

Film review

Stories from the She Punks: Music with a Different Agenda, Gina Birch and Helen Reddington (dirs.), Birch & Reddington, UK, 2016

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The documentary *Stories from the She Punks: Music with a Different Agenda* by Gina Birch (the Raincoats) and Helen Reddington (who founded the Chefs) premiered at Genesis cinema, London, in November 2018 as part of a film season dedicated to music documentary, the Doc 'n' Roll Film Festival. This short (45 minute) film brings together interviews with a selection of women who answered punk's *anyone can do it* call, forming bands and performing as lead and bass guitarists, drummers and keyboard players in punk bands in the late 1970s and the early 1980s and in the process becoming a presence in rock music for the first time. The neglect of female musicians and performers in punk rock history that prompted the film was also the reason for the book, *The Lost Women of Rock Music* (Reddington, 2007), following a Ph.D. authored by the co-creator of the film, Helen Reddington.

The film features performers from all-female punk band the Raincoats (vocalist and guitarist Ana Da Silva and vocalist and bassist/guitarist Gina Birch) along with the female musicians in the mixed-gender post-punk band the Au Pairs (bassist Jane Munro and vocalist/guitarist Lesley Woods), all of whom were vocal from a left-wing, feminist perspective at the time. Interviews with participants in bands with a strong female presence such as these convey the importance of creating female-centred spaces to create and learn in, within otherwise male-dominated environments. There was a similar premise to the inspirational short (13 minute)

film that preceded the Genesis screening, entitled *TO THE FRONT: Scenes from a Women's Rock Camp*. Filmed in the present day, this featured young women involved in an intense three-day session to learn an instrument, form a band and perform. The women involved describe being changed from within by the experience.

Also featured in *Stories from the She Punks* are members of all female bands the Mo-dettes (bass player Jane Perry Woodgate and drummer, June Miles-Kingston) and the Slits (drummer Palmolive and guitarist Viv Albertine) along with the sole female member of the Adverts (bassist Gaye Black).

Rachel Lovell (vocalist) and Hester Smith (drummer) from Dolly Mixture who were rated within 'indie' circles at the time, but generally overlooked in the media are also featured, as are Karen Yarnell (drummer) and Enid Williams (bassist) from the all-female band Gymslips. Yarnell describes how they were persistently courted by music journalist Gary Bushell to be bracketed under Oi!, which he saw as the 'real', i.e. working-class, punk movement, but they were reluctant to play ball. The film also features Shanne Bradley (bass player for the Nipple Erectors, an early London punk group that featured Shane McGowan, later of the Pogues), Helen McCookerybook (vocalist and bassist for the Chefs) and Vivien Goldman (solo artist and contributor to quirky post-punk band the Flying Lizards). Also included were participants from bands that were relatively unknown at the time, including Trash (bassist, the Ettes) and Lucy O'Brien (synthesizer player, the Catholic Girls). Liz Naylor, who co-ran the Manchester fanzine *City Fun* (1979–83) with Cath Carroll and jointly managed Ludus, a band featuring radical feminist artist Linder Sterling, also features, with reference to her musical participation as keyboard player in the largely unknown Manchester band Gay Animals.

The interviewees are all drawn from a very specific sub-strand of punk – what can loosely be defined as the late 1970s, early 1980s UK post-punk scene, within which the Raincoats were one of the most prominent groups. As such, there are some interesting parallels that emerge from the stories of these women. Despite their ostensibly foul behaviour and liberal use of expletives, many of the subjects come across as quite well-behaved girls from supportive, middle-class homes, who describe fitting in band rehearsal around their homework schedules. However, this also means that the perspectives on punk are quite narrow in scope. The perspectives of women in first-wave punk, such as Poly Styrene, Jordan, Pauline Murray and Siouxsie Sioux, or of later women from the anarcho-punk scene, not to mention the US New Wave, hardcore or Riot Grrrl participants, would have told a different story. Some attempt to locate the interviewees within the wider herstory of female punk and to bring in divergent perspectives would have been welcome. This is particularly notable as the reality for many women in punk was they had more difficult backgrounds and/or were more rebellious.

One of the strengths of the film is in providing its female interviewees the opportunity to reflect on punk culture and its wider context, including the sexual politics of the time. Women faced hostility: this was a male-dominated environment where they were subjected to sexualized verbal abuse and comments such as ‘get your tits out’, while several participants describe both threatened and actual violence. O’Brien recalls her band playing badly due to an intimidating atmosphere at a gig that resulted in bottles being hurled at the stage accompanied by shouts of ‘get off; fuck off’ from skinheads in the audience. Da Silva similarly recalls having a bottle hurled at her onstage. These recitations reflect the prevalent level of violence, both misogynist and more generally in society that was often manifest in youth culture at the time.

The women in punk also had to overcome the limited horizons for women in a society that expected them to be first and foremost wives and mothers. Jane from the Mo-dettes, for instance, recalls her desire to escape the future that her adoptive parents (who she describes as good people) envisioned for her as a checkout girl. Generally, any form of individuality, originality or creativity was particularly suppressed in women. With a few notable exceptions, men were the rock stars of the 1960s and the early 1970s. Women tended to be relegated to the position of muse or appendage, rock star girlfriend.

Punk was the vehicle through which the women in this film managed to become authors of their own lives, finding their own voice, personally, creatively and politically. It is important to hear what they have to say about their experiences; what it was like to be a young woman in an environment that both inherited some of the liberating ideas of the 1960s, and yet was still highly reactionary. What it was like to discover punk and find it simultaneously emancipatory and chauvinistic or to be in an environment where an *anyone can do it* attitude prevailed and men were often highly supportive, while they simultaneously faced derogatory attitudes towards women that mirrored wider society.

On the one hand, having presence as a woman in a male-dominated environment was a step forward from a feminist perspective. Indeed these women were operating within a milieu where horizons had already been broadened by their feminist predecessors and contemporaries. On the other hand, the film does not pick up on the fact that many female punk musicians and performers at the time did not want to be associated with feminism. Some more rounded discussion on the complexities and nuances of what feminism was then and how it related to the scene, by contrast with how this has changed over time would have been worthwhile. The Q&A

touched upon the ambiguities around the women's movement, with Gina Birch saying that she felt it was concerned too much with telling people what to do.

This film is therefore important in bringing to light the perspective and experiences of women in punk that have often been overlooked. Its most obvious drawback is that it is comprised of snippets of the participants' thoughts without an overarching narrative. There is also an absence of music, or footage from the time; instead photos of the participants' younger punk selves are included. Whether due to a lack of available archive, a budgetary/licensing issue or a creative choice, this is a major drawback as you get very little sense of who they were, what their music was like, who their audience was or how the scene changed over time. What you have instead is the recollections of a group of women in their 50s and 60s, undoubtedly changed since their teenage years, which limits the extent to which the film can transport you in time. On the plus side, the film gives older women who were involved in the creation of culture visibility, which can serve as a source of inspiration to younger women who would like to participate in male-dominated environments. When seen in the context of the proliferation of music – and particularly punk – documentaries, narrated by older men, this in itself is very encouraging.

The most positive message to come from the film is that women stand to gain hugely – not just from being visible, finding their voice and expressing themselves – but from being involved in creative projects with other women. Removing individual women from the male gaze, and male judgement was cited to free them up to learn from scratch together. Many of the women involved had no prior experience playing instruments or performing in a band, and the expectations placed on them were very much in opposition to this. The openness and emancipatory aspect of punk meant that not having the prior musical attainment was not a bar, and actually the limitations placed on women not to form bands or express themselves made

plenty of those featured in the film more determined to break down barriers. The example that they have set has fed into culturally significant movements from Riot Grrrl in the 1990s through to contemporary manifestations of punk and feminism today.

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Reference

Redddington, H (2007), *The Lost Women of Rock Music*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007.