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THE WOMAN PUNK MADE ME

Lucy O’Brien

It’s 1977. ‘I choked Linda Lovelace’ T-shirts are everywhere, Fleetwood Mac’s ‘Rumours’ is at No. 1, Italian drummer Cerrone has a disco hit with ‘Love in C Major’ and a host of girls in let’s-get-physical boxer shorts and tight vests, Ronnie Spector is referred to in Sounds as ‘the little jean-creamer’, Stevie Nicks, Elkie Brooks, Lindsay Wagner and Olivia Newton John hold sway, along with the Eagles, Starsky & Hutch, Led Zeppelin and those die-hards, the Rolling Stones. Guitars come in all shapes and sizes, including pistols. An advert for Kasuga guitars features two naked women with instruments placed strategically over their private parts alongside the line: ‘Ecstasy at your fingertips’. Jenny Darren is billed as ‘raunchy and ready to rock…one of the new breed of lady rockers’. Two of the most popular T-shirts are ‘Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of Death—I shall fear no evil: for I am the meanest Son of a Bitch in the Valley’, and the mushroom cloud ‘Suppose they gave a war and nobody came’.

‘We were trying to find a new vocabulary’ (personal communication 1997), says Linda Sterling, or Linder, art terrorist and former lead singer with avant-garde punk Manchester group Ludus, who once sang at the Hacienda covered in pigs’ entrails and wearing a large black dildo. ‘We just wanted to take the whole thing to its logical extreme’ (personal communication 1990), said Siouxsie Sioux, who screamed of a suburban relapse and went into a Bromley wine bar in fetish gear with her friend Berlin on a leash and all fours. There were the Slits, defiantly naked and daubed in mud, on the cover of their debut album, Cut, and other girl groups like the Raincoats, the Mo-Dettes, and my own, the Catholic Girls, knots of resistance surrounded by incomprehension and hostility. Against this was the backdrop of tiered flowery skirts, flicks and flares, and the crushing conformity of what it meant to be female in a Britain still tinged by post-war austerity.

Despite the assertion that the hippies were the first to slough off old values, punk was the test case, the first modern generation. In just three years, from 1977 to 1979, and then another social leap to 1980, the gender map had radically
begun to alter. The unpicking that started with celebratory abandon on the underground 60s freakscene became a giant unravelling with punk. It was during punk that the ‘sex wars’ went overground, that the battle for territory on stage, on the street and in the workplace began to pierce the mainstream. That was the context that made us.

The orthodoxy was that punks hated hippies, and that the era of sexual permissiveness, ‘sexual liberation’ had been a big con, just a way of getting women into bed more easily. Punks objected to what they saw as hippie idealism and naiveté, the ‘grow your own hi h’ approach that failed to take account of the rigours of late twentieth-century urban life. Before the acid house boom of the late 80s and the second ‘summer of love’, it was presupposed that swinging 60s ideals had collapsed in the face of growing cynicism and materialism.

It was the 60s and early 70s counterculture movement, however, that opened up pathways for punk feminism. In 1970, for instance, Germaine Greer put the politics of female sexuality firmly on the agenda when she guest-edited the special ‘Cuntpower’ issue of the underground magazine *0z*. Included in the issue was a women’s liberation manifesto, a piece on female masturbation, instructions on how to make your own ‘Cuntpower’ bikinis, and a Greer polemic on the power of ‘cunt’ confrontation. No longer were women to remain ‘chaste guardians of their husbands’ honour’. In a characteristic clarion call, she wrote: ‘Cunt is knowledge … Skirts must be lifted, knickers…must come off forever. It is time to dig CUNT and women must dig it first’ (Greer 1970:24)

Despite the rhetoric of sexual liberation, though, women were still finding equality an uphill struggle. Twenty-seven years after that special issue of *Oz*, Greer admitted that because production of the magazine had ultimately been controlled by men, she had to tolerate her ideas being ‘tidied up’ and smoothed over in the name of ‘professionalism’. Greer felt compromised in presenting women as they really are:

> Hairy, smelly, energetic and strong. Up till then women had been represented in *Oz* principally by wispy bare-breasted flower children and the pneumatic creations of Robert Crum [sic]. The sixties was the hey-day of male display; the most successful sixties women were scented, decorative and slender, voluptuously dressed in diaphanous chiffons, old embroideries, baubles, bangles, beads and boots, and spoke in blurred voices—if they spoke at all.

(McQuiston 1997:6)

They also assisted the revolution by doing the washing up, rolling the roll-ups, making coffee and taking the Pill. As 60s Black Panther, Stokely Carmichael, once said, the position of women in the freedom movement was ‘prone’, and lines like
‘A pretty girl is like a manifesto’ over wide-eyed naked sylphs on the cover of an edition of *International Times* bear this out. For women the new sexuality was a muddled mix of old-fashioned passivity and experimental self-assertion. Queen of 60s pop, Marianne Faithfull, for instance, recalled a time when Rolling Stone Brian Jones unexpectedly came on to her:

I was in his flat, I was a pretty girl…it [was] almost de rigueur that he make a pass at me, it was the new sexual politesse. For my part, I thought, Oh, he’s making a play for me. I really should let him…. Hippie etiquette. You just sort of went along, didn’t you?

(Faithfull 1994:65)

To resist a potential lover, it seemed, you were holding up the revolution. ‘Reichian ideas of sexual liberation were quite powerful at that point. The theory was that if you free yourself sexually, you free humanity,’ says psychoanalyst and prominent 60s campaigner Juliet Mitchell. ‘The trouble was that sexual liberation hadn’t taken account of psychological liberation. You don’t get freed of all the jealousy and pain that infidelity and promiscuity cause. There was a psychological time lag’ (personal communication). For Mitchell, although men ‘were having a hard time readjusting to the women’s movement’, there were genuine freedoms for women.

The availability of the Pill and relatively safe abortion made a huge difference. There was much greater pleasure in the body. You could see it in the clothes, for instance. Until the early ’60s women wore wasp waists, stiletto heels, beehive hair—very, very constricting. Then clothes became much more whacky and liberated. I remember Mondrian squared skirts, long flowing hippy Indian fabrics and a lack of restriction.

(ibid.)

Not wearing make up, going bra-less and barefoot, the emphasis was on expansion and experimentation. But, as Mitchell concedes, ‘we were a very privileged generation, coming into our own in near enough full employment’. By 1976, amid increasing economic uncertainty, the hippie look had been mass marketed and diluted to the point where it became the new conformity. To find fresh meanings as a woman it was necessary to overturn the pastel shades of post-60s femininity and make an overt statement on a newly emerging, more aggressive understanding of female sexuality. Punk provided the perfect opportunity.

From the slinging of bras and girdles into the Freedom Trashcan at the 1968 Miss America Contest, to Barbara Kruger’s late 80s ProChoice slogan ‘your body is a battleground’, women have understood the need for a visual vocabulary.
Women are so regularly evaluated in physical terms, it is hardly surprising that much of the gender battle takes place in terms of image. Up to the mid-70s traditional notions of female beauty remained pretty much intact, and even within the excesses of hippiedom a ‘natural’ look was maintained. With punk, leading characters like Vivienne Westwood, Jordan and Siouxsie Sioux systematically set about dismantling these standards, while former 60s beauties such as Marianne Faithfull and the German Velvet Underground chanteuse, Nico, destroyed the looks that had led to their initial success. Beauty, like sex, was debased currency.

With the shops Sex (opened in 1974) and Seditionaries (1977), Westwood and partner Malcolm McLaren popularised the mood of the new brutalism. Playing with the paraphernalia of pornography, Westwood devised confrontational rubberwear, ripped slogan-daubed T-shirts and the infamous bondage trousers. Everything was ‘studded, buckled, strapped, chained and zippered’ (Martin 1995:545–47). Unlike the loose-limbed, hippie 60s, punk celebrated the rigours of restriction, constriction and sado-masochistic denial. ‘Not that I strapped myself up and had sex like that…but I wanted to get hold of those extreme articles of clothing and feel what it was like to wear them’, explained Westwood (ibid.).

Underwear as outerwear became her motif, one modelled with brazen self-containment by Sex assistant Jordan.

I used to take real pride in the way I looked and because I could do the job. Sometimes I’d get on the train and all I had on was a stocking and suspenders and a rubber top, that was it. Some of the commuters used to go absolutely wild, and they loved it. Some of the men got rather hot under the collar, paper on the lap.

(Savage 1991:95)

Westwood’s designs playfully made the vocabulary of porn explicit, but though keen to ‘seduce people into revolt’, she shied away from making links with porn’s female exploitation. In graphic art, Linder, meanwhile, tackled ‘the last taboo’ with a more focused feminist statement. Her cover design for The Buzzcocks’ 1979 single ‘Orgasm Addict’, for instance, was a cut-up collage featuring a naked woman with an iron for a head, and teeth where her nipples should be. Inspired by punk fanzine culture and the way anti-fascist artist John Heartfield used montage, the former Manchester art student created pictures from shopping catalogues, porn mags and pictures of household appliances as a disturbing comment on the sex roles (see Figure 11.1). Collages included: a woman in lacy lingerie with a hoover for a head and a camera poking out from her dressing table; a courting couple, she with a fork in her eyes; and a girl masturbating a hoover where the man’s penis should be. Linder recalls:
Figure 11.1 Collage by Under, 1977.
Source: © Linder.
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It was like doing a peculiar jigsaw puzzle. I had two piles of magazines—trashy men’s stuff and trashy women’s. I noticed that in both women were high profile. Men’s magazines were filled with pictures of women. And the invisible man was present by his absence. I was fascinated by the fact that I as a woman was supposed to be in all these worlds, I was represented in two separate male/female views of the world. These montages became an explicit diary of my feelings at that time.

(Personal communication 1997)

Like many women during punk, Linder made a connection with the writings of the early 70s feminist movement, Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* (1970) in particular. ‘For me at 16 reading that re-arranged mv molecular structure. It was fantastic. Then later there was a neat collision of my anger and frustration and punk coming along. The book must have been a catalyst’ (ibid.). Linder made explicit women’s bodily processes and obsessions, from eating disorders to the mechanics of menstruation. One of her best known songs is called ‘My Cherry Is In Sherry’, for instance, while the cover design for Ludus album The Seduction features the bottom half of a woman wearing the traditional garb of soft porn seduction—fishnet stockings and suspenders—but with an unglamorous belt and sanitary towel.

The fact that so many punk girls refused to regulate or disguise body size was also an acknowledgement, for Linder, of women’s real physicality, or ‘cuntpower’.

There were lots of clothes coming out of Sex, and women like Jordan, over Size 12, daring to wear fantastic clothes. Up North, too, there were big lumpy punks around. A lot of the punk women weren’t ‘ideal’ prizes, but they had small skirts on if they wanted. Punk was about being looked at, creating a temporary celebrity. There was something glorious about all those shapes and sizes of bodies on show.

(ibid.)

Punk was also a place where women felt free to express difference. ‘It was more about being a freak than a punk,’ says Liz Naylor, co-editor of the Manchester punk fanzine *City Fun* (see Figure 11.2), and later on, manager of the UK’s leading 90s Riot Grrrl band, Huggy Bear. She feels that punk revolutionised her generation in the same way that the Pill had done for women in the 1960s, and that women interpreted punk very differently from men. ‘It wasn’t immediately: “OK, I can form a band and be like The Clash.” It was about knowing you could escape to be something bigger’ (personal communication 1997). It also gave women a place to rage. Before the mid-1970s women who expressed seething anger were ostracised as misfits, Janis Joplin being a prime high-profile example of the girl whose refusal to be first the good prom queen and then the acquiescent rocker left her isolated,
Figure 11.2 Covers to City Fun fanzine (1982, 83).
Source: © Linder.
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with a debilitating anger that had nowhere to go. It cannot be over-emphasised, then, how much punk in the 1970s was a visible threat. Naylor recalls:

There is a rosy view of ye olde punks, but there was actually a lot of painful stuff going on around it. You were seen as deviant. There was a lot of anger and self-mutilation. In a symbolic sense, women were cutting and destroying the established image of femininity, aggressively tearing it down.

( ibid. )

Shortly after Naylor left school, a bewildered mother had her committed to a mental hospital for six months. ‘I was fucked up, but my “therapy” was the doctors asking me, “Why do you feel you have to be anti-social?”’ If a kid wore punk fashion now, it would just be seen as part of growing up. You forget the impact it had’ (ibid.).

For many punk women the streets became a battleground, as if by dressing in a certain way you gave up your ‘rights’ as a woman to be respected and protected. ‘We got picked on in the street, our lead singer Ari was stabbed—just because of what we looked like,’ remembers Viv Albertine, guitarist of seminal girl band the Slits.

We’d be dressed half in bondage fetish gear, half in Doc Martens with our hair all out there, scowling at everybody. People didn’t know if we were a pin-up or what. That mixture of rubber stockings, DMs and fuck off you wanker what are you staring at. They didn’t know if they were coming or going

(O’Brien 1997)

Often this confusion resulted in violence. I remember as a teenager in the late 70s, playing a gig in Kingston with our all-girl band the Catholic Girls, and being bottled by an audience of skinheads. After the show a crowd of around 20 of them followed us outside and attacked us as we were loading up the van. During gigs there were regular cries of: ‘fuckin’ cows, who do you think you are?’ while at one pub gig we barely got through the first number when a brick was thrown through the front window, tables were overturned, and Wild West bar-room mayhem ensued. ‘We’d have Hell’s Angels and skinheads coming to our gigs. If you don’t show fear, they’re not a problem. You had to have a hell of a front,’ recalls Albertine. All the punk women I spoke to talked of that sense of running the gauntlet every time they went out the front door, and the relief when they got to the safety of a gig or a club. ‘There was that joy when you arrived at the venue. Here I am among the dispossessed, all punks together’, says Linder.
Punk also had its own sexual codes. Despite the prevalence of fetish gear and provocative clothes, it was curiously asexual. In hippie culture, the emphasis on ‘permissive’ freedom meant that many people felt compelled to be heterosexually active, but punk choices to be asexual, gay, androgynous or celibate were usually accepted without comment. This was particularly liberating for young women. ‘I hated discos and all that handbag, boys and make-up stuff. I loathed it. For me punk was like fresh air’, says Judith Roche, former bassist with the Catholic Girls (personal communication 1997). There was no pressure to ‘couple up’, in fact, romantic love was frowned upon as something wishy washy and sentimental, and sex was just something you got on with. ‘By the time you’re twenty you just think—yawn—just another squelch session’, John Lydon languidly remarked in 1976 (Savage 1991: 189).

In the first year we were together as the Catholic Girls, none of us was interested in having a boyfriend. As Anjali, lead singer of 90s Riot Grrrl band, Voodoo Queens, once said ‘Who needs boys when you got guitars?’ (personal communication 1993). There was the heady optimism of being part of a girl gang—for once we were tasting the joy that a group like the Clash had as The Last Gang In Town, being able to walk down the street as an invincible unit. ‘Part of being in a band was learning about that female solidarity,’ recalls Roche. And for many that sense of strength was intoxicating. ‘We’d walk down the street as a bunch and feel very very powerful’, says Albertine of the Slits, ‘It was very exciting. I don’t think many girls get to do that’.

It was important for girls on the punk scene to find some kind of solidarity. Contrary to myth, punk was not necessarily woman-friendly, and it was hard to make an impact as a female musician. Apart from a few high-profile acts like Siouxsie and the Banshees, Pauline Murray, X-Ray Spex, the Slits and the Raincoats, women suffered the same discrimination they had always done, treated as novelty, decoration and not as serious contenders. In a 1977 Sounds round-up of all the key punk bands, for instance, there were only five female acts out of 36 (2 April: 23–28). On the positive side, the lack of emphasis on technical expertise meant that many women felt able to enter a world from which they’d previously been excluded. Once there, however, few made it above ground level. And those that signed record deals often found themselves at loggerheads with a music industry that was still locked into marketing women as disco dollies or raunchy rock chicks. A few entered the commercial mainstream, but at that point the pressure was to be like Debbie Harry, the pneumatic pretty punk, or Chrissie Hynde, one of the guys.

The punk scene itself, also, was not always one of halcyon acceptance. While there were men wrestling with questions of masculinity and feminism, there were just as many content to leave it unreconstructed. ‘A lot of the punk boys were just regular knobheads who happened to have spikey hair’, remarks Naylor. This view
of girls as chicks and men as the real deal was perpetuated through the sexist lyrics of such bands as the Depressions, singing 'Screw Ya', and ridiculing the woman with options in 'Career Girl', or Adam Ant’s ditty ‘Fat Fun’, or the Stranglers, with strippers at their Battersca Park show (see Figure 11.3) and demeaning songs like ‘London Lady’, ‘Princess of the Street’, and ‘Peaches’. ‘Rather than being socially progressive, Punk Rock contained a provocative ambiguity. It doesn’t care if it offends’ (Home 199S: 73).

In response to this women often relied on a fierce sense of individuality to buttress themselves, whether it was Siouxsie Sioux confronting crowds with her black-eyed stare—‘everything felt so abrasive, you’d have missiles thrown at you on stage, your head was in the block. You needed a protest voice to survive within that’ (O’Brien 1995:137)—or the 14-year-old Slits vocalist Ari Up pissing on stage, or Lora Logic blasting the saxophone her way in day-glo punk band X-Ray Spcex. Palmolive, the Slits drummer with the wayward, pummelling style, recalled the kind of thing they were all up against when describing how Malcolm McLaren, the main male svengali on the scene, approached them. “I want to work with you because you’re girls and you play music. I hate music and I hate girls. I thrive on

Figure 11.3 The Stranglers at Battersea Park, 1978, plus strippers.
Source: Photograph by Pennie Smith.

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hate. I wanna work with you.” I said, “No thank you”. He was trying to break us’ (Appelstein 1995:3).

Carving a definitive style separate from male expectation also meant embracing ‘ugliness’. Poly Styrene, for instance, X-Ray Spex’s half-Somalian, half-British lead vocalist, sang with a spiralling shriek and appeared on Top Of The Pops in a little soldier’s outfit and a large brace on her teeth. ‘I was very conscious of the brace. I wasn’t one of the pretty punkettes. I was rebelling. Although I could actually sing, I didn’t want to sing—I wanted to be an anti-singer’ (O’Brien 1995:133).

After the shock tactics of the first summer of punk, the scene settled into various sub-divisions such as New Wave, psychobilly, and ‘art school’ post-punk, characterised by bands like Gang of Four and Delta 5. A more intellectual feminist element grew alongside the development of political punk campaigns such as the Anti-Nazi League, Rock Against Racism and Rock Against Sexism, the latter a benefit network set up to raise money for organisations like Women’s Aid or Rape Crisis. Like mixed-gender, splintered dance outfit the Au Pairs, the Raincoats directly tackled feminist issues directly. Their song ‘Off Duty Trip’, for instance, told the true story of a soldier tried for raping a teenage girl and acquitted by a judge concerned about his army career. The Catholic Girls, too, came together after going on the National Abortion Campaign’s Anti-Corrie Bill march in 1978. ‘I remember being excited by the Sex Pistols’ antics, because it was anti-authority’, recalls Judith Roche. ‘Before we formed the group we’d already done demonstrations. We had a political edge. Since 16 we’d been doing Hunt Saboteurs, Friends of the Earth, CND—and punk reinforced it’ (personal communication 1997).

One of the attractions of punk was having an outlet for that political outrage, that disaffection with the status quo which was cemented by the early years of a Conservative Government hostile to dissent, and a leader, Margaret Thatcher, who took great pride in disassociating herself from ‘shrill feminism’. For women this revolt was present not just in words, but music that deliberately veered away from standard rock ‘n’ roll time. ‘We were trying to find a way of looking at the world that was personal and different’, says the Raincoats’ founder member, Gina Birch, of their scratchy, cyclical, compelling sound. ‘We’d improvise around things, pull them out and make spaces. We wanted to bring in an element of discovery and discomfort’ (personal communication 1994).

They were one remove from the more theatrical approach of the Banshees or X-Ray Spex, deliberately dressing down, appearing dowdy even, as a way of counteracting the sexy female star syndrome. Ludus, too, made few concessions to chart-dom, with their complicated rhythms and Linder’s off-kilter vocals. Her final gig at the Hacienda in Manchester perhaps sums up how far, in terms of intellectual and visual resistance, women in punk could go.
Bucks Fizz had just won the Eurovision Song Contest. At the end of their song the men pulled off the girls’ skirts, and that ticked off an outrage in me. Oh no, I thought, it’s still going on. At the same time at the Hacienda they were showing lots of soft porn and they thought it was really cool. I took my revenge. I was a vegetarian, I got meat from a Chinese restaurant, all the discarded entrails. I went to a sex shop and bought a large dildo. I didn’t tell anybody about it.

(Personal communication 1997)

Just before the show, she and a few female friends ‘decorated’ the club, tying tampons to the balconies and handing out to the crowd giblets wrapped in pornography. ‘The Hacienda was still this male preserve. They were panicking—“it’s going to mark the floors”, they said. And they refused to do a Bloody Linder cocktail in the cocktail bar’. Then Ludus played the gig, with Linder upfront, covered in meat. At the crucial moment, just like the Bucks Fizz girls, she pulled off her skirt to reveal the shiny black dildo.

I remember the audience going back about three foot. There was hardly any applause at the end. And that was a crowd who thought, nothing can shock us, we see porn all the time, we’re cool. When that happened, when they stepped back, I thought, that’s it, where do you go from here?

(ibid.)

Linder had done the ultimate in making the implicit explicit, her imagery not acceptably contained on the video screen. Through the use of meat and tampons she was showing the ‘reality of womanhood’, and with the dildo: ‘Here’s manhood, the invisible male of pornography. That it can be reduced to this, a thing that sticks out like a toy.’

By the time of Linder’s final gig, punk was going through its last incoherent blast. Nancy Spungeon, the ‘little broad from Philadelphia’, died a junkie’s death, allegedly murdered by her boyfriend Sid Vicious. She represented the most powerless, timeless example of women in rock ’n’ roll—the woman as groupie and victim. Punk’s essential exuberance was dissolving into nihilism and factional fighting, while punk as high fashion was beginning to show up on the catwalk. When Zandra Rhodes showcased her bejewelled safety-pin and delicately torn evening dress, Woman’s Own magazine ran a feature on DIY punk, and PVC trousers were available at Miss Selfridge, it was obvious that the movement was rapidly being assimilated into the mainstream.

What survived though, and continued to evolve long after the mediated version was pronounced dead, was punk’s meaning for women. It reacted against, yet at the same time re-defined 60s feminism, resurfaced in the 90s with grunge and Riot
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Grrrl, and still has an impact on the way women operate, not just in music, but culture generally. ‘Twenty years on, our vocabulary is still forming’, says Linder. Those of us who experienced that battleground have been shaped by it. We still find it difficult to shake off the questioning rigour that the scene demanded, and maybe we don’t want to. That’s the women punk made us.

Bibliography