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Bubblegum Girls Need Not Apply: Deviant Women the Punk Scene

Anna Batt
Student of Journalism and Media Studies
Rutgers University

Abstract

Certain images surface when considering the history of the punk movement in the United States and England: The Ramones, Dead Kennedy's, Sid Vicious and with him, the Sex Pistols. Punk is a subculture that prides itself on freedom of expression, and culminates in various art forms including music and fashion. Despite the movements' unwritten policy of openness, women within the punk movement have experienced a complex record of rejection and abuse within the scene. Women who felt they did not have a place within society during their place and time looked to the punk scene for solace. In many cases, they were treated as deviants, and experienced disrespect or violence against them. This paper explores how a variety of female punk acts were seen as deviant, and how their philosophies and actions helped reshape the subculture itself. They themselves forged a place in history as some of the most influential leaders in punk, or within any subculture. This paper also interrogates the medias' reaction to women in punk, and commercial efforts to commodify the attitudes and do-it-yourself nature of the punk scene.

Author's Note

Anna Batt currently studies at Rutgers University, where she is pursuing a major in Journalism and Media Studies, with minors in Women and Gender Studies and Digital Communication, Information and Media. She is an Editorial Intern at the College Music Journal in New York, where she researches new music, writes album reviews and proves live concert coverage for the Journals' website. In the summer, she will intern at Rutgers University's Graduate School of Social Work. In her spare time, she loves listening to live music in basements of New Brunswick, reading comic books, watching television and trying to be funny on Twitter.

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1. Introduction

When one looks at a list of the 100 most popular artists in the 1970's, a mere seven of the artists listed are in bands with a female lead.[1] On a similar list of the most popular bands in the 1970's based on genre, of the twelve bands listed under the "Punk/New Wave" genre, only two bands fit that same category.[2] Even in a music scene that prides itself on its openness and acceptance of all different lifestyles, women were still (and continue to be) the minority. However, many extraordinary women broke through this tough exterior. For example, Patti Smith, Siouxie Sioux, The Raincoats, Wendy O. Williams, Bikini Kill and the other Riot Grrrls were all influential in

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[1] "100 Greatest Rock Music Artists Of The 1970's," last modified April 23, 2007, <http://www.digitaldreamdoor.com/pages/best_artists70s.html>

[2] "Popular Music of the Seventies," <http://www.thepeoplehistory.com/70smusic.html>

the women's punk movements from Britain and United States from the 1970's-early 2000's. These women created and helped create a sub-cultural movement that deviated sharply from not only the accepted and "appropriate" behavior for women in American society, but also from the male-dominated musical scene that they were trying to join. As a result, they became some of the most powerful leaders of a subculture and beyond.

In Lauraine Leblanc's research on women in the punk scene published in her book, *Pretty in Punk,* Leblanc interviewed a young woman who said that in her experience in the punk scene, she "felt troubled about the male-dominated gender dynamics in the punk subculture, a subculture that portrays itself as being egalitarian, and even feminist, but it is actually far from being either. Yet [...] she had found that this same subculture gave her a place to be assertive and aggressive, to express herself in less 'feminine' ways then other girls."[3] The shocking way that the women in punk bands presented themselves, from "boyish" clothing and unkempt hair to nearly naked women with Mohawks, produced a variety of reactions. Many women hailed these punk women for their aggressive rejection of the status quo. However, many people considered these women to be more of a novelty rather than an actual force within the movement. Men within the scene had mostly negative, disapproving reactions. A lot of the negative reactions came from media outlets, which helped to create a society plagued with moral panic about the subculture beginning in the 1970's that prevails to the present. Stigmas against people in the punk movement worked to delegitimize their aims, and developed fear against them. People outside the movement rejected what they did not understand; this was a sentiment fueled by mass, mainstream media, which helped to perpetuate the stereotypes and misinformation about the punk movement and more specifically about the women within it. They promulgated an image that all punks (especially women) are violent youths, hell-bent on the destruction of the American Way. The stereotypes of the women are that they drink, smoke, have sex and are extremely dangerous. They are stereotyped as "unfeminine" and "inappropriate." Media and consumer culture always has had a dynamic relationship with the ideals and images of women in punk.

Recently, the advertising industry, mainstream music producers and the fashion industry have made the scene itself into a trendy commodity. It has transformed the rebellious spirit of the punks into the world of fashion and commercial advertising. These industries have begun using the DIY (do- it-yourself) fashion and music content in a commercialized way. They also promote more

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[3] Lauraine Leblac, *Pretty In Punk: Girl's Gender Resistance in a Boy's Subculture* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, March 1, 1999) 5

easily accepted, non-threatening and sexualized versions of the "angry female," like the iconic images of rock stars such as Patti Smith, clad in baggy t-shirts, a leather jacket and messy hair. These images have been copied, mass-produced, and distributed.

2. Patt Smith and Androgyny in the New York Punk Scene

One of the most famous women in punk is Patti Smith. Smith has commented on her place in the punk scene, saying: "These things were on my mind: the course of the artist, the course of freedom redefined, the re-creation of space, the emergence of new voices."[4] Smith is one of the most influential women in punk music not because she created punk per se, but rather on account of her extraordinary ability to connect with her fans. Smith's first single, "Piss Factory," shed light on her experiences at a factory in New Jersey, in which it "painted the factory as a place from which a woman, a worker, had no escape."[5] After moving to New York, she set to give a poetry reading by another poet, Gerard Malanga, and soon gained a reputation as a poet herself. She deviated from other female poets of the time, creating her own vision of beat poetry, as it had seen a revival in the New York punk scene in the 1970s. In an art form that was commonly perceived as male-dominated, she tended to write about women from a more masculine perspective by either making women the subject of her poetry, or speaking to them with admiration within her work. Smith asserted herself as an artist like the male writers and musicians she respected. She was artistically and physically androgynous, including her baggy clothing and shaggy, Keith Richards-inspired hairstyle.[6]

Few women strayed from the ideals of femininity the way Smith did at the time. In her book, Mara Raha asserts, "Unlike Led Zeppelin's groupies, Smith wanted to be her male idols as much as she longed to be around them. And, unlike other women who fawned over male musicians, she internalized and emulated the things she liked about them, creating her own statements, forging a new musical woman."[7] In this way, Smith existed beyond the gender binary, and created her own voice using symbols from both male and female behaviors, with her signature look and content. She rejected ideals of what a woman could or could not be, and tended to function beyond the constraints that most other women in her time were bound by. Her genderlessness and

[4] Mara Raha, *Cinderella's Big Score: Women of the Punk and Indie Underground* (Emeryville, California: Seal Press, December 31, 2004) 16

[5] Raha, *Cinderella's Big Score,* 17

[6] Keith Richards a founding member of the English rock and roll group The Rolling Stones, well known for his shaggy hair.

[7] Raha *Cinderella's Big Score*, 18

representation of the “othered”, blue-collar workers in society made her very different from others who came before her and forged the way for women in punk music. Though others in the punk movement originally rejected her, she created music and forged her own path. Once she proved herself as an artist and became a driving force of power for the punk movement, she was impossible to ignore.

2. Sexuality, Politics and the Punk Movement

The 1970’s in Britain displayed a rise in feminism and for human rights. A significant number of female heads of state were coming into power; for example, Margaret Thatcher became the first female Prime Minister in 1979. The first Gay Pride march was held in London, on July 1st, 1972. In 1977, the first Reclaim The Night march was held in London, to demand justice for rape survivors.[8] Diverse women with all different skills, styles and ideologies gained prominence in this era. The punk scene was no exception. Some of the most influential female punk musicians rose up in the scene during this period, all packed with the angst and fury it took to relay their messages.

A British performer, Siouxie Sioux, was also very influential in the punk scene in the ‘70s. She was involved in the movement in a different way then Smith, however. She, along with other performers in her category was more interested in redefining female sexuality. Sioux is known for her image of anti glamour, mixing sensuality with disgust, and her clear rejection of traditional ideals of beauty for women. Sioux said that her fetishized clothing had a purpose: “to show that erogenous zones are overrated…and that tits are no big deal.”[9] Larger culture viewed the punk, Sioux image as “ugly.” Her unapologetic nudity functioned as a statement against sexual repression and shocked audiences: “Sioux’s emotional and aesthetic multiplicity stood as a very public reminder that anger and impulse weren’t singularly male.”[10] Sioux and her band are also different from other women and punk artists in that she wanted to create a totally different sound than what was being created at the time. They incorporated tribal rhythms and abstract sounds that worked to expand the idea of what punk could be.

At the same time in 1970’s Britain, The Raincoats were another punk band that prided itself on its independent thinking and political activism but that did not adhere to the mores of the

[8] "An Oral History of the women's liberations movement." Accessed February 16, 2014. http://www.bl.uk/learning/histcitizen/sisterhood/timeline.html.

[9] *Punk 77*, <www.punk77.co.uk/groups.banshees.htm>

[10] Raha, *Cinderella’s Big Score*, 78

prevailing punk sound. The band was not quite post-punk either, instead celebrating its unique identity and experimentalism. "The basic theme of rock and roll is what goes on between men and women," they told American author, music journalist and cultural critic, Greil Marcus in 1980. They separated themselves from mainstream music genres, exposing the stereotypes underlying those movements: "Rock and roll is based on black music. And it's based in the exclusion of women and the ghettoization of blacks. Which is why we want to put a little distance between what we do and the rock and roll tradition." Along with the music they played, their dress did not conform to the established ideal of the "punk woman" in the '70s, with rumpled clothing and knotty hair. The band did not use the same type of theatrics that was traditional in punk performers, which set them apart. The Raincoats seemed to be a strange, unexplained presence within the scene; as a result, many people did not know what to make of them. They seemed to be deviants within an already deviant punk scene. The Raincoats were inspirational to performers like famous '90's grunge musicians, Kurt Cobain of Nirvana and Kim Gordan of Sonic Youth.

1981 saw the beginning of MTV and the presidency of Ronald Reagan, and with that came a re-emergence of conservatism and traditional ideals of female appearance, behavior, and interests. The decade also saw a rise in female performers at the top of the charts, such as Joan Jett, Whitney Houston, Madonna and Cyndi Lauper. However, despite the increasing presence of female leads, male-based acts continued to debase females with lyrics and videos that objectified women. For example, Mötley Crüe's "Girls, Girls, Girls", J. Geils Band "Centerfold", and ZZ Top's "Legs" were all based around sexist ideals and images. In the punk scene in United States, women such as Wendy O. Williams worked against not only the objectification of women by male artists, but also against the portrayal of women in mainstream media whose images of beauty and pop they rejected.

Wendy O. Williams, founder of the Plasmatics, may be one of the best examples of the many ways that female artists in the punk scene were societal and musical deviants: she was completely different from the women in the culture in which she had been raised, from the punk movement she found herself immersed, and from the women who found their voices within the scene. She was a heavy metal, chainsaw wielding, naked, and feminist rock star. She performed dangerous stunts and destroyed things in an attempt to not only have fun, but also in a symbolic rejection of the American need for material goods. She explained in a TV interview, "With the Plasmatics, I have the opportunity to do what I love, which is smash these things and show they are

just things. People in our society, I think, place too much value on things."[11] In a capitalist economy that places so much importance on goods, Williams's desire was to destroy what she describes as "just things;" it was jarring for people who saw her act. She wanted to shock people in an effort to expose the problems she saw in society. The stunts that Williams performed and the energy that she displayed in those stunts surpassed the dynamism of almost all other acts in the punk scene: "Besides sawing countless guitars in half, she drove a school bus through a mount of television sets for a Plasmatics video and skydived naked for a *Playboy* centerfold shoot- the only way she would agree to pose for them."[12] Williams' commitment to extreme individualism set her apart from other women in the punk scene solidifying her position as a true punk deviant.

Unfortunately, the 1990's saw a regression in the types of mainstream female acts, showcasing fewer acts like Pat Benatar and Joan Jett. The most popular content was either pop or R&B, leading the way for artists such as Mariah Carey, Paula Abdul and Whitney Houston to dominate the charts. About this shift, Raha says, "The dialogue acted like a call and response of stereotypical male and female sexuality; the male's rampantly heterosexual mating call, followed by the tirelessly loving, sexually restrained female's answer."[13] Mass media promoted these acts to create a common sense about idealized beauty, and about what goes on inside the mind of the "average female." However, the acts that began to emerge in the underground music scene were a clear response of the uneasiness that the women in the up-and-coming bands were feeling about the homogeneity of mainstream music. In fact, that uneasiness took such a toll on these women that a completely new revolution of "Riot Grrrls" emerged.

3. The Riot Grrrl Movement and Sexuality within the Punk Scene

The Riot Grrrl movement consisted of networks of young women who worked to challenge male hegemony within the punk scene and in society in general. The Riot Grrrls began in the early 1990s by Washington State band, Bikini Kill, and lead singer Kathleen Hanna.[14] Throughout the history of the punk scene, many women took on this challenge, but the Riot Grrrls were the first group to organize and hold women-only meetings in which they would discussed the ways sexism controlled their everyday lives. The Riot Grrrl believed in a DIY (do it yourself) culture. They

[11] Raha, *Cinderella's Big Score,* 129
[12] Raha, *Cinderella's Big Score*, 131
[13] Raha, *Cinderella's Big Score,* 153
[14] *Riot Grrrl Manifesto*, <http://onewarart.org/riot_grrrl_manifesto.htm>

rejected the popular culture of their time, so they worked to create their own music and fanzines that confronted issues in their society such as body image head on. The *Bikini Kill* magazine spearheaded by musician Tobi Vail and Hanna in the early 1990s was instrumental in spreading the Riot Grrrl movement. They rejected the pressure to embrace the hegemonic ideal of female perfection and celebrated diversity. They worked to redefine the word "feminist" as well as what it meant to be a "girl."[15] The Riot Grrrls decided that they would no longer take part in the institutions that oppressed them, but would create content of their own that embraced their ideals.

Throughout the time and spaces of the punk scene, the positive reactions to women came from both men and women for different reasons. Many men saw punk women as a novelty and because of this, they were mildly supportive. Authors whose work surrounds female artists, such as Mara Raha, Lauraine Leblanc and Helen Reddington are all examples of positive reactions of women in the punk scene. They have written researched accounts of what punk women stood for and experienced as a part of the scene in order to open the eyes of readers. They work to debunk the stereotypes that have plagued the punk scene since it's humble beginnings. They also recognize the impact of what women such as Patti Smith or Kathleen Hanna. For example, in 2011 *The New York Times* published a story about the Riot Grrrls, describing not only their impact they had in the '90s but also how they inspire women today. The article, by Melena Ryzik, described a tribute concert for the Riot Grrrls. The piece chronicled the history of the movement, interviewed a diverse collection of women in modern punk bands. They shared their experiences as women in the scene and how they continue to be inspired by the Riot Grrrls and by one of its founders, Kathleen Hanna. Hanna also discussed her ideology during the time of the Riot Grrrls, the issues they faced, and decisions they made to cultivate their image [16]

As many accounts by Kathleen Hanna and other punk women suggest, many men within the punk scene were extremely unsupportive of women and presented contradictory expectations for them. According to Leblanc's research, this included pressure by men to be "tough like the guys," while remaining attractive and sexually available. Yet, though they were expected to be sexual, they could not be overly promiscuous or they ran the risk of being labeled "sluts" not only by their male

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[15] *Words + Guitar: The Riot Grrrl Movement and Third-Wave Feminism*. Hilary Belzer. 2004. Georgetown U. April 23, 2004 <http://cct.georgetown.edu/research/thesisdatabase/HillaryBelzer.pdf>

[16] Melena Ryzuk, "A Feminist Riot That Still Inspires."*The New York Times,* sec. Music , June 1 03, 2011. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/05/arts/music/the-riot-grrrl-movement-still-inspires.html?pagewanted=all&_r=2& (accessed April 17, 2013)>

counterparts, but also by other women. Punk women have reported rampant sexual harassment within the community, which reflects their lack of acceptance.[17] For example, Kim Gordan, a member of punk band Sonic Youth discussed in a 1987 tour diary that a male fan in the audience picked up a broken drumstick from the floor and threw it directly at Gordan, hitting her in the forehead as she played. She said, "I didn't know whether to cry or keep playing, but then I just felt incredibly angry. […] It really made me feel sick, violated, like walking to the dressing room after a set, and having some guy say 'Nice show,' then getting my ass pinched as I walk away."[18] Gordan's experience reflects a shared consciousness of many women in the punk scene and beyond. There is an expectation to accept and embrace male attention without analyzing how it subjugates them. Punk women rejected this expectation, and were some of the first females to make a public statement about their anger and resentment about where their place in society was supposed to be. They spit in the face of the patriarchy, making them leaders for future women, but deviant in society and in media.

4. The Punk Movement and Popular Culture

Joan Jett, lead singer of the band The Runaways, explains her encounters with the media: "First, people just tried to get around it by saying, 'Oh, wow, isn't that cute? Girls playing rock and roll!' and when we said, 'Yeah, right, this isn't a phase; it's what we want to do with our lives,' it became, 'Oh! You must be a bunch of sluts. You dykes, you whores."[19] The ideas that the punk subculture represents tear at the fabric of mainstream society and capitalism. Punk ideology works to challenge the status quo, and mass media and advertising depend on the status quo to function. Stereotyping punks into something to be feared was an effective way to prevent many people from involving themselves within the movement. Similarly, stereotyping the women in the scene as 'sluts,' 'whores' and as a general danger to society pushes them aside, rendering them ineffective to those who do not take a closer look into what they do beyond what is reported in mass media.

However, starting in the '90's with the grunge movement, media and advertising could no longer ignore the presence of the rock and punk subculture as it was becoming a part of what their target audience was interested in. Grunge is a subgenre of rock music inspired by hardcore punk, heavy metal and indie rock. The style of artists within this genre was similar to The Raincoats, with a

[17] Leblanc, *Pretty In Punk,* 131-133
[18] Raha, *Cinderella's Big Score*, Introduction
[19] Joe Garden, "Joan Jett", *The Onion AV Club (*February 26, 1998)

rejection for theatrics and with a generally unkempt appearance. When bands such as Nirvana and Pearl Jam become commercially successful, advertising and fashion began to reflect images of Patti Smith for inspiration on how to appeal to this new generation of consumers. Fashion moguls began looking at groups such as the Riot Grrrls, and Bikini Kill in particular, in the hopes of utilizing the revolutionary spirit of women in punk that had become fashionable. When these women rejected mainstream advances, media again used its power to undercut what these women were trying to accomplish. For example, when Bikini Kill member and Riot Grrrl founder Kathleen Hanna chose not to be interviewed for an article in *Spin* magazine, the writer lashed out at her, stating "Hanna, however, doesn't exactly have mass-media savvy- she declined to speak to *Spin* and, with that, gave up the opportunity to reach thousands with her motivating voice. At a recent show, many guys panted at the prospect of seeing Hanna topless, turning a potential act of defiance into an ogle fest."[20] Because the interviewer, a representative of mainstream media, did not understand why Hanna made the choice not to speak to *Spin,* they felt the need to turn Hanna's act into something with a negative connotation and undermine the validity of what she was trying to convey.

Mass media and mainstream culture could not reach characters such as Hanna within the scene because they had departed from mainstream society after feeling rejected from it. Now that they had formulated their own symbols and ideologies, they did not want to share them with the masses, so media took matters into their hands. In his article "What Do I Get? Punk Rock, Authenticity and Cultural Capital." Brian Cogan discusses the process of dominant culture making sense of subcultures. In this instance, the subculture is the punk movement. The process includes writing news reports and articles exploring its historical context, and taking parts of the culture and commodifing them for consumption. He uses fashion as an example and says, "safety pins, leather jackets and ripped jeans are taken out of the context of rebellion and translated into runway fashion, selling for thousands of dollars at ritzy boutiques." [21] Mainstream music culture often takes a similar approach to these female deviants. They cannot control the women who represent "the angry female" within the movement, so they promote female artists that are seen as less threatening, sexualized and commercialized versions of the real thing. For example, artists such as Alanis Morissette or Avril Lavigne were both extremely popular, recording-industry depictions of "punk" women who adhere to the MTV and commercial rules of being deviants, meaning taking their anger

[20] Sara Marcus, *Girls To The Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution* (New York, New York: Harper Perennial, (September 28, 2010) 191
[21] Brian Cogan, *What Do I Get? Punk Rock, Authenticity and Cultural Capital*, http://www.nyu.edu/pubs/counterblast/punk.htm

fair enough to be trendy.[22] They are self-described tomboys, who are mad at their boyfriends and husbands (or ex-boyfriends and ex-husbands) for breaking their heart, but they do not explore the why.[23] The historical implications would be too subversive.

5. Conclusion

Women such as Patti Smith, Siouxie Sioux, the members of The Raincoats, Wendy O. Williams and the Riot Grrrls were different not only from other women in mainstream society, but also effectively became deviants in an already deviant punk subculture. They pushed the boundaries of femininity, rejecting tradition in order to challenge the political, sexual and social issues in their surroundings. This radical approach received both positive and negative reactions from men, women and the media. Many of the negative reactions functioned to stereotype and limit the reach of these women in rallying change, and the positive reactions (in part) worked to debunk these stereotypes. Many of these women and their messages are not widely known. This article has sought to highlight the women within the punk scene who have been critical examples of female leadership who have probed and attacked stereotypes of female sexuality. While women such as Patti Smith and Kathleen Hanna should be remembered for their fearless talent in the face of harsh criticism, their message is becoming co-opted by the advertising and fashion industries that attempt to package their revolutionary spirit and sell it in mass consumption. While the notion that punk counter-culture has influenced mainstream culture displays the power of the movement, the commodification of punk clothing and style is at odds with the central tenets of the genre. As female leaders in a male dominated music scene, the punk women discussed in this piece directly attacked assumptions based upon their sexuality and truly embodied the punk spirit.

[22] Alanis Morissette's lyrical content usually surrounds angst-filled songs about revenge.
[23] Lavigne is portrayed as a tomboy who will only associate herself with stereotypical male skaters who rejects femininity, yet can most recently be found in a Proactiv commercial.

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