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THE LOST

WOMEN OF

ROCK MUSIC

FEMALE MUSICIANS OF THE

PUNK ERA

1 A Ladder Through the Glass Ceiling?

These success stories had ambiguous implications. As with every other "youth revolution" (e.g. the beat boom, the mod explosion and the Swinging Sixties) the relative success of a few individuals created the impression of energy, expansion and limitless upward mobility.¹

Hebdige, above, utters words of caution as the music press rejoices in punk bands getting record deals, bank clerks metamorphosing into fanzine editors (Mark Perry of Sniffin' Glue) and then into music journalists and so on; subcultures become focused on "a handful of brilliant nonconformists," he claims. By presenting the experiences of a group of contemporaries I interviewed, who were in bands in East and West London, Cambridge, Brighton, Oxford, Southampton, Birmingham, Leeds, Newcastle and Manchester,² we will see how their experiences empowered them, and how the punk community supported them. What these women have in common is that they started playing instruments in bands around 1976–77, during the moment that punk first became a major youth subculture; their mass-cultural reference points are therefore very similar, although at the time their ages would have varied from sixteen to forty-five. Some of these women (for example, Lora Logic) made recordings and were quite prominent musicians at the time, with reviews and interviews in the music press. Others made no recordings and gave no interviews, but were just as deeply involved in the production of music and living in the punk subculture.

Pinning down the energy and excitement of a movement, or a moment, like British punk is impossible to do in words, and boxing in the resulting captive within academia might seem like a crime. For a writer like myself, punk came first and academic education followed years behind it; analysis is necessary to consolidate the experiences of my generation, but should not distract the reader from the uniqueness of the punk experience for its community. The abrasive sound of the music matched our desperation; for us, it blew away the polished and smug sounds of progressive rock, epitomized by Rick Wakeman's progressive rock musical on ice that featured the by-then familiar expensive lighting rigs and sound systems plus a massive cast including horses; not only did this way

of presenting music have no relationship to young people's life experiences, but it made music-making seem like a millionaire's activity – how could the average person in the street afford banks of keyboards, stacks of amplifiers, and exotic stage dressing and costumes? At the other end of the spectrum, the undoubted genius of Kate Bush filled a very large gap in popular music. In 1978, her hot-housed talent was advertised on hoardings, buses, the music press: the woman-to-end-all-women was not only a prodigy musically, but was marketed very much in terms of her sexuality, photographed in a tight T-shirt that left little to the imagination. She was obviously a very high-maintenance prospect in terms of music; even the average listener could discern that a huge financial investment had been made not only in her studio recordings but also in the presentation of her oeuvre. The world of music and its potential as either a career or a method of communication therefore seemed impossible to penetrate until punk came and changed all the rules by force. It bypassed the tastes of the traditional gatekeepers; we were creating an atmosphere, a homemade expression of anger and dissatisfaction, redistributing power, and it cost us next to nothing; this was often read by the establishment as a celebration of amateurism and shambolic organization. Sometimes it was admired, in the way that those who analyse extreme activities seem secretly to admire their subjects, and sometimes attempts were made to co-opt the energy of the moment and divert it to other ends. Capitalism is so woven into the developed world that rejecting it as a starting-point for creative activity seems incomprehensible, unless one is in a position where capitalism makes no sense whatsoever.

This was a temporary subcultural and musical revolution stirred up by the concurrent activities of a group of very different but equally creative women who were active in different locations at the same time, and it is necessary to sail through what might seem like a sea of sociology in order to put this into a political and social context. History is not complete without attempts to fill in the missing parts, and this book is my attempt to right the misconceptions about what punk could mean to women (or, at the time, often girl) instrumentalists who were involved at its revolutionary core. To some of its protagonists, punk *was* a social revolution; for a while, it certainly introduced some revolutionary behaviour into the "frame." It was also a musical revolution, and the female punk bands had a particular sort of influence on British pop music that is also frequently underplayed, especially in their incorporation of reggae into the musical discourse. Arguably, if *male* bands had developed the sort of innovations in music that The Slits and The Raincoats, for instance, made, they would have become household names.³ Later, we will see that a sort of closed shop mentality was in operation in the

written histories of subcultures in general, let alone those that had music at their core. I will place punk in the context of other youth subcultures both before and since; mostly, those involved in writing “serious” histories of youth subcultures have concerned themselves only with the young men involved. The tensions between music-makers and the recording industry have a profound effect on gender perceptions among music fans of all ages, and I will show how frequently writers in the academic field subscribe unwittingly to gender-hegemonic assumptions and values. All too often, new eras for women in rock music are discovered⁴ but the inroads made by women into this genre of music are temporary, and always on male terms. As US journalist Toby Goldstein remarked in 1975:

Every women's band has been called a sign of some dawning era. So far that includes Birtha, Fanny, April Lawton's Ramatam, Suzi Quatro and perhaps, if they had ever been reviewed at the time, Goldie and the Gingerbreads way back in 1964 too. Women's bands proliferate in today's media, to be sure. But women playing music are still badly underreviewed and consequently underestimated. The “times” have been giving signs of things to come for as long as rock has been reviewed. When women are no longer asked why are you, you? [*sic*] we'll know the millennium has arrived.⁵

Carson, Lewis and Shaw report that, post-2000, Goldstein's millennium has still not arrived; they quote an interview in *Cleveland Scene* with Bikini Kill's guitarist Kathleen Hanna in which she challenges the reporter for asking her about feminism rather than music, and he acknowledges that three-quarters of the way through the interview he has yet to ask her about the music.⁶ There are constant attempts to isolate women's achievements in the fields of art and music, with a resulting detachment of experience that makes it very difficult to assess and value even one's own work, as articulated by the lead singer of The Slits, Ari:

It's really hard to relate to people after you've been through a revolution, because it's like talking to a Vietnam veteran, you know when the Vietnam people went through a war like that and they seem really normal and okay, and they come to this point when they can't talk about things 'cos they've got no one to relate to, so that's like with me, I keep that point quiet then suddenly I go into this memory. Right now I'm like a Vietnam veteran, feeling all these emotions, all these things, all these good explosions that we had, expressions of freedom that we were able to make [remembering], at the same time this completely tormented, constant sabotage that we were getting.⁷

Various different elements enabled the women players to begin their career (or sometimes, hobby) as rock and pop instrumentalists. Bayton⁸ has already identified many of these factors; there is no doubt that the moment of punk rock resulted in a much higher visibility of female instrumentalists in bands and an acknowledgement (sometimes grudging and misogynistic in tone) by the music papers normally targeted at a young male rock audience that some women were becoming present in more “male” roles in bands on the entry-level circuit of pubs, clubs and student venues. The punk moment, and its attraction for the unemployed, provided a unique context for changes in music-making.

Extended Childhood and Creative Opportunity

Virginia Caputo’s study of the “transformation, through various processes, of the child into a competent member of adult culture” describes childhood itself being regarded as inconsequential by adults; it is merely a stage during which the child makes up for what they “lack” in order to grow up: “This conceptualisation depicts children as ‘partially cultural.’”⁹ This is useful in discussing what could be described as the permanent childhood state of punks which was a feature of the subculture, as they were unable or unwilling to undertake the rite of passage provided by employment. As Glyptis writes:

One of the main confirmations that adulthood had been reached was the attainment of full-time employment, which signalled the beginning of “real” adult life, in an adult world and on adult terms, with concomitant financial independence.¹⁰

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Caputo provides another useful insight in her essay, commenting:

With regard to the issue of time, this element is significant for both youth and children. While one could argue that, for children at least, it appears that there is a connection between the loss of control over their time and a decrease in the production of culture, it cannot be substantiated.¹¹

There is a logical link between “control over their time” and the fact that by nature of being unemployed and therefore infantilized, the punks, both male and female, developed a productive subculture to continue and replace that of their childhood in a reversal of what happens to a child as school absorbs more and more of their time. This productive involvement, whether musical, political or otherwise, in the creation of their subculture would

have been psychologically rewarding. Stephen Harding's study, "Values and the Nature of Psychological Well-being," investigates what people do when they have nothing (compulsory) to occupy themselves with – for instance, in the case of those who are retired, or unemployed. People can achieve worth through activity, and he concludes that active engagement – whether socially useful or personally fulfilling (for instance, sports) – makes people happier than inactivity:

The evidence...points to the role of social interaction and voluntary activity as a means of enhancing personal well-being...whilst the eradication of dissatisfying social conditions may not be achieved overnight, and may be to an extent beyond the individual's direct ability to control, the finding that affective experience is related to voluntary social activity suggests that, at least as far as this component of the model is concerned, an individual's well-being may well be in his own hands.¹²

The fact that the labour market could not absorb large numbers of young people in the late 1970s was potentially disastrous for British society; what the punk subculture did for many of young people was to valorize them and their activities, whatever their gender. As Glyptis says:

The "gains" of unemployment are tempered by circumstance. Free time will be a gain for those who are able to use it in ways that are personally satisfying. Freedom from obligations will be a gain for those who can thrive without external demands. But even in these circumstances, neither is likely to be a gain unless those affected by it are cushioned financially, *or have access to something equivalent to the financial and social rewards of work.*¹³

She discusses people's need for daily structure, and their need to be needed, in the context of youth unemployment at this time: "The unemployed do not only feel different and useless. They often feel deviant and stigmatized."¹⁴ Punks *needed* each other, and used these feelings of deviance and stigmatization to create their own equivalent to the "financial and social rewards of work," creating their own voluntary social activity, or self-administered occupational therapy, to enhance their personal well-being. Within a relatively short period of time, the boundaries of leisure and work time had been blurred. Pre-recession, those involved in the counterculture had *chosen* to opt out of the mainstream; their working occupations were often closely interwoven with their "own" time and interests. They had had the choice of redefining the organization of their time:

The counter culture's rejection of work involved a rejection of the division between work and leisure, as well as a rejection of the concept of leisure as something earned by the worker in compensation for the loss of freedom caused by work.¹⁵

In some respects, this provided a blueprint for what was to follow. Although punks detested hippies, each group's rejection of mainstream culture and attempts to create an "outside" existence was a common factor.

The Bohemian Lifestyle and Punk

Control over time was one of the things the hippy subculture had in common with punk and, of course, with the state of childhood; and with time comes a consolidation of the beliefs and identity of the subculture itself. Therefore, according to Paul Willis:

If we can supply the premises, dynamics, logical relations of responses which look quite untheoretical and lived out "merely" as cultures, we will uncover a cultural politics – although, of course, disjoining what is most characteristic about it: its detailed incorporation and synthesis with a life-style and concrete forms of symbolic and artistic production.¹⁶

And Frith, during a discussion on Marx's views of the leisure time permitted to the worker as part of the capitalist ethos, remarked:

[B]ohemians articulate a leisure critique of the work ethic. They are cultural radicals not just as the source of the formalist avant-garde, but also in institutional terms – they don't work (and thus outraged bourgeois moralists have always denounced successful bohemians who, it seems, make their money out of play).¹⁷

Bohemia tended to cast women as the muse, rather than the protagonist; but in spite of this, Elizabeth Wilson, when discussing the rejection of male definition by feminists in the 1970s, observes:

Women as bohemians were outside the remit of this feminist re-evaluation of art history. This was ironic, given that the women's movements of the Western world came with all the trappings of bohemian lifestyle... The connection between "lifestyle politics" and an earlier bohemianism was never made.¹⁸

It is hardly surprising that there was a bohemian element in the customized punk rock that found its way into the lifestyles of unemployed youth in

Britain. Enforced leisure makes the temptation of cultural radicalism more appealing than its alternative, giving in to feelings of rejection.¹⁹ It was a busy subculture. One can be defined as “unemployed” or, euphemistically, “looking for work”; punks “worked at” the subculture twenty-four hours a day, creating a space for themselves that was outside the definition of mainstream society, whether official (according to the then Department of Health and Social Security) or mediated (by, principally, the tabloid press). I believe that the extension of the childhood state brought about by unemployment provided an opportunity for young women to avoid “growing up” and to reassess their future with a degree of equality that had not been present during times of full employment. Walkerdine describes the ways “through which the modern order, patriarchal and capitalist as it is, produces the positions for subjects to enter,”²⁰ citing Foucault's views of “technologies of the social”:

Scientific knowledges...constantly define girls and women as pathological, deviating from the norm and lacking, but they also define them as necessary to the procreation and rearing of democratic citizens.²¹

Playing in a band provided a wonderful opportunity for the rejection of this definition and for fighting against the natural order. Several of my interviewees described their *need* for an alternative destiny. For instance, musician/writer Liz Naylor said:

I had a really strong sense of not being in the straight world. I was listening to some punk record the other day and I was thinking [that] I really identified [it] as “us” in some way. When I was on my own in my bedroom, I knew what I was against: my cousins, and the girls at my school. I went to an all-girls school, and they were so square I just thought they were awful. I had this real sense of the other world. I thought there'd be some kind of revolution in some way. I wanted to destroy it, I really wanted to destroy it.

She continues, “My mum would say things like, ‘Why don't you go to secretarial college – shorthand is always useful.’ And I thought, ‘I want to be Janis Joplin, I don't want to go to fucking secretarial college.’”²² Similarly, Mavis Bayton of The Mistakes told me: “they kept dragging us round factories saying, ‘This is your future,’ and I was getting quite upset because I hadn't envisaged my future working in a factory. I didn't know what my future was, but it wasn't working in a factory.”²³ Gina Birch adds:

I never felt that I was going to be a “lady”... I probably always had a fear of growing up, and getting old, and I still do. I don't have a handbag... I

don't have the accoutrements of being a woman, and I am completely label-phobic about being "Mrs," or a "woman" – not woman, but what "woman" represents...²⁴

There was a frustration with the idea of growing up to be a "lady" with all the implications associated with such a destiny. Sheila Rowbotham had observed in 1973 that her "own sense of self as a person directly conflicted with the kind of girl who was sung about in pop songs."²⁵ Although Walkerdine has claimed that "Middle-class girls...do not need to fantasize being somebody, they are told clearly at every turn that they are: it is simply not a battle to be entered into,"²⁶ it is evident that, across class boundaries at this time, there was a redefinition of femaleness by certain women drawn to deviant behaviour through lack of future employment prospects.²⁷ I interviewed women from many different backgrounds, and all of them were quite clear about the opportunities to engage in a different world provided by the upheavals in the late 1970s: Walkerdine's theory does not hold true, according to the women involved in musical activity at this time.²⁸

The fantasies many of the women might have had as girls about making music were now on a par with the fantasy jobs created by the government during this recession in an attempt to stimulate the economy: rather than competing with men for "men's jobs," they could create "employment" (though often unpaid) for themselves. The rite of passage into adulthood provided by entry into the labour market was no longer relevant: "Special measures for training and work experience do not fill this role. They tend to be seen as second best. In a sense they are make-believe";²⁹ unemployment was as much a reality for middle-class graduates as it was for the school-leaver who had previously gone straight into the labour market. The introduction of the government's Enterprise Allowance Scheme in 1983 encouraged "accidental musicians" to opt in to the scheme (business plans, guaranteed income of £40 per week plus rent, and no DHSS hassles for a year) or remain external and excluded; this led to a degree of soul-searching regarding the oppositional nature of music-making later in their "careers."

The apparent gender-levelling effect of mass unemployment and the do-it-yourself nature of the punk ethos would prove to be both an advantage and a disadvantage to the girl instrumentalists; what was regarded as an advantage for male musicians was often a disadvantage for women, just because of assumptions based on their gender. For instance, Cohen describes how a certain degree of musical incompetence in the male bands she studied was seen to be almost endearing,³⁰ yet in a conversation I had with bass-player Suzi Quatro, she cited the incompetence of female instrumentalists in punk bands as being one of the major reasons why their profile in the rock world

was not sustained,³¹ although in reality many of the women became skilled on their instruments but were never reassessed by the media.

Not being a musical genius was not seen to be an obstacle. The Velvet Underground, a band with a female drummer, Mo Tucker, was cited by many of the women who wrote to me as a strong influence.³² As John Cale remarked at the time of the band's performing life:

We had so much trouble with drummers but Mo was good at being basic so she was brought in. Actually, Lou was always saying, "Sterling can't play guitar and Mo can't play." He kept saying, "But man, she can't play." My idea was to keep the sound simple, but by overlaying the instruments' simplistic patterns the accumulative effect of the sound would be incredibly powerful.³³

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This respect for the "can't play" musician was definitely a factor that encouraged young women to play in bands; it is interesting to note that in response to Quatro's comments, Geoff Travis articulated the ethos of the moment thus:

I just see it as a really interesting moment in time that certainly empowered a lot of people to make music who probably would not have made music, if Suzi Quatro's definition of who should be allowed to play music was the overriding rule. She probably prides herself in making her way in a men's game and beating the men at it. Whereas those rules went out the window really during the punk era, because it wasn't really a competition to see who could be the biggest and best, or the fastest. It was just, who could do something interesting.³⁴

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Some of the musicians I interviewed did indeed fall into the category of "one chord wonders," but others had been trained at school or at home to a high degree of musicianship, as Bayton also discovered in her research. Often, those who had started off knowing little about their instrument became relatively competent relatively quickly. It is also hard to decipher from the reportage of live performances how much of the incompetence was assumed and expected and how much of it was genuine. There is one fact that is incontrovertible: almost all of the young women that I interviewed felt that their involvement in making punk music was facilitated by the anarchic ideals of the subculture, and although there had been no specific mention of girls and young women in any of punk's "manifestos," this and the atmosphere of enablement in the mid-1970s that was formally created for women by the Sex Discrimination Act provided an additional force to their feeling that they were entitled to their position on stage alongside young men of their generation. Christine Robertson (manager of The Slits) told me:

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When punk happened it broke down gender roles, not because women had the feeling, "Oh we must do it for our sisters," but [because] women were emerging as strong individuals; they'd been through an education system and a culture that was telling them that they were now equal – the Equal Opportunities Act [*sic*] had been passed, and your work could now earn the same as a man. A lot of stereotypes for roles had been broken down. And punk just exploded onto the scene. The reason so many women were involved was that it liberated them from predefined roles that society might have in mind for them... It also broke the rules of how things should be done. Previously if you were a band you had to be virtuoso, you had to do years and years of touring, gigging, being ripped off by record companies to get exposure. But then suddenly, punk's on the scene and anybody can get exposure.³⁵

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The chains of empowerment – one band helps another band, who in turn helps another band, and so on – will later be seen to apply to many of the women I spoke to, or who responded to the questionnaires that I sent out.

Fantasies and Reality: Motivation and Role Models

Walkerdine³⁶ describes household and playground scenes that are familiar to many girls and women: the fantasy pop band, singing current chart hits and imagining themselves to be on stage, performing to an audience. Singing and dancing are part of childhood's rites of passage, as documented by Iona and Peter Opie;³⁷ Virginia Caputo also notes the importance of song-making to children as a method of defining and controlling the adult world:

Themes of songs dealing explicitly with issues such as female fear, females as property, physical abuse, control of the State, and traditional female and male roles, abound in the children's repertoire. Songs that carry these messages are repeated over and over again by children in predominantly "chant" form. The chants indicate that they are not merely reflective of the surrounding adult world, but that children are actively engaged in the process of shaping their worlds.³⁸

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It is interesting to compare this with Attali's remarks about the correlation between music and violence:

This channelization of childhood through music is a politically essential substitute for violence, which no longer finds ritual enactment. The youth see it as the expression of their revolts, the mouthpiece of their dreams and needs, when it is in fact a channelization of the imaginary, a pedagogy of the general confinement of social relations in the commodity.³⁹

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It is not unusual for girls to express themselves in song; making the transition into bands is therefore a cultural issue rather than one of ability. I found that the idea of forming a band was not problematic; what had been difficult was the identification, mostly by men, of playing in a rock band as adolescent male territory. Previously (if Attali's theory is correct and applied to the male-gendered rock discourse), only young men had the right to express revolt through the consumption and creation of music.

The following letter to *Sounds*, written in 1976 before punk had really taken off nationally, expresses the frustration of a woman instrumentalist, and possibly predicts the influx of girls into rock bands:

...I'm a bass guitarist who would like to play good, heavy rock (i.e. Sabs, Fairies), but because I'm a girl, no one's interested... You see I just want to stand on stage and play bass and that is (at the moment) unacceptable because I know (from experience) that men don't like the idea that girls can play as well, if not better, than them (I'm no women's libber – I'm talking about musical ability). I don't believe I'm the only person who feels this way, but if I am, surely I've not been devoting my life to an ambition which is doomed to failure just because I'm "the wrong sex" for a bassist? Maybe the answer lies in mixed bands... (Joy [the ferret], Carpenders Park, Watford, Herts).⁴⁰

The coming-into-existence of the punk ethos made it easier for women like Joy to form bands; there was a cultural shift away from the idea that "only a special (usually male) person can be in a band," and this directly affected the way some young women perceived themselves. Previous to this period, women's contact with the rock world was often to take on the role of groupie, providing sex for rock stars after the show.⁴¹ Chrissie Hynde articulates the frustration that she felt at the time, according to Amy Raphael, who mentions that Chrissie Hynde gave Johnny Rotten guitar lessons, and later tried rock journalism as a career, but:

...Hynde had an epiphany: she had no desire to live her life through others. She was more concerned with her own experience than writing about others' and intent upon not being regarded as a Pistols' groupie;⁴² she later said of the period, "Everyone had a band except me and it used to make me cry."⁴³

There was a sharp transition from the activities of the younger adolescent females at the time. McRobbie and Garber, writing on teenybopper culture, say:

There seems little doubt that the fantasy relationships which characterise this resistance depend for their very existence on the subordinate, adoring female in awe of the male on a pedestal... The small, structured and highly manufactured space that is available for ten to fifteen year old girls to create a personal and autonomous area seems to be offered only on the understanding that these strategies also symbolise a future general subordination – as well as a present one.⁴⁴

Deciding to Form a Band

Some of the women I spoke to had had fantasies of being in bands (similar to those described by Walkerdine) with siblings or friends,⁴⁵ and later made what must have seemed a natural transition into the real thing, pushing aside the "fantasy relationships" of their earlier years and claiming the pedestal for themselves. This early and easy transition from fantasy to practice was common to several of them; Zillah Ashworth of Rubella Ballet, for instance, told me:

My dad had been drafted into the army. He pretended he could play trombone. They did ask us if we wanted to have music lessons. We [would have] had to have free lessons, [but] they didn't do free lessons. Playing instruments was seen as a middle-class thing to do. It was still seen as a posh thing to do. I did want to be in a band from the beginning. I used to watch *Top of the Pops* and dress up as Pan's People with my sisters.⁴⁶

As a child, Hester Smith of Dolly Mixture had played at being in a band anyway:

Me and Debsey already had a pretend band of our own...it sounds so childish...so obviously it was exciting to be in a real band, even if we were just backing-singers. Then we decided to form our own... You know what it was, it was *Rock Follies*.⁴⁷ That was really exciting! We used to watch it every week and found it really thrilling. It would look so tacky probably now, but at the time, yeah!⁴⁸

Jane Munro of The Au Pairs had made props to use in her fantasy band:

Oh yes, I was an instrumentalist! I played guitar. We used to make cardboard guitar things... it was me and a little boy; there were only two of us. It was very driven by me, perhaps because he was a bit younger. I was an only child and I was inventive. I used to play all sorts of things. I was quite imaginative. We used to play along to records and we used to make a little stage on a low table. We were whoever we were playing along to.⁴⁹



ebrary Jane Munro, The Au Pairs. Unknown photographer

Poly Styrene (of X-ray Spex)'s early ambitions were focused on more traditional performance:

I wanted to be an actress, I wanted to be in musicals and we lived quite near the Granada TV studios on Kennington Road. I remember when I was really little we used to walk past there and I would start singing and dancing and hoping that someone would discover me.

My thing was singing like maybe The Supremes, so I always thought of being in a musical, that kind of thing, rather than being in a band. I used to do singing and dancing at school to entertain the other children.⁵⁰

This feeling of 'playing at' something was not unique to British bands; Tina Weymouth, bass-player with new-wave US band Talking Heads, described a similar feeling among all of the band-members, male and female: "There was a time...when we felt like people pretending to be a band. Then all of a sudden we were a band."⁵¹ Other women needed a catalyst – and seeing other women play live made performing seem easy enough to try, sometimes as a transition from political activity with a group of peers. This is what happened to Lucy O'Brien, who formed The Catholic Girls in Southampton:

We first formed the band in about 1978. We were all at school and we were very bored. There was four of us who were really good friends in the sixth form. We got into punk; we'd been on demonstrations together, we'd got involved in things like hunt saboteurs, with the Anti-Nazi League, and we'd just got very fired up by seeing Gang of Four and The Delta 5 on the back of a lorry at a pro-Abortion march in London. We just thought they were having so much fun, and punk is about do it yourself, and why don't we just go out and get some instruments and form a band? So that's how it started.⁵²

Both Gina Birch and June Miles-Kingston cited seeing The Slits live as their personal catalysts; Rhoda Dakar saw The Mo-dettes and was inspired to look for a band to join. Away from the larger urban centres like Cambridge or Southampton, it was more difficult to join or start a band: Sue Bradley had to wait until she had left home to attend Brighton Polytechnic before she could play with other musicians:

At school I always knew I wanted to play in bands. I came from a very small village. The boys tended to get together and play guitars but there wasn't anything for the girls at all. The girls just didn't do that. The girls just spent most of their time getting themselves ready to go out with boys; they didn't have group activities like that.⁵³

For others, living in a musical household, with equipment lying around waiting to be played, was enough to get them started, as will be shown later in the Brighton chapter, when the drum kit that was permanently set up in a shared house encouraged a young woman to start drumming. Jane Woodgate, who formed The Mo-dettes, describes an almost accidental series of events that led to the band getting together:

A great friend of mine had a satellite band called The Tesco Bombers; he would change the line-up for each song. I was to sing two songs... Gina Birch of The Raincoats played bass on a few of the numbers as well. The only constant in the band was to be the friend himself. At

the beginning of 1979 there was to be a gig at the Acklam Hall [in West London] and I thought it would be a cheeky idea if we had a line-up that didn't include him by having only girls, so I asked Ramona to sing and looked about me for a guitarist and drummer. I happened on Kate Korus in the Lisson Grove dole queue, she and June had been looking for a bassist and singer, it was a done deal.⁵⁴

Interestingly, the ability or desire to play an instrument did not always lead to a role as an instrumentalist. Penetration's Pauline Murray started at the age of fourteen as a folk singer/guitarist playing covers of songs like Peter Paul and Mary's *Leaving on a Jetplane*, gravitating at the age of fifteen to a band that played covers of songs by David Bowie and Cockney Rebel, before taking on the role of vocalist in the band. She was quite happy with this role, until later when she joined The Invisible Girls in 1980, and she took up guitar (and keyboards) again in the studio.

Choice of Instrument and Learning to Play

I found a variety of attitudes and abilities here. Some women (for instance, Enid Williams, Lora Logic, Nora Normal) were dedicated from their early teens to a particular instrument and were therefore "raring to go" when the opportunity arose to join or form a band. Their reasons for becoming involved in bands were positive, and they were ambitious to have careers in music. Rachel Bor of Dolly Mixture, on the other hand, was actively against the idea of being a musician:

It was accidental. I didn't want anything to do with music. That was the one thing I said I'd never do, because my parents were both musicians. I thought I'd go to art college, that was the only thing I had in mind. It was only because Debsey and Hester had to get this band together for a party that I got involved.⁵⁵

For others, in particular Liz Naylor, it was a way out of a claustrophobic upbringing, as her previous comments have shown (see above). Palmolive, drummer with The Slits, originally wanted to be a mime artist or street clown. She had been living with Joe Strummer (later of The Clash) and dancing at gigs by the 101'ers before deciding to try something on her own:

I met these people...they said, "Yeah, you can join us, but we only need someone to play drums when someone does something difficult." I didn't get on with the guy, I didn't like him, so I had a fight with him and left. But I had already kind of played the drums, and I thought, Ahhh! That's not hard! I can do this! So I started going "mm-cha, mm-

mm-cha." It went from there. And I really wanted to change, really wanted to do something different.⁵⁶

Whatever the skills or motivation of the women I interviewed, they often displayed an extremely self-effacing attitude to their abilities as musicians. Gina Birch, bass-player and guitarist with The Raincoats, articulates feelings that describe the combined insecurity and excitement of the pioneer:

In spite of my feeling [that] things were not difficult, I had a certain sense of modesty and I thought that one note was easier than chords... so I started to play... I actually put a lot into it, but I always thought that I was terrible. And when people said they thought what I did was interesting and good I didn't really believe them. And yet part of me did and part of me didn't.⁵⁷

Sometimes, the choice of instrument was imposed, but suited the personality of the player. Tessa Pollitt was asked to join The Slits as a bass-player even though she had originally intended otherwise:

I originally was planning to play the guitar, but it's only because I was asked to play the bass – it wasn't a decision coming from me; I think it's the best thing that ever happened. The bass is the perfect instrument for my character – it's just the deep tones – I've never really analysed it, but I feel much more comfortable with the bass than the guitar. It's a much more earthy character – the bass and the drums are the backbone. It's a much safer place for my character to be. I'm just not a guitarist – not that you should play just one instrument, but I think each person has an instrument that suits their character. I was just so quiet, it was just more me.⁵⁸

The retrospective attitude of some women was that the "package" of skills they had was worth more than their mastery of one particular instrument. Enid Williams of Girlschool told me:

I listened to some records and tried to copy them. I had a few music lessons from some guy, but not very much. The thing is that we were never "musician" musicians, we were always performers. The musicality was of a reasonable standard, but we weren't musos. We were always band-members, so we were entertainers, songwriters, musicians, all rolled into one. It was always, "Yeah, let's give that a go, let's see how it works, pick up a bit here, pick up a bit there," it was never a case of, "Let's study an instrument."⁵⁹

Some women were almost reluctantly propelled towards playing and had to be guided towards their destiny, as Mavis Bayton explains:

When I came into Oxford, I was a bit depressed and alienated from the city and looking for something to do. And a friend said to me, "You've always wanted to play guitar, why don't you have some lessons?" And I found somebody in the scene, who I think gave me six lessons. I think I learned how to do a bar chord – I think it was the F shape. After six weeks of me, he just said, Look, there's this ad in the *Backstreet Bugle*. And it said that they wanted women to get together to be in a band and he said, "Why don't you go along?" and I said, obviously, "I can't play the guitar"; his response was, "Well, they won't be able to play either." I think he wanted to get rid of me!⁶⁰

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Choice of instrument was often dictated by the limitations of other band-members; Rachel from Dolly Mixture was the only member of her fantasy band who could actually play anything at the outset:

My parents were both musicians and we'd always played instruments. I played piano and cello and taught myself guitar. I started learning chords and things when I was about twelve... Debsey and Hester had been in a band together. We just picked our instruments and I was the only one who could play anything so I played the guitar.⁶¹

And sometimes, choice of instrument was by default, as Hester, drummer with the band, explains:

It was one of those flukes; it wasn't one of those things I'd thought of doing, ever, although I'd seen Karen Carpenter play on TV and I remember thinking, that looks fun. A load of people just seemed to be in bands – not girls though, only blokes. A friend of ours was a singer and she and a couple of friends had formed this band. She asked me and Debsey to do backing vocals. There was me, Debsey and Rachel... Rachel could play a bit of guitar, Debsey wanted to play bass and my hands were quite small so they said, "You can play drums." This was a big thing... Rachel said, "You can use my brother's drums." Rachel's brother was in Cambridge's only punk band and Rachel said, "and he'll teach you." Really I should never have been a drummer, I never got on with it that well, but that's how it happened. I fell into it.⁶²

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Punk violin-player Sue Bradley, of Brighton band The Reward System, appeared to have no choice but to find a band that would include her skills after discovering that her environment was not supportive of girls who wanted

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to play rock instruments; her rural upbringing meant that at first she had no contact with the DIY ethos and its application to music-making:

I decided that I really wanted to learn the guitar. The only way that I could think to do this was to have guitar lessons. And of course the only lessons that were offered at school were classical guitar, and classical guitars have got a very wide neck. And I've got very small hands and so I just didn't get on with it at all⁶³ so I gave up on that. Which is a real shame because in retrospect, I think I'd have liked to play the bass, if I'd known any other girls that were doing it... It just didn't occur to me, oh yeah, buy a bass and just copy it off other bands, listen and play by ear. No one had introduced me to that and if they had, I'd have been off!⁶⁴

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For Karen ("Nora Normal"), drummer with The Gymslips, encouragement came from her family, who refused to subscribe to the gender conventions of "the outside world." Karen's father is a musician, and was more than happy to encourage his daughter in her choice of instrument:

I never had any training, I never had any lessons. I just taught myself by playing along with records and things like that, although my family are musical. But I never learned any other sort of instrument. My dad is a folk musician, English folk music. I can't say that I was given any confidence generally, but on the other hand it was helpful. It's quite unusual that girls would play drums, and part of it, any kid who says, "Oh mum, I wanna play drums," their parents would say, "No, because they're so noisy," and if you're a girl you'd get laughed at. At school I got laughed at by teachers, but at home it was different. My dad did encourage me. My dad helped me when I was sixteen to buy a second-hand drum kit. So in that way it was very helpful.⁶⁵

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The contrasting abilities of three keyboard-players show how difficult it is to stereotype the women I spoke to. First, Lucy O'Brien described how she transferred the piano-playing skills she already had to synthesizer:

I had learned the piano, I was up to about Grade 4 on the piano, I'd had lessons since I was about thirteen so I was already quite au fait with that and also with music theory. So it wasn't too hard to transpose and to actually play the keyboards. What I loved was all the extra bits, playing around with all these sort of psychedelic sounds, with these different knobs. I don't think I used the synthesizer to its full capacity at all, but it was really nice to have a piano with all these effects.⁶⁶

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Julie Blair, from The Mockingbirds, practised her parts on the piano at home before playing a borrowed Vox organ at rehearsals:

I had a Vox organ, and Rick [her partner] just showed me a few chords, literally. We've always had a piano at home, so I used to practise a few chords on the piano, then just fiddled around; it was very simple, what we did. I think I added to that and learned how to play a 12-bar blues on the piano, and learned how to play reggae sort of rhythms, but they were never really kosher.⁶⁷

The Gay Animals' keyboard-player, Liz Naylor, fits in more with the idea of the stereotypical punk player. She had no familiarity with playing an instrument, but she was carried away with the idea of being in a band and went ahead and joined one anyway:

[Previous to this time] it just seemed you could never do that, it was something boys did, and I had no musical ability, I wasn't at all gifted in any way in music, and didn't own any instruments. I didn't own an instrument and I just answered this advert which is a great indication of how great punk was. I thought, Well I'll just form a band, and I played keyboards... Really I can't play, all the keys had stickers on, like C, A, D, and all my keys had C, C, C.⁶⁸

From the above, it can be seen that there was a considerable determination to participate in bands regardless of skill, instrument played, or expectation. These young women were energetic and resourceful and had put the inherent political message of punk into practice: participation and action, rather than watching and absorbing. As Ari says here, within the London community there was also a lot of encouragement from men:

The only reason we really got in is because the boys were supportive – we were up against the world, all of us were. The boys were up against the world, so of course the girls were even more up against the world. If you put one and one [*sic*] ...and it was no problem for us, we were fully supported.⁶⁹

The Slits were particularly aided in the studio by Keith Levene when they started recording. Levene also taught Viv Albertine to play guitar, when he was fourteen and she was seventeen:

Keith took me seriously as a musician even though I'd never played in my life and it was just the hugest gift actually, to have him. He was younger than me; it may be that the dynamic of that was quite good; that he looked up to me in other ways. Maybe he fancied me! I didn't

feel threatened by him. I'd be so depressed, I'd play day after day, and I didn't get a bit better. You could talk to him about the most minute feelings you had, you could say, "Oh God I'm so depressed, I've spent two weeks now not getting any better. I've reached a plateau."

[He'd say] "That's called guitar depression, that's perfectly normal."

He would have words and understanding for whatever minute little mood you were going through, and make sense of it.⁷⁰

Encouragement came for at least two bands from Paul Cook of The Sex Pistols, first for June Miles-Kingston:

Paul Cook came in one day to the office and said, "I need some money," and I said, "Well, I can't just give you some money," and he said, "I've got an old drum kit, do you know anyone who wants to buy it?" and I bought this drum kit for forty quid, set it up in the squat in the basement and just messed about. Paul showed me how to put it together. Kate played guitar anyway, 'cos she'd previously been in The Slits, way back. So we were just jamming along, Joe [Strummer, from the Clash] used to join in, Steve [Jones, from the Sex Pistols] used to join in, and I thought, I can do this.⁷¹

Paul told me:

Because it was good to see we helped the band out, giving loads of encouragement. [Punk] was an outpouring of talent that broke a lot of barriers. We didn't know what the future was going to be, we didn't know how long it was going to last at the time, but we knew there was a change in the air.⁷²

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Cook also helped out with The Bodysnatchers, according to Rhoda Dakar:

Who helped? SJ's boyfriend, people's boyfriends. SJ's boyfriend was in a band; I guess he must have helped her with the guitar. It was all done outside. The only person who ever came into rehearsals was Cooky, to help June with her drumming. She hadn't quite got it, and I'd asked him to come in and show her.⁷³

Siouxsie and the Banshees were helped by Johnny Thunders and the Heartbreakers: the band lent them equipment, money and rehearsal space, which meant they could carry on uncompromisingly until a record label would accept them regardless of their controversial image. The Damned invited The Adverts to tour the UK with them. Rubella Ballet shared a large house with Poison Girls, who encouraged them. There was a spirit of camaraderie

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between bands that was encouraged by the fact that they felt part of a community of outcasts, right from the start. I also found that the breaking-down of the divisions between audience and performer could be so complete that joining a band could be as easy and direct as an invitation from the stage, as in the case of The Thompson Twins:

At Thompson Twins' gigs people are nearly always invited up on stage to participate, to bang or blow something and contribute to the music... It was by clambering on stage that two new members, Joe Leeway (congas and percussion) and Jane Shorter (sax and keyboards), came to join recently.⁷⁴

Brighton band The Mockingbirds described a similar convention: b6bc906638a39aa
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We had this brilliant song called "I Like Boys" that just lent itself to a reggae rhythm, and it left lots of space. We had all these percussion instruments, so we used to get people to come up and sort of bang lots of different percussion things to fill all this space that we, as inadequate musicians, couldn't fill. *Like a collaboration with the audience?* Yes.⁷⁵

Perhaps the oddest source of encouragement I was told about was the nuns at Lucy O'Brien's school:

It surprised us hugely, because we went to quite a strict convent school and we assumed that they'd be really anti what we were doing. The interesting thing about nuns is that, thinking about it with hindsight, there's a sort of feminist subtext to being a nun (albeit a bit screwed up!). Basically in our school I remember them really admiring girls who went into careers and did really well educationally, who did well for themselves. There was no problem about women being independent. It was just felt that yes, marriage was an option and if you went into that, you had to do the whole thing and have children and be submissive to your husband; but I just felt that there was a message coming through as well about being independent educated women and doing stuff for yourself. So actually I felt they were secretly admiring of our chutzpah, of our ability to get something together like that.⁷⁶

However, "the boys" were not always encouraging, as this experience by Sue from Prag Vec reveals – a normal rite of passage for boys was ridiculed when practised by a girl:

I had a guitar when I was about fifteen. I had a copy of *Highway 61 Revisited*, and I learned to play "Tambourine Man." I remember sitting in my bedroom playing and I could hear my brother and his friend outside the window. They were laughing at me.⁷⁷

Other members of the family could also be disparaging: Lesley Woods of The Au Pairs describes her mother telling her that she had a voice "like a foghorn," and Stella Clifford of Brighton's Objeks said:

When I was fifteen I had a guitar for my birthday and I learned to play *American Pie*; one day I was playing it and my brother ran into the room and started singing it with me. I remember thinking this is the most fun I've ever, ever had. And my mum used to shout upstairs "Go down the garden if you're going to make all that noise." So I didn't have any encouragement at home.⁷⁸

Acquiring the First Instrument

Recycling discarded musical instruments was very much part of the ethos. While old music styles (and often, consequently, lifestyles) are discarded by the record business in order to pave the way for new styles for new generations of young consumers, Willis notes:

Commodities can be taken out of context, claimed in a particular way, developed and repossessed to express something deeply and thereby to change somewhat the very feelings which are their product. And this can happen under the very nose of the dominant class – and with their products... it is sometimes the dispossessed who are best placed to exploit the revolutionary double edge of unexplored things around us.⁷⁹

Although Willis is referring to black jazz musicians using discarded white people's instruments to make music, this is exactly what happened during punk, which started and continued to exist often with little or no capital investment by either the artists or external business; instruments were often borrowed, stolen at gigs from bands who were perceived to have "made it," or bought second-hand.⁸⁰

Possessing an instrument imposed a commitment on the aspiring musician to learn to play the instrument, and in this particular environment to perform live with it, straight away. The nature of the punk scene was that bands were often performing their first gigs within weeks, or even days, of forming; often there was little rehearsal. For some, like June (above), an opportune moment could lead to the acquisition of an instrument. Borrowing was also very common, particularly for the first few gigs, and this was one of the elements of informal mentoring that enabled women to join bands. Rachel's first guitar was borrowed:

I borrowed it off somebody and it was a Woolworth's guitar. It had a great name...it was a Thunder something or other. Every rehearsal I had to solder it back together again. This little wire inside it was getting shorter and shorter. We learned quite a lot as we went along.⁸¹

Julie Blair also borrowed her first instrument:

It was James's keyboard from The Parrots. I think everyone borrowed instruments, as far as I can remember.⁸²

However, the spectacle of punk gigs and the energy of the moment meant that a band could become busy very quickly however inexperienced they were, and this could cause problems with conflicting gig engagements: a shared guitar could not be in two venues at the same time. It would become necessary to buy an instrument of one's own.⁸³ Because most of these bands (even Girlschool, a heavy-metal band) were actively, as Enid says, against "musos," the quality of the instrument did not matter. Cheapness was essential, unless a parent could be persuaded to pay for the instrument – more likely in the case of instruments perceived to be jazz or classical in nature, less likely if the instrument was designed for rock. Karen's father's empathy with his daughter's musical ambitions led him to help her to purchase her first drum kit:

I got my first kit from a drum shop in Stratford. It was a very old jazz kit. I only had £100. The bloke in the shop was really helpful in trying to get something together for little money... When I was sixteen I had an endowment – they [her parents] had been putting a bit of money away for me every year. Also, I was working in Sainsburys on a Saturday.⁸⁴

Lora Logic's parents were keen at first to support their daughter's musical ambitions and bought a saxophone for her when she was fourteen; when asked what instrument she'd like to play, she asked for one, "half thinking they'd never buy me a saxophone because it was so big and so expensive, but they did."⁸⁵ Liz Naylor had had a difficult relationship with her mother, but still managed to persuade her that she should buy her first keyboard for her:

I actually did make my mum buy it; I must have guilt-tripped her; it was from A1 Music in Oxford Street in Manchester...it sounded like Una Baines's from The Fall and it [was] kind of some plinky piano thing and it was about a hundred quid...and then I came across a second-hand Vox Jaguar. I signed on during this time [so] God knows how I got the money!⁸⁶

Although some of the younger instrumentalists could persuade their parents to buy their instruments, this was not a possibility for older girls. Some of the younger ones also had to buy their own equipment and could be naïve about what to expect as they did not necessarily socialize in a music environment. As Enid says,

I bought it [bass guitar] second-hand out of my paper round, it was thirteen pounds, I was very shocked that it only had four strings, 'cos I thought that all guitars had six.⁸⁷

Gina Birch's first purchase was spontaneous:

I bought my first bass guitar in the beginning of 1977. I had no musical education...there were very few female bands around but a band called The Slits had started to play and I was so amazed and so wanted to do this when I saw them. I was at an Art and Politics conference at the Acme Gallery and it was just near Charing Cross Road where all the guitar shops are. So at lunchtime I went for a couple of drinks and when I came out of the pub I just walked straight into a guitar shop and bought a really cheap nasty brown bass guitar, took it home, and sprayed it with some sparkly car spray paint.⁸⁸

There was a considerable degree of determination and initiative present in Southampton's sixth-form band The Catholic Girls, as Lucy O'Brien explains:

My keyboards were actually assembled from a kit that was made by the keyboard-player from another punk band (who had a bit of a crush on me at the time). I'd saved up, I had a Saturday job and I'd saved up for this new synthesizer, and it was really exciting because synthesizers were just coming into play then, synthesizers were the new big thing... One of the big instruments was the drum kit. 'Cos we were all in the sixth form we didn't have a lot of money between us so we used to make cakes and earrings and things at school and sell them and with the money from that we got a drum kit on hire purchase and paid I think it was about nine pounds a week, or maybe it was less. So we gradually assembled our instruments.⁸⁹

Bands whose members had jobs had more money to spend on musical equipment; some felt embarrassed by this, due to the poverty ethos of punk, and would go to great lengths to disguise their relative wealth, as Mavis Bayton reveals:

Within a few weeks we said, "Let's get equipment." We looked at the ads in the paper. We bought a whole band's equipment – it was

really rubbish – for a hundred pounds. Mic stands, harmonicas, everything, it was really rubbish. Me and the mandolin-player shared an amp together, it was an old valve amp. It was really difficult sharing. Then after six months we thought, "Let's get our own gear then." I remember I went from this really crap guitar to a Les Paul. I was kind of embarrassed to have a Les Paul, and that was 'cos I had a job, I was teaching and I had the money to do it. I had the definite impression that a Les Paul just wasn't very punk. So I put elastoplast all over the Les Paul and sort of stuck stickers on it so it looked a bit nasty 'cos I thought it looked too posh.⁹⁰

More unusually perhaps, Lesley Woods of The Au Pairs persuaded her father to buy her a guitar at the age of seventeen when she joined a club band:

I first got an electric guitar because after I got into writing songs with an acoustic guitar I actually joined a group, a social club outfit who would go round social clubs, like labour clubs, singing (sings) "Hey hey Paul, I've been waiting for you; Hey, hey Paul I want to marry you too..." that sort of really corny thing! That's when I got my first electric guitar, 'cos I played with them. My dad bought it for me – a very, very bad, bad, bad, cheap, nasty electric guitar! (*Wasn't this unusual at the time?*) Yeah, but they insisted. I was the only girl. All I remember is that my Dad went and bought me an electric guitar. Maybe I was lying when I said they told me that they needed me to play the electric guitar!⁹¹

I found that everybody who responded to my questionnaires had displayed considerable determination in order to acquire their instruments; the following replies show the variety of sources that supplied instruments for women players. For example it could be a gift from a friend, as, for instance, in the case of female drummer S.B., from Autonomy, north of England: "Mostly the drum kit was given by a friend – a very old, knackered Salvation Army drum kit. I bought a few bits for it from local musicians, classifieds, etcetera." An instrument might also be bought through the diversion of savings intended for another purpose, as for bass-player Suzanne Long, in Gateshead: "We were planning to get married and we had saved £100 and he insisted I bought a bass with the money as there was one in a sale for £112. It was an Ibanez Blazer bass." Factory work at unsocial hours could accrue enough money to pay for a bass. M.H. from The Passage, Manchester, wrote: "I bought my first bass guitar by working nights in a factory, chosen with Gus Gangrene of The Drones (ugh!)." Instruments might also be bought second-hand or borrowed: M.H.'s sister L.H., who was a synth-player

in the same band, writes, "Bought the Vox (amplifier) and borrowed the synth from Dick Witts." Poor-quality equipment could be bought cheaply – E.T., of The Syphletix in Hounslow, played a bass that was "Bought for £5!" – or bought in instalments: Sian Treherne, of the band *Scream and Scream Again*, in Gloucester, bought her bass guitar from "a catalogue! Needless to say it was not a 'name make' but I could pay weekly!" Finally, one woman eventually had a guitar made by an enthusiastic friend: Vi Subversa, guitarist with *Poison Girls*, told me, "I bought one second-hand in Brighton. I don't recall it particularly – I remember it was too heavy for me and I eventually found a guitar comfortable for me. Richard [Famous] *made* me a superb one which accommodated my curves."⁹²

Trading also could enable a musician to acquire a large and expensive piece of "kit":

I had a car, a Renault 10, and the water pump broke, and I thought the car was finished. My brother, who never missed an opportunity to make money, knew that I wanted a guitar amp and he said, "If you give me the car I'll buy you a guitar amp." And he bought me this great combo H&H which I thought was fantastic.⁹³

The First Gigs

Like musical amateurism, finding gigs was an issue that held both advantage and disadvantage for girls in bands. Girls playing instruments in bands have continually been seen as a novelty by promoters, and indeed by almost all facets of the music industry, and within punk there was a dual ethic of promoting bands with women members, first, because they would draw crowds (men perhaps to gawp, women perhaps to admire) and, second, because of the ideological clout one would acquire. The supportive nature of local scenes, whether through Women's Centres (Mavis Bayton), sibling encouragement (Rachel Bor), mentoring (Vi Subversa and various other women), or just being "on the punk scene" (Liz Naylor, June Miles-Kingston, Rhoda Dakar) meant that the first step to live performance often bypassed a more normal way of getting a live gig – sending a demo tape. The atmosphere of facilitation was quite different from the competitive situation that exists when venues are scarce and audiences for live music are dwindling. An important potential hurdle, that of getting past the entry-level live gatekeeper, was thus avoided. Much has been made of Siouxsie and the Banshees' first gig, in which they performed an extended version of 'The Lord's Prayer' – it is tempting in retrospect to regard this as part of punk mythology, but the examples below show how frequently the rules of access were

broken or pushed aside; as punk poet Attila the Stockbroker told me, it was expected that a band would ask to perform at another band's gig, and to refuse was to seem unreasonable. Hester Smith's comments about Dolly Mixture bear this out:

We didn't really need a lot of help [to get gigs], we found it quite easy... We used to go to gigs and then just go up to the bands and say, "Can we support you?," and they usually said yes – I think they were just intrigued. Or we would go to colleges if we heard of any students who had bands, we'd go and visit them and say, "Can we play with you?" We were quite, you know, forward in that way. Just anyone, we'd ask if we could play.⁹⁴

The audience was usually prepared to accept whatever was on offer: Stuart Home has commented that he was often unaware of the line-up of bands before he went to a gig; he just went along for the experience.⁹⁵ This attitude was typical of people attending gigs at this time, and was displayed by the promoters I spoke to. For instance, Christine Robertson, who started promoting punk gigs at various venues in Reading when she was at university there, describes the nature of gigs in Reading at this time:

The reason I was promoting concerts was because there were no good concerts being put on in our locality, it was just stuck in a time warp, and this was a way of addressing my need for good music.

How did you find bands?

I used to come to London a lot. It was more something that was in the air – there were a lot of people thinking along similar lines somehow; and it didn't matter whether it was a successful punk band or something that was unknown. It was whether a band was available for the gig and if they were someone you'd vaguely heard of in that scene – so it was very much events based.⁹⁶

Attila organized gigs at the University of Kent, and describes the young promoters' willingness to gamble at the time:

The scene in Canterbury was mainly based at the University because we had the venues. I'd go to London and see bands and it would be their first gig and I'd ask them to play, and I booked them. [Once] the Gay Society asked me to organize something. I booked this band for fifty quid to play one of the venues. By the time the gig arrived they were on the front page of the *Melody Maker* and *NME*. The Gay Society were really chuffed with it, they made loads of money.⁹⁷

Christine Robertson continues:

I can't remember a lot of the bands that I saw. You always remember the key ones that went on to be famous. I saw *loads* of bands, *loads* of bands; some of the support acts we had were really, really good and perhaps never got the audience they deserved... There was a real proliferation.⁹⁸

It can be surmised from these comments that there was no preconception about what a band would sound like or look like, as long as they could provide an experience for the audience. Musical competence, gender, style and content were arbitrary; the audience was expected to be open-minded. This was very much a feature of early punk (the so-called "first wave") and allowed unusual bands to take to the stage.⁹⁹ Sometimes, a party would provide the setting for the first gig, and this would not only lead to other bookings, but also provide the vitally important factor for any successful band at the time – a local following. This is what started the performing careers of Dolly Mixture, and The Mistakes:

It was at a party in a hall. I don't know if it was like this when you were growing up, but there just seemed to be parties every weekend. Somebody would hire a hall, you wouldn't necessarily have to know them but everybody went. It was one of those. When this woman heard that we were going to form a band she said, "Oh, you can play at my party." So we had two or three weeks to get ready to play our first gig. Just this hall in Cambridge, a church hall.¹⁰⁰

The first gig we did was the party of a friend and we thought that would be a safe environment to come out as a band in. We had a following from day one; there were just so many people...what was important was the following. We were a breath of fresh air: within eight weeks of forming we played outdoors to one-and-a-half thousand people in the open air festival, the annual Mayfly, down by the river, and the organizer of that had heard about us, so we were catapulted onto that, really.¹⁰¹

Frequently, planning the first gig provided the stimulus for formally writing the first songs, taking the band from being just an idea to the reality of live performance. For The Catholic Girls,

The first gig was sort of by accident as often happens with punk things. We'd just about scraped together all the instruments between us. I think Judith had just bought her bass guitar from Woolworth's really cheap. There were some male friends of ours who had heard that

"there's this all-girl band, we'll get them to support us," 'cos they had a gig at a place called The Joiners Arms (which actually I've noticed is still on the circuit). So they just rang us and said, "We've got a gig for you," and we thought, "Oh shit, we'd better write some songs!," so we just got about three songs together in as many days and just got up on stage and it was the most frightening experience of my life – but I was hooked from then on.¹⁰²



The Catholic Girls, used by kind permission of Mark Baker

Bands would do gigs further afield from their local area en masse, sharing transport, equipment and moral support. Lucy continues:

There were about four or five local bands in Southampton and we all would do gigs together and support each other, and gigs around the south coast and maybe a few in London; it was quite a tight-knit little scene really.¹⁰³

There was an advantage to shared gigs for the beginner bands – three songs are not enough for a full band set, as bass-player G.S. acknowledges:

We shared some equipment, like PA systems, with other local bands, and did joint gigs, which helps when you don't have much material!¹⁰⁴

The smallness (and sometimes the oppositional nature) of the scene, even in a large city like Manchester, often meant that bands clumped together and encouraged each other almost as a show of strength. Liz Naylor says:

Manchester at that time was really small; it was a tiny musical community and if you say to people, "Of course I knew Joy Division," it's nothing – they were just blokes you sat with. So we supported The Fall on lots of dates, it didn't mean anything to us. In a way we took it seriously because we thought we were great – I mean, we were appalling, but we didn't think of it as a career, it was just an experience, and we were there. Me and Cath [Carroll, later to become a journalist] thought we were kind of somebody in this tiny Manchester scene and our band was just the thing we did.¹⁰⁵

In Leeds, there was a loose community of musicians that included The Gang of Four, The Mekons and The Delta 5 and who were connected by friendship and a common interest in music. The most successful of these bands, The Gang of Four, facilitated the activities of the others; Bethan Peters describes the way this worked:

I was at the Polytechnic doing art stuff, Ros [second bass-player] was doing Fine Art at the University and the guys were doing other stuff. Jools [vocalist] was just a friend. The Gang of Four had a rehearsal space and we just went in and used the space; they'd finish rehearsing in the evening and we'd pick the stuff up! We borrowed Dave Allen, bass-player from The Gang of Four, as our first drummer, John Langford from The Mekons as our guitarist and we just sort of did five or six songs...our first gig was supporting Gang of Four.

Then Gang of Four signed with EMI so we tended to get studio time; their manager Rob Ewer was the one who got us into studios. After they had finished recording in the Old Kent Road we went in there 'cos EMI didn't want to sign us...it all sort of happened quite effortlessly though I don't know where my head was at the time. It was like a gang really.¹⁰⁶

For Girlschool, their recognizably heavy-metal style meant that a gig circuit already existed, and this gave them a great advantage over punk or new-wave bands whose music may have challenged the ears of promoters. Enid adds:

It was a big help being female in the sense of getting gigs – because it was like, great! women on stage, or girls on stage as they would see it, we'll pull the punters in, you know, it was a little bit of a novelty; it made us stand out. It was definitely a help in terms of getting

work and in terms of getting publicity in the music press. But it was a hindrance in terms of being taken seriously. We got an agent in '78 who got us lots and lots of gigs. So he was helpful in the sense of we wouldn't have been working if he hadn't been getting us gigs...but it was just business; he wasn't pro female bands or anything like that. It was just that he thought we were sellable¹⁰⁷ and he could get us work. I don't think that was any different to a male band that would have an angle or something.¹⁰⁸

The above shows that promoters were keen on the “sellable” (gimmicky) aspect of all-female bands. For some bands, early exposure to the music press accelerated their progress from a local to national profile within a matter of weeks. Dolly Mixture progressed rapidly:

Our fourth gig was at the Cambridge Corn Exchange.¹⁰⁹ I think it was The Fall and Kevin Rowland's band and The Nips. Somehow we got on the bill and the *NME* were there and they gave us a really, really good review and after that it was really, really easy – there were a lot of people interested in us in Cambridge, interested in managing us. There just seemed to be a lot of interest in what we were doing, everywhere. We were very, very lucky; it was easy.¹¹⁰

Penetration benefited for a while from being the only punk band in the north-east, and were invited to support the more nationally well-known bands as they toured and played the larger venues in Newcastle upon Tyne:

We used to get all the supports up here because there were no other bands like us. So we supported The Stranglers very early on, we did three nights at the Marquee with The Vibrators, we just played with lots of the bands that were coming up here.¹¹¹

In London, the bands had progressed in a similar way. Tessa describes the ease with which The Slits started touring:

The Pistols helped us, The Clash helped us on the White Riot Tour. They offered to take us on board with them. I think Don Letts had to pay Bernie Rhodes to take us, 'cos he just saw it as trouble. The coach driver had to be bribed to have us on the coach, but the actual groups themselves were very supportive, partly because Mick [Jones, of The Clash] had a relationship with Viv, and likewise Joe [Strummer] with Palmolive, so they were all close friends anyway.¹¹²

The Modettes also found themselves touring very soon after getting together as a group:

Kate said, "Well, I know some other people, that we could get together," and we started to get together with Jane and she had met Ramona, the singer, and she brought Ramona down, and within about three months we were off, touring! Joe gave us a spot, Madness gave us a spot, Siouxsie gave us a spot, just supporting all these people at this great time... And then we just started playing gigs off our own back.¹¹³

For The Bodysnatchers, it was almost as if the space already existed for them to play; they were the only all-female band who could fit into the Two Tone category, starting with punk characteristics and idealism, but falling much more into the category of early Two Tone:

It was mad: the second gig we did, Jerry [Dammers] turned up and offered us the second Two Tone Tour pretty much right there. We kind of got into it straight away.¹¹⁴

They were fortuitous in their choice of boyfriends, as guitarist Sarah-Jane explains:

Both Stella and I had boyfriends that were gigging the London circuit. It was Stella's boyfriend who leaked our debut gig at the Windsor Castle to the press... The word was out that an all-girl ska band was going to play, so we were all surprised when most if not all of The Selecter and The Specials showed up, led by Jerry Dammers who wanted to sign us up for a major tour supporting his bands.¹¹⁵

Others were propelled even further afield: after a few gigs playing local pubs "treading where the 101'ers¹¹⁶ had played before," The Raincoats played a pub in West London called the Chippenham:

There was this guy over from Warsaw who was organizing this international performance art festival...they liked us so much they invited us to go to Poland...so off we go...the fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh gig I ever did were in Warsaw.¹¹⁷

The Influence of Seeing The Sex Pistols

There is no doubt that Malcolm McLaren's project succeeded in galvanising young people into making music, and in the group of women that I interviewed for the second edition of this book; Shanne Bradley had been brought up in St Albans and saw the group at the art school there in 1975:

That's how I got drawn into the whole thing. It wasn't called Punk. We were wearing the same sort of thing; I had short spiky hair after a peroxide accident with henna, and a lot of piercings, and holsters and ripped-up fishnets and ice-skating boots and stuff from Oxfam shops.

And McLaren was there and they were just like yeah, you gotta come to the shop and [they] just started inviting me to everything, it was synchronicity or something. It was November 75, just after Halloween. They had played at St Martins the week before and it was their second gig, they just came along and gate-crashed. They had some plan to play all the art schools. And we just laughed at them because we thought they were piss-taking, a sort of 60s band. I got into them more when I saw them after that.¹¹⁸

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The attitude of the band proved infectious for Viv Albertine:

I think I'd seen the Pistols once, and having seen the Pistols, I *knew*; I immediately got it. It wasn't about how well you play; it was about you've got something to say that no-one else is saying. And I utterly got that: otherwise I'd never have thought in a million years of buying a guitar because I couldn't play, and I'd never played, and I didn't consider myself a musician. But it was just so liberating seeing the Pistols because I thought "Oh, you don't have to be a musician, you just have something you desperately want to say and the bollocks to get up and say it."¹¹⁹

Pauline Murray had seen one of the earliest gigs in Yorkshire:

The first time it was in Northallerton and it was in a night club, it was just full of ordinary Saturday night punters and they came on and it was just hilarious, it was just funny. It was the attitude, you know, we're just doing it and we don't care what you think, I mean that's a really liberating attitude because people are frightened to do things because they are worried about what will other people think and that's quite restricting. We really don't care what you think, we're gonna have a go anyway, we've got some good ideas and we're young.¹²⁰

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Therefore it can be seen that a combination of circumstances – inspiration from barrier-breaking role models, the "time being right," easy access to equipment and gigs, help from boyfriends, and a continued interest in, and support for, new bands from an eager and tolerant audience – elevated these women to an unprecedented level of self-expression in musical performance. It is interesting to note how few of the women I spoke to had *no* musical skill: some of them, such as Lucy O'Brien, transferred existing skills to a similar

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instrument. Others had picked up skills, or at least enabling ideas, from the school system or home musical environments. Some of the bands, like Dolly Mixture and, later, The Marine Girls, were “user-friendly” and almost gentle and child-like in their style; others’ music, for instance that of The Slits, was sometimes downright aggressive, but just as inspirational to the women (and men) who came to see them. The attitude of the press, in particular the music press – the “inkies”¹²¹ – was to play an important part in the way bands with women players were received. As the punk bands moved from subcultural to mainstream consciousness, from local to national audiences, they began a real engagement with national media institutions.

6 The Social Context: Academic Writing on Subcultures, the Rock Press and “Women in Music”

I will start this chapter with an exploration of attitudes expressed by writers in various relevant fields who explore youth subcultures, deviance and moral panics – the rules and actions of young people that differentiate them from their elders, and the attempts by their elders to define, control and assimilate these differences, generation upon generation; these studies focus almost completely on the activities of young men, probably because the writers, as men, can identify with the rites of passage they are documenting.

Academic Gatekeeping: Issues of Gender

Because punk was notable for a distinct difference that marked it from previous identified subcultures, with the involvement of women not just as observers or consumers, but as *visibly* active protagonists in production, Stanley Cohen's sweeping comment, in the Introduction to the 1993 edition of his much-respected work, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, needs to be addressed at the outset:

To re-examine the subject of post-war British youth subcultures is not quite the same as constructing, say, a revised historiography of World War II: there are no new archives to be opened, no secret documents to be discovered, no pacts of silence to be broken. There are just the same (rather poor) sources of information from the same (often inarticulate) informants. The question is what new sense can be made out of this same data.¹

This regrettable comment has probably returned to haunt Cohen on many occasions, and will return again, I hope, as I have opened new archives, discovered previously hidden documents and allowed suppressed voices to speak.²

Any exploration of women's contribution to (what are, by default) men's discourses involves disentangling men's attempts to rationalize

suppression (and occasionally oppression³) from their empirical observations, and a discussion of the nature of supposedly objective viewpoints. In 1990, Angela McRobbie had made an observation which was effectively ignored until much later on⁴ – an observation that now seems obvious but had never been said before:

Although few radical (male) sociologists would deny the importance of the personal in precipitating social and political awareness, to admit how their own experience has influenced their choice of subject matter (the politics of selection) seems more or less taboo... The point is that this absence of self (this is quite different from the authorial "I" or "we") and the invalidating of personal experience in the name of the more objective social sciences goes hand in hand with the silencing of other areas, which are for feminists of the greatest importance.⁵

Statements of the obvious made by McRobbie (and reiterated by others such as Walkerdine⁶) have prompted even some male writers (for instance Nehring⁷ in his study of the Riot Grrrl phenomenon) to acknowledge that the notion of objectivity is, itself, subjective. McRobbie started her academic life living in a house in Birmingham with members of mixed-gender band The Au Pairs, and I think this is significant; she was not content, as a writer, to accept the status quo in terms of what she noticed about the social environment in the late 1970s and women's and girls' places in it. The politicized community of Birmingham bands must have affected her attitude; there is nothing like the lived experience of a "moment" to readjust one's feelings about how history is documented. Although some find great difficulty in adapting what they regard as men's revolution to the feminist discourse,⁸ this has been a problem at every stage of the women's movement as women contextualize their attitudes and experiences.⁹

The texts examined in this chapter are relevant for two reasons, in spite of the fact that so many of them speak so little of women. First, the aspects of "being apart from society" that they describe apply as much to the women that I have interviewed as they do to the young men that form their focus. Second, by giving the reader an impression of the volume and variety of these texts, the wide scope of the "silencing of other areas" as described by McRobbie will, I hope, become more apparent.¹⁰

The relative isolation of *women's* writing on women in subcultures, women in employment and women in rock (women in anything, in fact) is inevitable, since previous historical studies (pre-1980s) have not only referred just to men, but also to a male environment in which women were a mere side issue – at most facilitators, occasionally agitators and at least a

hindrance to male advancement. Rosalind Miles reminds us that, even in the developed western world:

Traditionalist arguments of masculine supremacy have been remarkably resilient over time – all democratic experiments, all revolutions, all demands for equality have so far stopped short of sexual equality – and women, seen as biologically determined, continue to be denied the human right of full self-determination.¹¹

Women's writing therefore has to provide a sort of potted context for itself whatever its focus, given the fact that the hegemonic historical context is male.¹² Because the writer is "assumed to be a feminist,"¹³ the target audience is also assumed to be female/feminist, by inference. The excitement for male academicians surrounding postmodernism as a social and design phenomenon must have provided a welcome diversion from feminism during the 1980s and 1990s.¹⁴ However, for some female writers it tempered one of the acknowledged drawbacks of the feminist movement in the 1970s; as Barbara Bradby remarks: "Postmodernist theorising has certainly sharpened awareness of the need to...avoid 'speaking for' other groups of women, and to be aware that one's analysis is only ever partial."¹⁵ Bradby thus not only builds upon McRobbie's remark about male writers, but also reminds us that any analysis must always acknowledge the drawbacks of personal bias; this established, the academic context follows.

Interest in the Power of the Adolescent Male

The first major post-war study of teenagers and their habits was *The Teenage Consumer*, written by Mark Abrams in 1959.¹⁶ This heralded the concept of the teenager as an independent entity, with their own income, making decisions about what they spent this income on during their leisure time. Since then, studies on young people's leisure activities have generally swung between market-research-oriented cultural studies (for example, Abrams through Lewis to Thornton) and left-leaning sociology (for example, Becker through Hebdige to Walkerdine), and conclusions have inevitably been drawn about what young people think, and their social groupings, according to the agendas of those who are making the study. There have also been changes in what society accepts as normal behaviour, and this too will be discussed in this section.

Becker's research in 1963 unearthed a degree of fatalism in those involved in the jazz community. In Becker's analysis, subcultures are formed when groups of potentially lone deviants find each other, and redefine themselves

according to what they have in common – this is as likely to be an inability to relate to the hegemonic culture as a desire to disrupt it:

Many people have suggested that culture arises essentially in response to a problem faced in common by a group of people, insofar as they are able to interact and communicate with each other effectively. People who engage in activities regarded as deviant typically have the problem that their view of what they do is not shared by other members of the society... Where people who engage in deviant activities have the opportunity to interact with one another they are likely to develop a culture built around the problems rising out of the differences between their definition of what they do and the definition held by other members of the society. They develop perspectives on themselves and their deviant activities and on their relations with other members of the society.¹⁷

Becker's study was, of course, made in the US, but it is interesting to note that at the time of Cohen's work on the Mods in the 1960s, the British tabloid press were beginning to feel the effects of television news on their circulation, and sensationalist headlines were seen to be an antidote to this problem. This, twinned with the social visibility of the Mods (like their predecessors the Teddy Boys they were readily identifiable by uniform, albeit different, garb), led to the "moral panic" that Cohen identified.¹⁸ By the time punk came around, the British tabloids were ready for a new moral panic, and relished the pseudo-sexual dress of the punks, while bypassing the political and social aspects of the group. For the punk subculture was about more than just bricolage in dress; it also incorporated idealism, anarchy, gender and race politics, and the creation of art, music and alternative media. The unemployment in the late 1970s and early 1980s that straddled gender divides also dissolved boundaries between classes. One of the most influential studies of post-war youth was made by members of the Birmingham CCCS and published as *Resistance through Rituals* in 1975.¹⁹ Included in their discourse on subcultures, Hall, Jefferson *et al.* had discussed the lack of faith working-class youth had in what they perceived to be the "thinly-disguised middle-class elitism"²⁰ in ideas of cultural revolution; the luxury of the middle classes taking this attitude was dependent on the security of access to paid work and spending power for the working-class youth. The lack of work in the late 1970s had a profound influence on the DIY culture of punk, and also to attitudes to gender differences within the subculture; unemployment was a levelling force and the predicament of being workless often led to greater communication between young people.

Becker's definition of a deviant subculture can be applied to the simultaneous desire by certain young women all over Britain to assume their right to

participate in activities in a way that was normally associated with a world of maleness. With no precedent to follow, the rules of both fashion and music were bent and broken in order to defy classification. This, added to the outlaw nature of punk itself, meant that the "perspectives" of the women interviewed here were well outside those defined as normal. There was not a master plan; as Willis explains:

Cultural expressions are...likely to be displaced, distorted or condensed reflections of barely understood, or "misunderstood," knots of feeling, contradiction and frustration – as well as forms of action on these things...we learn from the culture, not from its explicit consciousness.²¹

The "explicit consciousness" is a composite of the various "deviant" participants in the subculture, here processed by the subjective author; for this reason, I urge the reader to value the oral contributions to this book and to understand the fluid nature of perceptions of history.

Many factors other than unemployment fed into a massive cultural shift in the attitudes of young people in the UK towards the end of the 1970s. For women, there was no doubt that the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act made them understand that they had statutory rights in the workplace, whereas before this they had been merely tolerated. This, combined with the unprecedented increase in unemployment among school- and college-leavers of both genders at this point, resulted in a shift in attitudes "on the ground" or "on the street," which according to some of my informants resulted in a reassessment of women's and men's roles in society. Without jobs (that were still largely gendered), both sexes experienced the same feelings of exclusion and the same freedom from routine. The rearticulation of women's rights undoubtedly affected the expectations of both young men and young women. This introduced a tension into the phenomenon of "girl" instrumentalists, who sometimes found themselves to be unwilling spokespeople for the phenomenon itself, when they aspired to no more than participation or, at most, a role as non-confrontational pioneer.

It was suggested by Abrams *et al.* when analysing data collected in 1981, that the word "deviant" should now be applied to those who had traditional values; the word now applied to the *opposite* attitude to Becker's original study of jazz musicians:

The "conformists" (those holding anti-traditional values) were more prone than the deviant, traditionalist minority of younger people to question authority; to approve of cheating and lying when these

served their own self-interest; to denigrate respect for parents; to disavow any pride in being British; to regard the maintenance of public order as of little consequence; to refuse to accept the idea that there is a clear-cut difference between what is good and what is evil, and to have very little contact with organised religion.²²

This is quoted here for two reasons: partly to show how "rock'n'roll" attitudes had now become hegemonic and partly to reiterate the subjectivity and transience of works like this, reminding the reader that many of the theories explored here have been written in different socio-political environments, sometimes with hindsight gained from previous studies of subcultures. Becker, Cohen and Willis were observing phenomena in new ways in their own contexts, and although they are criticized here for aspects of their research, it has to be acknowledged that had their respective studies not existed, several histories of marginalized groups would not have been recorded and analysed, and their lives and lifestyles may well have disappeared in the meta-narrative of twentieth-century war/peace/industry/high culture. There are different understandings of "the purpose" (or lack thereof) of a subculture; for instance, for Stan Cohen, Hebdige²³ and, later, Thornton,²⁴ the purpose of participants in a subculture appears to be to draw attention to themselves and their activities, while Becker describes his subjects as marginalized by their differences. To summarize, there are two different definitions of what subcultures are – roughly, they divide into studies of social deviance, and studies of style statements (leading to media interest and possible money-making opportunities).²⁵

It must not be forgotten that stereotypes are tempting to scholars. Muggleton²⁶ has pointed out that young people often belong to more than one subcultural group, and while I do not subscribe to everything he reports (I found a degree of commitment to punk that is not acknowledged by Muggleton, for instance), any group of people consists of individuals with their own histories and aspirations, no matter how uniform they appear from the outside.

Changes in the Definition of "Subcultures"

I believe changes in the way in which subcultures are defined have affected historical perspectives and have led commentators to believe in a "one size fits all" definition of what a subculture is and what it means to its participants. Any person or group of people not fitting this definition is ignored, and their significance within the group disappears. Hebdige's *Subculture, the Meaning of Style* had been a groundbreaking attempt to examine subcultures through

semiotics and literary theory. Although there are many interesting observations in his work, women and girls are barely mentioned or acknowledged throughout. It is very much an outsider's study, and indeed he is wont to sound positively paternal in places ("after all, we, the sociologists and interested straights, threaten to kill with kindness the forms which we seek to elucidate"²⁷). There is also a problem with his interpretation of the *motivation* of his subjects through their surface appearance. These shortcomings are all the more disappointing because of his skill in acknowledging the purpose of subcultures in relation to society, and the function of the media in mythologizing them through their

... continual process of recuperation...[in which] the fractured order is repaired and the subculture incorporated as a diverting spectacle within the dominant mythology from which it in part emanates: as "folk devil," as Other, as Enemy. The process of recuperation takes two characteristic forms: (1) the conversion of subcultural signs (dress, music, etc.) into mass-produced objects (i.e. the commodity form) (2) the "labelling" and redefinition of deviant behaviour by dominant groups – the police, the media, the judiciary (i.e. the ideological form).²⁸

Thornton takes Hebdige's ideas further when she describes "The Media Development of Subcultures" thus:

Youth resent approving mass mediation of their culture but relish the attention conferred by media condemnation. How else might one turn difference into defiance, lifestyle into social upheaval, leisure into revolt? "Moral panics" can now with retrospect, all be seen as a culmination and fulfilment of youth cultural agendas in so far as negative newspaper and broadcast news coverage baptise transgression.²⁹

To Thornton, the "labelling" described by Hebdige provides a handy trademark for the attention-seeking youth generation, perhaps so they can take control of the "subcultural signs" described by Hebdige, and capitalize on them.³⁰ By the end of this book, I hope the reader will conclude that the punk subculture and the music that it produced were not superficial; the most influential and retrospectively respected of the female punk bands, The Slits and The Raincoats, believed utterly in the revolution they felt themselves to be part of – indeed, both bands had personnel that had come to England from countries in which fascism had been a reality. Palmolive, drummer with The Slits, had come to England as a child from Franco's Spain, and Ana Da Silva, singer and guitarist with The Raincoats, had come from authoritarian, dictator-led Por-

tugal. Even the less "aware" bands acknowledge today the pioneering attitudes they had at the time, which were far from attention-seeking, as we saw in the chapter on Brighton. Although Thornton is writing about a later visible youth subculture, one must not be tempted to apply her interpretations across the board. The impression of superficiality can be contrasted with what Willis (the "ideological form") said about the hippies:

The sense of community was the sense of others being engaged in a similar experiment, enjoying similar insights, sharing common, though often unexpressed, views on the nature of interaction. Only with people who shared the same symbolic atmosphere could there be meaningful interaction. Only with the *sharing* of assumptions could those assumptions be exquisitely shaped and presented as style.³¹

Contrasting attitudes to the definition of subcultures imply that the *meaning* of the word subculture has changed over time, just as much as the *meaning* of the word deviance: perhaps in the almost twenty-year gap between these two studies, a "knowing," self-conscious (therefore postmodern) participation in subcultural activity has developed – the young person has a relationship to the subculture, rather than "living" it; the idea of subcultures being worked up from the street has increasingly been sidelined in favour of a bias towards *lifestyle*.³²

Hebdige wrote that subcultures develop as a result of "the twin concepts of conjuncture and specificity (each subculture representing a distinctive 'moment' – a particular response to a particular set of circumstances),"³³ and understood that "different youths bring different degrees of commitment to a subculture."³⁴ This point is constantly explored in writing about rock music too: Frith asks, "What is the relationship between rock as a style and rock as an activity?"³⁵ He reiterates the observations made by Muggleton and Hebdige as he continues, "For every youth 'stylist' committed to a cult as a full-time creative task, there are hundreds of working-class kids who grow up in loose membership of several groups and run with a variety of gangs."³⁶ And, of course, many of the women who were part of the punk subculture didn't "look like" the tabloid photographs of "punkettes," but were pivotal to the subculture. Even in London, acknowledged as the epicentre of punk, the audience for punk gigs was not, as media reports would have it, made up exclusively of young men with mohawks and safety pins through their faces; the film *The Filth and the Fury*³⁷ shows that this was not the case; and for every report such as Charles Shaar Murray's of a young girl piercing her cheek at a Sex Pistols gig in Sweden,³⁸ there is photographic evidence that punk gigs belonged to variously

dressed performers and audiences from different ethnic, cultural and demographic backgrounds. The London punk scene is fairly well documented,³⁹ and most of these writers acknowledge that, at the beginning, members of the punk subculture were autonomous in their attitudes and dress. Thus we have to acknowledge a large and marginal subcultural "grey area" that applies to every subculture, even the most intense and visually and musically recognizable, which is especially noticeable at related musical events because of the part-time nature of some participants.

Although Street⁴⁰ claims that all punks really wanted was to have a good time, I would argue that, for most, their situation was too bleak to be hedonistic: in reality, it was often a time of violence and personal difficulty; although there was pleasure to be gained from creativity, it was also a necessity in the face of a confusing and depressing future. As Liz Naylor told me, 1970s Manchester was a dismal place:

It felt very bleak; it didn't feel like an optimistic time. I think the 1970s were really grim...my memories are in black and white almost. If you see footage of Britain in 1975, it looks like the war's just finished.⁴¹

She went on to tell me that punk gave her an identity that protected her and gave her self-respect in an atmosphere of rejection, and her description of her circumstances shows how punk had a positive effect on those who had been defined as deviant by their behaviour and attitudes:

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ebrary I got expelled when I was fifteen... I was committed to a secure unit in Macclesfield and I think people were really scared of me, as a punk, and I remember being interviewed and I was wearing a man's suit, albeit fucked up, and I had this spiky hair; I cut it myself with bald patches. And the people who interviewed me saw my behaviour and dress as deeply sociopathic, and dwelt a lot upon it. And I thought, "Well, I'm a punk." I was an Other. I think it was a big gathering-together of people who regarded themselves as freaks.⁴²

The fake cheeriness surrounding the Queen's Silver Jubilee in 1977 had an odd effect; there was a feeling that she represented a stratum of society that was oblivious to the chaos that the young people of Britain were experiencing. But what all punks had in common was a sense of self-worth, in spite of their lack of faith in what the future would hold for them. As Savage remarks:

What was "new," in the stifling summer of 1976, was Rotten's moral authority...the extraordinary behaviour, the splendour of their small group of dedicated followers, and the collective depth of information that went into their creation.⁴³

There was indeed a feeling of almost Presbyterian *duty* within some of the punk communities; Frith's and Home's observations about the "art school experience" not only give an insight into the way punk worked, but also, I believe, show how much the art-school ethos fed into punk: "The art school experience is about commitment to a working practice, to a mode of learning which assumes the status of a lifestyle."⁴⁴ And Hebdige concludes:

Punks were not only directly *responding* to increasing joblessness, changing moral standards, the rediscovery of poverty, the Depression, etc., they were *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... The punks appropriated the rhetoric of crisis which had filled the airwaves and the editorials throughout the period and translated it into tangible (and visible) terms.⁴⁵

Tony Parsons's review of The Slits underlines the way this translated into a live experience, with their "bad girl" performance style:

These four girls make The Runaways look like Girl Guides. I mean, who cares about such trivialities as staying in tune, playing together or striking the right chords when one possesses such a sense of *theatrics*?⁴⁶

I have concluded that the "moment" overarched the variety of different ways in which people defined themselves and were defined by others. The end result, women playing instruments in a previously completely male world, is no less of an unusual phenomenon, whatever the retrospective arguments about punk and feminism tell us. Indeed, the attitudes of my interviewees towards their music-making, both towards their position in the subculture and their transition (or not) from amateur to professional, could change greatly during their period of involvement with their bands.

Authenticity

By far the most challenging debate for rock critics and fans alike is the question of musical authenticity,⁴⁷ because it is very rare for authenticity to be ascribed to a female rock artist. This is probably because, as Angela McRobbie points out, male subculture writers see *themselves* as escaping from families and the "trap" of romance (both feminine-identified arenas), thus over-romanticizing the male resistance and escape element of the subcultures they study,⁴⁸ although female musicians such as Joni Mitchell and Joan Armatrading who utilized their lyrics to express personal desires that would

liberate them from the humdrum, were respected as the female equivalent to male rock artists.⁴⁹

Perhaps the inherent misogyny in all of these studies is not surprising; as Bradley points out, "the standard notion of 'the teenager' is usually of a boy, not a girl, and...the 'threat' of sex is a threat of boys against girls, as seen by parents, teachers etc." He acknowledges that this is never mentioned in rock histories.⁵⁰ *Pop* belongs to girls and gay men; it is assumed to be passively consumed, in spite of McRobbie's own recuperation of the word "teenybopper," previously an insulting term. Rock is lived by its male (or honorary male) audience, to the exclusion of girls and women. Within these parameters, the authenticity debate centres on the contrasts between song-writing as a craft (for instance, the Tin-Pan-Alley manufacture of popular songs for all occasions) and song-writing as self-expression – in other words art (and, implied, expressive of adolescent male dissatisfaction with their lot).

Hidden beneath this debate is another consideration, that of song-writing as a political activity. Folk music is often categorized as political music, but in actual fact politics, and particularly gender politics, underlies all forms of music.⁵¹ For instance, the self-expression of rock must articulate the emotions of its (male) audience, with a strong feeling for the *Zeitgeist*. Lawrence Grossberg identified the necessity of rock culture to the "meaning of life" for young males in the US, and the way its authenticity

... was defined by rock's ability to articulate the historical condition to the experience of post-war youth. Only by making youth belong somewhere could it speak to both the identity and the difference of its audience. Because it mattered, rock constituted a generational identity and empowered that generation to define its own ways of articulating meaning into its mattering maps. A differentiating machine is deployed in the service of rock's territorializing work.⁵²

Grossberg's description of generational identity and empowerment defines the nature of the politics of traditional rock music. American youth had needed the frisson of identifying and defending territory that being at war had provided. As Attali has pointed out, all music reflects the rules of society, so when the rules of society are redefined, new music is created as part of that redefinition; if music is created in an oppositional environment, its aesthetic rules will run counter to those of the mainstream: "Its order simulates the social order, and its dissonances express marginalities. *The code of music simulates the accepted rules of society.*"⁵³ Thus rock breaks the aesthetic rules of mainstream art music to the extent that, as Foucault says:

Rock offers the possibility of a relation which is intense, strong, alive, "dramatic" (in that rock presents itself as a spectacle, that listening to it is an event and that it produces itself on stage), with a music that is itself impoverished, but through which the listener affirms himself; and with the other music, one has a frail, faraway, hothouse, problematical relation with an erudite music from which the cultivated public feels excluded.⁵⁴

Here we see debate in which the hegemonic music is assumed to be conformist (that is, classical) and the oppositional music, nonconformist (that is, rock) that runs parallel to the findings of Abrams *et al.* (mentioned earlier). But rock has become the most popular as well as the most conservative force in western society, particularly, but not exclusively, in terms of gender politics. As I have shown, there is enormous resistance to change in the consolidated world of authentic male rock anger.

The foremost British voice in the "authenticity debate" is that of Simon Frith, because he is a rock fan who progressed to journalism, and from there to academic research. He therefore can claim a sort of "rock writer authenticity" for himself, and hence becomes a gatekeeper of rock history, analysis and sociology in exactly the same way that a record business representative, say an A&R man, is a gatekeeper for the band or artist themselves. Frith, too, had displayed a veiled contempt for young women who began to approach guitar-playing, as this remark about young female musicians in Keighley in 1972 suggests:

Alison and her friends were a group of sixth formers and college students who had a busy and self-contained social life, meeting weekly at the folk club (most of them picked at guitars themselves)...⁵⁵

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Subsequently, however, he teamed up with McRobbie and began to analyse what was actually happening in the world of rock.⁵⁶ He points out that "rock operates as counterculture only at moments. There are creative breakthroughs, when the music does express the needs of real communities, but it never takes the industry long to corrupt the results."⁵⁷

Industrialization has had a constantly rocky relationship with art, music and the written word; Adorno pre-mourned the effect of the industrialization of music production on the audience:

In the sphere of luxury production, to which popular music belongs and in which no necessities of life are immediately involved... [p]seudo-individualisation ... keeps them in line by making them forget what they listen to is already listened to for them, or "pre-digested."⁵⁸

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In other words, once music becomes a commodity by becoming a desirable vinyl object, he believes that the fetishization of the commodity itself becomes more important than its content. He also discusses the "handicraft" nature of early recordings, predicting the transformation of listeners from audience to consumer.

Adorno's despair can be applied in many different contexts: the reality for artists is that the element of communication in their artefact, whether visual, conceptual or sonic, communicates marketability to those willing and able to exploit it. I doubt, however, that Adorno would have been cheered by the aural assault of much of punk's "product"; he pursued what he regarded as aesthetic beauty, and there was little romance in the sounds of punk for anybody but its live audience until the public at large had been sold a mediated form which, it had been taught, was the Next Big Thing.

A wide-ranging account of the predicaments and resolutions of artistic practice and its dissemination is given in Becker's *Art Worlds*; although he discusses mainly the visual arts, several of his observations apply to the professional choices made by the previously amateur musicians involved with punk,⁵⁹ and the aesthetic judgement of their work. Punk was a live and erratic spectacle, celebrating randomness and chance, which made it difficult for an industry with a production-line mentality to capitalize on – doubly difficult given its implications for women musicians and bands. Punk music and its production and consumption can be thought of as a lived debate about the dilemmas that Adorno analyses, because there is general agreement that a pivotal point in a pop or rock musician's attitude occurs on signing a recording contract (and, indeed, for many of the women I spoke to, this was defined as the moment when everything started to fall apart for them). For instance, Chambers implicates recording itself as the factor that commodifies the experience of the originating community in the creation of new forms in Black music in the US (in the 1950s):

The resulting music was an expression held together and concretised in the shared cultural and social context of audience and performer... In other words this music is worked up in a living social and cultural context that may later be "captured" on record.⁶⁰

The word "captured" is well chosen, for the mysterious element that guarantees authenticity must be present in the recording in order for it to break commercially; ironically, it is this "capture" of the essence of the music's "worked-upness" that may eventually divorce the music from its original context, leaving behind a dry and indigestible idealism for the original fans to

choke upon. Whiteley explores the results of the eventual disconnection from the counterculture of the band Pink Floyd:

Political and social confrontation had become fragmented; subjective experience had degenerated into *play power*, which had little purchase other than an irreverent and often irrelevant questioning of authority, materialism and capitalism.⁶¹

Psychedelic rock had developed into an alternative form of entertainment rather than an oppositional "weapon." Later, of course, Pink Floyd demonstrated the same overblown attitude to their concerts as that of Rick Wakeman, described earlier; and the countercultural core to their music was lost in the replacement of energy and imagination with Things – staging, gimmicks and other "unique selling points," possibly devised by a marketing team. This breaking-down of a subculture-based music happens all too frequently; in the case of punk, Laing discusses the detachment of the innovative and marketable ideas from the subculture (leaving the politics to a few die-hard fans), commercializing them and selling them not only to the public at large, but also back to the originators, in their now more polished form. A wry comment from June Miles-Kingston sums up what happened: "When you can buy PVC trousers and pinned-up things in Topshop: once it becomes commercial it's got to end."⁶² Laing articulates this internal struggle of the punk movement, whose "open membership" embraced diverse individual ethics:

It is important to distinguish the tendency towards independence in punk rock from that towards separation from the mainstream. The distinction is that while "independence" (expressed mainly in the production and distribution of records) may be concerned to reach the same people as are reached by the musical mainstream, but by a different route, "separation" is concerned with consolidating a special community of punks, to whom punk rock will have special meanings.⁶³

The implication of this is that however much political change is intended or desired by rock bands and their followers at the moment of creation, eventually the different intentions of those involved, combined with external interest and exploitation, will divert the energies of those people into diverse goals at odds with their original intentions.⁶⁴ This I found to be particularly pertinent to the women I interviewed; often, they had come to the point of signing a recording contract and discovered a discrepancy between what they wanted in terms of access to a larger audience and the compromises they would have to make in terms of the traditional gender presentation required by their record

companies – this could result in the destruction of bands that had been in operation for as long as five years. This problem is a recurring one for “aware” bands, as Schippers discovered in her research of 2002:

If their desire to eliminate sexism in rock was explicitly attached to the music, once the music lost favour in the mainstream, so would the politics. Rather than making the music a message that would eventually be lost in the heap of past trends, alternative hard rockers have tried to change the rules of the game. And so, alternative hard rockers rarely speak or sing of their feminist politics. They perform and embody them...⁶⁵

Schipper's use of the word “alternative” is pertinent here; British punk was very much oppositional in nature, rather than alternative.⁶⁶ An alternative subculture rarely shakes society up, although this is not to say that its ideas do not percolate through to the mainstream.

To return to Laing's statement, the process of alienation from the safe, local environment is part of the rock band experience; punk bands moving out of their punk community were all too often just as isolated from their audience's support as their audience felt disconnected from the bands themselves. The relevance to my study here is that this factor worked to the disadvantage of many of the women I have interviewed; the recuperation of the female punk protagonist was complex. For example, in her study of a male band in the music scene in Liverpool in the 1980s, Cohen found that:

Each move away from the band's original locality marked another rung on the ladder: from music-making within a close circle of friends and relatives; to performing in front of strangers outside the locality; to London, the record industry, and contact, through the media, with a nation-wide audience... Each stage or rung might also involve a change in attitude of bands' members towards music and music-making, representing a gradual transition from music performed largely for self-indulgence in a live, social context, to music and band as commodities to be bartered over and sold to a mass audience.⁶⁷

Accusations of “selling out” are something many male rock bands have to deal with; for girls in mixed bands or all-women bands, there was/is the additional responsibility of being regarded as a pioneering female role model in a small locality, and carrying the expectations of those who have invested time and energy into your career with you as your career progresses into and through a much more traditionally male rock trajectory. Later, we will see what a burden this was to some of the women I spoke to, as they carried not only a responsibility to their local fans, but also to others of their gender.

It must also be noted that the effects of the recuperation of psychedelic music had been observed by Malcolm McLaren, for according to Sadie Plant:

There is also a sense in which McLaren's tactics can be read as a rather more astute response. Aware that punk would be in any case recuperated, his own anticipation of its commodification did at least ensure that punk had some control over its own recuperation. By the time the dissatisfaction it expressed had grown into a marketable force, it had already been marketed. And if punk did recuperate anything, it was not situationist theory, but the possibility of effective dissent, a danger which, as "The End of Music" points out, punk shares with the spectacle of revolution presented in reggae and any other rebel music.⁶⁸

Plant remarks that although entrepreneurs such as Richard Branson⁶⁹ and Manchester's Tony Wilson made relatively large amounts of money by exploiting punk music,

... punk's do-it-yourself ethic also produced a host of self-published fanzines and autonomous organisations, and the observation that fortunes were made cannot belittle the sincerity, anger, and achievements of those involved in punk and its later manifestations.⁷⁰

With all forms of new music, the point at which the music becomes commodified is always distressing for its primary audience; for punks at least, the delays and obstructions put in place by the bands along this route to commodification were greatly appreciated by their audiences.

Peter York, who documented London punk sardonically and perceptively from its inception to its premature death-by-media, identified the retail outlet Rough Trade (which was based in Ladbroke Grove) as an important exponent in the lived debate about commercialization of the phenomenon:

Rough Trade has the look of a head shop – which indeed it once was. The more *oppositional* sixties type, but a head shop nonetheless. You feel there could be discussions on elitism in the new wave and how the groups should relate to the record companies: the whole issue of *selling out*... It is here you begin to think the *politics* could be for real.⁷¹

In spite of McLaren's ability to profit personally from the spectacle of the selling(-out) of The Sex Pistols, Paul Taylor reports him as saying:

Punk rock couldn't be sold... It was too much to do with Do-It-Yourself. As soon as you get a Do-It-Yourself force out there, you spawn 5,000 other groups. The record industry never wanted 5,000 groups. They only want one group. One group is more manageable. It's one dictator telling you what the culture is all about rather than 5,000. They don't like the socialist idea that everyone can do it.⁷²

Some commentators interpreted this resurgence in political debate about commercialism as part of a "last post-materialist thrust"⁷³ before Thatcher's materialist influence took effect:

The unexpected re-emergence of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, the growth of the environmental movement and the more general adoption of conservationist goals may indeed point to an underlying shift in the focus of political values. The change is not dramatic or universal and whether one regards it as a move away from materialist, economic preoccupations towards post-materialist concerns, or as some broader change in values is open to debate.⁷⁴

Even if the challenge to established means and structures of music production and distribution methods was momentary, the "product," too, was challenged – and this is what opened a door for women artists. All of the rock rules were ridiculed, as Street notes:

The proliferation of independent labels, inspired by the DIY ethos, disrupted the complacency of the majors who had got rich on glam-rock and superstardom. Less tangibly, punk exposed rock's rules. It poked fun at ideas of romantic love; it celebrated boredom and mocked the idea that being a teenager meant perpetual pleasure; it forced the pop business, its controllers and its motives, into the limelight.⁷⁵

Frith seems to have regarded punk rock as a welcome return to something the (male) rock fan could believe in:

From the progressive point of view, the point of punk was its threat to established means of consumption. Traditionally, "accessible" pop gave access only to a void, to social habits that made no sense of people's needs at all.⁷⁶ *Really* accessible music reaches the parts that other musics can't.⁷⁷

However, Street goes on to claim that there was no real political motivation behind the punks:

The point was to have a good time. This meant causing havoc, not reading Marx; it meant celebrating the moment, not the future; it meant mocking the established order, not working for a new one.⁷⁸

Both Frith and Street display a sort of old-school critical thinking; it is hard for an outsider to understand the way punk worked for its protagonists, the strong link between being and doing punk, the process of creation being part of the product created and the creators being part of a greater community of misfits. For the people I interviewed, it meant *making a* new order, not merely mocking the established one or working for a new one.

It has already been established that subcultures rarely consist of identikit members who all subscribe to the same ideology, wear identical clothing and are all aged seventeen years old. The small Brighton punk subculture used in this book as a case study was vociferously oppositional in nature: there was much discussion and argument about the meaning of our lives and what we were doing.⁷⁹ And Angela McRobbie herself, in the Introduction to *Feminism and Youth Culture*, describes the empowering environment of a shared house in which she lived in Birmingham with members of the mixed-gender band The Au Pairs, where students mixed with musicians, artists and writers who were all concerned with punk as a political force.⁸⁰

The Rock Press

The rock press had a vital role in the bestowing of authenticity to music, as well as its role in publicizing new musical styles, and as taste-makers. After the *New Musical Express* advertised for new, younger writers, and employed Tony Parsons and Julie Burchill, who both lauded punk and scorned other, older forms of rock through their aggressive writing styles, other music papers followed suit. The principal three papers that wrote about punk music were *Sounds*, *New Musical Express*⁸¹ and *Melody Maker*; and they all had a strong influence in the promotion of punk music as a countercultural force.⁸² Helen Davies⁸³ discusses the male bias of the music weeklies, a discourse that clearly applies to the experiences of my primary sources. A summary of the general feeling, though, was that men who wrote (and write) about rock music are "wannabe" rock stars, secondary to those who do it. How could women (secondary citizens) get up and do what men could not?⁸⁴

As far as the 1960s counterculture was concerned, women had been seen so much as part of the oppression of the free male spirit (after all, all they wanted was to get married and have babies and mortgages!) that their possible contribution to the revolution was all but ignored. However, Elizabeth Nelson's critique of the underground press in the late 1960s and early 1970s

highlights a major issue concerning cultural radicalism, and although this refers to hippies, there is enough relevance in her observations to apply them to the assumptions made about punks. In her discussion of the counterculture's attitudes to women, she remarks that the protagonists basically had a lot in common with mainstream culture and thus were not challenging hegemony in a very important area:

The question of women's liberation was not only grasped too late and inadequately, but more importantly, women were apparently never considered as suitable candidates in the search for allies... Even if the countercultural revolution had been "won," it would, judging from the evidence presented in the underground press, have been a revolution achieved by and on behalf of men.⁸⁵

The most influential underground publication of the time, *Oz* magazine, regularly featured pictures of naked women, alongside, it must be said, articles by feminist radicals like Germaine Greer, who also appeared naked. Whether tokenism in the form of inclusion of feminist articles in a publication later prosecuted for obscenity was of any lasting benefit to the Women's Liberation Movement in the UK is not my remit here; but it may draw an interesting parallel in terms of the anarchic atmosphere at the time and that at the moment of this work. When "anything goes" culturally, there is an opportunity for women to make their voices heard; historically, however, it is not unknown for progress made by women to be entirely reversed.⁸⁶ The pioneering work by Sheila Rowbotham⁸⁷ has been discussed in relation to this and my primary sources; the problem, also acknowledged by Elizabeth Wilson,⁸⁸ is that the rules of Bohemia dictate that women must ultimately suppress their creativity in preference to that of a male partner – a point that will be returned to in my final chapter. This will have some relevance to the fact that punk as a subculture had so many female protagonists, and why their profile diminished later.

Writing on Women in Rock and Pop Music

The marginalization of women's musical activities that occurs in rock literature reflects the debate regarding separatism that is constantly being played out and possibly even starts at gatekeeper level, just as it does in the music business itself, from reviewers in rock magazines being predominantly male, onwards. Just as with an all-female band, a decision has to be made by a female writer as to whether they are writing for a female audience, a mixed audience or a male audience; this in turn will inform the writing style and the facts disseminated about the artists they are writing about. Rumsey and

Little's comment about the minority nature of feminists in the audience for "serious music" (see Chapter 4) is also reflected in rock criticism.

Should the writer "scare away" the male audience by refusing to pander to misogyny, or write like men do and embrace the ethos of rock-writing? Most of these writers adopt a neutral tone, allowing their enthusiasm for their subjects to drive their writing; occasionally, there is a disappointing evasion of issues that arise. For instance, in Charlotte Grieg's well-researched *Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow?*, which details a history of the 1950s girl groups in the US right through until the late 1980s,⁸⁹ there is no real analysis of the fact that so many of the lyrics sung by the apparently strong and self-confident women she talks about are attributed to men, or of the implications for women listeners and performers alike, defined only by those lyrics that are "approved" by men, either as gatekeepers or writers.⁹⁰ Although these women provided inspiration for a generation of fans,⁹¹ the reality of their lives, dominated by Svengali figures such as Phil Spector, was far from empowered.⁹² When women did become involved in song-writing, it was common that their royalties did not get paid to them.⁹³ Although this undoubtedly happened to men too, there is something particularly poignant about one of the least empowered sections of American society, Black women, singing songs that empower others, while becoming disempowered themselves. This phenomenon of men articulating what they think women (should) feel is a constant feature of pop and rock; when it does not occur directly in "first person" lyric-writing, it occurs in description (for instance in The Rolling Stones' *Some Girls* album, discussed at length by Reynolds and Press⁹⁴). It is this empowering/empowered dichotomy that was breached by the women in my study.

One of the most interesting and unusual studies of women's experience in the British music industry is that of Sue Steward and Sheryl Garratt in 1984.⁹⁵ Steward and Garratt talked to women involved in almost every part of the music industry, and in doing so, demystify parts of the process of record-making. Although Negus⁹⁶ later explores the way record companies work as vertical organizations, examining women's roles therein, Steward and Garratt⁹⁷ go beyond the boundaries of the companies themselves, describing the whole "machine" behind a record release and how women may be involved in this process, and their study provides an interesting complement to this one.⁹⁸

In *The Sex Revolts*, Simon Reynolds and Joy Press explore the history of recent rock music through an exploration of its relationship to aggression, revolt and reaction.⁹⁹ Their discussion makes many valid points (many of which have been discussed in earlier chapters), but is often marred by their own anger, in addition to a lack of analysis that makes the text difficult to read. However, it does reinforce the maleness of rock and helps to contextualize punk rock

within the rock discourse; both Deena Weinstein's study of heavy metal¹⁰⁰ and Robert Walser's¹⁰¹ were also very useful in understanding the way a rock subculture with different values is engaged with by its fans.

The two scholarly writers whose work has been of most relevance to this study are Bayton,¹⁰² whose collection of interviews with women instrumentalists spans more than fifteen years, and Green,¹⁰³ whose research on the perception of women instrumentalists has been of great use when analysing the data I have collected myself. Again in the interests of context, some studies on women in punk subcultures in the US have been referred to here. These include studies by Roman,¹⁰⁴ Miles¹⁰⁵ and Leblanc,¹⁰⁶ who mainly discuss female *fans* of punk rock. However, their observations on alienation and class difference within the punk subculture have provided interesting reading.

Finally, for all of the women I spoke to, punk was about individual freedom and self-expression above anything else, and it is the importance of this factor that is lost in many of the texts written after the fact. Hindsight shows up many of the flaws in the ideology of punk, but its protagonists were, in the main, sincere in their activities, and no amount of academic misinterpretation can deny them this.

7 Conclusion

When I took up the banjo, d'you know what I was told? "That's a boy's instrument" and that's exactly why I took it up. Because I was a tomboy and I wanted to play it.

Did you wish you were a little boy, like in your song "I'm gonna be an engineer"?

No, I never wished I was a boy. But I wished I had a boy's privileges...¹

Gradually it became something you can't put your finger on: it's an unnamed source of grief in your life which...becomes too unbearable if you acknowledge it. I don't want to know. Yes, the music industry is like any other industry, like the car industry or whatever...it's ultimately a cynical machine. But most of the people involved in it are totally besotted by music and you get very emotionally involved in the job, so the last thing you want to know is how shitty and sexist it is.²

When I began this work, an element of vanity motivated me. How could the music I had been involved with have felt so important and revolutionary at the time, yet have made no impact at all on the history of rock'n'roll? This concluding chapter, as well as attempting to analyse the information presented previously, will refer once again to primary sources in an attempt to show the role of gatekeepers (particularly those of the music press) in the demise of what was to later appear to be merely a fashion for female instrumentalists in bands: when the next fashion, for drag-garbed singers and electronic music, caught the imagination of the music press, all the issues associated with female instrumentalists, such as women's place in the "rock world," ceased to be of interest to papers such as the *New Musical Express*, which had seemed to take a genuine interest in the effects of feminism on rock music during the early 1980s. Because the bands that included, or consisted of, female rock instrumentalists did not establish themselves to any great degree in the mainstream charts, the impression that they were a passing phase was underlined. Some of the points made in this conclusion have already been explored in depth earlier, but their importance will be reiterated where relevant. I have included the commentary of media gatekeepers to emphasize the importance of pleasing these gatekeepers who were, of course, most frequently male and, if they were not,

were rare females in a male-centred environment, who were themselves in the position of pleasing males. As Dale Spender observed of women writers:

Since women have been able to write, women have written; some of them have achieved publication particularly in specific areas...and some who have been published have enjoyed prestige. But this does not constitute a denial that women are a muted group in terms of writing: it may be nothing other than an indication that some women writers have been able to please some influential men.³

Practically speaking, a woman gatekeeper also had a double problem: both of asserting her own views and also asserting the right of women to perform at all in the rock environment, let alone as equal instrumentalists. Caroline Coon describes this experience:

No women were taken seriously in the music press, or a very limited selection of women were even considered worth writing about... The reason that I had difficulty in persuading the *Melody Maker* that what I saw happening in counterculture was important was because as a woman, and the only woman at that meeting, I was having to overcome a huge amount of sexual prejudice to consider myself, my work, as important. So if I would suggest something it would be automatically laughed out of the way. You have to understand that also those environments are very competitive, the men also are competing for space... So it was doubly loaded against what I was saying.⁴

However, in this conclusion I will attempt to explain first the unusual circumstances that led to the refusal of some young women to engage in the "real world" of jobs and homemaking, and then to examine the many different reasons why their progress (and that of other women who followed them) was stopped in its tracks.

Reaching the Limits of Possibility

The glass ceiling my subjects hit came about partly through loss of interest by the media and industry as the novelty of women players in punk wore off; few of them "performed male" like Chrissie Hynde or Suzi Quatro. Those who spoke to females as much as males, who experimented with the form of rock music, became sidelined as "avant-garde"; this is what befell The Raincoats, who had deliberately looked away from rock music in spite of their rock line-up:⁵

"The basic theme in rock'n'roll is what goes on between men and women," said The Raincoats, each one chipping into the conversation. "Rock'n'roll is based on black music. And it's based *in* the exclusion of women and the ghettoisation of blacks. Which is why we want to put a bit of distance between what we do and the rock'n'roll tradition."⁶

Christine Robertson, manager of The Slits, reveals how, with hindsight, she can understand the way many of the male punk rock bands fitted into the existing rock world⁷ in spite of (or even because of) their revolutionary stance, and the importance of their skills in playing music that fitted into an already-established rock style:

The Slits had an ability to play together, but often it would almost fall apart and then it would come back even better together – but The Clash could play together all the time and I was quite impressed by that. Of course, looking back now I see what they were, they were just a rock band and they are successful like a rock band. So The Clash earn millions of pounds now⁸ and The Slits earn a few thousand every year. It's no measure of the quality of the music at all, but they fit into the male rock thing and The Slits didn't fit into anything.⁹

Her description of the practical experience of The Slits' career drawing to a halt as she desperately tried to make them more accepted by mainstream TV and radio channels in the UK rang very true:

We tried *everything*. A lot of our meetings would be, "What should we do next, who should we try next?" Their greatest desire was to go on *Tiswas*, maybe with a birthday cake, and have a cake fight, you know, the sort of thing they did on *Tiswas* anyway. Could we? No – we couldn't get *near* it!¹⁰ No real anarchy on there at all, I'm afraid; they couldn't get near it. There was a block. I don't want to get into a syndrome of "Oh it's all the men's fault, they were threatened by the women," but I'd have to say that all the media industry, apart from record-pluggers, were men. By the time you got to somebody who was gonna make a decision, like a radio producer, it was a man. And I think they threatened men, or their reputation threatened men.¹¹

The responsibility to bring about change was left in the hands of women, who seemed to have the choice of either charm or anger to energize men. In spite of and because of "Women's Lib" and the *Spare Rib* ethos, there was, and remains, little will by men to change popular culture at this time. Bayton ruefully observes:

It is from the start an unequal race, set up in a way that favours men rather than women. Some individual men do nothing to either help or hinder individual women and may think that the whole issue is irrelevant to themselves, but they are (unwitting) beneficiaries of a set-up that is skewed in their favour, in terms of a whole range of material and cultural resources.¹²

Ironically, the unemployment that had equalized some sections of society polarized others; given the collapse of British industry and the sudden increase in unemployment, there was sometimes a feeling that women were not wanted in the workplace, where they were taking employment that was a working man's entitlement.¹³ This resentment channelled itself into many areas with a hitherto unfelt female presence, and by default into youth culture. However, opposition by peers, especially men, is not a new concept for female instrumentalists in spite of the fact that, as young women, even those who plan careers of this nature feel free to choose their occupation. Caroline Coon spoke of the naïve optimism of young women who have not yet experienced the realities of competing against men in a world formed for their own convenience:¹⁴

It's interesting because when you're in your own skin, you look outwards, you don't see yourself "as a woman." You see yourself as a *person*, and as a *person* you can do anything. When you're seeing a great rock'n'roll band, you want to be in a great rock'n'roll band. You are unaware at that point of the politics of it. It's not surprising that women want to do anything, because it's there to do. You want to be like the rest of the world. You want to have the same opportunities as the rest of the world. Just because you don't see women guitarists, it doesn't enter your head that the reason you don't see women guitarists is a political issue. You think, oh maybe somebody just didn't have that idea, but I have that idea, [and] I want to do it.¹⁵

It must be noted here that even in the past, women with a musical "calling" encountered obstruction from their male peers; Carol Kaye, who played bass on many of the Motown hits and was described as the "chick with a pick," had to develop a strategy to deal with male musicians who opposed her. Like many "pre-feminist" female instrumentalists, she is vague about the nature of this opposition:¹⁶

They [the male players] did their best to break me, because they don't believe in women, but I proved to them that I could play my instrument. I stuck up for myself, but in a nice way, without destroying the man's ego. Once I established my playing abilities, it was easy. I was no longer a female oddity. I was a musician, commanding \$70,000 a year.¹⁷

Responsibility for Change: A Poisoned Chalice

There was a political burden carried by female band-members, regardless of whether (as did The Au Pairs or Delta 5) they wanted to acknowledge this. The argument about the right of women to be performing in traditionally male territory was (and still is) debated from many different standpoints. It is as difficult to describe the "cutting edge" of the debate, as it applied to rock music at the time, as it is easy for the women involved to explain with hindsight what was actually going on. It is important to remember that there were two general types of musical ethic that most women players subscribed to: broadly, the competent and equal (as personified by Lesley Woods of The Au Pairs, perhaps), and the incompetent and feisty (as personified by many of the local female musicians I interviewed). Both types, however, were perceived to have the same responsibilities *to* their gender and problems *because of* their gender, and in this section I shall summarize what these were. It will help the understanding of the former to describe the experience of the iconic US female performer Joni Mitchell. Lisa Kennedy here explains the projection of male desires onto Mitchell:

Far too often, Mitchell's critics had located her gift (her peers were better at recognising her discipline) in the deep recesses of feminine power. In fact, in promoting Mitchell as the quintessential feminine poet in the wilderness of a vigorous seventies feminism, her astounding craftsmanship and musical ambition were side-stepped. One writer put it this way in 1974: "Her disarming intelligence had special appeal for men bored by the dull polarity of beach bunnies and hard-line feminists."¹⁸

There was a stigma attached to being a feminist and a musician, and especially, a feminist musician (let alone a lesbian musician, whether feminist or not). The idea of banding together for solidarity that had been so empowering for Mavis Bayton's band The Mistakes, for instance, was deeply unappealing to the women in some other bands, and was seen as commercial suicide; often band-members within the same band would have differing views about this issue. Here is an example, from an interview that feminist band Jam Today gave to *Spare Rib*:

Deirdre: ... Look at the impact Fanny¹⁹ had though they weren't feminists – they reached thousands of women, which Jam Today can't, by being commercial and getting publicity.

Terry: How have Fanny reached more women – by saying "you too can be a superstar"? Most women who started playing an instrument as a result of seeing Fanny will have ended up being exploited and demor-

alised by the commercial music business... Angele: But Fanny actually showed the record buying public, who'd only seen male bands before, that there were women who could "do it" – by going commercial. Jam Today, by not doing so, runs the risk of providing an "in-service" for feminists and the converted left.²⁰

Jam Today were a band of older women who were technically very competent as instrumentalists;²¹ in contrast, Poly Styrene displays an attitude that was very common among younger female band-members:

You'd rather have a mixed band?

Yea, 'cos if you think you're as good as guys, then you should be able to work with them on an equal level. Sex isn't an issue, maybe it has been in the past but there should be a new approach. Forget you're a girl, just think of it from a music point of view. I think all girl bands are sort of woman chauvinist, bit women's lib. Women's lib is changed now, it was necessary before, but I feel equal now.²²

Even at this time, feminism was regarded by both men and some women, like Poly, as no longer necessary. If you "feel equal now" as an individual, then surely women's liberation has succeeded! Caroline Coon was frustrated by the lack of awareness of these younger women; she told me:

Sitting here interviewing The Slits...having them say, "We have nothing to do with Women's Liberation," I have to just take a deep breath and say, "I'm not going to challenge that," because that's just a normal part of the process of consciousness-raising. There's nothing you can say to young women at that point. I understood it, because the way feminism was presenting itself was, even to me, pretty horrendous. I remember going with a girlfriend of mine who was in a band to a feminist benefit, and they weren't allowed in because they were wearing dresses and lipstick. So there was all that going on. So this was a group of young women, who wanted to be sexually attractive, assertive...naming yourself as a feminist would be a very brave and difficult thing to do.²³

Steve Beresford has another perspective on their attitude:

There were ironies, like there was a kind of absolute clichéd feminist who showed up from the *Morning Star*; they were deeply insulted that she was only interested in them because they were women. They said, "We're not interested in talking to you, 'cos you just want to talk to us because we're women. We want you to talk to us because you like the music." I was much more sympathetic to her; all the women I

went out with at that time were pretty hardline feminists to the point where some of them stopped going out with me 'cos they weren't supposed to go out with men... I knew this thing backwards, I'd read all the books, I knew this stuff, and of course The Slits hated feminists. They felt it was patronizing. The whole contradiction of the British Left is that it constantly acts like a colonizing power.²⁴

Ari summed up the attitude of the band at the time when I interviewed her, and her attitude could, I think, be applied to everybody I spoke to and, in particular, provide a different perspective to Bayton's point. In a situation with a supportive male community, women can achieve as much as their male counterparts:

There was a big window open for women at the time to take part in this explosion of music and culture – and I don't want to say politics, because that's the whole point; we weren't political, we were just humanly outspoken – so we weren't aware of "Oh, we're women so we've got to defend women's lib and women's rights and we're women-political." It was more like, we all had friends and peers that were mostly boys, and those boys happened to leave a very open window for women to express themselves just as much as they did, because they were not offended by us being women.²⁵

This has a parallel with the observations made above by Lisa Kennedy; in spite of the importance of the music to the band (and regardless of their alleged competence/incompetence instrumentally), they are still perceived by elements of the media as protagonists in the "sex war" – this time, ironically, by a publication that should have given the band more respect for their musical achievements. Some bands deliberately tried to identify with the promotion of women artists and the creation of a "space" for them on the rock circuit; but women's bands who were involved with Rock Against Sexism (formed as an offshoot of Rock Against Racism in 1979) got short shrift from rock journalists, who could easily identify the futility of the exercise:

Taken on the most fundamental level, to completely eradicate sexism would mean tampering with the whole structure of modern day music. Certainly the most uneasy implication lies in RAS's hope of getting participating bands to sign an "anti-sexist" contract clause before each gig. Whatever that might mean, its inherent censorship is a frightening thought. Big Sister is watching, and wearing no dancing shoes – otherwise she'd know rock music is all about outrage, and outrageousness. No way can you kick ass with a contract clause, however well intentioned.²⁶

It was rare for female rock and pop acts to speak out in favour of other female artists;²⁷ in this, they echoed what many felt was a "special woman" syndrome much practised by Thatcher. There was an implied "I am as good as a man" thought behind this. This is demonstrated best by this exchange between Chrissie Hynde and interviewer Andrea Juno:

AJ: Did you have a support system with other women in the London scene?

CH: No, there wasn't a support system... But I never thought there was anything to distinguish a female guitar player or a male guitar player any more than you can distinguish a male cellist or a female cellist. Other than the fact that chicks never seemed to be nearly as good at guitar.

AJ: Why do you think that is?

CH: I think that, inherently, they don't have the aptitude for it, like men do.

AJ: Do you think that inability might be self-imposed – that women just think they can't do it?

CH: Yeah, I think it's self-imposed. When I say aptitude, I don't know if it's the way our brains are wired up, if it's biological, or what it is. All I know is that since I got interested in rock'n'roll music, and up to this present day, I've never heard a woman be an innovator on the guitar, like Jimi Hendrix, Jeff Beck, or any of the great guitar players. I'm not concluding anything from that other than what's obvious: they're not as good at it. I'm not saying why, or for what reason. It's just that so far, no girls have done it.²⁸

Perhaps the fact that Hynde was supported largely by male musicians leads her to subscribe to the idea that women "don't have the aptitude" to play guitar.²⁹ Hynde ignores Maybelle Carter's famous "Carter Scratch," an innovative guitar-picking style, among other respected female guitar innovators:

Perhaps the most remarkable of Maybelle's many talents was her skill as a guitarist. She revolutionized the instrument's role by developing a style in which she played melody lines on the bass strings with her thumb while rhythmically strumming with her fingers. Her innovative technique, to this day known as the Carter Scratch, influenced the guitar's shift from rhythm to lead instrument.³⁰

For Hynde, possibly, it may have been more important to have the self-image of a maverick, rather than as a woman involved in a macho culture, tolerated or celebrated as a token.³¹ She had, after all, encountered personal opposition from Vivienne Westwood when she first arrived in London from

America, and this may have led her to withdraw from participating in a female music ethos; about McLaren and Westwood she remarked:

I always admired and looked up to Malcolm and Vivienne – to the point where I thought, Why should they like me? Maybe I am a despicable piece of shit.³² Look at my clothes. I've got no style. On the other hand, I was the girl who was musical. Vivienne was shocked when she saw me play a guitar. "You really can squeeze some chords out of that thing, can't you, Chrissie?" They were all surprised that a low-life like me could actually do something.³³

Hynde's remarks about the reaction, even by supposedly avant-garde colleagues, reflect the "front-line"; her experience was, probably voluntarily, solitary. Although she claims there was not a supportive "movement" of women in London's punk scene to compare with the local situation in Oxford, experienced by Mavis Bayton,³⁴ or with the later Riot Grrrl phenomenon, Ari cited Hynde in particular as a beneficiary of a support network, simply in terms of the general change in the awareness of female instrumental participation in rock:

If we weren't supported by our peers and our colleagues who were like brothers to us, we wouldn't have been able to express what we could. This is why people like Chrissie Hynde got their break, because there was all this female support. It wasn't like switching on a button of saying "Let's help girls," it was about being in a revolution and when you're in that type of constant adrenaline, of changing the world every day that you're doing it, and you're so young, they're not busy thinking, "Oh, the women that we've got to compete against, that's a threat," because they can see the rest of the world is reacting really violently towards us, just as they are to the boys, but even more.³⁵

But even Gina Birch articulated the frustration she felt at being lumped together with others as a sort of "female band" paradigm:

When you compare the Riot Grrrl movement to seventies punk, I don't remember us being very supportive of each other. I adored The Slits but didn't take much interest in some of the other groups that were going around like The Mo-dettes, The Delta 5, The Au Pairs... I liked them, but I didn't go crazy about them. We were constantly being thrown together in articles and compared to the point at which it divides you. We never went out with a sense of sisterhood, we never toured together. The idea never entered our heads. We were as supportive of male groups that we liked as female groups. Gender wasn't an issue for us, which perhaps it should have been.³⁶

Gina describes almost being defeated by the pressure to “come out” as a feminist, in spite of the stigma attached to the term:

We finally decided it was important to have a positive attitude towards women – although the word feminism seemed to inspire fear and loathing in people. I mean, I didn't want to be associated with some of the people who claimed to be feminists, but at the same time it began to appear to be cowardly not to. In the end we used to spend most of our interviews discussing feminism.³⁷

In contrast, keyboard-player Liz Naylor felt that feminists were a middle-class confection, although her attitude has since changed:

We hated women musicians. I remember going to see The Raincoats and The Au Pairs at the Polytechnic and me and Cath were at the back going, “Pah, pah, these feminists”; there was a real tension between myself and feminism at the time. In Manchester, Whalley Range and Charlton and Didsbury, where all the feminists lived, that was everything punk *wasn't*.³⁸

In print, The Mo-dettes prided themselves on their femininity because they considered their deliberately sexualized, feminine visual image as a reaction to the low-key presentation of The Raincoats, attempting to reclaim the “girly” pop image for themselves, while simultaneously playing “male” instruments onstage:

Jane: We just go out as ourselves; we're all pretty, vain girls.

Kate: There's a bit of a reaction against girls like The Raincoats, who try to cover it up...even though that's part of their lifestyles and they don't really go out of their way to dress like *that*, it's just a way of saying: just because I'm a girl, don't *expect* me to do anything.³⁹

However, this did not prevent them, also, from hitting the glass ceiling patrolled by record companies. It seems that whatever tactics the bands with a strong female presence employed, they were still not able to attain long-term success of the type that male bands had. The sophisticated tensions between representing womankind, the realities of press hostility, and the exaggerated focus of being a novelty female drummer proved almost too much for Hester Smith:

That sort of thing was a real burden actually. That's why I think it would be different now, I don't think there would be that kind of political consciousness...having to represent the vanguard of females

in music. I really felt that strongly at the time, that we weren't political enough, or that we were kind of letting the side down by not being like The Slits or something...⁴⁰

Gina describes her practical experience of the situation noted by Sally Potter⁴¹ in which "as more women achieve in a given area they are forced to compete with each other for the same space rather than the space itself expanding":

There was a kind of competition and a kind of war between each other [The Mo-dettes, Delta 5], and we were pitted against each other, by the press and also a bit probably by ourselves. I remember when I was doing *Dorothy* with Vicky [Aspinall] ...there was this group, a model and a make-up artist or something, and I remember feeling very competitive with them. There wasn't room for both of us; it wasn't like, well, they're doing it, therefore if people like them they will like us. I used to think, well, if they're being successful, somehow it's to our detriment.⁴²

Gaar has a more positive view, talking about a "specific realm in which to create their opportunities";⁴³ however, in light of the constant "forgetting" of women's inroads into rock musicianship by rock historians, this seems a romanticized evasion of reality.

Finally, male journalists of course were only too delighted if they could deny the necessity for further debate. The following review sums up an attitude that started to become more common towards the end of the 1970s. Admittedly, the musicians reviewed here were older and perhaps rather simplistic in their rejection of the approach of male bands, but there is a hint of triumph in the reviewer's delight in giving them a bad review:

They seem too conscious of competing in what they evidently regard as a male-dominated system. It's a redundant attitude given that we are beyond the stage of regarding women rockers solely as jail-bait or white-garbed fantasy princesses... It's because I believe that the female group is on the verge of becoming more substantial that I refuse to patronise a rock band purely because of its feminine content. Actually, I didn't like Tour De Force.⁴⁴

How easy for a male reviewer to reject the fact that some groups (particularly the previously established ones) still perceived a gender bias in the music business and still wanted to critique the stereotypes so beloved of the rock press! Meanwhile, at the more academic end of the spectrum, Kaplan perceives a strategic move by scholars to avoid engagement with feminism:

Is it possible that the postmodernist discourse has been constructed by male theorists partly to mitigate the increasing dominance of feminist theory in intellectual discourse?... I am suggesting that certain theorists are drawn to postmodernism (rather than struggling against it) precisely because it seems to render feminism obsolete – because it offers a relief from the recent concentration on feminist discourse.⁴⁵

Collusion by women in this process (and arguably Madonna is the arch-colluder!) meant that any sort of solidarity could be perceived from the women's point of view as weakness, according to Caroline Coon:

It's also in art that that happened too, because many women artists didn't want to be grouped together as women because "women are second rate." "I don't want to define myself in a group show of women artists because they think we're all second rate, so I'm not going to be anything to do with women's liberation, or feminist." But the way I see it is that actually where women are is the avant-garde.⁴⁶

Green writes that collusion happens "through willingness to conform, through reluctance to deviate, through embarrassment and, extremely, fear";⁴⁷ the attitudes of bands like The Mo-dettes and Chrissie Hynde in the interviews with the rock press quoted earlier very probably reflect this.⁴⁸

To conclude this section, it is worth noting that this problem also is not completely genre-related, nor new, as Leslie Gourse discovered in her research on female jazz instrumentalists:

Some women never agree to play in all-women's groups or all-women's festivals out of an unwillingness to be ghettoised. For that reason, several musicians, primarily those who play in pop groups and studios and occasionally play jazz too, have taken a firm anti-women's group stand. If a forum has sexism and not music as its *raison d'être*, all women jazz musicians like to avoid it.⁴⁹

The Gimmick

As the conference delegate cited at the very beginning of this work commented, women instrumentalists have a great "novelty" appeal, but as with anything concerned with "difference," the debate engendered by this novelty was a mixed blessing. Linda Dahl's interview with jazz drummer Dottie Dodgion illustrates not only a reluctance to playing with other women ascribed to the novelty factor, but also a wry stoicism in her awareness of her position:

Women are still in the minority in the music business. I think you'll find there are a lot of lady musicians who never wanted to work with other women because you just didn't feel they were serious enough about it. They were sold like they were a bag of meat and potatoes, strictly because they were women... It's just a natural selling point. Of course, we women never make any money off it, only the promoters. And nobody likes to be sold because of their gender. It's an understandable tendency and you can't help it, but you don't have to go along with it.⁵⁰

Enid Williams brings the situation up to date, explaining the balance Girlschool had to negotiate in order to rationalize their existence:

It was a big help being female in the sense of getting gigs, because it was like, great! women on stage, or girls on stage as they would see it; we'll pull the punters in, you know, it was a little bit of a novelty; it made us stand out. It was definitely a help in terms of getting work and in terms of getting publicity in the music press. But it was a hindrance in terms of being taken seriously.⁵¹

Ironically, perhaps, the "easy" access to certain aspects of the business for certain women at certain times could be touted as proof that women were now equal in rock music, for as Griffin says:

Debates about women's position in non-traditional jobs have been dominated by the ideology of equal opportunities, particularly since the sex discrimination legislation was passed in 1975. In these terms, both women and men can be discriminated against on the grounds of sex, since there is no concept of differential power. Lone "token" women (and men) in non-traditional occupations can then be presented as evidence that particular jobs are equally open to women and men.⁵²

Julie Burchill twisted the "token" achievement of Gaye Black into an overt criticism of her band, implying that not only does she fulfil this role, but that she provides a novelty aspect for The Adverts that they could not survive without: "without little Gaye's wide, frightened eyes, luscious lips and batman ring, what are The Adverts but a gaggle of noise-merchants, no worse, no better than all the others?"⁵³ This serves to reiterate the divisive nature of journalism, from the addition of the diminutive "-ette" to female punks by the tabloids mentioned by Zillah Ashworth earlier, to the attempts to engender jealousy not only among those of the same gender, but also between male and female musicians, in the rock press.

The Shelf-life Question: The Duration of the Pop/Rock Career

Simon Frith has rightly pointed out that:

Pop music is created, however successfully, for a large audience and is marketed accordingly by the record industry... The record industry depends on constant consumer turnover and therefore exploits notions of fashion and obsolescence to keep people buying.⁵⁴

Given that many of the artists in my study entered the arena of rock and pop along the lines of "art as free practice versus art as a response to an external demand,"⁵⁵ it is perhaps not surprising that they did not sustain the interest of the music press. The professional life span of a female artist in the UK roughly corresponds to (passing for) the ages seventeen to twenty-three. After the five-year shelf-life, the business wants a new gimmick; in this case, new technology and new "women" – pantomime dames (otherwise known as androgynous male performers) and female-male impersonators, that is, "male" heads in female bodies, for example Annie Lennox, Grace Jones, Tracey Ullman, Toni Basil, Madonna. Women instrumentalists returned to the keyboards and piano; this, after all, was an instrument that they were more likely to have spent their adolescence playing, and did not threaten male space in the way that the playing of traditional rock instruments had done.

Mary Ann Clawson offers an argument that, coupled with the short attention span of the British record industry, shows that it remains unlikely that female guitarists and bass-players will have an impact on British rock music; she discovered that for the young women in her study, "rock musicianship was more frequently a phenomenon of young adulthood than a product of early adolescence. Aspiring women rock musicians are thus often denied the years of teenage apprenticeship and skill acquisition experienced by male counterparts."⁵⁶ Although some of the respondents to my study did start learning to play their instruments at school, and some, such as Sue Bradley, had their choice of instrument dictated by this circumstance, others had to wait until the enabling factor of punk started their music-making. Ironically, it was one of the school band guitarists, still trying to continue her career, who told me at the time of interview that although record companies still liked her music, once they discovered her age (late thirties) they were not interested; indeed, one A&R man told her, "We never sign girls over the age of twenty-three."⁵⁷ Given the fact that young women have not tended to spend their adolescence in bands working on their guitar-playing skills, and by the time they have acquired such skills, if Clawson is correct, they are likely to be in their early twenties, the ageism/sexism of the British music industry will constantly

close the gates of access to any sort of long-term rock music career to young women. It is also interesting to note the results of research by Michael Fogarty, carried out in the late 1970s:

At a number of points the Study suggests that hard-edged attitudes on work or work-related issues develop later among women than among men, so that women are at a disadvantage where career opportunities and patterns tend to be determined early in life. At age 18-24 women express much less interest than men in a job with opportunity for initiative and one which fully uses their abilities, but at age 25-34 their interest in these features of a job rises sharply and catches up with men's.⁵⁸

In other words, by the time a woman realizes that she has potential, and wants to use this in her work, it may be too late for her, should her interests lie in the direction of becoming a rock or pop performer.

Musical Confidence and Competence: A Chance for Longevity?⁵⁹

When featured on Radio 4's *You and Yours*,⁶⁰ Suzi Quatro cited lack of musicianship as the major reason for the short-lived careers of many of the musicians I have discussed in this work. But sometimes, it was the *male* members of the band who were less skilled at playing their instruments;⁶¹ earlier, we saw how Gaye Black was finally acknowledged as a competent bass-player. Her own description of a recording session shows that musical problems in the band came from elsewhere:

I remember when we were recording, there was this song that we'd do that started with a big, long slide. It starts off on the bass, and the drummer got it wrong every single time and I think we did twenty-three takes; my fingers were bleeding at the end.⁶²

Lucy Green points out that there is much admiration for professed incompetence in young men's musicianship (especially in Britain, I believe), and that they use rock music as an escape from traditional musical skills, and amateurism as justification for their involvement in pop or rock instead of classical music. It seems rather unfair that we apply one set of critical criteria to young men and another to young women.

Although many of the women involved in bands as instrumentalists at this time became skilled as time went on, they'd simply not had time to plan careers as musicians, and the very ordinariness that made their activities so appealing in the first place became a burden to them as the opposing poles of business and political concerns removed them from the environments that

had “grown” them.⁶³ Nothing illustrates this better than Naylor’s recollection of a typical gig:

We lived in a high-rise block in Harperhay, one of the grimmest places in the world. I had this enormous keyboard, and Cath had a cheap guitar and a Vox AC30. We needed a team of young men but we didn’t have one of those – we had a wheely thing for suitcases which we bungied them on. We had no money; we were pitifully poor. We’d play the Mayfair, a ballroom at Bellevue. We’d catch the bus to be there at 5 o’clock when the PA got there, to see the blokes assembling it. We didn’t know anything about soundchecks – we never really learned; we didn’t think we had the right...we’d sit in this horrible damp hall, but we didn’t mind, it would be part of it...we’d just hang around. Soundchecks seemed really mysterious; I didn’t really understand how instruments worked. I’d think, Well, they’ve assembled the drums, they’re up, why does this carry on, why are we last?, and then at about 8.30, somebody would shout at us to go on after being there all day. And always, our instruments were kind of propped up on top of things, so I couldn’t see the stickers on my keys. And we’d just kind of plug in and make some noise and somebody would go “Fine,” and that was it. I don’t even remember being nervous. I don’t think there was ever any line about our performing – I don’t think I ever stepped across it and thought, I’m a performer and in half an hour’s time I shall be performing to about twenty people. I’d just get drunk and hang out – that’s what we did.⁶⁴

They had not all intended to become “stars,” although some women did come to experience the trappings of stardom; the whole tradition of “genius” musician was an alien concept, even to a respected guitarist like Chrissie Hynde. Added to this was the fact that so many musicians actively wanted *not* to be like rock stars – Reynolds quotes Dennis Bovell, the producer of The Slits’ album, *Cut*, talking about their guitarist Viv Albertine, who

... was no Jimi Hendrixette... She’d do the occasional bit of single-note lead guitar, but mostly she was more like a female Steve Cropper from Booker T and the MGs, doing all these great rhythm things. She was always very conscious of not wanting to play the guitar like a man, but actually trying to create a style of her own.⁶⁵

Viv adds to this, describing the deliberate minimalism she used as a guitarist:

We were utterly anti wanky guitar solos, which were just someone showing how fast their fingers moved going up and down some blues scale, and everyone going “wow.”

Unless a note had to be there we wouldn't play it; so it's not that I was happy to be a rhythm guitarist. I love rhythm and I love rhythm for its own sake. Someone like Steve Cropper, I'd much prefer to play like him than Jimi Hendrix. I did play little breaks but they were utterly to undermine guitar solos. They were thought about, and not an indulgent thing to show off.⁶⁶

What happened at this time was an odd sort of accident, a type of "action research" that was unsophisticated, often maverick, occasionally corruptible, and constantly debatable.⁶⁷ Sometimes, the practitioners had no empathy with, or support from, their female "fellow travellers" in this experience, like Liz, who found a class issue difficult to empathize with, or Karen from The Gymslips, who said:

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The band I really liked was The Mo-dettes. There were a lot of others that I thought, What the fuck is going on? Like The Raincoats and The Slits, that were very popular, and I couldn't see why because to me it seemed that they couldn't really play at all.⁶⁸

Strangely, women who *were* competent were criticized for this, too:

Frankie: We have been criticised for being too professional.

Alison: Yes, it's absurd when women are taking something seriously. This criticism is directed at the arts more than at mechanical things. Why are all male professional standards supposed to be completely thrown out for music and not for, say, plumbing?⁶⁹

In contrast, Hester felt that her skills were never going to improve enough to compete with the better drummers of her gender, and told me that she felt that she had not been assigned the right instrument in the first place by her band:

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If I felt like I'd had a calling to play the drums then it would have been different. I got more embarrassed about that as time went on; I went to have drum lessons...and desperately doing these drum exercises every day. Particularly when I felt I had to be representing female drummers, and I knew how people would be taking the piss anyway before I even started. And I knew there were some really, really good female drummers around and I didn't want them to think that I represented them.⁷⁰

June Miles-Kingston, however, really did learn to play, although she had to "earn her stripes":

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We did a tour with Spizz Energi. Spizz was great 'cos he's really good fun, but the band were like, "An all-girl band, supporting us? They're gonna be crap," especially the drummer, who was like, "I'm the best drummer." By the end of the tour, we were playing two drums together on stage and we were all best mates. You've only got to prove yourself once. Most guys, especially in music, they're gonna be open, aren't they? They're not like the normal guy in the street that reads the *Daily Mail* and won't think about a woman doing any kind of important job. They're musicians – you've only got to prove yourself, I can play.⁷¹

Eventually, respect came to June automatically:

I remember in our third year we played in LA at the Whisky, and it was all really exciting, you know, "The Whisky-a-Go-Go, you know." Blondie came to our gig and came backstage afterwards (I loved Blondie and used to listen to her all the time), and her and her drummer Clem Burke came backstage afterwards and said to me, "Hey, you're a really cool drummer."⁷²

Notwithstanding obviously skilled musicians, there was a subtext to many of the gig reviews, even those which superficially celebrated the influx of women into bands, that was patronizing and paternalistic. This could appear whether or not a band was "angry" or "decorative." The Slits, in particular, suffered from this; their actual discipline and determination offstage were far removed from the disorganized appearance in their first few gigs documented by punters and journalists alike. Ari described it thus:

I can't forget us every day walking round, trying to hustle, trying to get better in the rehearsal room, rehearsing every day. Army life, like a fucking army, very disciplined, walking around trying to get into the business, trying to organize gigs, trying to get a record deal, trying to do interviews, trying to rehearse. And there was people saying, "Aow, they're not a serious band, they can't play, they can't play music, they're like a whatever – they're girls." We were incredible for our age; we were all teenagers. I wanna see any girls getting up doing what we did back then! I dare them! We were amazing!⁷³

A performance by a band with female instrumentalists could be read entirely differently according to the tastes and age of the audience member, regardless of their sex. The Slits, for instance, were "dramatizing" female concerns, in a reflection of the punks' dramatization of Britain's decline.⁷⁴ So, while Karen believed that bands like The Raincoats "couldn't play at all," Paul Morley praised their EP *Fairy Tale in the Supermarket* under the title, "Singles of the Week: Exhilarating,"⁷⁵ continuing: "The two barbed ballads *In Love* and

Adventure Close to Home are not normal, and expose a new kind of gentleness. They will not remind you of anything." Other reviewers would cover themselves, such as in this review of *Essential Logic* by Paul du Noyer:

They're fooling around with the boundaries of rock music dancing on a tightrope. If they ever fell off I'd hate to be there, because the mess could sound so unpleasant. But right now they're walking the line stylishly.⁷⁶

Many other reviews of female bands by male journalists displayed a voyeuristic thrill in waiting for things to go wrong; women felt differently, as they often related to the performers. Eventually, some reviewers "came round" to the idea that they were actually hearing a new type of music being made, as Richard Grabel's 1980 review "The Slits, New York" testifies:

It works very well live, where the convictions they carry in their persons translates the recorded and fixed sentiments of the songs into comments on the instant, inviting reflection and dialogue. They prove too that the distinctiveness of their recorded sound can't just be credited to Dennis Bovell's production. This was a fortuitous intersection of a producer's proclivities with an artist's intentions. The sound grows from the material.⁷⁷

The reputation of The Raincoats as an avant-garde group was vindicated when Kurt Cobain invited the group to tour with Nirvana, one of the most influential US alternative groups of the 1980s, in 1994. This would have raised their profile in rock histories without a doubt; the unfortunate suicide of Cobain before the tour took place resulted in a return to the margins for the band and their reputation. Susan Suleiman identifies the margins as a place of relegation for women artists, regardless of whether or not they have chosen to belong to the avant-garde:

Avant-garde movements have wilfully chosen their marginal position, the better to launch attacks at the center, whereas women have more often than not been relegated to the margins: far from the altar as from the marketplace, those centers where cultural subjects invent and enact their symbolic and material rites.⁷⁸

In spite of Sara Cohen's observations about the value attributed by young male rock musicians to *not* having musical skills, and Green's comments about the alternative values about musicianship that they posit in their own rock world, we have seen that lack of skill was assumed to be a major reason for the demise of female rock musicians at the end of this moment. I believe this to

be in part due to the redefinition of skill in relation to rock musicianship, and that this is in part to do with the necessity by young males to reassert the male identification of their music.⁷⁹ Clawson cites skill shortages as a reason for the incorporation of women into rock bands as bass-players, and remarks that generally both male and female rock musicians regard bass-playing as a lesser skill once it is perceived as a "female instrument."⁸⁰ Hartmann (paraphrased here by Phillips and Taylor) remarked that:

Capitalism in its historical development encounters individuals who are already sex-stratified, and this pre-existing sexual stratification – patriarchy – then becomes harnessed to capital's need for different types of labour.⁸¹

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Women instrumentalists are acceptable in an emergency, whether the social emergency of punk or the political emergency of the First World War, but once they seem to become established, they become a threat. If they become skilled, they become permanent, and the flexibility that led to their acceptance suddenly disappears. The happy amateurs who took to the stage for fun or political expression were not so welcome if and when they began to take themselves more seriously. McRobbie points out that: "as unskilled rock workers women are a source of cheap labour, a pool of talent from which the successes are chosen more for their appropriate appearance than for their musical talents."⁸²

Skilled rock workers are instrumentalists; for many skilled male rock workers, there was a double interest in not promoting skilled women – some men think they will be squeezed out by a combination of both attractive appearance and instrumental skill that they cannot compete with, and are not prepared to suffer the consequences of their gender's emphasis on women's sexuality as a selling-point. In other words, with more women instrumentalists, there is not only more competition in instrumental terms, there is also an unfair advantage in terms of both men and women responding positively to female-friendly rock bands.

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However, female audience members could be tough on female players. In an article by Robbi Millar in *Sounds*, a woman audience member at a rock gig is asked about Girlschool, who are playing on an otherwise all-male bill. In an interesting slant on Lucy Green's observation about male musicians "listening out" to see how skilled female instrumentalists were in a band, she says:

Girlschool are a good band, a good example of the music, but I think for a girl to really prove herself in a band, she needs to be a lead guitarist or a drummer, say, on her own with a bunch of guys. Then the

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onus would be on her to prove herself. She'd *have* to be good enough to survive. Girlschool are an all-female band so I don't think they have that pressure to be as good as individually they perhaps could be.⁸³

Some, like June Miles-Kingston, developed the skills to work in otherwise all-male bands for many years afterwards, having been in an all-female band previously, but it was shocking to discover just how far some male band-members would go to destroy the career of a competent and attractive female rival. In one incident, two male band-members fabricated a drugs incident in order to prevent a female player from taking part in a tour of the US with a major British female new-wave act:

The drummer was particularly sexist, and although I tried to keep my head down he was gunning for me from the word go, and towed the bass player along with him. In hindsight, I suspect it was the "I fancy her so I'll be vile to her" routine. Anyway, I became friendly with the guitarist, who was a regular guy, and that fuelled the drummer's fire. Accusations about drug-taking, being a disruptive influence, and so on were made in writing, so I had to fight back – I took the issue to the Musican's [*sic*] Union and won compensation for the US tour.⁸⁴

The problem with challenging, and succeeding in winning in, such a scenario is that the musician then finds it extremely difficult to get further work and is also put in the position of fighting her corner in a situation where she should be making music.

For those women who played in mixed bands, we have seen that there was often a need for band personnel who did not desire traditional male roles such as that of "rock star guitarist," and this explains the tendency of women to play bass guitar. In British punk bands, the sheer speed of creation and quantity of bands had been a factor in the inclusion of women causing the relative ease of access to punk music-making. The next musical trend, towards a respect for electronic technology in music-making and the emphasis on the skills of "the producer" as auteur, should have been no excuse for the exclusion of women. This music was keyboards-based, more conventionally associated with women, and should therefore have encouraged women to participate.⁸⁵ However, it was also based on electronic innovation, conventionally associated with male technical mastery. The coincidence with this new music and the repositioning of masculine energy into war "drained" rock music of this energy, and the patriarchal solution was to recruit feminized men as practitioners of the new genre. To us, it seemed as though Thatcher had won and, as Thatcher won, the record industry won, returning the creation of music to the status quo, in which the system ensured that abrasive elements were



The Mo-dettes (Kate, June, Ramona and Jane). Photographer Virginia Turbett, Redferns Collection; © Getty Images

smoothed over or eradicated before they had an impact on the mainstream. Music returned to its polished, produced norm, epitomized by the emollient vocal sounds of Boy George; dissenting females were represented by the fun, raggedy-looking, unthreatening Bananarama or the attention-capitalizing Madonna. Margaret Thatcher represented the victory of greed over creativity, and the rewarding of obedience with material goods. The punks had regarded the establishment, and the Queen, if not with affection, then with a humorous dismissal; for many people, the Queen had been reduced to a heritage figure rather than one of authority in the aftermath of The Sex Pistols' "God Save the Queen" single. She had, in the eyes of many punks, become equivalent to the kitsch sold on stalls to tourists in central London – a bit like a diecast metal Routemaster bus, say, or a plastic bobby-on-the-beat. Thatcher was an utterly different prospect; she was a new version of the Queen of England, with a new, humourless establishment that had co-opted enough of the do-it-yourself mentality of the punk subculture to apparently sneer at its manifestations of more deep political unrest. Whereas many punks had seemingly subverted

their parents' suburban DIY environments (dad in the garage mending the lawn mower, mum in the kitchen baking cakes), the suburban mentality they had hated came back with a vengeance. The autonomous punk subculture, with its own clothing, media and music, became a series of cottage industries; all the activity that had created a culture to replace that which rejected the punks was capitalized on; the old order, supported and, some would say, throttled by the Trades Unions, was replaced; in the media, union-free newspapers like *Today* came into being; the large record companies regrouped and created their own "independent" labels to service the post-punk music that was more marketable to a large audience. Any humour there had been in the spectacle and realization of punk was forgotten; the dramatization and self-mockery of the subculture were frequently reduced to ridicule by its spectators, and largely abandoned by its practitioners.

What must be remembered, though, is that success in punk terms did not necessarily mean the same thing as it would for a mainstream artist or musician. Not every band wanted a record deal and not every player wanted to be famous. For many, just having the self-confidence to get up on stage and do something was a challenge that gave them a sense of achievement they had never imagined possible; being part of a social group, "the punks," was something that for a person designated a reject at school or at home could completely change their life. Making money out of the music by competing in the mainstream, or even alternative record business, meant becoming part of an established, competitive hierarchy; the activity itself was enough to counter the social and political negativity of the era. The "I can be in a band" mentality undoubtedly rescued many of our generation, whether or not we left behind anything in terms of a concrete musical or artistic legacy; this personal empowerment stayed with everybody I spoke to, and has informed their lives ever since. As Lucy O'Brien says:

I just found it such an empowering experience and I'd recommend every teenage girl to be in a band – a band particularly, because it's all about doing something together, launching something together that's your own. It does take quite a bit to get it off the ground, quite a bit of guts. Also, the other thing is just appearing on stage. I remember, it was only about six inches off the ground, but it was so scary standing there looking at this sea of faces looking back at me expectantly and I thought, Shit, I've got to actually do something now. To conquer that fear, it's a bit like going on a big sky-dive; at such a young age, it sets you up somehow. I remember for years afterwards nothing scared me – once you've faced that situation, it gives you a certain fearlessness!⁸⁶

The punk battle had been one in which people took clearly defined sides. A phenomenal amount of energy went into preventing it from having any lasting influence; as far as the female band personnel were concerned, with the attempts at the beginning to prevent and discourage women from being involved, but also in retrospect with the attempts to belittle and forget those who were part of it all, institutionalized misogyny is the last taboo.

It is interesting that some of the bands discussed here have re-formed at the time of writing: The Slits introduced "new blood" and were recording and touring again with their new members until Ari's untimely death at the end of 2010; Girlschool have toured recently with their original line-up; and Gina Birch continues to play solo gigs and perform with The Raincoats, notably at MoMA in New York in 2010. Palmolive plays with a church rock band in Cape Cod, changing the songs she wrote with The Slits so the lyrics reflect her Christian beliefs. There is an awareness that their past is valid and can provide a foundation for not only further self-expression but also influence succeeding generations. Web communities such as "Typical Girls"⁸⁷ and "Women in 70s Punk"⁸⁸ have archived much information and encouraged a revival of interest in the women of this period.

This book has described an important historical moment when women instrumentalists established themselves in an influential new rock music genre, and has examined how they were eventually excluded from participation in male-identified music. It also represents a process of rescuing this moment from the amnesia of conventional popular music historiography in the same way that other "histories from below" have been written about the achievements and experiences of other excluded or marginalized social groups. The mechanism of exclusion is not unique to the early 1980s,⁸⁹ and it is likely that it will continue to operate in the future, particularly if such histories as this are not brought to light. We should regard this as cautionary as we congratulate ourselves for progress made in the twentieth century.⁹⁰ As Enid Williams said:

There was a programme on television some years ago, and it was an hour long, and they had all the Zeppelins and Deep Purples, but also lots of really tiny little bands that most people would never have heard of, and they didn't mention Girlschool once! We certainly weren't in the league of Led Zeppelin, although they did come to see us play once, but we were far, far more successful than half the bands on that programme and they didn't even mention our name, because to them we were a female band; we didn't come under the banner of "heavy metal" and somehow we were forgotten about.⁹¹