
Book Review: *Revenge of the She-Punks: A Feminist Music History from Poly Styrene to Pussy Riot*

Vivien Goldman. *Revenge of the She-Punks: A Feminist Music History from Poly Styrene to Pussy Riot*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2019. 216 pp.

All criticisms in academia are complicated but when they involve community histories with competing memories, they are vexing at best. As a queer Chicana punk scholar, I find it tiresome bearing witness to punk women and femmes of color writing their own stories and memoirs only to constantly face accusations that the genealogies they advocate *must* be riddled with error—errors which often include not featuring enough men or refusing to identify with Riot Grrrl. Moreover, because punk communities do the unique labor of self-preservation, the stakes are higher for protecting these intergenerational archives by any means necessary, especially those created by punk women and queers. Vivien Goldman’s *Revenge of the She-Punks: A Feminist Music History from Poly Styrene to Pussy Riot* takes on that urgency and offers a chance to explore what it would be like to create entirely new genealogies of punk women from across eras and all over the world—guided by playlists.

Revenge of the She-Punks consists of four robust playlists: Girly Identity, Money, Love/Unlove, and Protest. Each playlist features the names of bands and musicians from different parts of the world, their song titles, the performers’ origins, and the year their songs were released, accompanied by a brief summary of each song’s lyrics. The order of the playlist also organizes the chapter so the reader can easily cue up each song for the corresponding section. Drawing on more than forty-three interviews with women, or “She-Punks,” Goldman curates a music history of internationally based artists beyond the scope of the more famously archived U.K. and U.S. punk movements to challenge the notion that punk has always been a westernized boys club. In doing so, Goldman argues this book is an “attempt at a healing and yes even non-corrosive revenge, as the title suggests,” to help interlock the experiences of She-Punks from diverse backgrounds into a book meant to uplift their voices, connect their complex struggles with race, class, and gender, and celebrate their musical craft. Simply put, the “revenge” in *She-Punks* is not shallowly rooted in anger about women’s erasure from music history, but rather is an instrument of fierce historical recuperation and exaltation of women’s work in alternative music. This is evidenced by the succinct focus on women- and femme-only narratives throughout the book with very little attention to men’s roles or influences. Reading

through, readers will want to have their favorite music-streaming service handy to pull up each band, especially the unfamiliar ones. At the core of this text is the reality that we must demand room for She-Punks on our airwaves. In order to truly participate in Goldman's revenge one must actively explore the contributions of the She-Punks featured and any other She-Punks that may surface from those explorations.

Goldman mixes auto/ethnography, feminist theory, and lyrical analysis to create a web connecting the musicians across time and eras. For example, Chapter Two, titled "Money: Are We Our Stuff?" is an analysis of financial loss, wealth, and poverty through a variety of She-Punks who either reaped the benefits of fame or were subject to the commercial exploitation of the recording industry with little credit in return. Consider the third track in Chapter Two by ESG entitled "Earn It" (1981-1992). Goldman uses this track to highlight the career of the Scroggins sisters from the Bronx and their struggle with fiscal abuse and lack of artistic credit from a handful of mainstream rappers who sampled ESG's catalogue, including J. Dilla and the Notorious B.I.G. In contrast, the track "Free Money" (1975) by Patti Smith, the acclaimed punk poetess from New York and Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Inductee, tells the story of a She-Punk who was monetarily compensated throughout her career. This chapter marks some of Goldman's most compelling writing because the author successfully draws out the spectrum of views She-Punks have had on the right to money and the right to refuse money. The lingering aftertaste of racialized discrimination within the music industry at the end of Chapter Two, while cringeworthy, is a refreshing take on the layered lives of She-Punks whose accounts expose the discrepancies in the distribution of wealth and fame within punk. Additionally, the mas-saging of issues of race and gender into every chapter offers fresh approaches to ongoing debates within punk.

According to the introduction, *Revenge of the She-Punks* was not intended to act as an absolute "one-stop shop" text for all punk women's experiences but aimed to open up dialogue about punk's international impact. Goldman explores this impact by deploying a variety of feminist frameworks, mostly rooted in second-wave feminist thought, provoking questions about race and gender even in multicultural transnational feminist music histories. From the perspective of a U.S.-born Chicana, I found that in order to explain how race and racism were addressed by She-Punks of color, the narratives throughout the text would have benefited from further outside research on the differences and overlaps in the constructs of race in the U.S. and the U.K. For instance, disassociating narratives of Black She-Punks in the U.K. from the struggles of Black She-Punks in the U.S., Goldman missed an opportunity to further engage with Third World Feminisms. Like other mainstream punk histories, especially those guided by western feminisms, Goldman effectively ignores what Chandra Talpade Mohanty explains in *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* as the "complex interconnections between First and Third World economies and the profound effect of [these] on the lives of women from all countries."¹ Other punk histories also

1. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 20.

ignore the imposition of English on countries some She-Punks hail from where it is not the primary language. Moreover, what makes Goldman's contribution to feminist music history with *Revenge of the She-Punks* by far one the most compelling works on women and femme punks is that it still raises the question: what genealogies of feminist music history can be produced that responsibly account for women of color and still incorporate white women? And should those models account for trans issues?

In regard to gender specifically, Goldman's use of "She-Punks" brings to the forefront vibrant debates on trans women's visibility. Perhaps there was not enough room in this edition to carve out the nuances of the "she" in "She-Punks," considering performers from the first waves of punk could not come out or were from areas that still persecuted LGBTQIA communities. The heavy lifting of engaging with transgressive genealogies, such as the ones presented throughout *Revenge of the She-Punks*, requires not only deepening the writing about cis-women in the music history but also unapologetically welcoming queer femme identities beyond the experiences of cis-women. I look forward to future editions of *Revenge of the She-Punks* where this topic is explored more concretely.

Punk has never been above controversy. Rather punk has the inherent capacity to take on difficult conversations and unpopular political stances. Whether a conservative stance like that of Gia Wang from the band Hang on the Box, who supports Donald Trump despite being part of the first all-girl punk band from China (ch. 3, track 3), or a progressive stance like that of Alice Bag, Southern California's godmother of Hardcore, whose remarkable career and music continue to uplift Chicana punks across generations (ch. 3, track 9), all these narratives expose the complexity of being punk of color and a woman/femme. I know that writing/teaching about punk women and femmes is never easy—it is, in fact, quite discouraging at times due to the adherence to masculinist histories of punk. Over time, I have learned students do not have to be fans of punk to admit that they still define punk today as white, male, and straight, despite assignments highlighting the careers and testimonies of queer punk elders of color from the late 1970s and younger gender-non-confirming bands from this current moment. Yet, some students eager to share or search for more punk bands of color often start with a playlist. In a time when playlists and streaming services offer ways to share digitized curated playlists (unlike the former days of burning CDs or crafting cassette tape mixes), discovering punk rock's wide spectrum of styles across the globe has never been easier—facilitating tough conversations around punk, race, class, and gender with the sonic proof that women and queer people have always been creators of punk. I thank *Revenge of the She-Punks* for reminding me that "our revenge is our complex struggle," and any time we come forth with more She-Punk stories, we do it fearlessly and without apology. ■

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