

**Rip “Her” To Shreds:  
How the Women of 1970s New York Punk  
Defied Gender Norms**

Rebecca Willa Davis

Senior Thesis in American Studies  
Barnard College, Columbia University  
Thesis Advisor: Karine Walther  
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## Introduction

Nestled between the height of the second wave of feminism and the impending takeover of government by conservatives in 1980 stood a stretch of time in which Americans grappled with new choices and old stereotypes. It was here, in the mid-to-late 1970s, that punk was born.<sup>1</sup> Starting in New York—a city on the verge of bankruptcy—and spreading to Los Angeles and London, women took to the stage, picking punk as their Trojan Horse for entry into the boy bastion of rock’n’roll.<sup>2</sup> It wasn’t just the music that these women were looking to change, but also traditionally held notions of gender as well. This thesis focuses on Patti Smith, Deborah Harry, and Tina Weymouth—arguably the first, and most important, female punk musicians—to demonstrate that women in punk used multiple methods to question, re-interpret, and reject gender.

On the surface, punk appeared just as sexist as any other previous rock movement; men still controlled the stage, the sound room, the music journals and the record labels. As writer Carola Dibbell admitted in 1995, “I still have trouble figuring out how women ever won their place in this noise-loving, boy-loving, love-fearing, body-hating music, which at first glance looked like one more case where rock’s little problem, women, would be neutralized by male androgyny.” According to Dibbell, “Punk was the music of the obnoxious, permanently adolescent white boy—skinny, zitty, ugly, loud, stupid, fucked up.”<sup>3</sup> Punk music was loud and aggressive, spawning the violent, almost exclusively-male mosh pit at live shows that still exists today. Yet much of the punk ethos stood in contrast to rock music of the time, allowing women like Smith, Harry, and Weymouth their places in punk.

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<sup>1</sup> I will be using the terms “punk,” “punk rock,” “rock,” and “rock and roll” interchangeably in my paper.

<sup>2</sup> Carola Dibbell, “Inside Was Us: Women and Punk,” *Trouble Girls: The Rolling Stone Book of Women in Rock*, ed. Barbara O’Dair (New York: Random House, 1995), 284.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 278.

The years preceding punk's emergence were rife with political upheaval, particularly with regards to women's rights. In 1963, Betty Friedan released the bestselling book *The Feminine Mystique*, re-introducing feminism to Americans. What followed was a decade of social critique and change: the National Organization for Women formed in 1966, the Miss America pageant sparked huge protests in 1968, the radical feminist group Redstockings wrote their manifesto in 1969, the Equal Rights Amendment passed Congress in 1972, and the Supreme Court decided *Roe v. Wade* in 1973. By the early-1970s, it seemed as if women were truly improving their position within society.

Yet women's position within rock music tells a different story. Rock, which began as a radical anti-establishment cultural expression, had become bloated by the 1970s. The public placed rock musicians on a pedestal, and the musicians themselves acted every bit the part by playing to huge stadium arenas and infusing their songs with long drawn-out solos. Copious amounts of drugs and easy access to sex with groupies led to an increasingly more decadent, less idealistic music scene.<sup>4</sup> What was once considered by listeners to be a counter-cultural movement became something controlled by mainstream culture and large corporations; by 1974, 81 percent of the U.S. market share of music was controlled by six companies.<sup>5</sup>

While the role of rock stars during this era changed, the role of women within the music scene did not. The music industry never considered women to be viable producers of music, and relegated them to the positions of muse, mistress, groupie, or girlfriend. By the early-1970s, it was becoming clear to many participants in rock that the music had strayed from its original counter-cultural goal. Music journalist Patricia Kennealy-Morrison stated in 1970 that, "For all

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<sup>4</sup> Along with the rise of the rock star in the late-1960s and early-1970s came the rise of groupie culture, with *Rolling Stone* devoting an entire issue to them in 1969 and a film documenting their lives released in 1970. Ann Powers, "The Love You Make: Fans and Groupies," *Trouble Girls: The Rolling Stone Book of Women in Rock*, ed. Barbara O'Dair (New York: Random House, 1995), 185.

<sup>5</sup> Stacy Thompson, *Punk Productions* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004), 10.

its self-hype to the contrary, rock is just another dismal male chauvinist trip, with one important difference: it's got the power and the looseness with which to change itself. It better happen quick."<sup>6</sup> Little did she realize that a change was about to occur.

While punk's roots go back much further, its emblematic date of birth was on March 31, 1974, when the first punk band graced the stage at CBGB, a small music venue on the Lower East Side of New York City. Opened in 1973, CBGB was not intended to be a rock'n'roll venue. But as more and more underground bands formed and vied for what little space was available at the few independent music clubs in the city, CBGB became a necessary addition, and Harry, Smith, and Weymouth all graced CBGB's stage in its earliest years. The club's small size and low stage helped facilitate the close relationship between punk performers and audience members, a relationship which was paramount in punk.<sup>7</sup>

Even though punk did not set out to create a more egalitarian, less-sexist environment for women, its basic ethos was much different from rock music of the time, and ultimately allowed women the space to create music and question gender. The two basic tenets of punk, according to music critic Maria Raha, were that anyone could make great art, no matter their talent or previous experience, and that individuality was supreme.<sup>8</sup> Whereas superb technical skill was expected in the popular rock of the era, with drawn-out guitar and drum solos in abundance, punk brought rock'n'roll back to its most basic roots, with some of its brightest stars playing an instrument for the first time in their lives. In addition, many of the basic ideals of punk allowed what was once "uncool" to become "cool," and vice-versa, especially when it came to sexuality:

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<sup>6</sup> Patricia Kennealy-Morrison, "Rock Around the Clock," *Rock She Wrote*, ed. Evelyn McDonnell and Ann Powers (New York: Delta Books, 1995), 363.

<sup>7</sup> Thompson, *Punk Productions*, 11.

<sup>8</sup> Maria Raha, *Cinderella's Big Score* (California: Seal Press, 2005), 3.

“while boys could be nerds or retards or female impersonators or just deeply uptight, girls could be boys.”<sup>9</sup>

Unlike bands like Led Zeppelin and Pink Floyd from the 1970s, whose power increased as their distance (both literally and figuratively) from the audience increased, punk’s power came as it reduced music to its most basic form, allowing both musician and audience member to stand on the same plane. As music journalist Carola Dibbell argues,

The classic formula for punk was, throw acid at rock & roll and construct a genre out of what was left. What was left was three-chord, four-four stuff so in terror of conventional rock posturing that many of its finest exponents barely moved their hips at all, and so suspicious of technique that it opened the field to amateurs who would never have made it into this world before—geeks, nerds, published poets, unregenerate bohos, mutants of various sorts, us. We slipped in with the crowd.<sup>10</sup>

Musicians couldn’t be put up on a pedestal if the audience members could just as easily switch positions with them and play the same basic notes. This was particularly important for women because punk did not require them to have spent their entire lives practicing music. Few women had been raised to become rock musicians, since it was such a male-dominated domain, but with punk they were free to pick up a guitar or stand in front of the mic without years of practice. What’s more, by placing musicians and audience members on equal grounds, punk eradicated the need for and the power of groupies; it was not the same conquering accomplishment (for either the groupie or the musician). This didn’t mean that sex was no longer a part of the picture; famous punk musicians Johnny Thunders, Richard Hell, and Dee Dee Ramone in particular used women for drugs and sex, and little else. But unlike popular rock music of the era, punk actually allowed for relationships between men and women to form without requiring romantic interest. According to punk singer and guitarist Elliott Kidd, “I think our scene was probably the first

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<sup>9</sup> Dibbell, *Trouble Girls*, 280.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

scene where guys and girls hung out as friends, equally.”<sup>11</sup> Women were no longer limited to the roles of groupie, muse, or girlfriend. Instead, they could stand on equal ground with other male musicians, who could consider women both as friends and as producers of music.

For punk bands, it wasn't just the music that mattered; rather it was an entire look that made someone “punk.” Lisa Robinson, writing in the underground music magazine *Creem* in 1975 wrote, “Patti Smith, Television, the Ramones, and perhaps the Talking Heads are evolving a totally new *look*, as well as a sound. There's a decidedly chiaroscuro...feel to these bands...So antifashion that it has become, for those of us looking closely, a fashion itself.”<sup>12</sup> Because punk posited itself against the mainstream, there was widespread acceptance of anything deemed deviant in society. For men, this meant the freedom to dress up as women, nerds, or Bowery bums. For women, just getting onstage was a transgressive act; from there, they were given the freedom to reject the traditional ideal of femininity projected upon them by society. According to sociologist Mavis Bayton, “Ugliness was celebrated and, in contrast to the beauty advice in magazines, punks, male and female, deliberately uglified themselves.”<sup>13</sup>

After punk's initial birth in New York, it exploded across the country and the Atlantic Ocean, with both London and Los Angeles becoming important centers of punk music. The women who were a part of punk's development, such as Smith, Harry, and Weymouth, inspired and left their mark on the subsequent bands that formed. Punk bands, although united by a basic ethos, were influenced by a variety of factors that led to differences from city to city; the punk music of New York was quite different from that which later developed in London and L.A. Greg Shaw, founder of Bomp Record and *Who Put the Bomp* punk fanzine, claimed that “New

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<sup>11</sup> Legs McNeil and Gillian McCain, *Please Kill Me* (New York: Grove Press, 1996), 209.

<sup>12</sup> Lisa Robinson, “The New Velvet Underground,” *Rock She Wrote*, ed. Evelyn McDonnell and Ann Powers (New York: Delta Books, 1995), 90.

<sup>13</sup> Mavis Bayton, *Frock Rock* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 65.

York punk was about art, and London punk was about politics, [and] L.A. punk was about pop culture.”<sup>14</sup>

That politics was absent from New York punk is notable, especially since the city was the site for much feminist activism. Very few female musicians allied themselves with feminism, Smith, Harry, and Weymouth included. Yet considering their groundbreaking position within music, it is not a surprising revelation. First of all, punk was all about being an individual and refusing to be a part of the mainstream. By the mid-1970s, the feminist movement was established enough that it would have been considered “uncool” to align oneself with “women’s lib.” It is also important to remember that women such as Smith, Harry, and Weymouth had enough trouble being accepted as rock musicians without having to connect themselves to a political movement. To have claimed the title of “feminist” would have made it seem as if they were playing music not because they truly cared about it, but because they were trying to make a political statement. It would have also made it much easier for rock critics to write them off and ignore their talent.

But despite their distancing from the feminist label, Smith, Harry, and Weymouth all embodied modern day feminist ideals. Judith Butler’s theory in *Gender Trouble* will be integral to my argument, as both a theoretical basis and a historical comparison. In her book, Butler posits gender as a fabrication, merely a set of actions performed. According to Butler, one of the major ways to subvert the gender assumptions that dominate society is to parody gender, which is done through drag, cross-dressing, and butch/femme identities, to name a few. Thus, to dress in drag is to weaken society’s notions of what gender is: “Drag fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of

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<sup>14</sup> Marc Spitz and Brendan Mullen, *We’ve Got the Neutron Bomb* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001), 71.



gender and the notion of a true gender identity.”<sup>15</sup> What is important about the process of dressing in drag is that “in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency...The notion of gender parody defended here does not assume that there is an original which such parodic identities imitate. Indeed, the parody is *of* the very notion of an original.”<sup>16</sup> Therefore, a woman dressing as a man is both a powerful and subversive tool because it questions the very notion that there is a men’s style of dressing and a women’s style of dressing and, by extension, a natural way of being for men and a natural way of being for women that are distinct from one another.

Butler also problematizes the use of the universalized term “woman” by the second wave of feminism by arguing for true gender freedom. As Butler contends, the attempt by feminists in the 1960s and 70s to focus on “women’s rights” or “women’s liberation” reinforced the very gender assumptions that they were working against, namely the essentialist belief that there were two categories—men and women—and that there were inherent differences between them. This problematic mode of thinking assumed that there was a universal experience that united women behind an identity while ignoring people who may not have fallen into this singular definition of “women.” As Butler argues, “the insistence upon the coherence and unity of the category of women has effectively refused the multiplicity of cultural, social, and political intersections in which the concrete array of ‘women’ are constructed.”<sup>17</sup> While feminism opposed the dominant binary between women and men, it set the stage for yet another dichotomy in its construction of a singular version of “women” because it allowed for only a singular version of “women’s” opposite. In doing this, feminism reinforced the dominant discourse that it was seeking to destroy: “The effort to identify the enemy as singular in form is a reverse-discourse that

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<sup>15</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 174.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

uncritically mimics the strategy of the oppressor instead of offering a different set of terms.”<sup>18</sup>

Harry, Smith, and Weymouth all questioned gender, but they did so in such different ways that it would have been impossible to consider them as all falling under the umbrella of the “women’s movement.” Instead of focusing on changing the definition of “women,” these three focused on changing the very idea of what it means to be a woman, or a man for that matter. Instead of liberating women, they wanted to liberate gender.

Not only did Smith, Harry, and Weymouth reflect the very techniques that Butler recommends in her book, but they did so nearly twenty years before *Gender Trouble* was even published. That Butler looks only at the mainstream feminist movement as a means of determining the productivity of feminism reflects a problem she and many other feminist theorists have, which is their inability to recognize sites of sub-cultural production. Punk music, often written off by scholars for its popularity and association with teenage rebellion, may in fact have been part of the breeding ground for a feminist gender revolution decades ahead of its time, and it is vital to recognize this. As academic Lisa Duggan has pointed out, “The more that identity and cultural politics are represented as the irresponsible, trivial, divisive ‘other’ of serious left analysis and organizing, the more constituencies seeking equality may be alienated from the left and abandoned to claim redress through liberal reform alone.”<sup>19</sup>

My thesis aims not only to extend Butler’s analysis into the realm of women in punk, but also to fill the gap left by books specifically about music. Much has been written about “women in rock,” yet these books often clump all women into that broad group regardless of their actual demeanor onstage, or employ biographical summaries rather than theoretical analysis. Books such as Maria Raha’s *Cinderella’s Big Score*, Lucy O’Brien’s *She Bop II*, and Barbara O’Dair’s

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>19</sup> Lisa Duggan, *The Attack of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), 71.

*Trouble Girls* do an honorable job of documenting women's contributions to the field of music, but lack academic analysis. Simon Reynold's and Joy Press' *The Sex Revolts*, goes a step beyond and does in fact use psychoanalytical and gender theories as the basis of their argument. Yet the authors make the mistake of trying to shoe horn women in rock into four rigid categories, implying that every female musician falls into one of these groupings perfectly. As my thesis argues, women such as Smith, Harry, and Weymouth cannot be placed into specific categories; doing so would ignore many valuable components of their physical and musical image. Their multi-dimensionality was what allowed them to be not just "women in rock," but gender rebels in rock.

In my first chapter, I present Patti Smith as a gender rebel through her drag-king looks and music. In my second chapter, I analyze the way in which Deborah Harry managed to both present both a strong female character onstage and to reveal how gender is just a construction through her dressing-up as a caricature of femininity. In my third chapter, I trace the ways in which Tina Weymouth rejected gender altogether while onstage. Although there was no one uniform way to challenge gender, these women in punk attacked gender from all sides, proving that there was no single way of being a "woman" in rock. I chose these three musicians not only for their diverse and innovative approaches to punk, but also for the success they achieved with their bands despite being women.

Although punk did not set out to destroy gender roles, it couldn't help but open up a space for women to enter. Between its return-to-roots sound, do-it-yourself ethic, rejection of all accepted norms, and obsession with equalizing the performer and the audience, punk not only created a space for women to play music, but allowed them to project gender in more than the dichotomous male/female way.

## Chapter One

### Patti Smith: Jesus Died for Somebody's Sins, But Not Mine

“Being a woman is irrelevant so far as the artist in me goes. When I’m working and dipping as far as I can into my subliminal, I get to a point when race and gender and all that stuff no longer exists,” stated Smith in an interview in 1977, summing up much of the thinking behind her onstage and offstage persona.<sup>20</sup> Dubbed the Godmother of Punk, Patti Smith paved the way for a generation of New York rock bands with her fusion of rock and poetry. But she was also groundbreaking for her gender fusion: Smith questioned gender norms, dressing up herself—and her music—like a drag king. She infused her music, lyrics, dress, and onstage demeanor with a gender bend, and in doing so, bent mainstream ideas about gender.

Growing up in New Jersey, Smith was a self-described tomboy whose heroes were men, with the exception of the few women in history who had pressed gender boundaries, such as Joan of Arc.<sup>21</sup> According to Penny Arcade, performance artist and friend of Smith’s, “Patti wanted to look like Keith Richards, smoke like Jeanne Moreau, walk like Bob Dylan, and write like Arthur Rimbaud.”<sup>22</sup> Unlike other women who had fantasized about being with men like Dylan and Richards, Smith literally wanted to *be* them, to the point of mimicking their looks and mannerisms in a drag-like performance.

Smith’s appearance on her album covers reflected her desire to question gender.<sup>23</sup> On her debut album *Horses*, released in 1975, Smith took a truly groundbreaking step by mixing a “feminine” pose with a “masculine” look; between her shaggy haircut and her loose clothing, there is nothing that specifically stated her gender, as defined by society. Her look emphasized how malleable and socially constructible gender could be. On first glance, Smith’s appearance

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<sup>20</sup> Raha, *Cinderella's Big Score*, 19.

<sup>21</sup> Simon Reynolds and Joy Press, *The Sex Revolts* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), 237.

<sup>22</sup> McNeil and McCain, *Please Kill Me*, 101

<sup>23</sup> Rebecca Davis, “Patti Smith: From Tomboy to Queen of Punk,” (Barnard College, April 25, 2005), 2-3.

on the album cover of 1978's *Easter* seems to be a departure from the masculine pose she took on for *Horses*. Yet closer inspection reveals that beyond her longer hair, delicate pink dress, and visible nipple, she has unshaven armpits. This mixing of masculine and feminine traits again emphasized her ability to dress up as and associate with either gender: "There are masculine and feminine rhythms in me. We're all made up of opposites, and they often crucify us, but I deal with that by accepting the bad stuff."<sup>24</sup> To Smith, people were made up of both traits, and to stifle one would be to repress an important part of one's personality. Rather than being forced to accept the strict gender categories that separated masculinity from femininity, Smith was able to experience both by dressing up in a form of drag.

But it wasn't just Smith's look that mixed genders; her music itself was a form of drag, in that she dressed up a masculine art form with a feminine shell. Smith's music was a sharp break from the "guitars as phallus" music pumped out by testosterone-fueled bands of the era, such as Led Zeppelin. "We're not like a male band either," said Smith in a 1978 interview, "in that the male process of ecstasy in performance is starting here (Smith mimed jerking at the base of an imaginary giant phallus) and building and building until the big spurt at the end. We're a feminine band, we'll go so far and peak and then we'll start again and peak, over and over. It's like an ocean."<sup>25</sup>

Smith not only equated a certain type of music with masculinity, but the symbolism of the guitar as well; in a music review she wrote for *Creem* in April 1974, Smith remarked, "[Bob Dylan] in his plaid jumpsuit. It hit me then. How a guitar rests so completely on a man's cock."<sup>26</sup> The fact that it was Lenny Kaye playing guitar in the Patti Smith Group (PSG) rather than Smith

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<sup>24</sup> Susan Shapiro, "Patti Smith: Somewhere Over the Rimbaud," *Rock She Wrote*, ed. Evelyn McDonnell and Ann Powers (New York: Delta Books, 1995), 282.

<sup>25</sup> Reynolds and Press, *The Sex Revolts*, 356.

<sup>26</sup> Patti Smith, "Masked Bawl," *Rock She Wrote*, ed. Evelyn McDonnell and Ann Powers (New York: Delta Books, 1995), 214.

herself backs up her claim connecting the guitar with the phallus; yet rather than allow the guitar all of the power in her band, she focused on the vocals and the lyrics as the most powerful part of her music. In a 1975 interview Smith personified her lyrics in a masculine way by stating that, “The Word is just for me, when I’m alone late at night and I’m jerkin’ off, you know, pouring out streams of words. That’s a very one-on-one process, but I’m interested in communicatin’. I’m another instrument in the band.”<sup>27</sup> Here Smith took masturbation, an action perceived by mainstream society as transgressive when done by a woman rather than a man, and reframed it within the process of writing, thereby bringing the power she associated with guitars to lyrics. She, as an author, was assigning herself male attributes while writing lyrics that deviated from the traditional male form, thereby confusing and obliterating gender even more through her verbal and sonic drag.

This was not the only time that Smith hinted at her metaphoric phallus and masturbation in an interview. Smith was quoted in Clinton Heylin’s book on the American punk scene as saying, “I don’t consider writing a quiet, closet act. I consider it a real physical act. When I’m home writing on the typewriter, I go crazy. I move like a monkey. I’ve wet myself, I’ve come in my pants writing...Instead of shooting smack, I masturbate—fourteen times in a row.”<sup>28</sup> Smith’s boasts about the power of her writing and her ability to masturbate numerous times in one sitting echo the boasts men are expected by society to make to one another about their prowess in the bedroom. In an interview published in *Rolling Stone*, Smith explained that she enjoyed masturbating to her own photograph: “It was the photo for the cover of *Easter*. I thought if I could do it as an experiment, then fifteen-year-old boys could do it, and that would make me

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 280.

<sup>28</sup> Clinton Heylin, *From the Velvets to the Voidoids* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1993), 194.

very happy.”<sup>29</sup> Although this admission implies that Smith was looking to be seen as sexually attractive to her male listeners, it also shows the duality of her gender and her embrace of what is considered a male-only activity. The power dynamic in this example mutates from a man objectifying a woman for his own pleasure to a woman objectifying herself for her own pleasure. By masturbating to her own photograph, she assumes the male perspective in a heteronormative society—and thus his actions—in an act of drag.

Layered on top of her gender-bending songs were gender-bending lyrics. Smith rarely wrote love songs, which were what most female musicians sang at the time, and often covered songs originally written by men, such as “Gloria,” and “Hey Joe.” Smith, who began her career as a poet in downtown New York, took the basic notions behind beat poetry, often considered a masculine art form, and made it her own by contextualizing it with music.<sup>30</sup> She did the same with the music criticism she wrote for various magazines, utilizing stream-of-consciousness rather than the straightforward review style being written by men at the time.<sup>31</sup> For example, in a review she wrote of Bob Dylan’s *Planet Wave* in 1974 for *Creem* magazine, Smith tumbled from image to image, idea to idea: “‘Dirge’ is a love song Burroughs could get into. Amphetamine IBM. Masculine honor broken on low streets. Corrupt and beautiful. Man to man.”<sup>32</sup> Her writing style not only rebelled against the traditional style so popular among the mainly-male ranks in rock and music journalism, but was also devoid of any marks of gender; whereas famous music journalists of the time, such as Lester Bangs, wrote under the assumption that their readers were men, with Smith’s criticism it is impossible to tell if she is a woman or a man from just reading her words.

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<sup>29</sup> Gerri Hirshey, *We Gotta Get Out of This Place* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2001), 112.

<sup>30</sup> Raha, *Cinderella’s Big Score*, 18.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>32</sup> Smith, *Rock She Wrote*, 214.

There is no better example of Smith dressing a song up in drag as a means of questioning gender relations than in her cover of “Hey Joe.”<sup>33</sup> Originally written in 1962 but covered by numerous bands, “Hey Joe” has been hugely popular, mostly due to the fact that it is supposed to represent the everyday man, quite literally your average Joe.<sup>34</sup> The song is about a young man who shoots and kills his girlfriend after she cheats on him with another man. In Smith’s version, released in 1974 as the B-side on her first record, she kept the core lyrics of the song the same but bookended them with a new introduction and an altered ending, turning the story of Joe into the story of Patty Hearst.<sup>35</sup> It is this change that turns the song from a machismo rant into a subversive tale donned in drag.

Hearst, who—at the time that the song was written—was on the run from the F.B.I. after robbing a bank with the Symbionese Liberation Army, represented a young woman rejecting white upper-class femininity by donning a gun, the ultimate phallic symbol. By inserting Hearst into “Hey Joe,” Smith turns a song that glorifies violence against women into a song that glorifies violence *by* women as a means of giving Hearst the agency and power that had eluded her for most of her life. The phallic image of the gun that Smith writes into her version of “Hey Joe” is comparable to the phallic image of the guitar in rock music. Although both Smith and Hearst are posited as the passive objects in the song’s newly-written introduction, by the end they are both active agents of their own liberation; Hearst carries a gun and is running away from the F.B.I., and Smith takes over the song and therefore becomes its owner. Smith was able to validate her entrance into the male-dominated music world by re-working “Hey Joe” into a song validating Hearst’s entrance into the male-dominated criminal world.

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<sup>33</sup> Rebecca Davis, “‘I Am Nobody’s Patsy Anymore;’ Drag as Liberation in Patti Smith’s ‘Hey Joe,’” (Barnard College, December 1, 2006), 3-12.

<sup>34</sup> The song has been covered by over 1,000 bands as diverse as the Byrds, Love, and the Jimi Hendrix Experience, has reached the top of the charts, and even has an entire website devoted to the song’s history.

<sup>35</sup> Patti Smith, “Hey Joe (Version),” 1974.



Even in her role as vocalist in the band, Smith did manage to subvert commonly held assumptions about female singers by dressing her voice up in drag. For many women, the only role in popular music (be it rock or otherwise) was in front of the mic stand; from Billie Holiday to the Shirelles to Janis Joplin, women had found that their only acceptable position in a band was as singer. As sociologist Mavis Bayton explains in her book *Frock Rock*, “Within popular music, singing is seen as ‘natural’ or innate and women are believed to be naturally better singers. Women’s singing is seen in contrast with the learnt skills of playing an instrument, a kind of direct female emotional expression, rather than a set of refined techniques.”<sup>36</sup> Despite these commonly held beliefs about women and their voices, Smith found a way to undermine them by making her voice sound unnatural. Rather than sing “properly,” Smith would speak-sing her lyrics, fusing poetry with rock music as a means of dressing her voice up in drag. By semi-speaking her lyrics, Smith was able to take masculine poetry reading and apply it to feminine singing. She “confronted conventional vocal norms head-on, singing in an unconventional and often deliberately ‘artificial’ way, thereby challenging the very notion of the ‘naturalness’ of the voice.”<sup>37</sup> By donning vocal drag, Smith was in fact questioning the very assumption of gender in the act of singing.

As Lenny Kaye, guitarist of the Patti Smith Group (PSG), once explained, Smith was the driving force—both creative and otherwise—behind the band, so there was not much that they could do once she left: “I mean, it was our job to support Patti—she was the aesthetic direction—so without that, we slowed considerably.”<sup>38</sup> Smith’s band, comprised entirely of men, seemed quite compliant in their supporting position; besides playing in a group whose moniker was a woman’s name, members of PSG were proud to be associated with Smith. Kaye, in a 1978

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<sup>36</sup> Bayton, *Frock Rock*, 13.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

interview, stated that, “There’s not anyone in this band that doesn’t accept...the bend of the knee, the humility that comes with working with her, because she is the best. We feel very honoured to work with her.”<sup>39</sup> When, in 1980, Smith told the rest of the band that the group was no more, their responses were just as telling: “I wasn’t angry, but I was devastated,” said drummer Jay Dee Daugherty. “I didn’t realize at the time that the group was my identity. That’s who I was—I was the drummer of the Patti Smith Group. I wasn’t anything, I wasn’t me, I was a thing.”<sup>40</sup> The fact that these men based their identities off of a group both named after and led by a woman reveals just how powerful she was, regardless of her gender.

Even with Smith’s success (sold-out tours and albums breaking into the *Billboard* chart’s Top 50) there were still signs that both punk and the rest of the country were not ready for her. For one thing, despite her many attempts to reject gendered norms, Smith was still subject to objectification. According to Penny Arcade, “Some people thought Patti was this ugly girl, you know, when ugly was a sin.”<sup>41</sup> Celia Farber, a music journalist for *Spin*, recalled a story that ran in the magazine making disparaging remarks about Smith’s looks: “Somebody wrote in *Spin*, ‘I was standing behind Patti Smith in line. She’s the most unattractive woman I’ve ever seen in my life.’ Would a woman write that? How many rock stars aren’t totally unattractive men? With men it’s like a shock if a woman isn’t attractive.”<sup>42</sup> This exemplified the paradox of punk; on the one hand, “punk [was] regarded as a liberating time for women... Women were free to uglify themselves, to escape the *chanteuse* role to which they were generally limited.”<sup>43</sup> But on the other hand, it was still within the reaches of social regulation, making women, such as Smith, still held accountable for their looks.

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<sup>39</sup> O’Brien, *She Bop II*, 112.

<sup>40</sup> McNeil and McCain, *Please Kill Me*, 370.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 92.

<sup>42</sup> Gaar, *She’s a Rebel*, 351-352.

<sup>43</sup> Reynolds and Press, *The Sex Revolts*, 33.

In addition, Smith wasn't able to escape the belief held by some that she used her sexuality to achieve success. She had relationships with several famous men in the art and music scenes, including playwright/actor Sam Shepard (who co-wrote and co-starred in the 1971 play *Cowboy Mouth* with Smith), photographer Robert Mapplethorpe (who shot the cover of *Horses*), and musicians Allen Lanier, Tom Verlaine, and Fred Smith. Some saw this as Smith's attempt to gain traction in the music scene through her sexuality. Poet Gerard Malanga, upset that fellow writer Bobby Neuwirth received an acknowledgement in Smith's first book of poetry and he didn't, said that, "She must have had an affair with Bobby Neuwirth for her to make that acknowledgement like she did."<sup>44</sup> Terry Ork, manager of punk band Television, believed Smith's actions to be calculated, having once stated that, "Patti would always kiss somebody and then look at you to make sure you'd notice...She was very self-conscious about living as if she were onstage and about being a starfucker."<sup>45</sup> Statements like these worked to take away from Smith's achievements, implying that it was her sexuality, rather than her talent, that got her success.

To some, the fact that she never publicly came out in support of women and always surrounded herself with gifted men, "suggest[ed] a woman who was more interested in achieving a personal success than risking compromise through an explicit identification with the women's movement."<sup>46</sup> There is substantial evidence supporting the charge that Smith collaborated more with men than with women. The people with whom Smith chose to play music were all men, and she modeled her image after a variety of men—Bob Dylan, Keith Richards, and Arthur Rimbaud, to name a few. Her greatest mentors, including Neuwirth, Lanier, and Shepard, were all men.<sup>47</sup> And while she had several close relationships with men, she did not seem to develop

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<sup>44</sup> McNeil and McCain, *Please Kill Me*, 109.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 100.

<sup>46</sup> Sheila Whiteley, *Women and Popular Music* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 107.

<sup>47</sup> Heylin, *From the Velvets*, 111.

as many close relationships with women; several women in the punk scene have said that they found Smith competitive and unfriendly, including Harry, who has claimed that Smith tried to sabotage Blondie's career by "stealing" their guitarist, Ivan Kral, and urging their bassist Fred Smith to quit Blondie and start playing for Television.<sup>48</sup>

But considering the circumstances under which Smith entered into the world of rock, her actions were indeed groundbreaking. At the time, there were few female role models for Smith to use as inspiration; she was "venturing into uncharted territory, and pretty much the only models available to [Smith] were male. To make an impression at all, [she] had to imitate male rebels and define [herself] against the 'limitations' of femininity."<sup>49</sup> Smith seemed to be aware of the fact that her role models were all men, but wanted to break out of their shadow in order to create her own version of their art. As she recalled, in 1972 "I went to Jim Morrison's grave in Paris, and I didn't feel anything... I went to Rimbaud's grave afterwards, and stood there and felt totally cold. And then I just said, 'Fuck it. I'm going home and doing my own work. I'm not standing over the graves of these people.'"<sup>50</sup> The result of this experience soon led to Smith making the transition from poetry to rock, and the song "Break It Up" on her debut album *Horses* documents this moment when she realized that she could create on her own without the help of these men. Although Smith relied on men to play in her band, she hired a woman—Jane Friedman—as her band manager, which was quite a rarity in the mid-70s.<sup>51</sup> And had Smith completely rejected working with and basing her image off of other men, she would never have been able to successfully employ her drag-based imitation of masculinity onstage and in her music.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 161.

<sup>49</sup> Reynolds and Press, *The Sex Revolts*, 236.

<sup>50</sup> Heylin, *From the Velvets*, 193.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 112; Bayton, *Frock Rock*, 5.

Regardless of these issues raised by both supporters and detractors alike, Smith's impact on music and gender is undeniable. "She either inspired or improved the climate for a generation of women in rock whether they actually got somewhere or remained so minor you've never heard of them," wrote Carola Dibbell, whose point is backed up by Penelope Houston of the punk band the Avengers, who said, "I remember hearing Patti Smith's *Horses* when it came out, and that really blew me away."<sup>52</sup> The important all-female post-punk group the Raincoats have cited Smith as an inspiration, and Courtney Love has said, "When I heard my first Patti Smith record, *Horses*, it was like, the ticket's right here in my hand. I can write it. It's a free zone."<sup>53</sup> Smith even inspired people who were beyond the realm of music, including Marcelle Karp and Debbie Stoller, the founders and editors of the feminist magazine *Bust*.<sup>54</sup>

Smith wasn't just the Godmother of Punk; she was a gender innovator, pushing the boundaries of what it meant to be a man or a woman in the rock world and beyond. For Smith, questioning gender didn't mean attending NOW meetings or protesting in support of the ERA, but instead meant questioning the actual idea of women's rights in the context of the music scene. She used drag and gender-bending as her main tool in deconstructing the very reality of gender categories, in order to show that they were fabricated enterprises situated in the midst of masculine and feminine traits. Smith, therefore, attempted to move beyond socially-enforced boundaries and enter into a world where there was just creation: "As an artist, I don't feel any gender restrictions. When I'm performing, it's a very—for me—transcendent experience. I can't say I feel like a male or a female. Or both. What I feel is not in the human vocabulary."<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Dibbell, *Trouble Girls*, 279; Raha, *Cinderella's Big Score*, 11.

<sup>53</sup> Gaar, *She's a Rebel*, 243; Hirshey, *We Gotta Get Out*, 167.

<sup>54</sup> Marcelle Karp and Debbie Stoller, ed. *The Bust Guide to the New Girl Order* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), xii.

<sup>55</sup> Mina Carson, Tisa Lewis, and Susan M. Shaw, *Girls Rock!* (Kentucky: Kentucky Press, 2004), 43.

## Chapter Two

### Deborah Harry: I Wanna Be a Platinum Blonde

“The initial idea was to be desirable, feminine, and vulnerable, but a resilient, tenacious wit at the same time rather than a poor female sapped of her strength by heartthrob and unrequited love,” explained Deborah Harry in 1982, presenting the paradox that was Blondie’s front person.<sup>56</sup> Between her bleached blonde hair, heavily lined eyes, tight outfits, and 60s girl-group inspired songs, Harry could be pegged as a typical example of traditional femininity. Yet this drag-queen-like image of womanhood was just that—an image, created by a witty and intelligent woman. Harry thereby helped to reveal that femininity and, by extension, gender were a mere construction, just as Smith had done with masculinity. Playing in one of the most successful punk groups to come out of New York in the 1970s, Harry embraced the basic tenets of punk by valuing individuality and rejecting gender assumptions. Influenced by various components of pop culture, Harry claimed a caricature of femininity as a pre-emptive defense.

As an adopted child growing up in New Jersey, a young Harry fantasized about Marilyn Monroe being her birth mother. And for a while, it seemed as if Harry was destined for looks-based success: after being voted the prettiest girl in her senior class, Harry moved to New York City and worked as a Playboy Bunny for nine months. Yet Harry very quickly tired of what she felt was a demeaning lifestyle. In an interview in 1976, Harry explained that, “I wanted the money. It was a goal and something I always had held in front of me in my younger life. When you’re younger, you have idyllic dreams of things to do, I did it, and it’s not so good. It’s pretty disgusting work.”<sup>57</sup> But she didn’t completely leave behind the iconography associated with Marilyn Monroe and other bombshell blondes. Instead, she re-worked them, ironically using these images as a means of subverting them.

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<sup>56</sup> Debbie Harry, Chris Stein, and Victor Bockris, *Making Tracks* (New York: DeCapo Press, 1998), 29.

<sup>57</sup> Roy Cohn, “Blondie Cometh,” *NME*, (13 Nov. 1976): 9.

Everything about Blondie, from its name on down, was a way of “out-cheesing the assholes,” as a means of defending the band and rejecting notions of femininity; the decision to name the band Blondie came “after some trucker hollered at [Harry] on the street, ‘Hey, blondie, how about a blow job?’”<sup>58</sup> Rather than allowing someone else to stick the label “blondie” onto her, Harry decided to claim it for herself. As the lead singer of the band, Harry knew that she would be quickly defined by others; as a means of defense, she cultivated her own look, one that was outside of herself. In reference to the early stages of Blondie’s development in 1974, Harry wrote in her biography of Blondie, “I was developing the Blondie character. She wasn’t there yet, but she was on her way.”<sup>59</sup> By separating herself from her band persona, Harry was able to put quotes around her onstage image as a means of revealing its construction. This was picked up by music journalists, including Carola Dibbell, who wrote,

Debbie claimed calendar pinup, chorus girl, Sandra Dee, go-go airhead, slut—disrespectful, sure, but no-respect personas were the currency of American punk. Claiming them was a preemptive defense. Put quotes around them and you got the option of identifying with the person outside of the quotes, the person who had elected to use them.<sup>60</sup>

While Harry didn’t ignore her band’s music, she knew that being in a band wasn’t entirely about writing songs: “I’ve always thought rock and roll is fifty percent music and fifty percent visual. That’s not to say the music doesn’t come first. But I’ve always expected a *look*, if it was Elvis or Sigue Sigue Sputnik.”<sup>61</sup> And so like any great rock star, Harry created a look for herself that accompanied the music.

Harry mined a variety of sources when looking for inspiration for her Blondie character. One of them was comics, which she and the other band members read and collected. Punk music

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<sup>58</sup> Hirshey, *We Gotta Get Out*, 106.

<sup>59</sup> Harry, Stein, and Bockris, *Making Tracks*, 26

<sup>60</sup> Dibbell, *Trouble Girls*, 282.

<sup>61</sup> Hirshey, *We Gotta Get Out*, 104.

had always been interested in pop culture, even if that interest lay in destroying or subverting it. Comics were of particular interest to the punk scene in New York; one of the most important zines, *Punk Magazine*, always included comic strips and was illustrated by popular punk cartoonist John Holmstrom. As Harry saw it, “the idea of a drawing coming to life and stepping into the stage had a terrific surrealness about it.”<sup>62</sup> Like any cartoonist, Harry had a very clear idea of what she wanted her comic character in Blondie to look like: “I wanted to create this character who was primarily having fun, even though she was being maligned by her friends and her heart was being stepped on by various members of the opposite, or same, sex. Even if she was getting ready to jump off the Empire State Building, Blondie was going to have fun on the way down.”<sup>63</sup> The name itself, Blondie, was the title of a popular comic strip and comic character dating back to the 1930s, thereby referencing an icon from the past while simultaneously recreating it in Harry’s own image.

Another source of inspiration came from the art world, in particular work by Andy Warhol. Harry had first met Warhol and members of the Warhol Factory in the late 1960s while working as a waitress at Max’s Kansas City, and their influence can be seen in her poses and music with Blondie. Like Jackie Curtis, part of the Warhol Factory scene who made waves with his work in drag, Harry acted like someone in blonde drag—peroxide-blond hair, overdone makeup, and ultra-feminine outfits. This form of hyper-femininity looked no more natural on Harry than it did on Curtis, parodying commonly held beliefs about gender and, as Butler argues in *Gender Trouble*, rejecting the idea that there is even an original on which this look is based. By dressing like a man who dressed like a woman, Harry blurred the lines between what was natural and what was constructed when it came to femininity. Warhol himself helped to

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<sup>62</sup> Harry, Stein, and Bockris, *Making Tracks*, 29.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*



emphasize this assembled façade of femininity when, in 1980, he made a portrait of Harry. Like her inspiration, Marilyn Monroe, Harry's character in Blondie became an actual piece of art, a true construction.

The girl-groups of the 60s, such as the Shangri-Las, also served as both a reference point and inspiration to Harry and the rest of Blondie. While girl groups of this era are often written off for representing women as weak, many of them were able to subvert common beliefs about teen girls by singing about rebellion and sexual agency. As Susan J. Douglas notes in her essay about girl groups, “[their] songs were, by turns, boastful, rebellious, and self-abnegating, and through them girls could assume different personas, some of them strong and empowering and others masochistic and defeating.”<sup>64</sup> Blondie's sound and lyrics, best defined as “cute harmonic pop songs with a blistering edge,” were in many ways similar to music by 60s girl groups. For example, the band layered lyrics about a sex offender over a bouncy keyboard-driven melody.<sup>65</sup> While some may question Blondie's place within the punk canon, Harry viewed their music as very much a rebellion against the current state of rock and as something with shock-value: “At that time in the mid-70s, [60s girl group music] wasn't really so accessible, it wasn't available on records that much. And [Blondie] was a new version of that, so it was sort of shocking in that respect.”<sup>66</sup> In fact Richard Gottehrer, who had worked with girl groups in the 1960s, produced the group's debut album *Blondie*, and Ellie Greenwich, who wrote hit songs for the Ronettes and the Shangri-Las, sung backing vocals on the same album.

Harry made sure that the character she was crafted wasn't one-dimensional. Rather than being portrayed as a victim, Harry sought to present herself as someone in charge and in power.

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<sup>64</sup> Susan J. Douglas, “Why the Shirelles Mattered: Girl Groups on the Cusp of a Feminist Awakening,” in Linda K. Kerber and Jane Sherron DeHart ed., *Women's America*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 569.

<sup>65</sup> Lucy O'Brien, *She Bop II* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 139.

<sup>66</sup> Gillian G. Gaar, *She's a Rebel* (Seattle: Seal Press, 1992), 259.

Music journalist Chris Roberts described Harry as both, “a tough, snarling female role model,” and as someone with, “a mischievous sense of humour,” and Harry herself backed up this idea when she wrote in 1982 that she “wanted the girl in Blondie to be funny, too.”<sup>67</sup> Both men and women looked up to her (and developed crushes on her), and she “exuded something previously associated only with male musicians: cool.”<sup>68</sup> And despite the way in which the media presented her (which is discussed at length later in this paper), Harry consciously tried to contain her sexuality when onstage: “When Blondie did finally hop onstage as a character she would try to be bisexual or asexual, and a lot of times she would see and do things from the point of view of a third person.”<sup>69</sup> What this all built up to was a character who, unlike many previous women who had graced the stage, was multi-dimensional; who could be both funny and sexy, energetic and cool; who wasn’t just a caricature or a reflection of pop culture, but a thought-out symbol who reflected and rejected society as Harry saw fit.<sup>70</sup>

Some of this dimensionality came from the fact that Harry, as a woman fronting a band full of men, had to take into account several different perspectives. As she explained, “It was a funny thing being a girl singer during the punk era. It was an odd position to take. Since I was a front for a bunch of guys, it was like some of their perspective came through me, so I couldn’t be ‘real cute.’ I *was* cute, but I had to be tough, too. So that helped me in a way.”<sup>71</sup> Part of Harry’s onstage persona was based off of a punk desire to reject the sorts of poses that had become an accepted element of rock music. “When I began doing shows I tried to avoid the hackneyed rock poses and movements, along with the usual use-me-abuse-me attitude of most girl singers...I

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<sup>67</sup> Chris Roberts, *Idle Worship* (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1995), 103; Harry, Stein, and Bockris, *Making Tracks* 29

<sup>68</sup> Amy Raphael, *Grrrls* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1995), xix.

<sup>69</sup> Harry, Stein, and Bockris, *Making Tracks*, 30.

<sup>70</sup> Raha, *Cinderella’s Big Score*, 40.

<sup>71</sup> Dibbell, *Trouble Girls*, 281.

don't try to come on too tough either."<sup>72</sup> Although Harry presented herself as a character inspired by (and rejecting) rock's past, she also imbued her character with a realness that refused to become an extreme.

Yet Harry's attempt to approach rock from a woman's point of view, as she has claimed to do, had its negative consequences. She believed that on numerous occasions Blondie received criticism only because the group was fronted by a woman, and would not have received the same criticism had they played the exact same music with a male singer. Harry referred to this belief that audiences treated bands differently according to the gender of the musicians onstage in an interview with *NME* in 1978, when she said that, "If a band full of men is on stage and an audience of girls is screaming then everything is as it should be...but if it's a girl on stage then suddenly everything is cheap because I'm a girl and they're not used to that. If it were the Bay City Rollers up there then everything would be cool."<sup>73</sup> In 1982, Harry compared the media's response to Blondie with its response to The Runaways, a punk band from Los Angeles comprised entirely of teenage women:

We were hardly received in New York for a very long time and we didn't sound very different [from other bands]. It was just like The Runaways. People see a chick and...Really! We thought The Runaways were great and there were numerous bands who were worse...The press stomped them mercilessly. If they had been boys it definitely wouldn't have happened to them.<sup>74</sup>

In another interview, Harry seemed to press upon this idea of Blondie not doing as well as they should have commercially (she believed that there was an unofficial radio boycott of the band, although there is no hard evidence to prove it) because they combined pop music with the image of a strong woman. "It was pop that was very aggressive, and with a female front person, and a

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<sup>72</sup> Harry, Stein, and Bockris, *Making Tracks*, 69.

<sup>73</sup> "In Their Own Words, Part 1," 2 April 1978, 22 Feb. 2007

<<http://www.punk77.co.uk/groups/womeninpunkintheirownwordspart1.htm>>.

<sup>74</sup> Harry, Stein, and Bockris, *Making Tracks*, 75.

female front person had never really been done in pop. It was very difficult to be in that position at the time—it's hard to be a groundbreaker."<sup>75</sup> But ultimately, Harry and the rest of Blondie were not deterred. As Harry proclaimed in a 1976 interview with *NME*, "Rock and roll is a really masculine business, and I think it's time that girls did something about it."<sup>76</sup>

Harry's aggressive persona in Blondie can best be seen in the many lyrics she wrote for the band. The fact that she was one of the group's main songwriters is often overshadowed by her role as the band's lead singer and icon. In fact, she co-wrote seven of the eight singles that reached the Top 40.<sup>77</sup> "One Way or Another," written by Harry, is one of the best examples of her positing herself as an agent, rather than an object, in her songs.<sup>78</sup> Released in 1978 on Blondie's third album, *Parallel Lines*, the song begins with Harry menacingly singing, "One way or another I'm gonna find ya, I'm gonna getcha getcha getcha getcha." The tone of her voice is that of a person who knows how to get what she wants, and it's clear that Harry means business. And the song's speaker is just as aggressive about losing this lover as she is about getting him when she sings, "One way or another I'm gonna lose ya, I'm gonna give you the slip, a slip of the lip or another, I'm gonna lose ya, I'm gonna trick ya." Harry may be dressed up as a sexy blond bombshell, but it's clear with this song that she is no vulnerable Monroe.

Although Harry intended to subvert classic ideas of femininity with her constructed character in Blondie, not everyone was in on the joke, leading some to view her as the very type of sex symbol she was hoping to undermine. According to academic Sheila Whiteley, "She was largely viewed as a rock sex symbol rather than as a ground-breaking front-line singer."<sup>79</sup> It was for this reason that many people didn't expect much from Blondie as a group, and has been

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<sup>75</sup> Gaar, *She's a Rebel*, 259.

<sup>76</sup> Roy Cohn, "Blondie Cometh," *NME* (13 Nov. 1976): 9, as quoted in Raha, *Cinderella's Big Score*, 38.

<sup>77</sup> Raha, *Cinderella's Big Score*, 41.

<sup>78</sup> Blondie, "One Way or Another," *Parallel Lines*, Chrysalis, 1978.

<sup>79</sup> Whiteley, *Women and Popular Music*, 113-114.

attributed to the reasoning behind the initial radio boycott of the band. When describing the way that other bands viewed Blondie in the early years of punk, Harry stated that, “Most of them thought I was cute, but never thought we’d get anywhere.”<sup>80</sup> Harry’s subversive image lost much of its edge once the media started to pick up on Blondie, and between the press and the band’s record company, the media framed Harry as a bona fide sex symbol.

To begin with, the press often focused only on Harry while ignoring the rest of the band. Blondie’s record company, Chrysalis, had a lot to do with this. While touring in support of their second album, *Plastic Letters*, Chrysalis had Harry be the sole band member attending interviews and going to press events. “Chrysalis wanted me to front the group alone so all the press attention would be focused on me, because they still thought that I was our strongest asset and attention drawer,” said Harry in 1982.<sup>81</sup> The band’s first manager, Peter Leeds, used the slogan “Blondie Is A Group” to garner press. And while it may seem as if the phrase was trying to move attention away from Harry and towards the rest of the group, Harry saw it differently: “He built that into a problem because it wasn’t really a problem until he made that statement.”<sup>82</sup>

Separating Harry from the rest of the group then allowed the press to characterize her as they saw fit; she was no longer intelligent, witty, or in control of her sexuality, but instead a sexy ice princess. Once again, the way that Blondie was advertised by its record labels did not help this. The band’s first label, Private Stock, used a photo of Harry wearing a see-through blouse as the promotional poster for their debut album. Harry labeled this type of marketing as “a cheap trick...This...is not my idea of a poster. I didn’t know anything about it until I saw it, and it

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<sup>80</sup> Harry, Stein, and Bockris, *Making Tracks*, 30.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>82</sup> Gaar, *She’s a Rebel*, 260.

certainly wasn't my idea."<sup>83</sup> This wasn't the only poster of its kind—another played off of a Blondie song entitled “Rip Her to Shreds.” While the song's lyrics, written by Harry, referred to the sorts of negative comments she would receive on the streets of New York because of the strange way she dressed, Chrysalis turned the song's meaning on its head; posters were printed with the question, “Wouldn't you like to rip her to shreds?” floating above a picture of Harry.<sup>84</sup> Harry was not at all pleased with this poster, and made sure that her objections to it were known. When asked about it, she said, “Listen, I was furious when I saw that fuckin' ad! I told them not to put out anymore—and they didn't!”<sup>85</sup> What was so problematic about these posters was that they changed Harry from being a subject to being an object. Her onstage persona may have been sexual, but Harry was in control of her sexuality. The media took away her power so that *they* constructed and controlled her sexuality. She was no longer an aggressive musician, but a passive victim waiting to be ripped to shreds. It not only demeaned Harry as a public figure, but denied that she had any musical talent. According to these posters, Harry's only talent was in having a body deemed sexy. That Harry objected to these sorts of media tactics shows just how subversive her Blondie persona was, and how powerful it had the potential to be.

But at that point, the damage had already been done. Not only was Harry framed as a sex symbol, but one whose power had been castrated; the once-aggressive front woman singing “One way or another I'm gonna getcha,” became a fragile doll to be torn apart (both literally and sexually). Music journalist Lester Bangs made this point frighteningly clear in his biography of Blondie when he wrote, “I think if most guys in America could somehow get their faverave [sic] poster girl in bed and have total license to do whatever they wanted with this legendary body for

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<sup>83</sup> Brian Harrigan, “Seeds, Giant Ants, and Blondie,” *NME* (28 May 1977): 46, as quoted in Raha, *Cinderella's Big Score*, 40.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> “In Their Own Words, Part One,” <<http://www.punk77.co.uk/groups/womeninpunkintheirownwordspart1.htm>>.

one afternoon, at least seventy-five percent of the guys in the country would elect to beat her up.”<sup>86</sup> But Bangs was not alone in obsessing over (and misinterpreting) Harry’s looks while ignoring her band’s music. In her biography of Blondie, Harry pointed out the way in which the press exaggerated what she did onstage as a means of fitting her into their sex symbol role:

[The press] always exaggerated what I did, that I tore my clothes off when I sang ‘Rip Her to Shreds.’ Everywhere I went that was the first question I was asked: ‘Uh, yes, we hear that you, uh, TEAR YOUR CLOTHES OFF IN PERFORMANCE? AAAHHHH!’ That was all they wanted to know about, proving further that sex is the universal language.<sup>87</sup>

Harry’s attempt to create a bisexual or asexual persona onstage clearly fell flat with some, and instead she was made up as a passive, sexual object.

This sort of press coverage also obscured Harry’s multidimensionality; her humor, intelligence, and irony weren’t picked up by the press. As writer Maria Raha points out, “Since Harry couldn’t easily fit the temptress slot unless she was stripped of her sarcasm, the industry simply shrugged its shoulders and deleted it.”<sup>88</sup> While many of her fans understood the irony and sarcasm of her onstage character, enough people didn’t to perpetuate the image of Harry as a sex symbol rather than an intelligent musician. Harry herself admitted this, saying, “I made my own image, then I was trapped in it.”<sup>89</sup>

Yet this misinterpretation has not stopped Harry from being an inspiration for women trying to break into the boys club of rock. The most obvious would be Madonna, who took the image of Marilyn Monroe to its extreme and inspired a growing fan base and a future generation of pop stars (such as Christina Aguilera) to do the same. Even during the 70s, Harry noticed while on tour that kids would change their looks overnight to mimic her 60s-mod style. “When

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<sup>86</sup> Cheryl Cline, “Little Songs of Misogyny,” *Rock She Wrote*, ed. Evelyn McDonnell and Ann Powers (New York: Delta Books, 1995), 372.

<sup>87</sup> Harry, Stein, and Bockris, *Making Tracks*, 99.

<sup>88</sup> Raha, *Cinderella’s Big Score*, 41.

<sup>89</sup> O’Brien, *She Bop II*, 139.

we arrived [in Los Angeles], most kids were wearing bell-bottom pants, but by the end of the first week girls were wearing miniskirts, while the boys were suddenly packed into straight-legged tight pants and sporting skinny ties.”<sup>90</sup> Many of these L.A. teens went on to start their own punk bands. Within the New York world of punk, Harry—and her band Blondie—were central figures to the scene’s impact and success. The 1976 documentary film *The Blank Generation* included live footage of the top punk bands of the moment, and amongst iconic bands like the Ramones and Television is Blondie, proving just how vital the band was to New York punk.<sup>91</sup>

The fact that the press was, for the most part, unable to imagine Harry as anything other than a sex symbol makes her attempt (in many ways successful) to undermine and subvert common female tropes all the more impressive. She infused the stereotype of femininity with intelligence, aggression, and power, while simultaneously showing audiences that being a woman was just a construction, a role to be played. She exemplified what it meant to be punk in the 1970s by taking on rock and rejecting what it deemed cool—namely, masculinity. Most importantly, she was able to get up onstage and take control of the audience all while reasserting her femininity, denying its role as a dirty word in rock music.

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<sup>90</sup> Harry, Stein, and Bockris, *Making Tracks*, 55.

<sup>91</sup> *The Blank Generation*, dir. Ivan Kral and Amos Poe, 1976.



### Chapter Three

#### Tina Weymouth: Seen and Not Seen

While both Patti Smith and Deborah Harry, as the singers and symbolic leaders of their bands, questioned gender through their caricatures of either extreme masculinity or femininity, Tina Weymouth went out of her way not to evoke any gendered pose. Not only did she adopt an androgynous, consciously unsexy look, but she was the bassist in her band, Talking Heads. She lurked in the stage's shadows rather than standing front and center and commanding attention by singing. It was her bass playing, rather than her looks, that provided the backbone for the band. But like Smith and Harry, Weymouth questioned the very stability of the gender binary by offering an alternative gender position for young women. Behind the scenes, she was a vital member and leader of the band, acting as accountant and making important decisions that helped put the band on the road to commercial success. She not only presented another gender option to punk's audiences and showed that women could play instruments (and play them well), but proved that rejecting the role of symbolic band leader onstage did not mean that she had to reject her power within the band.

Born to an admiral father and a French mother, Weymouth was raised in a fairly typical white middle-class household, and despite her attempt to rebel, often conformed to the female teenage role that surrounded her.<sup>92</sup> As a teenager, Weymouth developed an interest in rock music and, because "keyboards seemed too typical for a girl," picked up the guitar.<sup>93</sup> But, like most young women of her generation without any female guitar playing role models, Weymouth eventually gave it up, becoming a cheerleader instead. After a short stint studying at Barnard College, Weymouth enrolled in Rhode Island School of Design (RISD). It was there that she met

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<sup>92</sup> Jerome Davis, *Talking Heads* (New York: Vintage/Musician), 30.

<sup>93</sup> Evelyn McDonnell, "She's in the Band: Maureen Tucker, Tina Weymouth, and Tara Key." *Trouble Girls: The Rolling Stone Book of Women in Rock*, ed. Barbara O'Dair (New York: Random House), 430.

future bandmates David Byrne and Chris Frantz (who would eventually become her husband). Yet while the two men formed a band, Weymouth enjoyed music from a distance, choosing to stand on the sidelines rather than take part in their music-making. “I was at every performance and every rehearsal,” said Weymouth in an interview in 1984, yet she was never invited to join them.<sup>94</sup>

After graduating from RISD with Frantz in the spring of 1974, the pair moved to New York City to reunite with Byrne, who had moved there after dropping out of school. Frantz and Byrne began searching for a bass player, but were not impressed with what they saw; “We wanted someone who wasn’t stylistically formed yet or obsessed with technical virtuosity,” explained Frantz in an interview with *Rolling Stone* in 1979.<sup>95</sup> While the two men held unsuccessful auditions after unsuccessful auditions, Weymouth was secretly putting aside \$5 a week in order to buy a bass.<sup>96</sup> One day mid-winter she returned to their loft with her newly-bought bass in hand, telling Byrne, “I’ll be the bass player. Teach me.” Like much of her future onstage persona, Weymouth’s decision to play bass for the band came quietly, as she told no one of her plans until after she bought a bass guitar. Her determination to play music overpowered her notions of what it meant to be a middle-class woman, and by the end of the year she was playing with Byrne’s and Frantz’s newly formed band, Talking Heads.

Talking Heads were not the only punk band that had a bass player without much previous experience, since the entire notion of technical proficiency was rejected by punk.<sup>97</sup> Weymouth embraced this credo when it came to playing bass, placing raw passion before technical virtuosity. In an interview with *Bass Player*, Weymouth explained that, “The point [of playing

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<sup>94</sup> Raha, *Cinderella’s Big Score*, 28.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> David Bowman, *This Must Be the Place* (New York: Harper Entertainment, 2001), 56.

<sup>97</sup> One of the major icons of New York punk, Richard Hell, was respected in spite of his untrained bass playing, Heylin, *From the Velvets*, 200.

the bass] is to move people, not bore them with meaningless technical prowess.”<sup>98</sup> Music critics agreed with Weymouth; the *Village Voice* declared Weymouth to be, “the queen of the bass players,” less than a year after she picked up the instrument, and *NME* said that her bass playing was a, “solid, hypnotic repetitive line that support[ed] the rest of [the band].”<sup>99</sup> Her bass lines formed the backbone to Talking Heads’ songs and created a simple soundscape in front of which their spastic front person, Byrne, would perform.

Weymouth even received praise from those most likely to be critical of her—fellow bass players. John Illsley, bassist for Talking Heads’ tour mates Dire Straits, despite mentioning her lack of experience, expressed how impressed he was with Weymouth’s bass playing:

Tina played very melodic bass lines—almost reggaeish on occasion. They were, when we met, a very primitive band, very uncomplicated, which was a great thing to be then. Tina played very simply. That has a lot to do with lack of technique and all the rest, but it also pinpoints the music in a certain way that a funk bass player wouldn’t. He’d fill in too much. And because there was no real lead guitar player, she was also playing melodic lead lines. What she did on the bass often made the songs. It was very simple and very nice.<sup>100</sup>

She also had an impact on Fred Smith, bass player of the New York punk band Television, who admitted that, “I really liked Tina’s simplicity on the bass. After seeing them I went out and bought a Mustang bass just like hers.”<sup>101</sup> With support from both music critics and fellow musicians, Talking Heads’ position in the New York punk scene was solidified.

What is significant about the praise that Weymouth received was that it had little to do with her being female; instead, it had to do with her bass playing skills. While for some, initial interest in the band may have been because Talking Heads had a female bassist, a rarity in music at the time, it would often be superseded once the person actually watched Weymouth play. As

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<sup>98</sup> Raha, *Cinderella’s Big Score*, 31.

<sup>99</sup> Bowman, *This Must Be*, 4; Raha, *Cinderella’s Big Score*, 29.

<sup>100</sup> Davis, *Talking Heads*, 87-88.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid*, 53.

Lenny Kaye, guitarist in the Patti Smith Group, explained, “The initial interest was Tina, very determined, playing bass. This wasn’t a standard girl role in rock & roll; she wasn’t singing or dancing.” Yet once Kaye watched the band perform live, his interest in her became less about her position as a woman playing an instrument and more about her bass playing: “Chris and Tina, the rhythm section, were really central. Talking Heads were a dance band.”<sup>102</sup> Weymouth’s central position in the band was showcased in one of Talking Heads’ earliest hits, “Psycho Killer,” whose memorably opening notes come from Weymouth’s bass as she plucks a simple yet propelling bass line, around which the rest of the song revolves.<sup>103</sup> Part of what allowed listeners and the press to focus on Weymouth’s playing almost exclusively was that her stage presence was nearly non-existent. Often hovering towards the edge of stage left, Weymouth would stare resolutely into Byrne’s back, to “anticipate any improvisation and to indicate support.”<sup>104</sup> Her short page boy haircut and unisex clothing, such as polo shirts and jumpsuits, only added to her asexual appearance onstage.

Since she wasn’t providing the press with much to comment on looks-wise, they had little choice but to instead describe Weymouth as a musician. For many journalists, it was the first time that they were challenged with writing about a female musician who did not fall into clichéd archetypes (or could be forced into one, as was done with Harry); “Because she could not easily be placed into one of the stereotypes of women in rock, (male) rock journalists seemed left without a category in which to fit this competent, confident bass player who was neither a tough chick nor a sultry vixen.”<sup>105</sup> *NME* described Weymouth as “exud[ing] chaste self-assurance,” thereby removing any sort of sexuality from her actual performance and allowing her to be

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid, 57.

<sup>103</sup> Talking Heads, “Psycho Killer,” *Talking Heads ’77*, Sire, 1977.

<sup>104</sup> Bowman, *This Must Be*, 63.

<sup>105</sup> Carson, Lewis, and Shaw, *Girls Rock!*, 82.

worthy of review not because she was sexy, but because she could play the bass.<sup>106</sup> Whereas many women in bands would draw attention to themselves as objects by dancing and singing as a means of providing pleasure to the audience (to connote a *to-be-looked-at-ness*, as Laura Mulvey would say), in Talking Heads it was singer Byrne who drew attention to his body, with his spastic shakes and paranoid glares towards the audience.<sup>107</sup>

In fact, an article in the *Village Voice* compared the playing techniques of Byrne and Weymouth, assigning the feminine descriptors to Byrne and the masculine descriptors to Weymouth “by making the observation that Byrne was ‘Linus’ clutching his guitar like a ‘security blanket,’ while Tina—with her ‘guttural bass which sometimes seems bigger than her arms’—was the ‘fulcrum’ of Talking Heads.”<sup>108</sup> Weymouth even distanced *herself* from feminine adjectives, stating in an interview in *Sounds* that, “I play bass much less delicately than David plays guitar.”<sup>109</sup> But rather than distance herself from feminine traits in order to prove that she was “man enough” to play an instrument in a band, Weymouth seemed to inhabit a space between the genders, where her abilities and accomplishments argued that it was the music that mattered, not the gender.<sup>110</sup>

But as invisible as Weymouth tried to appear while onstage with Talking Heads, offstage she was anything but. In his biography of the band, Jerome Davis wrote, “Everyone agrees that Martina Weymouth was a very tough woman, a woman who knew what she wanted and got it. Some people hated her for that and others loved her for it.”<sup>111</sup> The love that she received for her

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<sup>106</sup> Gaar, *She's a Rebel*, 256.

<sup>107</sup> Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Film Theory and Criticism*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed., ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 841.

<sup>108</sup> Bowman, *This Must Be*, 73.

<sup>109</sup> Davis, *Talking Heads*, 88.

<sup>110</sup> Unlike women like Suzi Quatro, Joan Jett, and Chrissie Hynde, who took on what is often dubbed a “macha” stance, Weymouth did not appropriate an ultra-masculine look as a means of reinforcing the essentialist belief that women can't play music, especially rock music.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid*, 30.

role in Talking Heads stemmed from her initial encouragement of Byrne, her ability to keep the band focused throughout the span of their career, and her role as band businessperson. It took a while for Byrne to feel fully comfortable onstage, and much of his ultimate success came from Weymouth's early support. "People originally said we weren't going to make it *with* David," Weymouth explained in an interview with *Bass Magazine*. "They told us he was awful, but that just made us love him and back him even more."<sup>112</sup> In the early stages of the band's development, it was Weymouth who acted as advocate of Byrne and urged him to perform onstage. According to Paul Cummins, Talking Heads' road manager in Europe,

I think Tina's always been the one who supported the band, really. Tina's a very strong person and a very sensible person, too. I think she's wonderful. She had a lot to say and everyone responded to that. Tina would keep David in check. She was certainly a balancing power to keep things on an even keel, because they're all artists; they came from that crazy background.<sup>113</sup>

Although Byrne is often credited as the band's leader and was the author of their earliest material, his creativity may never have even made it onto vinyl had he not partnered up with Weymouth. She was an incredibly smart and focused businessperson who made sure that the band got off the ground. "Whether by luck or by design, the combinations of Byrne's creativity and Weymouth's very American go-getter tenacity fueled an extraordinary entity, a rock band capable of simultaneously and consistently expanding their artistic reputation and bank accounts."<sup>114</sup> According to Weymouth, Byrne would have never been able to step up as the public figure for Talking Heads had she and Frantz not pushed him: "We held David's hand for a period of time. Now David's confident."<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Bowman, *This Must Be*, 354.

<sup>113</sup> Davis, *Talking Heads*, 95.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, xii.

<sup>115</sup> Bowman, *This Must Be*, 162.

When she wasn't promoting her bandmates' creativity, Weymouth was taking charge of the business side of being in a band. In a 1976 letter to John Rockwell, music critic for the *New York Times*, asking for potential band manager suggestions, Weymouth was the first to sign the letter, followed by Byrne and then Frantz.<sup>116</sup> Weymouth also oversaw all things financial, acting as their accountant back when few women could claim that job title as their own.<sup>117</sup> Ed Bicknell, who worked with the band (by that time a quartet) while they toured Europe, described Tina as having a,

very forceful personality. She was the one of the four naturally oriented toward the business side of things. Of course, through the business side you can acquire power. Power in rock bands comes through two things: either by being the main creative force or by being the business head. Now, David was obviously the creative force in that band, but she is probably the business force.<sup>118</sup>

Despite the fact that Weymouth made her position as musician—rather than as woman—paramount, others had trouble getting past the fact that she was daring to break into rock music, the bastion of boy bonding. Weymouth faced resistance from the very beginning, starting with Byrne when she offered to play bass for the band. He made her audition twice—the first time to join the band, and the second time once Talking Heads signed a record deal with Sire Records in 1976 (two years after she first auditioned).<sup>119</sup> According to Weymouth, Byrne's decision to make her re-audition, "had to do with David's paranoia. David made me re-audition time and time again... The whole time it was so painful for me."<sup>120</sup> Byrne's many explanations for having this second audition, which no other band member was forced to go through, run the gamut. In an interview with the music magazine *Melody Maker*, Byrne told journalist Caroline Coon that,

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid, 82.

<sup>117</sup> Davis, *Talking Heads*, 72.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid, 94.

<sup>119</sup> Gaar, *She's a Rebel*, 255.

<sup>120</sup> Bowman, *This Must Be*, 192.

“Rock’n’roll is thought of as a male music. I wasn’t sure how it would be received.”<sup>121</sup> But in Bowman’s biography, Byrne claims to have forgotten the incident altogether, and is quoted as saying, “I don’t think I did that. I may have asked, ‘Are you sure you want to do this? We’re going down a road here and it looks like it’s going to go for a ways. Are you sure you want to do it?’ Reconsider things.”<sup>122</sup> In both of his explanations for the re-audition, Byrnes expresses many concerns about women entering into traditionally male arenas; he assumes that a woman will eventually want to return to the home and have children, thereby being unable to commit to the band for the long haul, and that a female bassist’s ability to play would automatically be questioned by audiences, regardless of her actual talent.

Weymouth found her position in and power over the band questioned by Byrne not just through her bass playing, but through her creative input as well. Weymouth’s experience while working on their 1979 album, *Fear of Music*, was a perfect example of the ways in which she did not receive proper credit for her creative contributions. Weymouth, with the help of Frantz, took on the responsibility of creating the album’s cover. Weymouth was shocked to find that M&Co., the design firm that helped with the layout of the album, received all of the credit when the album was actually released. While he has not been blamed outright for the mis-credit on the album, Byrne was the one in charge of writing out the liner notes.<sup>123</sup> There were also problems with the song credits for this album. When the band first formed all songs were written and composed by Byrne, but it soon became a group process, where what started as a band jam would morph into a fully structured song. Someone would contribute a bass line, someone else a drum beat, someone else a guitar riff, and eventually the song would be fleshed out. With tensions high over who would be credited for the songwriting (made worse by Brian Eno, who

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<sup>121</sup> Gaar, *She’s a Rebel*, 255.

<sup>122</sup> Bowman, *This Must Be*, 192.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid*, 103.



produced the album and was considered by some to be the fifth member of the band because of his close relationship with Byrne), the band “took a vote and decided we’d all written stuff; all five names were supposed to go on,” explained Weymouth.<sup>124</sup> But after being pressured by Eno, Byrne changed the credits at the last minute, so that they were printed on the back cover as, “All songs by David Byrne, Brian Eno, Talking Heads.”<sup>125</sup> Weymouth’s contributions were no longer her own, but instead that of a faceless, nameless group backing Byrne and Eno.

Perhaps most demeaning to Weymouth’s contributions has been the way in which Byrne and his followers have reduced Weymouth from a genderless musician to a hysterical, scorned woman. In the introduction to his biography on the band, Davis writes that, “The story of Talking Heads is also the story of Tina Weymouth’s use of power—how she got it and how she held on to it when it was threatened.”<sup>126</sup> For Byrne—and his biographers—it was problematic to be working with a woman who refused to cede power to men, and so it becomes a central point in the story of Talking Heads. Bowman, in his biased biography on the band, frames his argument not around Weymouth’s musical skill and her business contributions to the band, but on her “hysterical” accounts of how their history has been re-written to erase her from it, and how her bitterness stems from an unrequited love for Byrne. In his introduction, Bowman describes an aged Weymouth as “brittle,” “a tragically lame prima ballerina,” and similar to “Valerie Solanis [sic].”<sup>127</sup> Whereas Byrne is described as a virile, active man who is still creatively fecund, Weymouth is described by her deteriorating looks and similarities to the feminist writer of the *SCUM Manifesto*.

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid, 121.

<sup>125</sup> Bowman, *This Must Be*, 183.

<sup>126</sup> Davis, *Talking Heads*, xiii.

<sup>127</sup> Bowman, *This Must Be*, 4.

Bowman belittles Weymouth in every way possible, attempting to make her seem as though she resents Byrne—and perhaps men in general—because she was in love with Byrne and he was never interested in her.<sup>128</sup> This assertion is repeated throughout the book, reducing Weymouth’s interest in the band to little more than a schoolgirl crush. Yet this argument is entirely implausible. It ignores, for example, the fact that Weymouth’s husband was also in the band with her. Refusing to stand by as her position and power within the band was reduced was not something expected of women, or even allowed; therefore, some have found the need to punish Weymouth for transgressing from her assigned role in society by denigrating her in public and re-writing the band’s history.

The irony is that Weymouth began as a genderless musician—a bass player who floated in and out of the shadows while toying with androgyny—but has been turned into a stereotypical woman by many of Byrnes’ fans. Although her contributions to the band have been diminished over time, these incidents just go to show how truly powerful Weymouth was; there wouldn’t be a need to write biographies on the band that put down Weymouth if the writers hadn’t been intimidated by her work, both as a musician and as a woman.

Weymouth wasn’t discouraged from making music, and in fact her side project, a band called Tom Tom Club, achieved commercial success in the 1980s. The group, which included Frantz and Weymouth’s sisters, released their first album—which went gold—in 1981, and had several number one hits on the *Billboard* charts, including the genre-mixing singles “Genius of Love” and “Wordy Rappinghood.” Both were considered breakthrough songs for their use of rap, a music style still in its earliest development in the early eighties. That it was three white, middle-class women rapping made it all the more remarkable.

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<sup>128</sup> According to Lee Blake, onetime love interest of Byrne’s, “[Weymouth] was so in love with David Byrne that it was going to destroy her. That it was a real wild, unhealthy fixation,” Bowman, *This Must Be*, 110.

For many feminist music critics, the fact that Weymouth stood in the background, allowing her music rather than her gender to speak for itself, was one of her most important contributions to a field that rarely saw the likes of a female non-singing musician.

There really isn't that much to say about Tina Weymouth, which is how she seemed to want it—which is her genius, really. Yet without Patti's magnificent nerve or Debbie's fabulous baloney, Tina may well have made the most useful contribution of all. Tina was pretty, and competent, and patient. Except for a historically premature sense of self-worth, she really could have been anybody. And that was arguably what we needed most.<sup>129</sup>

Some music critics, like Evelyn McDonnell, attribute Weymouth's decision to remain out of the spotlight while onstage to a fear of being seen as a gimmick or novelty for the band.<sup>130</sup>

Weymouth herself addressed that gendered aspect of her playing bass in a band in a 1981 interview with *The Face*, in which she said, "One thing I did that I'm glad about in retrospect is that I never wanted to talk about the problems of being a woman. I didn't want to discourage anyone who had the same idea. I didn't want to make it look like an uphill trek, which it was."<sup>131</sup>

That Weymouth didn't want to discourage other women from playing music shows just how aware she was of what her gender meant in the world of rock, and hints at how her genderless pose may have been a conscious attempt at diffusing it. She was aware of the double standard held against women in rock: "Women musicians tend to be treated by critics like women drivers. If they aren't much good, well what can you expect? And if they're hot stuff, it is despite the fact that they are women."<sup>132</sup> For Weymouth, the only way to have avoided this catch-22 was to remove her gender from the picture, so that she could become a musician rather than a female musician. This awareness did indeed help to pave the way for a new generation of

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<sup>129</sup> Dibbell, *Trouble Girls*, 282.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 430.

<sup>131</sup> Gaar, *She's a Rebel*, 256.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*

women entering into rock. She helped make rock music open to women who didn't necessarily associate themselves with the highly-sexualized Harry or the drag-king dimensions of Smith:

For girls who saw a glimmer of hope in the example's of punk's women but were too self-conscious to take Patti Smith's path of expression, Weymouth was the "normal" girl who successfully carried the band's off-kilter, stripped-down funk rhythms. She was proof for those outside of the bohemian New York set that a regular girl could teach herself to play. And she inspired those women who were not interested in singing lead vocals, the more typical path for a woman in rock.<sup>133</sup>

The fact that Weymouth played an instrument regardless of her gender allowed for more and more women to feel comfortable with picking up a bass or guitar, rather than relegating themselves to the oft-deemed "feminine" realm of singing. Punk and alternative rock in particular have been open to female musicians, and by the mid-80s highly regarded bands Sonic Youth and the Pixies had female bassists whose ability to play music was what mattered to their fans, not what they looked like.

Weymouth offered another alternative to society's regulated forms of femininity—a genderless, albeit powerful, alternative. Her onstage persona barely extended beyond her actual bass-playing, as she provided few visual cues to the audience that she was someone to watch and look at. She allowed herself to become a subject onstage, instead of an object, and in the process forced listeners to question their initial thoughts and prejudices against a female musician. She also forced those in the music business to rethink their ideas about women and power; she was an important member of Talking Heads who refused to back down when her control was questioned. By showing that women could play instruments—and play them well—and be active members of a band while simultaneously rejecting the idea of a gendered onstage persona, Weymouth quietly made a very loud impact on the New York punk scene, and rock music in general.

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<sup>133</sup> Raha, *Cinderella's Big Score*, 30.

## Conclusion

By 1980, the original incarnation of punk was—for all intents and purposes—dead. Some bands, like Talking Heads and Blondie, developed a sound that moved them in a different direction away from punk, whereas others, like the Patti Smith Group, had thrown in the towel and disbanded before the start of the new decade. But the impact that Smith, Harry, and Weymouth had on both punk's development and people's notions of gender in rock was immeasurable.

What is most impressive about these three women is that they were taken seriously and became successful regardless of their gender. Smith was the first person in the punk scene to get signed to a label. Her debut, *Horses*, managed to crack into the *Billboard* Top 50 chart, the first (and one of the few) punk debut albums to do so, and *NME* “announced that *Horses* was a better first album than those of the Beatles, Rolling Stones, and Bob Dylan.”<sup>134</sup> Harry's band Blondie was one of the most successful bands to come out of the New York punk scene. The band's 1979 album *Parallel Lines* peaked at number six on the *Billboard* pop charts, and had several chart-topping singles, including “Heart of Glass,” “Call Me,” and “Rapture.” While Harry took a break from Blondie in the mid-1980s to care for bandmate Chris Stein, another blonde caricature named Madonna emerged, picking up where Harry had left off. Since then, there have been numerous singers who have taken on extreme femininity as a means of exposing its constraints. By 1980, Talking Heads had several albums peak in the top thirty of the *Billboard* charts, and had several singles that also charted well. Weymouth's side project, Tom Tom Club, did as well if not better on the charts; her genre-bending songs “Genius of Love” and “Word Rappinghood” reached number one on the charts. All three musicians have been inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, making a place for themselves within the mostly-male rock canon.

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<sup>134</sup> Heylin, *From the Velvets*, 193; Gaar, *She's a Rebel*, 237-238.

All three women were not just innovative because they entered into music, but also because of the way in which they made music. Smith's melding of poetry with punk, for example, allowed her to stand out from the crowd of Ramones wannabes. Both Harry and Weymouth went in the other direction, melding punk with a new sound coming out of New York—hip-hop. Weymouth's commercial success with Tom Tom Club and its rock/pop/rap fusion was unthinkable in the early 1980s, when hip-hop was still an underground sound. Like Weymouth, Harry also melded punk rock with hip-hop; her 1981 hit single "Rapture," juxtaposed a classic punk rock riff with a hip-hop section where Harry raps, name-checking rappers such as Fab Five Freddy and Grandmaster Flash. That Harry and Weymouth, both white middle-class women, could compose songs that would peak on both the "Singles" and "Black Singles" *Billboard* chart speaks to their innate drive towards musical innovation.<sup>135</sup> As disparate as they may sound, there are many similarities between punk and hip-hop that these two musicians picked up on before many others did. Both music genres were born out of apocalyptic 70s-era New York City and were rejections of what was deemed popular at the time. Like Harry and Weymouth, who used punk to reject gender stereotypes and take an active position in music making, hip-hop rejected racial stereotypes and allowed the disempowered to take control of their music. Both punk and hip-hop were more than just a type of music; they were a lifestyle, a way of dressing, dancing, and talking. Weymouth and Harry's foray into hip-hop shows that they not only challenged notions of gender, but of race as well.

Despite their work in deconstructing gender, Smith, Harry and Weymouth never aligned themselves with the feminist movement, and were often at odds with one another. There is scant

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<sup>135</sup> What is today referred to as the "Hot R&B/Hip Hop Songs" *Billboard* chart had been labeled the "Black Singles" *Billboard* chart in the 1970s and 80s.

evidence that they worked together or even created a support network for female musicians.<sup>136</sup> In fact, there was a fair amount of bitterness and competition between Smith and Harry, often attributed to the fact that Blondie's guitarist Ivan Kral left the band to play with the Patti Smith Group.<sup>137</sup> In addition, they distanced themselves from any political labels, feminism in particular. Smith said in an interview, "I ain't no women's lib chick," and Weymouth once qualified a statement about the double-standard in rock music with, "I simply can't be bothered with this [Women's] Lib analysis."<sup>138</sup> Their distancing from the "feminist" label may in part have been because it would have been deemed "uncool" to align themselves with such a public, mainstream movement, or because they didn't want a feminist alignment to then be used against them as a means of denigrating the musical significance of their work.

But it may have also been because they felt that the "women's liberation movement" was not speaking directly to them; if their aim was to destroy gendered assumptions, then the feminism of the 1970s would have appeared to them to be doing the opposite. As Butler argues, the second wave of feminism reified the very categories that they were purportedly against by framing everything under the umbrella term of "woman."<sup>139</sup> For Smith, Harry, and Weymouth, aligning themselves with the feminist movement would have meant aligning themselves with the term "woman." As can be seen with their music, these three musicians rejected the universal notion of "woman," replacing it instead with a varying spectrum of gender associations. Thus, to support 70s-era feminism would have undermined all that they were doing onstage.

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<sup>136</sup> This may have been due to the patriarchal nature of the music industry, in that Smith, Harry, and Weymouth felt that they needed to associate themselves with men over women in order to maintain their position and power within the scene.

<sup>137</sup> Heylin, *From the Velvets*, 161.

<sup>138</sup> McNeil and McCain, *Please Kill Me*, 114; Gaar, *She's a Rebel*, 256.

<sup>139</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 19.

That they were achieving what Butler suggested fifteen years before her book was published speaks loudly to the fact that these three musicians were ahead of their time. Whether they were dressing up in masculine drag as Smith did, caricaturing femininity as Harry did, or rejecting gendered connotations altogether as Weymouth did, they helped reveal that gender was a mere construction rather than a constant. They changed music—both punk and beyond—and in the process ripped gender to shreds.



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