and ask to play, and it was regarded as "not punk" to refuse.

Some women bands found that women's centers provided the best forum for their music: an audience crying out for music that they could dance to, whose lyrics dealt with women's issues, rather than objectifying women, as male rock music did. Others thrived in the more aggressive environment of punk gigs, which were often played as benefits for political causes, in particular in the late 1970s, Rock Against Racism (this was set up after inflammatory racist comments and gestures were made by established rock artists Eric Clapton and David Bowie). In this mixed environment, it was easy to believe that a minor revolution had happened—it was rare for an evening's bill not to include a band with at least one prominent woman, often an instrumentalist, in the line-up.

Previously, politically aware women musicians followed a stereotype of singer-songwriter protest artists, whose lyrics were often barbed but whose music was unchallenging. Their message was delivered alongside competent, but aesthetically pleasing, music. In contrast, the women's punk bands were sonically raucous. Perhaps the most well-known example of a female punk band was The Slits, a group of tousle-haired, feisty women who sang songs about subjects such as shoplifting over a loping, reggae-influenced beat. Their vocal timbres resembled those of aggressive children taunting each other in the playground, but their message was strong, emphasizing independence and defiance.

There were no style rules, however, either visually or musically, for women punks. Some, like Siouxsie of Siouxsie and the Banshees, adopted the threatening sexual style that is now most associated with what have been disparagingly labeled "punkettes": fishnet stockings, spiky dyed black hair, dramatic eye make-up, and a harsh, almost barking, vocal style. Others took the role of strong, silent presence, like Gaye Advert, bass player with The Adverts, who endured a constant media debate about whether she had any musical skill, coupled with salacious coverage about her sexual allure. Yet more chose to eschew any sort of "uniform;" as John Peel, the BBC Radio 1 DJ (who supported punk musicians, and in particular the bands with a female presence, right from the start), allegedly said, "Punk opened the door for plain women in dungarees to get up on stage and play."

It was easy to believe that rock music was now open to anyone as a conduit to self-expression, whereas before it had belonged exclusively to angry young

men. Girls-with-guitars were visible all over the British rock press, and music papers in the late 1970s and early 1980s published a constant debate about what was perceived as a revolution in music. The musical output of the punk subculture seemed as though it was going to spearhead a dramatic change in the voice of young people, which looked set to represent for the first time female anger and energy as well as those of young men.

It is difficult to recapture the pioneering spirit that we felt; pessimism was replaced with a feeling of direct involvement in progress. Some women hated "feminism," and some needed the support of its rhetoric (which was often clumsy, as feminist publications tried to coopt female musicians without understanding the difficulties of negotiating some of the entrenched attitudes found in more established organizations and venues). Rather than metaphorically reading over a man's shoulder as we absorbed the rock press, we could read about women and girls like ourselves, humorously and engagingly picking their way through uncharted territory.

But we had reckoned without the onslaught and subsequent entrenchment of Thatcherism. The shock of the British establishment at its election and acceptance of a female prime minister in 1979 had repercussions that affected sections of society that had thought themselves immune to mainstream political influence. Unemployment had reached an intolerable level and many sections of British society blamed this on the trade unions. Inflation was rife and quite terrifying for those at the lower end of the income scale. The Labour Party was regarded as a spent force, powerless in the face of strong unions and a weak pound. The time of the "British working class" was over: heavy industry was in decline, and with it the power of those who propelled it.

Small businesses were perceived as being a way out of the economic depression in the UK. As a "supporter of the small businessman", Thatcher was seen as the savior of the British economy by a substantial sector of the British electorate. She cleverly subverted punk's do-it-yourself ethos into Enterprise Culture, and her manner struck a chilling chord in the class-ridden layers of British society. Some men subconsciously found in her a sort of long-lost nanny, alternately fantasized about and feared; others (particularly working-class males) found themselves completely unprepared for political battle against a woman. She was not the (upper-class) Queen, and she bore no resemblance to their mother, sister or aunts. Perhaps she was closest in style and appearance to a schoolteacher, long since left behind and forgotten as a hated authority figure.

Within the punk subculture, there were divided opinions. Some, such as Poly Styrene, lead singer with the relatively successful band X-Ray Spex, admired her as an embodiment of female power, the "ultimate punk." Others detested her and her apparent grasp of the nation's psyche. Much of the punk subculture moved deeper underground; the commercially exploitable, willing and able as always, went on to embrace the label "post-punk." The ugly, the political, and the progressive aspects of punk were driven further underground as the commercially viable characteristics were exploited for profit. "Selling out" has always been part of rock mythology; this was a double betrayal, given the political core

within much punk music and within its subculture. And, included in the ugly, political, and progressive aspects of punk that fell by the wayside (in other words, that were ignored by the larger record labels and the broadcast media) were bands that featured prominent female musicians.

In an odd sort of way, Thatcher emasculated the "masculated" (or, rather, the newly empowered) as well as the masculine members of British society. There was, it seemed, room for only one honorary man in British society: Thatcher, the embodiment of Britannia, the woman to end all women. Thatcher was unique; all other women had a useful job to do—shopping, organizing their homes, and supporting their husbands—but it definitely did not include changing society, making subversive music, and creating unrest in a subculture that increasingly came to be regarded as including only "the unemployable."

Gradually, the feisty women players seemed to fade away from the music scene. As far as visibility for female instrumentalists was concerned, part of the problem became the fact that the gatekeepers—those who controlled access to radio and television and to recording contracts—were invariably male. The reassertion of the status quo in rock music was seen as a failure in women, not a failure in men. Women band-members have talked of burnout caused by a constant defensive stance: even when opportunities arose they felt unwilling or unable to take them. The music industry isn't known for its second chances. Particularly in the UK, women have to be young, willing, and attractive, and the tiny window of opportunity for these newly empowered female musicians closed all too quickly. As their stereotype-busting presence faded, so did the optimism felt by other young women within the punk subculture. Musicians are seen as figureheads and spokespeople for their generation; pop music by the early 1980s had largely returned to a showbiz format, at best decorated with postmodern irony, at worst tired and predictable.

In the context of British society as a whole, a marked change in gender delineations was occurring, and this apparently rang the death knell for any sort of progress for young women in general, let alone those in the musical arena. This change came about with the onset of the Falklands War, which brought about an intriguing realignment of gender assignment in Britain. Suddenly, the emasculated British working-class man was given renewed credibility as the "Tommy" of yore: brave, obedient, testosterone-fuelled, fighting the alien "Argies" without question and raising the profile of Great Britain (and our proto-Britannia, Margaret Thatcher) internationally. All that confusion—class confusion, gender confusion, assertion of racial identity, silly old "progress"—had been a short aberration, and the status quo had been reasserted at last.

These cultural and political changes were reflected in a bizarre way in the British music industry. If one looks through the music papers of the early 1980s, one can detect a resurgent interest in androgyny: Steve Strange, Boy George, Marilyn, and Soft Cell. Suddenly, it seemed the powers-that-be in the music industry would do anything rather than give credibility to a real, empowered woman. Image had become all important, and men who dressed as women could easily replace all those horrid women who, like The Slits, threatened

to disrupt the calm of suburban society with their bad inner-city manners and stridency. Cross-dressers appeal to the core of British sensibility, for they are part of a long tradition stretching from the pantomime dame through the *Carry On* films to David Bowie's "apolitical" gender-bending of the mid-1970s. British people can understand men who dress as women; they just cannot stand the idea that their own women might be as capable as men of being the artist, rather than the muse, and, as the artist, might have something personal to say about their position in British society.

So there was a sudden termination of interest in this new phenomenon—the punk subculture—that had introduced a generation of female performers who played guitars, keyboards, bass, and drums, controlling technology in a way that previously only young men had done. The circulation of weekly rock newspapers such as the *New Musical Express* and *Sounds* was overtaken by publications such as *Smash Hits*, which printed song lyrics and mild gossip, unchallenging and ameliorative. The latter pandered to the new capitalist ethos, offering a comforting emphasis on pleasure as opposed to the rather austere and Presbyterian sense of responsibility that had increasingly become a millstone around the neck of the longer-lasting punk bands.

Fashion-obsessed Britain developed a new passion for synth-pop and New Romantic dress codes; sartorial style became an indicator for individuality. Punk music now belonged solely to the underclass, expressing its aspirations for political change. Any feminist content or influence had effectively been white-washed, as theorists of postmodernity leapt on to anything that allowed them to look the other way in order to avoid any sort of engagement with feminism, now the last great taboo.

By the mid-1980s, Thatcher had declared she was going to "go on and on and on." At the time, she indeed seemed permanent, and her legacy certainly still has a depressingly interminable ring to it. But it is interesting to observe the equally strong legacy of the punk subculture, which in spite of indications to the contrary appears not to have died. Perhaps inevitably—given the entrenched nature of misogyny—the least of punk's inheritance is in the changes it brought about for women. Refreshing changes in the gender format of rock bands proved to be transient and soon forgotten; even when revived by the Riot Grrrl movement, which came and went in the 1990s (and which idolized non-stereotypical bands like The Raincoats), interest in the female protagonists of the British punk subculture was centered on media representations of the aforementioned spiky-haired, fishnet-clad dominatrix, and not on the empowerment that the subculture had bestowed on a generation of misfit women. But other aspects of punk, like the do-it-yourself record production, lived on in the dance music of the 1990s. And many of the debates about racial integration in Britain have been facilitated by the visible support of the punk movement for anti-racist policies.

As for women in today's music industry, while we have many more opportunities than we would have had in the mid-1970s, they must still be fought for, and, more importantly, defended, on a day-to-day basis. In music—perhaps to some the least important of arenas, but to myself, a musician, the one with which

I am most familiar—the cut-off for a female musician approaching the industry is still the age of 23. Only two weeks ago, I went to a local music shop to buy some strings for my electric guitar only to be asked, "What sort does *he* want?" On the other hand, many youth music organizations acknowledge the gender apartheid in music, and are beginning to address it. In British pop, we now have P.J. Harvey, Carina Round, Ms Dynamite, and many others; there are more visible role models for aspiring women musicians than ever before, but all still defending their precarious positions against a largely misogynist press in the U.K. In the 1970s, we had a subcultural context in which to defend and develop our interests, but few skills with which to compete. It appears now that the tables have turned—the skills are there, but the support is not.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

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Helen Reddington is Senior Lecturer in Commercial Music at the University of Westminster, London, and has made a professional journey from bass player with the worst punk band in Brighton, to completion of a doctorate based on research into women musicians of the late 1970s and early 1980s in the U.K. punk scene. *Correspondence*: 50 Bedford Avenue, Barnet, Hertfordshire EN5 2ER, U.K. Email: reddinh@wmin.ac.uk