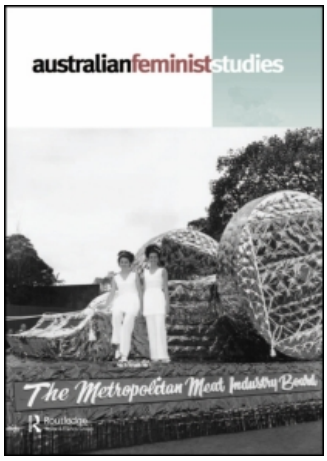

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BELOW THE BELT AND BLEEDING FINGERTIPS
Feminist and Lesbian Music in the Late 1970s

Kathy Sport

In May 1979, a young Kaye Brown found herself alongside many other women at the time immersed in a 'feminist scene' intent on social transformation. Brown began working at the Rape Crisis Centre in Adelaide and quickly gravitated to like-minded friends. Her co-shift worker on a Tuesday night was Judith Haines, who she discovered to her delight owned both an acoustic and an electric guitar, and had been writing and performing songs. Brown decided to invest in a cheap bass guitar and an amplifier to jam along with Haines, and six months later the two teamed up with classically trained violinist Cathy Bluff, and unorthodox bass player Julianne Watts. Pragmatic and practical, Brown switched to drums and was given, out of someone's shed, a kit held together with 'string and sticky tape'.[1] After three weeks of rehearsals, the four-piece all-women punk rock band Razor Cuts was born. It was a hot December evening in a suburban garden at a 21st birthday party.[2] The next night the band played at Adelaide Town Hall.

The following account of a historically situated 'feminist' and/or 'lesbian' music scene is taken from current, ethnographic and documentary film research to map stories of the women whose musical expressions and experiences live outside existing narratives about the history of Australian music.[3] During the 1970s the number of all-women bands grew rapidly in Australia, playing music that was influenced by folk and protest music and then by punk, ska, reggae, blues and rock. Several bands continued into the early 1980s, such as Razor Cuts, Adelaide blues and reggae band Foreign Body, and Melbourne's Toxic Shock. Others followed suit, but many were short lived. One exception was the ska-influenced Sydney outfit Stray Dags, who formed in 1979 and disbanded five years later. The original—and largely non-commercial—music of these bands is not likely to be downloadable as an iTunes-ready MP3 file. While photographs are abundant, the songs exist in their master format on analogue cassette tapes, quarter inch magnetic tape, or as independently produced vinyl, and rely on the willingness of individuals to locate boxes, some of which have not been touched for many years. The musicians in these bands often played in more than one group and tracking the way in which bands evolved and changed line-ups is a complex web of band genealogy common to the music industry itself. For this discussion I intend to focus primarily on three bands that may, arguably, be read as contributing to the second-wave 'feminist' and or the 'lesbian' scene during this period: Clitoris (1975–1977), Razor Cuts (1979–1981) and Toxic Shock (1979–1981).[4]

Traditional musicological accounts of rock and pop music pay close attention to the formal structures, codes and conventions but might overlook questions about what the music can express through a social context that is historical, geographic, and gender specific. Cultural studies, on the other hand, can neglect the unique mechanism of placing notes on a page, and the meanings to be found in the actual production of the music itself

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(Burns and Lafrance 2002, 28). One of the salient dilemmas of this project about all-women bands is the living reality that many women—for different reasons—now distance themselves from 'that time' in their lives. This can be due to a significant change in political, and spiritual beliefs, a change in sexual orientation, and/or more importantly because they consider their technical and music expertise to be unworthy of attention. In particular, some women who have continued to pursue a music career grumble that their first efforts from years ago are little more than 'cringe' material.[5]

Whilst consulting and interviewing a number of the musicians, and at times adopting the stance of an oral historian interested in a subjective interpretation of the past located in memory and autobiography, I nevertheless tend towards a reader-centred approach, which makes a departure from rock journalism's preference for authorial intent. Like other contemporary queer readings of music, this discussion is not so concerned with identities, uncovering the facts, and acts of private sexual preference. I am more interested in public representations and constructions of both feminism and lesbianism, even though lesbian social and cultural activities have struggled to be recorded, and are exacerbated by historical invisibility (Cvetkovich 2002, 110). Among the band members are disagreements and differing positions, and I cautiously alert the reader to avert assumptions about individuals unless explicitly stated. From a cultural archivist's point of view, my aim is to celebrate, document, critique and construct meanings from the public activities of these women, as well as capture the spirit of the era.

Feminist and/or lesbian bands in the 1970s may be characterised in three ways: through lyric content (*texts*); the egalitarian and collaborative approach to the music and to the internal structure of the band (*music production*); and how the music was received (*audience*). By examining the role of feminism, the influence of punk, and the dilemmas of sexuality, I will consider the conditions and the context under which these bands emerged, technical competence and style, and the narratives and ideological positions expressed through the lyrics.

Acoustic Beginnings

By the 1970s, the Australian mainstream music scene was in its so-called Third Wave dominated by the likes of AC/DC, Cold Chisel, Little River Band, Skyhooks and Split Enz. In spite of the force of the women's movement, front-line female singers were still expected to look feminine and pretty. Olivia Newton-John had her first hit in 1974 with 'I Honestly Love You', and it was uncommon for a girl to be playing an electric guitar in a popular context. Internationally, bass player and singer Suzi Quatro, who released 'Can the Can' in 1973, was an exception, while all-girl guitar band The Runaways formed in 1975 but were dismissed as a teenage gimmick. It was not until the mid-1970s that women, particularly feminists and lesbians, began to draw on feminism to mobilise separately from men, and to find the will and the confidence to perform at public social events. Harnessed to a project of enlightenment, self-determination and an idea of liberation, second-wave feminism created a set of universal, unifying principles and activities organised around a critique of violence towards women, lack of reproductive autonomy, compulsory heterosexuality and the beauty system (McCarthy 2006, 70). Second-wave feminist strategies often implied an assertive, pro-female stance, a radical opposition to patriarchy and misogyny, the creation of safe havens, a commitment to equality politics and egalitarian, collective processes, alternative means of production, and a do-it-yourself

ethos (Kearney 1997, 218). In popular music, the rhetoric of movement politics, marginality, freedom from oppression, and the idea of overturning social structures through revolution are situated foremost in the emotion and universal appeal of a protest song, and in the ethos and style of folk music, culturally imagined to be for the masses and about the masses, and in a feminist context is linked to the idea of an authentic self.

Like many musicians, a number of the women mentioned here began their relationship with music on an acoustic guitar, singing folk songs. Haines from Razor Cuts, for example, had a strong connection to Celtic music sung around the kitchen table as a child. Discontinuing music through lack of confidence, Haines was able to pick it up again with a later turn to feminism. Other women could not play a note when they joined a band and were looking for an opportunity to experience a sense of freedom and belonging. Leonie Crennan, who was a member of the acoustic group Clitoris, was so intrigued and drawn in by the sexuality and the sense of liberty expressed on stage when she first watched the band perform, that she took herself off to learn the flute just so she could be in the band. She says: 'It was a mad time, a time of chaos, group houses, sawn off overalls, hairy legs and armpits, and a feeling that the sky was the limit. My son suffered dreadfully.'[6] Acoustic guitar maker and founding member of Clitoris, Therese Jack describes the group as 'a bunch of rowdy lesbian feminist hippies'.[7] Based in the inner city of Sydney in 1975, Clitoris was at times unwieldy with nine members on stage. All acoustic, and heavily folk-influenced, the band often played to a mixed left-wing audience at venues like the Balmain Town Hall. Subsequently, the group developed a close relationship with the Women's Circus, the Women's Theatre and the Pram Factory in Melbourne, and travelled regularly to play at events. Choosing the name Clitoris was both a daring and a humorous public gesture. The word 'clitoris' as a linguistic intervention stated their angry feminist opposition to 'cock rock' and at the same time parodied it.

Clitoris pushed a non-hierarchical and experimental approach to the limit. Known for their chaotic free-form improvisations, the band 'fought like cats and dogs'.[8] Physical walk-offs mid-song, while the rest kept playing, were not uncommon because the emphasis was always on humour and egalitarianism rather than musical expertise. Putting their politics into practice also meant a willingness to swap instruments, even if it held up the performance from one song to the next. Swapping instruments breaks with popular music convention and in this context derives from a commitment to feminism and a belief in inclusiveness over technical competence, and that it was everyone's right to participate. Changing instruments was a practice that continued in many other feminist all-women bands and also stemmed from the influence of punk. It meant the group could sustain less technical proficiency, and place a value instead on the live event, and the experience of 'being there'. By the end of 1976, Clitoris had evolved into Sheila, an all-electric band with different sensibilities.

The Influence of Punk

Against a backdrop of the women's movement and the growth of big concerts by bands like Pink Floyd and The Rolling Stones, punk crashed into the music scene as an anti-establishment statement during the early to mid-1970s. Punk was a reaction against popular music of the time, particularly disco, heavy metal and progressive rock. Songs were stripped down to a few basic chords, lasted on average about two and a half minutes, had faster, aggressive tempos and minimal production values.[9] The Ramones,

The Sex Pistols, The Damned and The Clash came to exemplify this style. In Australia, it was bands such as The Saints, Flaming Hands, and Laughing Clowns. Punk's unlikely alliance with feminisms of the time turned on the concept of the outlaw, and those excluded from the dominant order, outsiders, rebels, misfits, marginalised, disadvantaged, dispossessed, homosexuals and lesbians. The punk rock male rebel, however, was positioned as breaking the rules, as distinct from a vision of feminism that was attached to an idea of creating a new and better social system (Reynolds and Press 1995, 3). Nevertheless, punk connected with feminism based on a strongly held belief that everyone has a right to play music.

Punks maintained that anyone with a modicum of talent could form a band and technical complexity was not required (Whiteley 2000, 98). In an all-women band setting, the idea that women could do anything was both a blessing and a burden. Embracing imperfection and not insisting on expertise was sometimes a trial, and people regularly got bands together who could not play.[10] The benefits, on the other hand, were a rich diversity of music experiences, especially in the act and gesture of being present at the live event, and their audiences were mostly willing to embrace minimal technical competence and low production values. Brown, whose father was a working-class card-carrying Labor man, adopted the anti-middle-class mantle of punk that empowered individuals such as her without any formal training or qualifications to play in a band.

Emboldened by the permission offered by feminism and punk, women began exploring masculinity and gender boundaries to investigate their own power, anger, aggression, and even nastiness (Whiteley 2000, 113). Women in punk bands deconstructed and destabilised the codes and conventions of femininity in music performances by adopting signs of refusal: extremely heavy make up or none at all, short-cropped hair, a safety pin, unfeminine clothing.[11] In Australia, early feminist and lesbian bands embraced the aesthetic of punk's 'anti-pretty' stance in different ways and with degrees of proximity. Razor Cuts regarded themselves as having a provocative energy that was not aggressive, even though to some they may have appeared hard-line on stage. Haines dressed in army shirts, jeans and heavy boots and often wore her hair either shaved or cut short as a sign of intent to disrupt gender.

When punk rock's poet laureate, Patti Smith, released her debut album *Horses* in 1975 she was largely ignored by the music industry but quickly became an icon of possibilities among feminist and lesbian musicians in Australia. The androgynous Smith eschewed feminist alliances but, in spite of this, women imagined her as breaking free from the limits of a prescribed female life, and two of her songs from the *Horses* album, 'Gloria' and 'Free Money', became frequent cover songs. Razor Cuts, for example, performed 'Free Money' as it could be about prostitution and it could be about a lust for money.[12]

The flip side of punk is that it tended to deny sexism. While the movement encouraged women to take up the performance space of the stage in order to enunciate alternative body images, movements and emotions, there were prejudices and biases that worked consistently to marginalise and trivialise women's expressions, particularly when it came to anything remotely anatomical or genealogical. Toxic Shock encountered a particularly misogynistic reaction to the name of their band on one occasion when they were scheduled to play with the more established folk music group Redgum at Latrobe University. Toxic Shock formed in Melbourne in 1979 and played everything from punk, funk, ska, blues, and avant-garde, to wall of sound. The name Toxic Shock was a direct reference to female pathology and to the toxic shock syndrome that has been linked,

although inconclusively, to the use of tampons. The name was edgy, sharp, punk, poisonous, and in-your-face, and foregrounded a woman's potential to be reduced to anatomical reproductive organs. The event at Latrobe University was an opportunity for Toxic Shock to gain exposure to a wider audience. When the gig was announced on mainstream radio, however, disc jockey Peter Grace refused to say the name of their band over the airwaves. Toxic Shock's guitarist Eve Glenn rang the station immediately and was met with a vitriolic rant, and more outrage once Grace realised the band was all-women.[13] Glenn, a talented graphic artist, was then stung into action and with other artist friends assisted in the production of a poster incorporating the announcer's name as Peter Disgrace in bold capital letters to advertise the band's next gig.

Self-determination and Do-it-yourself Productions

The ethos of do-it-yourself productions has long been associated with the punk movement, although it should be acknowledged that DIY has a lengthy history as 'an anti-corporate ideology, an ideology which grounded various leftist movements committed to creating non-alienated forms of labour and social relations long before punk emerged in the seventies' (Kearney 1997, 215). The first female-produced record album in Australia is credited as *The Ladies Choice* (1977) by well-known feminist and cabaret solo performer Robyn Archer.[14] The album features songs with strident and outrageous lyrics for the time, such as 'Menstruation Blues', 'Dicks Don't Grow on Trees' and 'That Old Soft Screw'. Notwithstanding the individual commercial success of Archer, feminist and lesbian bands struggled without a record company or agency to actively market and promote their music, in the way that women-owned Olivia Records and Goldenrod Music was able to do in America.[15] Clitoris has only two surviving live recordings from gigs, while Razor Cuts has one low-quality cassette tape from a practice session. Stray Dags' independent record *Lemons Alive* rated number one briefly on an inner-city independent chart, based on record sales in 1983, but it was a rarity.[16] For a number of reasons DIY was a method suited to feminist bands on the margins of the industry, and was adopted by a few bands in a position to pay for studio time or with the skills to organise fundraising events.[17]

Toxic Shock were determined to make a record before they broke up and gained access to the means of production using the pay-for-it-yourself approach. Their 45 rpm single was recorded at EMI, and to raise the money for the studio time, and the engineer, the band held a big benefit party at the Collingwood Town Hall Supper Room. A dedicated group of supporters who would not normally be caught dead in a frock were enlisted to help. On the inside of the record sleeve is the following statement:

> The money for this record was raised largely by the efforts of a group of friends called 'The Toxic Shock Ladies' Auxiliary' who organized and hostessed a large benefit party which grossed $1,358.00 and cost $350.00.

The 'ladies' also managed sly grog sales in garbage bins in the back, behind the supper room, and fended off a couple of local police who dropped in for a look.[18] Recorded at York Street, Melbourne, and pressed in 1981, the cost of making the single is stated at the bottom of the page as being $1,681:20. While they did not quite raise enough to cover costs, it demonstrates the political integrity, determination, and effectiveness of do-it-yourself principles.[19]

These principles flowed on to organising gigs and performances. Women met and formed bands through share households and political activities, and performed at social events with a mixed left-wing crowd, and/or women-only audiences. Early feminist and lesbian bands did not have agents and usually came by gigs through word of mouth, political activities, and friends working in community radio stations. Women's dances combined the do-it-yourself values of punk, the spirit of feminism and a desire to socialise separately along gender lines. All-women bands often took responsibility for organising the hire of a light and sound system, while associated friends organised the bar.

Women's dances 'invited women to viscerally engage the politics of embodiment and the reality of difference and the creation of new sexual politics' (Enke 2003, 651). For some women, music was a direct extension of second-wave feminist strategies and political goals, and a way of redirecting frustration and anger. Political rallies such as International Women's Day marches were usually supported by women's dances and music from an all-women band.[20] Hardcore radical feminists may have regarded women's dances and being in a band as a distraction from serious political activities, while others saw the dances as 'giving shape to political goals', and linked to broader concerns about women's embodiment (Enke 2003, 651). Local town halls were self-contained and affordable, and therefore popular in spite of their shocking acoustics, as were venues provided by universities, such as the Manning Bar at the University of Sydney, and the Helen Mayo Refectory at Adelaide University.

Song Lyrics

One of the foremost characteristics of reading feminist music is the meaning to be made from the lyrics. Feminist music is represented conventionally as 'pop music with lyrics written from a feminist perspective and usually, but not exclusively, sung for feminist audiences' (Kuhns 2006). Defining a 'feminist perspective', however, is not always limited to an anti-patriarchy and anti-male message. In their songs, women also expressed a desire for agency, and to be the subject of their own history. Mary Celeste Kearney writes that the links between earlier modes of feminism and riot grrls often favours a history that positions riot grrls as the offspring of male-dominated punk (Kearney 1997, 208). This narrative, she argues, overlooks the anger in early feminist music, which also included an uncompromising thread that combined tough lyrics with loud guitar playing (Kearney 1997; Halberstam 2006). Earlier feminist music is often linked to a 'softer' idea of women singing folk and ballad songs celebrating gender, such as the Helen Reddy song 'I Am Woman' (1972) (see Arrow 2007). This type of labelling and reiteration elides the fury and the rage to be found in the lyrics and performances of 1970s feminists, who are therefore contained, rendered less threatening, and/or trivialised.

The current tendency among scholars is towards a notion that women are innovative at the level of music consumption and at the level of lyric content, self-preservation and ideology, rather than technical wizardry and music production (Reynolds and Press 1995, 387; Whiteley 2000, 8). The *rather than* in this discourse devalues lyrics, and technical determination has been critiqued in the past as a patriarchal resolve. The question 'where is the female Tommy Emmanuel or Jimmy Hendrix?' is unanswerable, and further complicated when accomplished women musicians, such as Sally Ford from Flying Tackle (1976–1977) describe a 30-year career as 'in spite of her self'.[21] Women continue to reiterate and negotiate a sense of technical dysphoria, and their lyric content contributions

are not always recognized.[22] Furthermore, the various ways in which women have contributed to the technical landscape of music are stories not regularly told.[23]

The original lyrics of Razor Cuts and Toxic Shock reveal a willingness to express anger, and rehearse and reiterate difference, which pressed the edge of permissibility for women at the time. It was an innovation in the 1970s for women to organise themselves into spaces and activities that had previously been unimaginable. Razor Cuts' own feminist anthem, and band favourite, was 'Au Pair Girl', written by Haines (1979). The song describes female oppression as a pre-destined script: 'Everything is yours if you're / Not born a girl / You can have a career / And blow up the world / You can write your own story / In your very own words / And everybody believes it / Even though it's absurd.' The song ironically imagines travelling to an exotic destination only to encounter more of the same. 'Think I'll got to Paris and be an Au Pair Girl / I want to be an equal / But could I in this world? / I'd love to walk the streets at night / But that's just so absurd / I don't want to be a mother / But I don't get the last word.' Haines sang the fast-paced song with biting, edgy, sarcastic and pointed vocals, while musically the piece uses the sonic drama created through Bluff's lead guitar modulated by an effects pedal throughout the song.

A contemporary queer reading might alter the sense of the words entirely but it is difficult to imagine 'Au Pair Girl' being sung by a man. The meaning of the song depends on the 'I' to be read as female, and relies on interpreting the cartography of gender as a binary between woman and man, whereas current discourses conceptualise gender as naturalised through the recurrence of social performances and therefore potentially fluid. Influenced by second-wave feminism, 'Au Pair Girl' appeals to an understanding of patriarchy as the master narrative from which a woman 'should be' liberated, and expresses the frustration and impossibility of being 'an equal'.

Another central feminist theme found in songs from this period is the burden of domestic responsibilities suffered by universal *woman*, who is reduced to her reproductive organs. The lyrics of 'Housewives', written by Eve Glenn (1981), encapsulates the force of a second-wave feminist desire to be more than a slave to motherhood and home maker: 'Juggle the tea cup / Drum on the pots and pans / Put your foot through the TV / Spin around and stand on your hands / Get out into the world and do what you want to do / Walking the high wire you must eat fire too.' The song uses staccato rhythms and breaking glass sound effects to emphasise the point.

Enunciations of lesbian desire, in contrast, are not so easily definable, or transparently evident in the content of song lyrics. Both Razor Cuts and Toxic Shock included original love songs in their repertoire, although a specific lesbian meaning is contingent to the time of production and performance. For example Toxic Shock's song 'Prisoner' (1981) speaks about love that cuts: 'You know sometimes your beauty is just like knives to my heart / Cos to see you is to love you is to want you.' As a text, the lyrics themselves do not reveal anything that distinctively states a woman's desire for another woman, given that the protagonist is not named. A reader-centred approach allows the work to be named as lesbian without insinuating anything specific about the authorial intent or the author's sexual identity.[24] Meaning in this instance also circles around extra-textual knowledge of the band and the context of the performance, albeit complicated because the bands did not necessarily publicly identify as lesbian. Public constructions of lesbian desire with respect to whom the text is speaking, what the text is saying, and who is doing the singing, in the context of all-women bands from the 1970s and early 1980s is

invested in the first instance with meaning by lesbian listeners, audiences and readers. It also draws on a tradition of gay and lesbian sub-textual reading.

Straight listeners engage with the possibilities of queer readings of music texts in thoughtful ways, however, as musicologist Lori Burns argues: 'music can mean different things to different listeners but given the particulars of a texted song, it cannot mean just anything' (Burns and Lafrance 2002, 49). The notion that early feminist music was always performed to a 'knowing' audience is too simplistic. Not all feminist and/or lesbian bands in the 1970s regarded their music as exclusively for women, even though it was written and performed by women, and may have had a predominantly female audience. It also fails to acknowledge the vigilance by early feminist and lesbians for the ever-present potential of harassment from men unsettled by the performance or looking for a fight.[25] Nonetheless many audiences, both mixed and women-only, were openly receptive to an imagined lesbian love.

The Trouble with a Feminist Reading of Women's Music

American music journalist Kristy Eldredge claims women have now carved their place in music: 'Chicks Rock: No shit, Sherlock, isn't the question as obsolete as cracking eggs in a bowl?' (2003). Her tell-me-something-I-don't-already-know scepticism resonates sharply with the irritation women experience when asked the perennial question 'why an all-women band?', and yet there is always more to add. The term 'women's music' is defined originally as being 'music by women, for women, about women and financially controlled by women' (Lont, in Garofalo 1992, 242). Connotatively, it is used most often in relation to feminist bands from the 1970s and early 1980s and has been critiqued since that time for foregrounding gender over music, prompting some musicians to distance themselves from the category. Which women does it include and exclude, for example? Does it mean all women across all cultures? As a political strategy, if the term is used too broadly it becomes too inclusive and self-defeating; used too narrowly the term is reductive, and exclusive (De Lauretis 1990, 7). Furthermore, which music does it include or exclude? Does it include women who may have defined themselves as having a feminist and/or lesbian allegiance but played dumb 'cock rock' cover songs? What about the women who complicated the categories at the time, how are they represented in this discourse and picture of women playing and performing music? As a cultural description 'women's music' places women as different from, and outside the norm, and therefore a disruptive and possible threat, as Kearney points out succinctly:

> [O]ne of the primary ways the threat of difference can be neutralised and/or contained in dominant ideology and discourse is through the process of exoticisation wherein the Other is placed beyond analysis through the foregrounding of its divergence from the norm. (Kearney 1997, 211)

The fact that Haines signed and modified her body as masculine by wearing 'anti-pretty' clothes on stage, strapped on an electric guitar, and sang about the absurdity of the imbalanced power relations between men and women, contributed to her becoming a potential threat and an unacceptable female musician to the structures of mainstream rock, which institutionally keeps gender firmly in place. Feminists and lesbians during this period were attempting to become active participants in the production of music by organising along gender lines.[26] Yet their performances are imagined by commercial

mainstream music, and to a certain extent the independent music industry, to be unimportant, inauthentic and improper because *women's* music is a place no man can ever occupy (Kearney 1997, 211). The repetitive naming, and labelling 'women's music' systematically positions women as different from men, and out of reach of knowledge and understanding, and the efforts of early feminist and lesbian musicians and their stories are for the most part not found in existing narratives about Australian music. The same might be said of the term 'women in rock' in that it positions gender first and music second, keeping masculinity in its place of dominance and women as marginal. Women are related to 'rock' by being 'allowed in', as Norma Coates points out:

> The 'in' of 'women in rock' has a contingent feel about it, and aura of something that will never be complete, never fully integrated with the whole. As a result female performers . . . tend to refuse it, or refuse the subtextual meaning of the term—'women in rock' as being code for feminists, a contested site in itself. (Coates 1997, 61)

Female musicians, no matter their political and/or sexual allegiances, are irritated by being asked to respond to the 'why an all-women band?' question, which prompted Catherine Mitchell (aka Mystery Carnage, vocalist in Stray Dags and later Sticky Beat) to once reply: 'You feel like saying, oh it's because I bumped my head when I was younger' (Brisbane 1991). Arguably, women musicians are always self-conscious of their positioning as 'beyond analysis', inauthentic, disruptive and different, even when they are playing music 'straight up'. Such knowing produces sarcasm, irony and parody, and a play with self-interpretation and self-deprecating humour, which is also reflected in the band names.

Second-wave feminism is now regarded as masking the context of individual differences and feminism is itself recognised as a contestable term, and yet feminism has been influential in shaping women's relationship to music, as Mavis Bayton says:

> [F]eminism has been a major force in getting women into popular music making. It has given women access to instruments and provided safe women-only spaces for the learning of skills as well as rehearsal and performance; it has challenged ingrained technophobia and given women the confidence to believe that, like the boys, they can be music-makers rather than simply music fans. (Bayton, in Kearney 1997, 216)

Lack of confidence and an underestimation of ability are common themes among women musicians who wanted to be taken seriously in their musical endeavours, linked to the notion of being not a 'real' musician. When Flying Tackle's (1976–1977) saxophonist, Sally Ford played at the band's first gig at the Women's Space in Faraday Street, Melbourne, she encountered the disappointment and obstruction of not having female mentors. Barely able to hold a few notes, and not knowing the questions she needed to ask about music (e.g. what notes go with particular chords), Ford looked for guidance. She found none from any of the mostly male musicians she was mixing with, and says 'it was rough and ready, it was all about having a go and getting the vibe of music'.[27] Happily, cover songs like 'Suffragette City' and 'Lets Stick Together' only needed one note on the sax. A sense of self-doubt is nowhere more apparent than when women began playing electric guitars, and required an engagement with more complex technologies of production.

Haines first sang in public with her acoustic guitar at a Women's Liberation Centre event, performing an original protest song called 'Feels So Right'. Eventually drawn to the allure and power of an electric guitar, she procured a Gibson Les Paul Recording. This was done without a depth of knowledge about guitars, and the Gibson was not quite the sound she was after because it was designed for studio performance. The Gibson was 'too soft and pretty for who we were. I wanted something that sounded a lot harder. I should've had a Fender, but that's what I got, and it was heavy as hell.'[28] In spite of not having exactly the right type of guitar, Haines persisted and was able to create a space in the band to experiment and make mistakes. She describes the feeling of strapping it on her body:

> I was putting my guitar onto my woman's body, which I chose to [define] differently than how a woman was defined at that time. So for me it was setting off in unchartered waters, like going to a really new place outside the paradigm. And the feeling of that power was just fabulous.[29]

It is impossible for a woman rock musician not to be a *woman* rock musician (McCarthy 2006, 72). As McCarthy points out, the act of picking up and playing an electric guitar is a step outside the boundary of gender that continues. The terrain of rock and roll, especially when buying guitars and/or hiring a sound system, usually means an unavoidable, head-on negotiation with the masculine and the heterosexual norms firmly embedded in the music industry (Carson, Lewis, and Shaw 2004, 114). The familiar predicament for a historical narrative of 'feminist' and/or 'lesbian' music is that it can fall into the simplicity of an 'always-already antagonistic relation' between the sexes and sexual difference (De Lauretis 1987, 7). Pro-women narratives can encompass the suggestion of being anti-male (Kearney 1997, 212). This denies the complexity of feminist and lesbian relationships to men, and potentially ghettoises women in ways that disavow a myriad of influences from male musicians, male fans, and 'cock rock's' guilty (and not-so-guilty) pleasures.

Histories of music are 'subject to historical specificity' (Whiteley 1997, xxiii). Feminists did not form bands in the 1970s solely as a reaction to patriarchy, although frustration and anger is palpable and reflected in the collected stories, and in the content of the lyrics. Judith Halberstam's work on queer subcultures is useful here in thinking that the idea of participation in 'minority cultural production' at multiple levels is what the culture offers, in order to reject other texts, and in particular sexism and homophobia (Halberstam 2006, 6). Women formed bands because they also wanted to explore a different sense of self and experience music in a different space, which was at the time linked to an idea of liberation and freedom and belonging. Today, women may form rock bands along gender lines but take time to stress technical competency and musical ability over and above issues related to gender.[30]

The Trouble with a Lesbian Reading

Although historically situated as referring to feminist music from the 1970s and 1980s, 'women's music' is also an interchangeable description often used for what is more difficult to name: music by dykes. Music by lesbians is not always subversive but 'lesbian

music' has an abrasive and antagonistic relationship to rock and at times an uneasy relationship to feminism. Initially, the feminist movement was careful to distance itself from lesbianism, feeling that such an association would damage the fundamental, universal project of securing equal rights for all women (Jagose 1996, 45). By the end of the 1970s, at the intersection of feminism, punk and post-punk, 'women's music' and its associated connotative meanings carried wide political currency. It was often written as 'womyn's music' or 'wimin's music', particularly when the broader second-wave feminist struggle against sexism was dominated for a short period by radical feminism. Yet, at a time of valuing 'coming out' as a political strategy, some musicians felt ambivalent about the effectiveness of the term because it does not publicly name 'lesbian' as such.[31] Others did not care about it one way or the other and wanted to get on with playing music.

In an image-driven industry, the lesbian body and the category of lesbian have always been and continue to be troublesome in the world of popular music. Paradoxically, the music industry itself invites 'fantasy, cross-dressing and camp, but predicates heterosexuality' (Whiteley 2000, 152). Coming out as a lesbian still has the possibility of smelling like commercial suicide, in spite of the presence of international celebrity lesbians such as k.d. lang and Melissa Ethridge (Whiteley 2000, 35). As Lucy O'Brien writes: 'it is glamorous to play with lesbian imagery. If you are heterosexual it's considered daring but if you're not, it's airing your dirty laundry in public' (O'Brien, quoted in Whiteley 2000, 165). A post-feminist imaginary and anti-feminism has shown that resisting and disrupting patriarchal domination of the female body is not a simple matter of wiping off make-up, stepping out of high heels and choosing female sexual partners. Where once social constructionist meanings were assumed to be fixed (lipstick equals feminine equals heterosexual equals subordinate) they are now read as 'endlessly revisable' (McCarthy 2006, 72). The transformation in conceptualising sexuality since the 1970s focuses less on liberation and an insistence on 'coming out' as a means of social change, and more on a delimited lesbian category. Liberation suggests a pre-existence of self-definition; it suggests lesbians, and gays, are 'already there, waiting to be liberated or oppressed' (Berry 1997, 140). Refusing to go along with all scripts by marking the body in playful and ironic ways is the 'new mandate' (McCarthy 2006, 72). The tendency now is to emphasise the specific and local rather than universal changes.

Making a link between a theory of sexuality and the music produced by lesbians in the 1970s is a problematic project. The bands in this survey were participating and contributing to a particular scene or subculture, although this is a term that has since fallen out of favour, with respect to ideas around domination and subordination (Halberstam 2006). Yet posing the question 'are you in a lesbian band?' is impossible and awkward. Like the term 'women's music', it describes and positions music second rather than first, and elicits a range of responses from laughter to suspicion, particularly from women regarding themselves as aspirational, 'music-first' musicians and/or those who may have altered their sexual orientation. Connected to an imagined sense of self, it irritates and celebrates, deconstructs and constructs, agonises and excites, reduces and expands. It frames the social and cultural category of 'lesbian' as unified, coherent, stable and fixed, when in fact sexuality is constantly changing, an unresolvable puzzle with fluctuating practices, which post-structuralism and feminism have now revealed (Secomb 1997). Sexuality as an axis of social inquiry is illuminating but sexual practices move, change, slip, slide, reverse and traverse, and the degree to which 'lesbian' means and matters as a category is variable to individuals. Lesbian as an available cultural category

can mean different things at different times, and now queer readings of performativity, which emphasise non-essentialist notions of gender, and the discursivity of repetitive social performances are the preferred readings of sexuality, as the work of Judith Butler (1990) and others has shown.[32]

Some participants in this survey are lesbian but do not want it articulated publicly; others explored a lesbian sexuality for the life of the band, or might have been lesbian-identified 30 years ago and are now in a heterosexual partnership. Additionally, some band members are not lesbian in private but their music and music expressions might be read as lesbian by virtue of their gestures, signs, dyke-hag proximities and alignments. Bands and female musicians may be read and interpreted as 'feminist' and/or 'lesbian' when they might not necessarily see themselves in the same manner. A number of participants in this study are reluctant to discuss sexuality. With memories and life experiences of homophobia under their belt, caution continues to surface.[33] These subjective, personal and situated individual epistemologies about sexuality unsettle the way in which the forces of sexuality operate, both publicly and privately.

I am reluctant to consign feminist and lesbian bands unproblematically to the category of 'women's music', either homogenised as 'women in music' or 'women in rock', given it is possible to think of feminist and lesbian bands as existing within 'changing conceptions of social transformation' (Jagose 1996, 59). Yet if 'women's music' is erasable as a music influence because of its non-commercial practices and lesbianism is ignored as a social context, then the activity of this community will not take up its historical place as a forerunner to the wealth of women musicians that exists in a commercial and independent, popular music environment today.

Reflecting on 1970s feminism as text driven is useful with the recent growth in pop culture as the site driving new feminist philosophies (McCarthy 2006, 74). Revisiting the past from the present, however, brings limitations. Geneva Murray, for example, uses feminist music and the radical feminist theories of Luce Irigaray and Adrienne Rich to deconstruct compulsory heterosexuality. She comments that: 'feminist music gives women the assurance that their feelings and actions are not the oddity that mainstream society has assumed it to be, allowing women to recognise that they are not alone if they are lesbians' (Murray 2005, 16). What this notion elides is the tension and differences between feminists and lesbians during the 1970s and that may continue. Breaking away from the script of heterosexuality, women in the 1970s found themselves with another set of rules, codes and conventions (Reynolds and Press 1995, xv). Vicki Bell, vocalist for Toxic Shock and several other bands, for example, recounts a story about having a glass of water thrown at her by a woman in the audience for having, on that occasion, a male drummer in the band.[34] These new rules, codes and conventions were at times contradictory and confusing and did not necessarily make a feminist safe haven.

Provocations

Marginal spaces allow deviance, refusals and resistances that are complex, interesting and sometimes traumatic. The band members of Clitoris experienced a variety of internal and external stresses based on their approach to music, and their appearance. Crennan and Jack both remember being arrested at Spencer Street Station in Melbourne ostensibly for making too much noise and disturbing the peace on a train trip from Sydney. The nine members of the band were all taken to the police station, strip-searched,

and asked to jump naked off chairs so the police could establish if they were hiding any drugs. Crennan speculates that it was wearing bowler hats, dressing like men and being rowdy (unfeminine) that created the aggravation, and the heavy-handed response.[35]

As the front-line vocalist and guitarist for Razor Cuts, Haines found herself in a new space of possibilities, and was suddenly self-conscious that her radical feminist sisters might judge her for not being revolutionary enough. To counteract the 'political correctness' that sometimes plagued second-wave feminism she wrote 'Obsession' (1979). Lyrically, the song speaks of leading a life shaped by a particular set of beliefs, and struggling with the limitations of those beliefs: 'I am singing I am fine / I can walk a narrow line / I can be here all the time / I can also tell a lie / I can take the final step / I can do it without help / I can be a plastic creep / Burn up on a plastic heap / How will I know if this is me? / In the shadows you will see me / In the shadows I will be free.'

Toxic Shock's bass player Sylvie Leber and rhythm guitarist Eve Glenn both describe a journey that was met with aggravation. After starting on nylon string guitars with folk music and protest songs at the feet of male counterparts, each traded in their acoustic sounds for an electric guitar with all its associated equipment. Some radical feminists, who equated the electric guitar with masculinity, and cock rock, viewed it with misgiving, as if it was equivalent to 'bringing in the devil'.[36] Glenn says: 'men were criticised for holding their guitars like it was their dick but we quietly wanted some of that below the belt stuff too'.[37] Women who started playing electric guitar provoked hard-line radical feminists advocating acoustic music and less noise as the key to an 'authentic female self' (Reynolds and Press 1995; Kearney 1997). Girls with electric guitars found they could make a lot more noise than their acoustic sisters, although every so often they had to deal with bewildering and acerbic comments dished out by fans.[38] In spite of these problems, a number of dedicated 'rock chick' visionaries of the 1970s were prepared to sing and make music, with all its contradictions, about freedom from patriarchal oppression, and at the same time shake the 'leash of feminism'.[39]

Women playing electric guitar in bands in the 1970s made a double move: first, away from one of the foremost unspoken rules of rock that women do not play the guitar; second, away from a feminist, particularly radical feminist, view about the type of music considered appropriate to feminism and feminists (Kearney 1997, 219). Feminism and radical feminism set limits of play on body transformation that quite a few women musicians found wanting, and were prepared to suffer bleeding fingertips to disturb.

Conclusion

In the late 1970s and early 1980s noisy women grappled with the means of music production, and acceptable female musicianship, and set the stage for other women to follow. Early feminist and/or lesbian bands in Australia formed along musical, social, political and gender lines. Several got together as a direct result of the Women's Liberation Movement and second-wave feminism, with strong connections to social transformation and/or linked to the influence of punk. Others found each other by word of mouth and a musician's natural gravitation to other musicians, seeking relief and escape, as well as—or instead of—a revolutionary call to arms. Women formed all-women bands in the 1970s for a range of reasons and as a response to a set of historically contingent social relations. In the process they negotiated complex problems, many of which were important to feminism then, and are useful to ponder now, in a post-feminist imaginary. Bands such as

Clitoris, Razor Cuts and Toxic Shock, as well as Flying Tackle, and Stray Dags (and others not mentioned here) troubled the codes and conventions of both rock and femininity, and at various times encountered their own sharp contradictions. Their songs expressed rage at sexism and a desire to break away from a pre-destined script, while undergoing tensions and disagreements from within their own communities.

The activities of these bands are significant because they are marked as culturally marginal, unimportant, and/or insignificant through representations under the label of 'women's music', and because of their predominantly non-commercial approach. Early feminist and/or lesbian music mostly placed value on participation and being at the live event, rather than mainstream success, although individuals may have pursued their own personal music careers and some bands earned independent chart ratings.

Younger women may distance themselves from feminism and older women may distance themselves from their past, but even the most hardcore, queercore, dildo-wearing, in-your-face, don't-fuck-with-me-piss-off rock chick will turn to other 'cool women' to harvest encouragement and her own can-do attitude. The music moves, songs composed, and performances by early feminist and lesbian bands may continue to be represented as 'softer' but there is never anything softcore about experiencing limited opportunities and discrimination. The affect drills deep down. It is below the belt and it matters.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

'Au Pair Girl', Judith Haines
© 1979 Judith Haines
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'Obsession', Judith Haines
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'Housewives', Eve Glenn
© 1981 Toxic Shock, Eve Glenn
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'Prisoner', Vicki Bell
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NOTES

1. Interview with Brown, Razor Cuts, 4 August 2006.
2. Bluff lived in a share household with four other women, including Susan Aujard and me. Aujard was dedicated to live performances of music and invited Razor Cuts to play at her birthday party, together with another mixed band.

3. For example, another type of existing narrative of women playing music together concerns 'ladies' orchestras' who graced the stage of the Palais Picture Theatre in St Kilda during the Second World War. See Dreyfus (1999).
4. This paper is derived from a larger research project (PhD) to survey a 15-year period in Australia (1975–1990) through the lens of the female musicians. Currently my incomplete list stands at 55 bands and includes folk, punk, ska-influenced, reggae, blues, rock, heavy metal, experimental, big band and jazz. Almost all genres and styles of music are represented and are signified through an assortment of names: Stray Dags, Escargo Go, Screaming Jennies, Hotspots, Right Furniture, Barbie's Dead, and Sticky Beat, to name a few.
5. I am indebted to Jane Cottrill, heavy metal guitarist with Barbie's Dead, and later Arcane, for a discussion that clarified this point. Interview with Cottrill, 20 July 2006.
6. Interview with Crennan, Clitoris, 3 July 2006.
7. Jack says, 'What were we thinking calling ourselves Clitoris?' Interview with Jack, Clitoris, 25 June 2006.
8. Interview with Jack, Clitoris, 25 June 2006.
9. Although historical definitions differ, punk then shifted into a period at the very end of the 1970s described by some authors as 'post-punk'. See, for example, Reynolds and Press (1995, 306). Post-punk was a move away from the strictly simple chord structures into more complex sounds, for example, The Cure and Siouxsie and the Banshees evolved into gothic rock. Other bands such as Joy Division and Magazine, and British all-girl band The Raincoats formed in the wake of traditional punk.
10. Palmolive from British all-girl punk band The Slits talks about her drum kit sliding all over the floor when she first started playing. See Raha (2005, 79–85).
11. 'The punk movement was intensely political. It was almost a celebration of not having to be an entertainer and it became kind of fashionable to not be pretty and to not be cute and stereotyped. Girls could be really tough and boys could put make up on. It was that kind of freedom. I loved it.' Interview with Haines, Razor Cuts, 5 August 2006.
12. Razor Cuts also covered The Kinks' 'Lola', with all its gender twists and turns. They were an all-women band doing a straight men's song about a homosexual situation and owning it as women.
13. Grace was probably working at the newly established mainstream radio station EON FM at the time of the incident. Interview with Leber and Glenn, Toxic Shock, 19 July 2006.
14. Robyn Archer produced the album with Diana Manson (Archer 2003).
15. Olivia Records was the first independent women's record label created in America in 1973 to record and market women's music (using formal and informal network methods) and was set up by a collective of women including Meg Christian. Olivia Records ceased record distribution in 1988 and the company became Olivia, the cruise line. Goldenrod Music was established in 1975 specifically to distribute for Olivia and is still going strong with a broad list of music. See the entry about 'women's music' available from Wikipedia. See also http://www.goldenrod.com
16. Lemons Alive is listed as number one on the 'Scratches Oz Indie Chart' produced by Scratches Record Shop, Newtown for the October–December 1983 quarter.
17. Foreign Body and Stray Dags both recorded vinyl in 1981 and 1983, respectively. The commercially oriented all-women band Party Girls recorded a self-titled album in 1984.
18. Interview with Leber and Glenn, Toxic Shock, 19 July 2006.

19. Now, with the advent of technological changes and the Internet, many musicians are knowingly turning or returning to DIY rather than be signed to an ineffective label (Carson, Lewis, and Shaw 2004, 142).

20. For example, Toxic Shock vocalist Fran Kelly attended her first International Women's Day march with her mother and sister in Adelaide, and for her that is where it all started. Interview with Kelly, Toxic Shock, 21 March 2006.

21. Interview with Ford, Flying Tackle, 1 September 2006.

22. Patti Smith's innovative lyric style, for example, has been given mainstream recognition only recently.

23. Faye Reid, bass player from all-women band The Party Girls (1983–1986), is acknowledged anecdotally as influencing the production of the largest-selling single 15-inch bass speaker box in Australia's history in 1978, the legendary (EV) TL15. The inspiration came from Reid, who had used an Altec/EV theatre box called a TL606 in Germany as a bass box. Reid asked one of the engineers at Jands, a PA company that makes and hires PA systems, to build something like it for her own use, and the TL15 was born. It officially became an Electro-Voice box in 1979. For more, see the online article about the history of Jands (Harrison with McCartney 2007).

24. Jennifer Rycenga (1997) posits a framework for listening 'lesbian-i-cally' that other authors have since used to, for example, queer the work of P.J. Harvey.

25. Both Haines and Brown, for example, remember being mooned by a couple of drunken blokes at an Adelaide University gig. Interview with Haines, Razor Cuts, 5 August 2006; interview with Brown, Razor Cuts, 16 March 2006.

26. Anthony Carew (2007) describes a recent reunion by The Slits in the following way: 'In the annals of rock 'n' roll, *The Clash* and *The Slits* are portrayed in vastly different ways. *The Clash* are musical geniuses who authored a unique hybrid of punk and reggae. *The Slits* are a bunch of crazy chicks who got their kit off for the cover of their debut album.'

27. Interview with Ford, Flying Tackle, 1 September 2006.

28. Interview with Haines, Razor Cuts, 5 August 2006.

29. Interview with Haines, Razor Cuts, 5 August 2006.

30. See, for example, Gfroerer's 2003 interview with Swedish all-women band Sahara Hotnights.

31. 'How is it supposed to be a declaration of pride and strength', asks American percussionist Vicki Randle, 'when it dare not speak its own name?' (quoted in Carson, Lewis, and Shaw 2004, 100).

32. See particularly Foucault (1978).

33. During the 1980s, other all-women bands emerged in Australia, such as Nice Girls Don't Spit, who took their sexuality to the stage with an up-front, in-your-face style.

34. Interview with Bell, Toxic Shock, 22 March 2006.

35. Interview with Crennan, Clitoris, 3 July 2006.

36. Interview with Leber and Glenn, Toxic Shock, 19 July 2006.

37. Interview with Leber and Glenn, Toxic Shock, 19 July 2006.

38. Feminist criticism of a heavy electric guitar sound persisted well into the 1980s. Eve Glenn played in the punk- and metal-influenced Barbie's Dead (1984) with metal guitarist Jane Cottrill, who encountered outspoken comments on a number of occasions.

39. Interview with Brown, Razor Cuts, 16 March 2006.

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Kathy Sport is an independent documentary filmmaker currently conducting research into a 15-year period of all-women bands in Australia, 1975–1990, as part of a PhD at Macquarie University. Her award-winning short documentary, *About Vivien* (2001), is about a drag queen in the 1940s.