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The Raincoats: breaking down punk rock’s masculinities

CAROLINE O’MEARA

Abstract

The Raincoats were one of a handful of British, all-female punk bands successful enough to release records and tour internationally. Since the late 1970s, critics intrigued by the idea that music can enact gender, have heard their music as somehow embodying femininity. I explore the discursive origins of the Raincoats music as ‘feminine music’ before analysing their music to determine the specific nature of their work as female punk musicians. The Raincoats took advantage of punk’s ideology of amateurism to shatter traditional (read: masculine) subjectivity in rock music. Analysing their music reveals the ways in which their music triggers listening that encourages an understanding of their music as feminine.

Andy Gill: Imagine . . . if we were women. Is our music male music?
Hugo Burnham: You’re asking me, is our music male music?
Gill: Right.
Burnham: What do you mean by ‘male music’?
Burnham: I don’t know. It’s a ridiculous question.
Jon King: It’s not ridiculous.
Burnham: I suppose we wouldn’t be playing the same music. I suppose. But is the Raincoats’ music ‘female music’?
Gill: Quite
Burnham: Why is it?
Gill: No – that’s the question. I’m not sure. Having said what I’ve said – it strikes me as dangerous to equate certain types of music with men or women, with sexuality.
(Excerpted from a 1980 interview conducted by Greil Marcus (1993, pp. 122–3) with the band Gang of Four)

In the epigraph above, Gang of Four guitarist and lead singer Andy Gill challenges his bandmate Hugo Burnham to consider what it means to listen to music in terms of ‘male’ and ‘female’. Both men agree that they produce male music and that their contemporaries the Raincoats produce female music, but neither can say why. In the end, Gill simply warns against equating music with sex or sexuality. However, he resists making the distinction between sex and gender, thereby restricting music to biological categories. I agree with Gill that equating music with sex and sexuality can be ‘dangerous’, for it risks essentialising the most interesting and important qualities of the music in favour of generalisations about musical meaning. It is more productive to ask instead how the Raincoats’ interest in feminism resulted in music that questions masculine assumptions and formulations in rock music. The Raincoats took advantage of punk’s unskilled performances in order to shatter traditional (read: masculine) subjectivity in rock music, using punk’s ideology of pas-
sionate amateurism to express feminine possibilities. Punk advised them to reject rock’s traditions in order to refigure them, and the Raincoats’ expansions of rock’s codes opened the genre to new forms.

The Raincoats understood their music in terms of punk’s ideological opposition to mainstream music, but used this ‘negative operation’ for productive, overtly feminist means (Laing 1985). With its enthusiasm for musical amateurism, punk provided a space for women to fully participate in a rock discourse. Instead of reproducing musical and extra-musical gestures associated with male punk bands – including loud, guttural singing and aggressive stage posturing – the Raincoats made music that the Gang of Four describe as somehow ‘female’. Indeed, the Raincoats’ musical techniques corresponded with a specific, participatory feminist project. This article examines how the band accomplished their feminism musically in the context of their albums from the late 1970s and early 1980s. I begin by reviewing the Raincoats’ reception on both sides of the Atlantic in order to critique the ways they have been labelled both feminist and amateur, keeping in mind the persistent sexism of the music press – especially when reporting on female musicians and fans (Davies 2001). My investigation originates in the exceptionalist language directed towards the Raincoats and their music by members of the British and American press. It remains important to differentiate between the Raincoats’ actions and performances as a band, and their afterlife within rock discourse. I look to three of their earlier songs to consider how the Raincoats used music and lyrics to create representations of women’s worlds. Specifically, I examine how their music triggers a variety of readings and what these readings suggest about their position in the larger field of feminist punk discourse.

Receiving the Raincoats

While other well-known British female punk bands, most notably the Slits, shared many of the Raincoats musico-political goals, the discourse surrounding the Raincoats as feminist musicians creating feminine music distinguishes their reception. Their strong pro-women stance, demonstrated in lyrics and interviews, laid the groundwork for such descriptions of the band. Additionally, many of the qualities for which critics and scholars alike lauded the Raincoats – a focus on female experience, the creation of a collective-based musicking environment – were in fact shared by many all-female punk and post-punk bands of the late 1970s. Mavis Bayton distinguishes between ‘well-known professional’ and ‘local, amateur, usually unrecorded and invisible’ feminist bands that flourished throughout England in the late 1970s and 1980s (Bayton 1998, pp. 67–8). The Raincoats, while never truly famous, achieved a level of recognition in critical circles. Bands whose politics led them to separatist (all-women) performance venues remained generally invisible to the (mostly male) critics whose writings I trace below.

Two themes recur in early reviews of the band: the fact that they could not play well and that they sounded like no one else making rock music. In the liner notes to the Raincoats’ 1983 live album The Kitchen Tapes (recorded at The Kitchen in New York City in late 1982), Greil Marcus combines these ideas, stating that ‘the Raincoats could not play well enough to sound like anyone else’. In the same vein, Simon Frith wrote in 1981 that ‘the Raincoats [are] to my ears the subtlest and most exciting of Britain’s women’s bands . . . what is most striking about their live performances is the absence of any reference to previous rock sounds’ (Frith 1988,
p. 156). Neither author links this inability to play directly to the band members' sex, and they were careful not to make a direct connection between amateur performance and female biology. Yet, Frith's comment appears in an article on women's music and Marcus's liner notes go on to compare the opening punk rock created in rock discourse to a woman's discovery of her public voice, amazed at how 'the Raincoats' music has captured [this move], more fully than that of any other band'. These contexts may mark the beginning of the Raincoats inclusion in the women-in-rock narrative, whether the authors intended it as such or not.

Much of the strongest rhetoric surrounding the Raincoats' feminist project dates from the early 1980s and coincides with the band's increased attention to international touring (Rockwell 1982; Wuefling 1982; Marcus 1983; Lock 1984; Frith 1988). In such articles, writers almost universally respected and even revered the Raincoats' musical ambitions. An exception to this in the United States was Washington Post critic Howard Wuefling, who in December 1982 agreed with Marcus's assessment of the band's skill, yet equated this technique with 'obscurantist complacency'. My research indicates that such a negative understanding of their music – at least in print – remained the exception to the norm. Rather than interpreting their music as obscurantist, New Musical Express critic Graham Lock wrote about it as a brilliant risk:

At times, delicate male ears complained of strident or shrill notes, but these were the sounds of liberation. One of the Raincoats' greatest strengths has been their willingness to risk their voices, to push them beyond the limit in their attempts to reshape the parameters of female pop singing. (Lock 1984)

Lock and his audience, who would not be surprised by men screaming at a rock show, assume they know what 'female pop singing' should be. Of course, 'strident', if not 'shrill', notes were always part of punk's embrace of the ugly. This review differs in context from the earlier ones, since punk, while still alive as an underground rock movement and ideology, had dissipated by the late 1970s – evolving into genres such as 'new wave' and 'post-punk'. Although Lock squarely ties the Raincoats' creative process back to the do-it-yourself (DIY) aesthetic of early punk, he locates the band's innovations in 'a stubbornly individualistic female imagination' rather than a feminist reinterpretation of the punk project. The dominant sex of the band's line-up features prominently in Lock's and Wuefling's interpretations of the Raincoats' music, which the writers do not separate from the feminism and female worldview of the lyrics. However, the critics do not connect the Raincoats' project to the larger field of post-punk feminist bands.

The narrative of the Raincoats' music as uniquely feminine permeates writing on punk and more generally, rock. Rock critics Simon Reynolds and Joy Press hold up the band as a central example of 'Women in Rock' in their 1995 book, The Sex Revolts (Reynolds and Press 1995, p. 387). In their compelling narrative of gender and rebellion in rock 'n' roll – strongly built upon musical details – Reynolds and Press recognise and challenge what they call 'a theory that the untutored are more free when it comes to making unprecedented, out-there music than everyone apart from the most advanced virtuosos' (Reynolds and Press 1995, p. 309). (No doubt this trend was what Wuefling was reacting against with the phrase 'obscurantist complacency'.) Along these lines, they proclaim that 'the Raincoats' music seems, to retrospective ears, to have actually improved with the acquisition of technique'. I concur with this evaluation of the Raincoats' musical progression – although it
does not feature prominently in my assessments of their music – but disagree with the authors’ more general musical conclusions. Their argument centres around the ways in which the Raincoats sought out and deployed ‘non-phallocentric’ models in writing and performing their songs. Problematically, these non-phallocentric models – such as reggae – appear in other punk bands’ music (for example, the Clash) without the accompanying connotations of the feminine (Reynolds and Press 1995, pp. 309–10). In addition, the band deployed them unevenly over their history.

Reynolds and Press’ conclusions about how the Raincoats’ music functions often rest on hopeful essentialisations about the nature of male or female music – and masculinity and femininity. While they carefully avoid characterising women as fundamentally soft or non-hierarchical, their descriptions of women’s music can slip into exactly these categories. Diana Fuss, in her critical assessment of essentialism in feminist discourse, states that ‘if we read from multiple subject-positions, the very act of reading becomes a force for dislocating our belief in stable subjects and essential meanings’ (Fuss 1989, p. 35). The Raincoats’ music, in its frazzled beginnings, incomplete forms and shaky playing often makes it difficult to listen in terms of a single, unified subject position, drawing the listener into the kind of ‘reading’ that Fuss outlines. As interpreters, Reynolds and Press point toward this possibility but ultimately back away from its implications.

Ana da Silva of the Raincoats pushed against some of the limitations of both the ‘female’ and ‘feminist’ labels. In a Rough Trade booklet from the early 1980s entitled simply ‘The Raincoats’, she willingly admits that the label ‘female’ might apply to the band’s output, but only because growing up female was a unifying experience for the band members (da Silva c. 1982, p. 7). A resistance to being heard as ‘just female’ can be seen throughout da Silva’s booklet, as in the quote below:

We have felt sometimes a lack of understanding from some people about what we’re doing. This is partly due to some people’s need to label and exclude from their thoughts what is outside that label, so that they don’t have to think or cope with what comes out of that serious thinking . . . and although we feel that sexual modes are not questioned enough and therefore sickly defined, they are not our only concern. (da Silva c. 1982, p. 9)

Da Silva strongly disagrees with those who would reduce the Raincoats’ music to biology – and implicitly responds to any criticism of the band’s deviation from stricter versions of feminist punk – but she acknowledges that ‘sexual modes’, or gender, remain a topic deserving the band’s attention. The booklet also reveals da Silva’s understanding of the Raincoats’ music as an enactment of their political concerns, rather than simply a vehicle for expressing them lyrically. For instance, she states, ‘we were creating something very female – on our own terms – and that happened maybe because we’ve tried to stay as true to ourselves as possible’ (da Silva c. 1982, p. 7). She heard their music in terms of how it embodied the very issues discussed in the lyrics, such as body image (‘Odyshape’, Odyshape) and date rape (‘Off Duty Trip’, The Raincoats). I will examine the resonances between their lyrics and musical techniques below.

Women in (punk) rock

Genre conventions and expectations remain crucial to an understanding of the Raincoats, their music, and how their music can represent gender difference. As Robert Walser details within the context of heavy metal’s masculinities, ‘notions of gender circulate in the texts, sounds, images, and practices’ of genre discourse (Walser
1993, p. 109). Following this, it is not difficult to find scholarly formulations of rock’s masculinity. From the ejaculatory discharges of heavy metal’s guitar solos, to the pounding thrusts of standard rock beats, this music maps neatly onto Western ideas of the masculine. In punk, virtuosic display was replaced by aggressive simplicity and macho posturing, which could be found in both music and lyrics. At the other end of this discourse, the Raincoats fit squarely into punk’s female avant-garde, along with artists like the Slits and Patti Smith who challenged the masculine assumptions of the genre at every level. In comparison to the sexist atmosphere in 1960s and 1970s rock, punk’s emphasis on eccentric self-expression and its immediate availability to prospective participants opened the genre to women.

Lacking, among other things, a lead vocalist and guitar solos, the Raincoats’ music resists marks of musical masculinity while operating within the DIY conventions of punk. Their music generally eschews common badges of musical masculinity, and in performance they neither challenged passive notions of women nor asserted their right to the stage (Rockwell 1982; Wuefling 1982; Marcus 1993). Like good punkers, the Raincoats are neither overly concerned with enunciating lyrics nor creating full textures in order to showcase musical prowess and/or economic strength. However, their music is far from generic punk. They were one of the first bands able to release records (along with the Gang of Four and the Slits) to expand British punk’s political focus beyond nihilism. This development away from punk’s initial explosion in the UK aligns them with the new wave project.

By connecting feminism to the Raincoats’ music, I do not want to diminish the importance of other ideological forces in the music. Indeed, da Silva warns against exactly that (da Silva c. 1982, p. 9). The Raincoats’ created a space within punk discourse for women’s everyday life through, as da Silva puts it, ‘songs about awareness of not fitting in’ (da Silva c. 1982, p. 13). Yet, feminism has proved an incredibly productive force in the arts (as has misogyny) and the Raincoats’ politics radiates from this ideological core. For feminist performers, punk occupies a special place in rock history. As pointed out by Frith and McRobbie’s article, ‘Rock and Sexuality’, first published in 1979, ‘one of [punk’s] effects has been to allow female voices to be heard that are not often expressed’ (Frith and McRobbie 1989, p. 384).

In her Women and Popular Music, Sheila Whiteley loosely connects the emergence of international second wave feminism with 1960s counter-culture. Despite rock’s male-dominated and misogynist culture, women found in it ideological strands that corresponded with developing feminist goals (Whiteley 2000, p. 45). Whiteley looks at the work of Siouxsie Sioux and Patti Smith and concludes that a central problem faced by women in punk was that of ‘presenting their ideas with a comparable “feel”’ to that of the male groups, an attitude that was confrontational, challenging and culturally relevant’ (Whiteley 2000, p. 108). Whiteley does not discuss in detail other well-known female groups such as the Raincoats and the Slits, who found in punk ideology a mode of expression that did not require such a direct engagement with the ‘feel’ of male punk groups, and who also managed to achieve some level of popular renown. However, unlike Whiteley’s example of the Eurythmics’s Annie Lennox, the Raincoats never broke into mainstream radio (or MTV), therefore never challenging stereotypical representations of the feminine through the very mass media that created these representations.

Bayton’s work on feminism and punk rock in the UK places the Raincoats’
political project within the broader context of feminist music making. She connects punk-feminism to the branch of feminism that ‘emphasized the importance of women entering male terrain, doing things which only men were supposed to be able to do, so that, regardless of the lyrics and the music, being in a band was a political statement in itself’ (Bayton 1998, p. 68). Of course, the music and lyrics were always of great importance as well. Bayton’s work reminds us that punk was not the only – or primary – social movement of the 1970s that encouraged women to get out of the house and onto the stage (Bayton 1998, p. 69). Although punk encouraged DIY participation in music making, Bayton argues that it was the qualities punk shared with feminism that brought so many women onboard.

A good deal of the Raincoats musical and lyrical techniques were shared by British feminist musicians of all stripes, including a resistance to virtuosity that ran deeper than the standard punk opposition. While labelling a genre such as reggae as ‘non-masculine’ simplifies the relationship it has to entrenched masculinities, many female musicians understand its incorporation into punk as resisting the phallic insistence of guitar solos and a strong back-beat. One of the results of both women’s inexperience as performers and the feminist emphasis on ‘a more modest, non-competitive, collective, and democratic alternative’ was the proliferation of women’s groups as opposed to solo artists, or mixed-sex groups with a female front-woman (as in the case of Siouxsie Sioux or even Poly Styrene) (Bayton 1998, p. 69). Since DIY expanded the horizon of rock participation, punk rock was one of the first locations in popular music where women could control all the means of production. For many, the act of simply observing other women on stage – the most visible area of rock production (before MTV) and the first to be conquered by women – was inspirational. The lack of professional performance skills does not necessarily thwart musical production and communication, especially when tied to a strong ideological foundation.

Punk women proved that by taking the stage they were able to directly oppose the discourse that could limit their position within rock music to that of audience. Rather than isolate them within a subculture, Dave Laing (1985) demonstrates that punk women understood themselves as both objects and creators. Punk released them from the lyrical and performance obligations of rock, while continuing to provide the power of its form. Like other feminist bands, amateur and professional, the Raincoats’ used punk’s ideology of opposition as the basis for their experiment- ation with the genre’s possibilities. Yet they refused to use their gender as a starting off point for punk’s politics of shock. Instead, they used the public forum of rock discourse to open the closed worlds of the home and women’s emotional life to expression in rock. An examination of their music reveals how they accomplished this through the creation of complex representations of female subjectivity.

**Introducing the Raincoats**

The Raincoats formed in 1977 when two female art school students in London, da Silva and Gina Birch, along with two men – Ross and Nick – got together to try and write a song (da Silva c. 1982, p. 1). The Raincoats settled into an all-female line-up by the release of their first single, ‘Fairytale in the Supermarket’ (1979), but men remained important to their sound throughout their career. The band’s membership fluctuated quite a bit in the early years, making it difficult for the Raincoats to perform live, since ‘there was always someone new coming in who
would need some time to settle in the group' (da Silva c. 1982, p. 3). How the different members fitted together (or clashed) determined their staying power. Eventually da Silva and Birch invited former Slits drummer Palmolive to play with them. After joining the band, Palmolive placed an advertisement in the book store Compendium for a violinist, and Vicky Aspinall replied – she later played guitar on many of the recordings. That the band sought out a violinist underlines their musical and instrumental eclecticism, an eclecticism often present in new wave during the late 1970s and early 1980s. These four women, Birch, da Silva, Aspinall and Palmolive make up what many now consider the primary formation of the Raincoats (although Palmolive only appeared on their first, self-titled album).

In 1993, after many years of inactivity, the Raincoats reformed following an invitation from Kurt Cobain to open for Nirvana's 1994 European tour. Cobain's drug problems postponed the tour prior to his death, but Birch and da Silva reformed the band after locating a replacement for Aspinall and yet another drummer. They toured both the United States and Britain in 1996 in support of their new release, *Looking in the Shadows*. In an interview with *Guardian* critic Anita Chaudhuri from that year, Birch asserts the importance of 'living interesting lives artistically' to both her and da Silva. Interviews from this period contain an interesting hodgepodge of praise for their past accomplishments and subtle criticisms of the current state of women in music, the latter also an attempt to encourage new listeners for *Looking in the Shadows*. Following the activity in 1996, Birch formed the Hangovers and tackled some solo projects.

In contrast to a figure like Siouxsie Sioux, the Raincoats never overtly played with their sexuality on stage. In fact they cultivated a punk version of ordinariness, later described by Birch as a 'very asexual approach of dressing in bin liners and old boots' (Chaudhuri 1996). Earlier, da Silva also described their image: 'each one of us presents herself in the way she likes ... we don't have a group image because we're individuals like everybody else' (da Silva c. 1982, p.13). Publicity photos rarely focused on their whole bodies, and rather than posing dramatically for the camera, the Raincoats often interacted with each other, smiling or laughing. Pictures of the Raincoats create a feeling of community around the band, rather than one of stardom; the Raincoats share the space of their photographs as they share their music. Instead of confronting expectations of female rockers, their photographs depict the band simply speaking with and listening to each other.

As hinted at above, male performers appear in large numbers on every Raincoats album outside 'Fairytale in the Supermarket' (see Table). For example, percussionist Richard Dudanski played on every Raincoats album after their eponymous first release. Da Silva makes it clear – as do the album notes – that the compositional credit belongs to the women, 'because [the Raincoats] are women, the songs reflect a female point of view' (da Silva c. 1982, p. 13). Given the importance da Silva placed on the band's interpersonal harmony, and the difficulty they had recruiting drummers after the departure of Palmolive, one must assume Dudanski was more than a session player, but I have found nothing indicating his precise role. One member of This Heat, Charles Hayward, appears on *Odyshape* (the bands shared practice space at one point). Men accompanied the band on tour in the United States and reviews of live American performances in 1983 discuss the addition of three male performers – Dudanski, Paddy O'Connell and Derek Goddard – although Marcus's liner notes on *The Kitchen Tapes* bear no mark of the men's existence, much less their importance as the rhythm section (Wuefling 1982; Marcus
Table. Complete list of personnel on the first four Raincoats albums, listed alphabetically along with instruments played.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Album</th>
<th>Personnel</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Raincoats (1980)</td>
<td>Vicki Aspinall (Bass, guitar, violin, vocals)</td>
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1993). In a reversal of the historiographical tendency to write women to the margins, these men disappear altogether from many contemporary accounts of the band’s output. While these erasures are probably not deliberate, they apparently spring from writers’ desires to create a simplified version of the Raincoats’ feminist project, or perhaps to overdetermine it.

In any case, these men played active roles in the performance, production and recording of the Raincoats’ music, placing the band well outside the sizable underground population of feminist performers in the UK, whose music-making centred around all-women spaces. The omissions parallel the invisibility of the all-women scene of the 1970s and 1980s detailed by Bayton. Many of the bands, and the shows they played at ‘were never covered in the main music papers because there were hardly any female journalists – besides which the press were not courted’ (Bayton 1998, p. 69). Since this rich all-women scene was essentially unknown
in rock discourse, the presence of male musicians in the Raincoats may have seemed that much more ‘normal’ to the almost exclusively male writers I quote above. As a recorded and comparatively well-distributed band, the Raincoats may have found the inclusion of men a necessary ingredient for achieving a larger audience. In Da Silva’s account, she remains ambivalent when discussing larger, more organised versions of feminism, preferring to concentrate on the Raincoats’ specific project. She resists both punk rock and feminist categorisation.

**Turning to the music**

As mentioned above, critics received the Raincoats’ earliest music – particularly their live performances, but also their first albums – as a new phenomenon in rock music. In reviewing some of their comments (‘the Raincoats could not play well enough to sound like anyone else;’ and ‘what is most striking about their live performances is the absence of any reference to previous rock sounds’), a common element emerges, the band’s unique position within rock’s cutting edge (Frith 1988, p. 156; Marcus 1993). With greater hindsight and a critic’s knowledge of late 1970s punk rock, Reynolds and Press take a more reasoned approach, stepping back from ‘the giddy cultural context of the late seventies – when everyone from Scritti Politti to the Pop Group was deconstructing rock’s syntax’ (Reynolds and Press 1995, pp. 109–10). Finally, Bayton’s work emphasises the fact that the Raincoats’ music did not occur in a vacuum, and that their subject matter and lyrics were never as committed to feminism as others. The analyses below examine one track from each of the Raincoats’ first three studio releases, ‘Fairytale in the Supermarket’ (1979); ‘In Love’, The Raincoats (1980); and ‘Odyshape’, Odyshape (1982), looking at the specific modes the band uses to represent femininity in music. I outline ways in which feminist subject positions emerge in these songs, and how these positions interact with punk ideology.

**‘Fairytale in the Supermarket’**

‘Fairytale in the Supermarket’, released as a single in 1979, was the Raincoats’ first public offering. The song title refers to a common – and often theorised – location in a ‘woman’s world’, and the need to escape it from within while simultaneously criticising these escapist tendencies. Like many of their songs, ‘Fairytale in the Supermarket’ confronts the private lives of women in and outside the home, rather than fighting against the public abuses of women, such as rape and sexual discrimination. Indeed, none of the Raincoats’ songs devalue the home and its sphere as an important location of female experience. Examples of this are ‘Baby Song’ and ‘Odyshape’, songs about lonely motherhood and feeling invisible in and outside the home, respectively.

This emphasis on the home connects the Raincoats’ work with writings of British feminist scholars earlier in the 1970s. At this time, feminist scholars working within subcultural studies asked why girls so rarely appeared in their field’s investigations. These feminist writings were a site of resistance to the class-only structure of subcultural analyses. In an early collection, *Resistance through Ritual*, McRobbie and Garber examined the nature of girls’ participation, which often appeared either unimportant or fleeting to their (male) colleagues in sociology. They concluded that within many subcultures, space for girls’ productive enterprises could not exist –
girls' focus on home life often precludes them from full participation (McRobbie and Garber 1976, p. 219). In a 1974 book on housewives, British feminist Ann Oakley (1990, p. 81) pointed out that the very nature of women's work in the home - private and self-defined - acts to conceal it. The politics of the personal that evolved in the 1970s enabled private work, performed by women within the confines of the home, to become a possibility for social action. In the case of the Raincoats', the menial role of housewife - and women's confined sphere - became the basis for making music in public spaces.

Rhythmically and harmonically, 'Fairytale in the Supermarket' remains one of the band's most straightforward songs. With a guitar solo and a focused chorus, it does not lie outside punk conventions, but rather represents a new twist to punk rock's verse, shouted-chorus, verse format. Da Silva's vocals - the most disjunctive element of the song - do not hold onto single declamatory pitches, in fact they resemble Sprechstimme at times in their seemingly spontaneous bends and turns. Da Silva's punchy slides and her inexpert vocal technique fractures the musical surface, drawing the listener in without providing an opportunity for identification. She compels us to listen and attempts to shake us off. Her delivery reminds me of Johnny Rotten's (born Lydon) phrase endings in the Sex Pistols. Whereas Lydon used this technique to accent the end of phrases and important words, da Silva diffuses it, making it the primary mode of signification. Her singing creates an effect of dizzy uncertainty that contrasts with other band members' regularly occurring vocal interruptions.

Many of the best-known punk songs, the Sex Pistols's 'Anarchy in the UK', and Sham 69's 'The Kids are United', for example, encourage listener participation, thereby directly ensnaring the listener in the songs' subjective understanding. In contrast, 'Fairytale in the Supermarket' has a vocal melody nearly impossible to sing along to (except for the chorus), even as its curves become intimately familiar through repeat listening. The chorus's soothing lyrics, 'But don't worry, honey don't worry, this is just a fairy tale, happening in the supermarket', contrast to typical punk abrasion. However, their implicit sarcasm maintains the threat of all-encompassing alienation. This suggests that by escaping from the day-to-day through imagination, women are equally responsible for their condition in society. These lyrics resonate with Janice Radway's conclusion that although the practice of reading romance novels 'may enable women to resist their social role [these books] still function as active agents in the maintenance of the ideological status quo' (Radway 1980, p. 17). Throughout, da Silva remains high in the mix and her vocal instability continues to threaten a unified representation of a subject; despite their celebration of anarchy, the Sex Pistols never venture into this territory. This technique threatens the listener's position as a subject and corresponds directly with the deep alienation of the lyrics, their caution against escapism and easy answers. Its meaning lies primarily in delivery (as opposed to other musical details) which represent and comment upon a complex social positioning.

'In Love'

As the title suggests, 'In Love', from the band's 1980 eponymous first album, challenges assumptions of a woman's relationship to love. This song leaves romance behind, making love something that must be endured and experienced rather than
treasured and idealised. Birch sings lead, and her declamatory delivery differs significantly from da Silva’s. In contrast to what one might expect from a song called ‘In Love’, this track never discusses an object of desire. Neither ‘he’, ‘she’, nor ‘you’ causes the emotional strain discussed in the lyrics, where simply ‘[being] in love is so tough’. Instead, the expressive nucleus lies in the ways love affects the speaker, causing immobility, blindness and apathy.

Like ‘Fairytale in the Supermarket’, the music works to produce effects that complicate and enhance what is discussed in the lyrics. Rather than Sprechstimme, Birch screams/shouts each line, falling away on the end of words and phrases. She sings the chorus with an irregular stutter as da Silva joins in on a simple melodic pattern. Birch remains in the foreground by virtue of her vocal timbre and higher notes; her restrained yet frantic cries hover over the held notes in da Silva’s melody, painting an image of an unleashed frustration countering the other voice’s insistence. At the third iteration of the chorus, Birch’s line threatens to overcome da Silva’s, as she almost pulls the other woman’s melodic line up to her cries on a B. Da Silva peaks on an A before returning to her lower notes, and the precarious balance between rational thought and the irrationality of being in love returns (see Example 1). Birch’s vocals threaten the stability of the listener’s emotional world, a threat somewhat countered by da Silva.

While Birch’s voice remains central to the sound of ‘In Love’, Aspinall’s violin scratching provides a good portion of the melodic interest and momentum. The violin’s melody pivots within E-major, rotating through, E, B and A. Aspinall may have trained as a violinist, but her use of her instrument sounds deliberately off – untuned, scratchy and erratic-yet-confident. The resulting overtones embody the angst of the song just as lyrics and the rhythm section’s steady pulse reinforce a woman’s frustration with love’s resistance to control. The techniques developed in this song – Birch’s declamatory vocal delivery, da Silva’s uncomplicated underlying melody and the violin’s open fifths – are simple enough in and of themselves. Their assemblage and deployment allows the song to express a complex web of frustrations and desires. At the instrumental climax that encompasses practically the last full minute of the song, Aspinall briefly lets loose, a final representation of freedom outside the vocal bounds of ‘in love’, before again containing herself within the confines of her previous music.

Example 1. The third chorus of ‘In Love’.
'Shouting Out Loud'

On the album *Odyshape*, as much variation exists among as within songs. Tracks use a larger variety of instruments (see Table) and vocal techniques; the recording quality creates a strikingly different sound overall. The first track, 'Shouting Out Loud' begins with overlapping layers of drums, sparsely plucked guitar and a low bass guitar. The deep, relatively simple bass line reinforces and stabilises the more detailed drums. These distinct layers gently caress each other, until the song finally coalesces at the entrance of the voice, and the resulting song sounds both spontaneous and fully formed. The separate layers of percussion, instruments and vocals remain distinctly enunciated in a manner only possible through an intelligent and professional use of studio equipment. The voice’s entrance aurally opposes the studio skill present in the previous moments of music. Following the clear enunciation of the opening lines, the poorly pronounced words blend into the song’s instrumental texture.

More than any other aspect of 'Shouting Out Loud', the faltering notes of the singers characterise the song’s position of lost confidence. The song never reveals conclusively who is shouting; is it the man or the woman mentioned in the opening lines of text? As in ‘Fairytaile in the Supermarket’, a wavering yet confident da Silva sings lead, this time in a much more controlled and focused manner. Aspinall often joins her with a complimentary quiver, but no true chorus exists. Both da Silva and Aspinall float and drag through their melodic lines, rarely arriving at the end of phrases without sliding in pitch. Instead of reinforcing the dominant character of da Silva’s vocals and giving them the strength that would make them lead vocals, Aspinall’s singing reinforces the vocal’s feeble certainty.

At its start, ‘Shouting Out Loud’ obscurrs the eventual path the song will take – the opening establishes an unsteadiness that the song later counters with an assertive instrumental ending. The rhythm section, especially the bass, suggests that ‘Shouting out Loud’ might kick into a dance number at any moment, until the guitar softly enters followed immediately by the voice at bar thirteen. At this entrance the listener definitely knows this is no dance song (see Example 2). In fact, the unsteady vocals are the trappings of someone very uncomfortable in the rhythms of their body. For instance, although both the bass drum and the bass guitar establish a strong, steady sense of the pulse underneath the more jagged lines of the toms, da Silva and Aspinall’s voices resist these representations of stability (see Example 2). In the process of opposing the steady, somatic experience of dance, they re-imagine the rhythm section as the embodiment of the nervous energy and uncertainty of the lyrics.

When the voices disappear from the song, the instruments answer these questions with an assertion of forward momentum that insists that the listener and the song go on. Instrumental textures accumulate throughout ‘Shouting Out Loud’, an accumulation of momentum that develops and prolongs the song’s energy. The guitars, also played by Aspinall and da Silva, which begin with single, lightly sustained plucked notes, build over the course of the work, first contrasted with and then accompanying the sustained notes of Aspinall’s multi-tracked violin. This forward momentum builds steadily and provides only provisional climaxes, representing the growing roar of the story behind the lyrics. Eventually, the drums settle into alternatively pounding and shimmering circles of toms and cymbals while melodic fragments ride between the instruments, creating a single subject shifting and changing within the song.
Example 2. The opening of ‘Shouting Out Loud’.

Sean Cubitt writes how in the Raincoats music ‘the process of production of subject through the song’s diegesis is disrupted’ because of the lack of a single subject presented in the music. The detuned held notes of the singer’s melody reproduce the discomfort of the song’s protagonist with her (or his) position, which he concludes marks the loss of the subject. Between the sliding notes and violin swells, the listener understands that she is unhappy shouting, and later builds in volume and texture successfully reproduce her frustration. The end result of this disruption, for Cubitt (2000, p. 152), is uncomfortable, startling and disorienting. However, in ‘Shouting Out Loud’ the protagonist complexly realised in the music is a single subject – da Silva’s voice creates this subject and listeners identify with it as the song unfolds. The listening experience is unnerving as the music fractures and scatters the expressive centre, encouraging the listener to hear the music from
a variety of subject positions, which may be the source of Cubitt’s disorienting listening experience.

**Conclusion**

In each of the three songs I have analysed, the Raincoats demonstrate an interest in using their music to create a broad image of what they discuss in the song’s lyrics. Even as they develop over time and enter the studio, these kinds of musical analogues continue to be the primary way in which their music directly represents their belief system. Each song draws the listener into an image of femininity while threatening assumptions hinted at in the lyrics. In this paper, I discuss songs featuring specific feminist interpretations or topics, yet their music does not interact only with this singular goal. ‘Fairytale in the Supermarket’ draws the listener into a critical celebration of escapism and the complex system that produces the need for retreat from reality. In contrast, ‘In Love’ takes on an allegedly female topic and shakes it up with a musical aggregate that creates a portrait of the desire to be without desire. Finally, my analysis of ‘Shouting Out Loud’ demonstrates how the band creates a single, discomforting subject in their songs that successfully disarms the listener precisely because of her ability to identify with it.

The Raincoats took advantage of punk by using its ideology outside punk’s assumed political sphere of shock and nihilism. Many factors, including the men on their albums, complicate a simple understanding of their music as ‘feminist’, indeed many British feminist bands of the late 1970s took a more oppositional stance than can be found in the Raincoats’ lyrics. Yet, successful interpretations of the Raincoats’ music must take into account its ideological underpinnings. As Sonic Youth bassist Kim Gordon writes in the liner notes of the Odyshape reissue, ‘[The Raincoats] had enough confidence to be vulnerable and to be themselves without having to take on the mantle of male rock’s punk rock aggression . . . or the typical female as sex symbol avec irony’ (Gordon 1994). The Raincoats did not make music for anyone to pogo or sing along to. Unlike Siouxsie Sioux or Debbie Harry, they did not create sex symbols of themselves, knowing that many of their audience members could not see through to the irony. Rather, the Raincoats took punk’s admonition to reject rock’s traditions to heart, and explored the formal constraints of the genre. In so doing, they expanded the possibility of rock, broadly defined, to bring new meanings and subjectivities to the table.

**Endnotes**

1. Marcus vainly attempts to ward off their inclusion ‘as a half-page in one more new-women-in-rock book’. Almost exactly this circumstance occurred in Joy Press’s well-done article in The Rolling Stone Book of Women in Rock (pp. 293–302). Indeed, in the liner notes accompanying the Geffen reissue of Moving, violinist Vicky Aspinall said ‘I would like us to be remembered, not for the spurious “women in rock” tag where the short entry into the history of punk usually stresses some media-concocted image of fanatical feminism and dowdy thrift-shop clothing . . . at the expense of what we created together’.
2. The models discussed in The Sex Revolts are notably problematic. For example, the authors characterise reggae, a historically misogynist genre with few well-known female participants, as a non-phallocentric model upon which the Raincoats based their sound (Reynolds and Press 1995, pp. 387–8). Bayton also holds up reggae, pop, jazz, latin and improvisational/experimental music as ‘in direct opposition to “cock rock”’. She emphasises, however, that the bands them-
selves understood these forms as resistant to masculine forms (Bayton 1998, p. 69).
3. The conclusions in this article have been disputed by many scholars and even repudiated by Frith, in a later article ‘Afterthoughts’ (also reprinted in On Record). As Frith notes, they ‘confused issues of sex and issues of gender; we never decided whether sexuality was a social fact or a social discourse’ (Frith 1989, p. 420). However, Frith continues to argue for the changes wrought on rock music in the 1970s (Frith 1989, pp. 421–2). In this context, I believe my use of this particular quote from this article avoids the significant problems faced in using this source.
4. As a member of an all-female punk band in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Bayton’s first-hand experience deepens her analysis.
5. For Looking in the Shadows, they recruited Riot Grrrl drummer Heather Dunn and violinist Anne Wood. During their US tour, Sonic Youth drummer Steve Shelley played with them.

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