

Foundations of Female Gender Identity and  
Performativity in Rock 'n' Roll: Patti Smith, Joan Jett,  
and Kathleen Hanna

by

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## Introduction

When most people think of the words “rock star” and “guitar hero,” what comes to mind? The most obvious answer comes by way of simply leafing through the pages of any major music publication’s list of the “Top 100 Rock Stars of All Time” or “Rock’s Top 10 Most Influential Guitarists.” Not many are thrown off by the likes of Led Zeppelin, Jimi Hendrix, The Rolling Stones, Jeff Beck, and Eric Clapton topping those lists, as they are the names that have become synonymous with the sexual energy, musical prowess, and raw dynamism that define the genre as a whole. But what is *still* not seen as notable or unusual to the average eye is the fact that, no matter how much time passes or the genre evolves, women are scarcely talked about under these conventions without being perceived as a novelty. Rolling Stones’ “100 Greatest Guitarists,” for example, has only two female guitar players, two women so overwhelmingly outnumbered by male rock icons that, if one isn’t reading carefully enough, aren’t too hard to miss.

As a teenager, my understanding of the rock genre was undoubtedly affected by this incredibly skewed gender dichotomy. It was always my goal to play electric guitar, and it deeply bothered me when salesmen at guitar shops would automatically assume that I needed acoustic equipment, or when my high school guitar teacher would tell me that “I didn’t need to learn to play power chords because women rarely used them.” However, it wasn’t until beginning my college career when the concept of gender identity in rock entered the forefront of my mind. My increasing familiarity with the work of Patti Smith, Joan Jett and Kathleen Hanna and their respective roles as rock musicians made me wonder: what, *besides* gender, is so inherently different

about a woman plugging in, standing on stage with a microphone or an electric guitar, and commanding the attention of their audience with the same vigor and sexual energy as any male rocker? And, more importantly, how does one operate as a woman within such a heavily male-dominated genre knowing this binary exists, working around and/or combating gender norms to emerge as a successful artist in her own right?

Simon Reynolds, in his book *The Sex Revolts*, begins his discussion of women in rock by explaining that, when we look at the “scattered history of female rock rebellion, we can distinguish four strategies,” categorizing the most prominent movers and shakers as acting on one of four distinct strategies for developing their individuality. His interpretation of rock femininity relies on the understanding that women have either taken the “straightforward, can do approach,” pushing back against rock masculinity with equally forceful femininity; the “attempts to infuse rock with ‘feminine qualities,’” rethinking how necessary masculinity is to play rock music; the “celebration of female imagery approach...but in a more provisional, postmodern way;” or an association with the “trauma of identity formation,” reflecting complete inner turmoil with regard to gender identity and expression.<sup>1</sup> Though there is some merit to investigating the understanding of female identity in rock by pinpointing these common attributes, the very nature of this method of understanding reflects aspects of Western mentality that are at the roots of *why* society views the female rocker as an “other.” Because rock ‘n’ roll is historically predicated on the projection of masculinized behavior and artistic expression, there is

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<sup>1</sup> Simon Reynolds and Joy Press. *The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion, and Rock 'n' Roll*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1995. 232-234.

still a limited frame of reference in mainstream culture for understanding the role of the feminine in the genre as a whole.

I initially found this gross generalization to be quite bothersome, as Reynolds seemingly perpetuates the proverbial notion that it is – and always has been – impossible for a woman to break into the genre without being personally categorized or comparatively pinned against another individual in the public sphere. Upon reflection, however, I have realized that one cannot necessarily fault him for this narrowing interpretation of female rock identity. History has proven that, despite significant developments regarding gender equality and women’s rights that have emerged since the earliest roots of rock ‘n’ roll, society cannot help but view women who play rock music as “rebels,” or threats to mainstream social convention. We assign these social roles to the women who have been successful because we have been trained to associate the “rock star” and the “guitar hero” with masculinity, both because of the foundations and originators of the genre, and because the expression of male sexuality is the discernible vanguard of the genre’s aesthetic appeal. To be a woman in rock, so it seems, requires the absorption and adaption of the defining factors of the genre – body language, stage presence, vocal and playing style, etc. – all of whose precedents have been set mainly by men. From there, she must either embrace these factors as they have been set out by society within the context of masculinity, or find away to rethink and reinvent them within a female lens. Whether we like it or not, we live in a world where the interpretation and perpetuation of gender norms is all controlling and impossible to ignore.

This thesis seeks to explore the careers and work of Patti Smith, Joan Jett, and Kathleen Hanna, and the many factors that allowed them to both thrive and come into conflict with society as women in the rock genre. I have narrowed my focus to specific time periods within each of their careers (Patti Smith's first three albums, Jett's transition from The Runaways to Joan Jett and the Blackhearts, and Hanna's early work in Bikini Kill), as I think they are the most revealing with regard to the overarching concepts at hand. My goal in exploring this to analyze the many factors that have contributed to the development and outward expression of individualism in these three powerful female musicians, exploring the importance and validity of constructing a gender identity as each of them built their careers and operated within the public sphere. Using the work of Judith Butler and other influential theorists, this essay will employ feminist and sociological epistemology to investigate the underlying foundations of the perpetuated gender binary in rock and its impact on these three magnetically unique individuals.

My analysis is organized into six chapters, each focusing on a specific aspect of Smith, Jett, and Hanna's cultivation and projection of individualism as female rock musicians. The first two chapters are rooted in understanding the formative influences on each artist's development of personal taste, gender identity, and artistic drive. Chapter 1 explores their artistic and musical influences, focusing specifically on the cultural availability of aesthetic styles, projections of selfhood through musicianship and artistry, and ways of understanding gender. Chapter 2 looks at the community environment in which each artist emerged, analyzing the accessibility (or lack thereof) of certain individuals or social groups that guided their cultivation of

individuality and gender identity and expression. The latter four chapters, in large part, utilize the information and analysis of the former two to explore the ways in which these women chose to express themselves as women, as artists, and as individuals in the public sphere. Chapter 3 focuses on the cultivation of style and the ways in which Smith, Jett, and Hanna chose to present themselves externally, emphasizing the extent to which each woman deliberately expressed their own conception of gender through their appearance. Chapters 4 and 5 relate directly to the projection of gender and individuality through two important artistic realms: visual culture and lyric content. Finally, though all of these aspects of individual expression and conception of gender are undeniably intertwined, Chapter 6 seeks to tie each aforementioned component of understanding and conveying selfhood to analyze how they presented themselves through the *most* revealing means of expression available to a rock musician: the live stage.

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Though the work of many feminist and sociological theorists will be discussed throughout this essay, it is important to explain two concepts that arise in Judith Butler's groundbreaking feminist book, *Gender Trouble*. My analysis is, in part, based on Butler's assertion that gender is both an unavoidable and omnipotent social construct, and on her concept of gender "performativity" – the perpetuation of one's individual understanding of selfhood through conscious and repetitive acts of gender assertion.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge, 1990. 191.



One of Butler's central arguments stems from a belief that society, in order to establish functional social relations and interactions, perpetuates an unspoken set of rules that both dictate and limit the way we form identity in the public sphere.

Because we function in a world so heavily controlled by set boundaries that tell us what we can and cannot do as men or women, where we do and do not stand within our surroundings, Butler argues that

when the relevant 'culture' that 'constructs' gender is understood in terms of [an established social] law or set of laws, then it seems that gender is as determined and fixed as it was under the biology-is-destiny formulation. In such a case, not biology, but culture, becomes destiny.<sup>3</sup>

This concept relates quite significant to the information discussed in the first two chapters, as it is important to note the established cultural norms that subconsciously and consciously directed each of these artists to identify with, interpret, and express conceptions of gender in everyday life and as individuals in the public sphere. Thus, the cultivation of gender formation in society for Smith, Jett, and Hanna was rooted in the perpetuation of what society had cultivated *before* them, and by what it allowed for within the existing cultures in which they became known.

The concepts of social law and cultural construction of gender are the bases for Butler's theory of gender *performativity*: because gender is a learned concept rather than an inherent part of human nature, she argues that we as individuals have no choice but to constantly reaffirm our gender within preexisting cultural boundaries. This reaffirmation, as it were, is the only way we understand both our own gender identity and that of those around us. She argues,

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 11.

That gender reality is created through sustained social performances means that the very notions of an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity are also constituted as part of the strategy that conceals gender's performative character and the performative possibilities of proliferating gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality.<sup>4</sup>

The extent to which we are allowed to understand gender and its social boundaries, therefore, highly determines – and constrains – our ability to “perform” in a feminine or masculine manner, and simultaneously dictates the things we deny within gender performativity as things we do *not* identify with. Moreover, the fact that “masculinist domination” and “compulsory heterosexuality” are implicitly understood to be the foundations of these boundaries means that any deviation from conventional standards of femininity as being socially *subordinate* almost always creates tension or conflict in some form.

Judith Butler's multifaceted analyses of the ways in which we interpret and express gender is invaluable within the context of female gender identity and rock 'n' roll. The ideas of social law, cultural gender construction and perpetuation, and performativity continually influenced the ways in which artists like Patti Smith, Joan Jett, and Kathleen Hanna have been – and not been – allowed to operate within the public sphere. It is my hope that an exploration of gender identity and performativity as it relates to these women may begin to shed light on whether or not it is possible to answer one of the most crucial questions that Butler poses in this seminal body of work: “If gender is constructed, could it be constructed differently, or does its constructedness imply some form of social determinism, foreclosing the possibility of agency and transformation?”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 192-193.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 11

## Chapter 1: The Sincerest Form of Flattery? – Artistic Influences in their Formative Years

In order to understand the formation of selfhood of each of these individuals on both the private and public levels, one must first look at the cultural figures that were available to Patti Smith, Joan Jett, and Kathleen Hanna alike as they began to cultivate their identities and personal taste in their formative years. In talking about gender and music specifically, it is imperative not only to look at those musicians who came before them and how they *themselves* expressed their individuality and artistry, but also *how* and *why* these individuals were influential in context. As Judith Butler would assert, one can only begin to understand how each of these women came to see their gender by analyzing the ways in which their predecessors inspired them – or who taught them what they *didn't* want to be – expressed their *own* gender and operated in their surrounding environment.

Patti Smith, raised in rural New Jersey in the 1940's, developed her artistic preferences and worldview in large part through her inherent disassociation with conventional female gender identity, reflected in the personas and work of those who inspired her. Part of this is derived from an inborn need to both deny acknowledging gender in place of grander artistic and spiritual endeavors; she says in an interview in Cologne that “I don't limit my ideas of myself to gender. I've always fought against that... you don't say male artist, male painter, [...] so for me I don't like to confine myself by gender.”<sup>6</sup> However, it can be argued that much of her opinion on gender is taken from the fact that, at the time she was growing up, there were very few female

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<sup>6</sup> “Patti Smith about the Gender Question (Cologne 2002).” *atropina76*. YouTube. 24 October 2008. 1 February 2013. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TSW4ONnQfJE>>

role models, artists, or musicians with whom her artistic and aesthetic preferences aligned. Smith recounts that, “when [she] was a teenager, [she] listened to Nina Simone, another strong female. But in terms of women [she] could relate to, there weren’t too many. [She] related to Lotte Lenya, but [she] related more to Bob Dylan. [She] loved Billie Holiday, but as a performer [she] related more to Mick Jagger.”<sup>7</sup> The assertion that she could appreciate – but not identify with – the feminine qualities associated with performers like Simone and Holiday in the worlds of jazz and blues proves that, for Smith, her attraction to the beat generation and the early greats in rock ‘n’ roll came with an association between a specific art form and its associated masculinity. Her attraction to the archetypal rock ‘n’ roll swagger conveyed through the likes of Mick Jagger and Jim Morrison – contrasted with the poetic perceptiveness of figures like Bob Dylan – proved that Smith was not simply inspired by male influences, but by an amalgamation of artistic and aesthetic qualities that, in reality, had only been accessible to male artists at the time.

In analyzing her greatest influences as a teen and young adult, one can also argue that the most influential voices in Smith’s eyes – or at least the voices that spoke to her most unequivocally – possessed manners of perceiving the world that poetically and artistically *surpassed* that of the individual, representing the philosophical, the metaphysical, and the spiritual elements that drove her work throughout her career. One of these individuals was Bob Dylan, who, as Smith herself reflects,

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<sup>7</sup> David Fricke. “Patti Smith.” *The Rolling Stone Interviews*. Jann S. Wenner and Joe Levy ed. New York: Back Bay Books, 2007. 381.

was somebody to be with, somebody to be. He gave voice to my yearnings. His urgency, his awkwardness, matched my own. I adopted his walk, his Wayfarers, and his tarantula look, with just the right white tab collars and black jacket, which he probably adopted from Baudelaire. I borrowed from him as he borrowed from others.<sup>8</sup>

By asserting that her desire to express herself was, like Dylan's, more of a need to translate and reinvent the work of her greatest inspirations into something of personal value stems from the fact that she felt significant disconnect from her immediate surroundings, occupying the social role of a "skinny loser, the subject of much ridicule as [she] perched on the lowest rung of high school's social ladder."<sup>9</sup> Her need to make sense of the world through a grander, more poetic lens was hugely influential in developing a career that celebrated the social pariah, the individual brave enough to exist "outside of society," something that will be discussed at great length in later chapters. She took a similar liking to Little Richard, who she describes as "a person that was able to focus a certain physical anarchistic and spiritual energy into a form, which we call rock 'n' roll."<sup>10</sup> Her fondness for Little Richard alludes to her gravitation towards those who were able to transform societal otherness into an effectively expressive aspect of their musicianship and public persona, as his ability to test and transcend existing conceptions of gender and race were defining factors in his career. Moreover, the distinction she makes between idolizing a person in their own right and feeling inspired by someone who represents a certain ideal or desirable existential goal underscores her assertion that she has always been "more materialistic

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<sup>8</sup> Patti Smith. "We Can Be Heroes: Smith on the poets and pop stars who rescued her from teenage hell." *Details Magazine*. July 1993.

<sup>9</sup> Patti Smith. *Just Kids*. New York: Ecco, 2010.12.

<sup>10</sup> "Patti Smith Interviewed by Tom Snyder, May 11 1978." *tom51*. YouTube. 23 February 2009. December 2012. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iNg19CH9AwY>>

about [her] soul than [she is] about objects.”<sup>11</sup> This, in and of itself, contributed boundlessly to the formulation of her opinions regarding gender expression, assertion of individualism, and interpretation of the world through her art in years to come.

For Joan Jett, however, gender expression and artistic influence came completely adjoined, as those who Jett cites as her greatest influences all exuded a very specific hard rock/ punk rock aesthetic that she emulated and later defined in her own way as her signature style, both musically and physically. Like Patti Smith, Jett’s main frame of reference for rock music as a genre derived almost exclusively from male artists, as there were almost no female predecessors that she identified with to the extent that she did with artists like Led Zeppelin, T. Rex, and The Rolling Stones. In Todd Oldham’s biography *Joan Jett*, she reflects on a specific memory from high school that perfectly explains the disconnect she felt from those around her, especially her parents, regarding her affinity for the rock genre:

I can remember getting into an argument with my mother about a Zeppelin song. I think it was “Whole Lotta Love.” There’s this part with all these weird noises, and we were arguing about whether it was music or not, and then my brother agreed with her. The two of them made me so mad.<sup>12</sup>

The “weird noises” she refers to, as it were, are the highly sexualized combination of Robert Plant’s vocals and Jimmy Page’s production of experimental guitar licks and slides that intentionally invoke the male-specific, aggressively confrontational sexuality that was so common for Led Zeppelin and their contemporaries. Thus, it is safe to say that from an early age, Jett was attracted both as listener and as future performer to aspects of hard rock and early heavy metal that had neither been

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Todd Oldham and Kathleen Hanna. *Joan Jett*. Los Angeles, CA: Ammo, 2010. No page numbers available.

experimented with by women nor were associated with women in any other way but as *receivers* of this sexual energy.

Beyond the mere appeal of the male-dominated rock *aesthetic* of the time, she was also drawn to a style of musicianship – specifically guitar playing – that women had also not yet touched in any notable way. She recalls that, before actually learning to play the guitar herself, “[she] made up [her] mind that [she] wanted to play rhythm guitar, not lead, but more like Chuck Berry and Keith Richards.”<sup>13</sup> This assertion of a desire to play a certain *type* of rhythm guitar, not just rhythm guitar in general, shows how attuned she was to the specifics of rock musicianship, and discredits the proverbial association with female passivity and an innate aversion to learning lead guitar. However, the male artists she cites as influences stand apart quite substantially from the female rhythm guitarists that came before her, as the small percentage of women who actually played guitar *at all* typically played softer, more characteristically feminine music, such as Joni Mitchell or Joan Baez. Jett’s assertion of her desire to play stereotypically masculine rhythm guitar, then, expresses not only an affinity for a style of music, but the cultural undertones (sexual expression, toughness, masculine energy) that the style invokes.

Despite the discontinuity in Joan Jett’s gender association with the male rockers that predominated her cultivation of musical and aesthetic preference, she cites one of the only well-known female rockers playing within a similar musical realm, Suzi Quatro, as heavily influential in her desire to become a musician. As Gillian Gaar recounts, “Quatro’s example would serve as an inspiration for future

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

female performers; Joan Larkin, for one, was impressed enough with [her] that she picked up a guitar herself and, as ‘Joan Jett,’ went on to establish the Runaways in the mid-70s.”<sup>14</sup> Jett’s ability to connect with Quatro was important not only on a music-level, but also provided her with a relatable female style icon, and an example of an individual capable of breaking through gender barriers in rock culture. Joan never doubted the personal pull she felt towards playing rock music herself, as she asserts that, even as young as 12 years old, she went to her first rock concert (Blue Oyster Cult, Black Sabbath, and Black Oak Arkansas) and remembers thinking, “wow, that’s what I want to do. Be on stage and sweat and play my guitar.”<sup>15</sup> However, without Quatro’s influence on her at an early age, she would have been left to break gender and cultural barriers with almost no frame of reference as to how to do so, learning, as Mary Ann Clawson notes, “to interpret and negotiate [her] presence within a social system predicated on and constructed around [female] absence.”<sup>16</sup> Though male rockers taught Joan the *appeal* of the genre and gave her the basis for which she was able to cultivate her aesthetic as a musician, Suzi Quatro is arguably one of her most important influences, as she represented the possibility for acting upon one’s desires to play rock music despite societal gender limitations.

For Kathleen Hanna, the development of musical preference and the desire to deliberately call attention to female gender and sexuality in her work didn’t necessarily align. When she and her fellow band mates began writing music and performing, punk music – and the female musicians who brought it into popularity in

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<sup>14</sup> Gillian Gaar. *She’s a Rebel: The History of Women in Rock & Roll*. Seattle, WA: Seal, 1992. 181.

<sup>15</sup> Oldham and Hanna.

<sup>16</sup> Mary Ann Clawson. “Not Just Girl Singer: Women and Voice in Rock Bands.” *Negotiating at the Margins*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993. 239.



the late 70s and early 80s – had more or less faded into the background of the music industry, leaving a significant lack of female rock musicians and performers for inspiration. Joanna Gottlieb and Gayle Wald argue that “the seemingly ‘new’ entrance of women into rock culture” that Bikini Kill and the Riot Grrrl movement represented “had been seen before... artists like Debbie Harry, Chrissie Hynde, Siouxi Sioux, etc. also seemed to herald a fundamental change in the roles available to women as performers.”<sup>17</sup> However, because punk music had transformed into a more male-dominated hardcore scene, the cultural understanding of what punk had *been* versus what punk had *become* was significant. Hanna notes that, despite admiring – and later collaborating with – the likes of Joan Jett and other strong female presences in the rock music genre, her frame of reference for “punk” as it was understood for her generation came from growing up listening to Molly Hatchet and other hyper-masculine punk/ hardcore bands.<sup>18</sup> Thus, despite cultivating a specific musical taste that she would later pull from in creating her own style of rock, Hanna and those in the emerging Riot Grrrl scene were not necessarily operating within a rock genre directly influenced in feminine strength or prowess.

Moreover, the culturally instated gender divergence that Hanna represented by playing traditionally masculine music was, to some extent, due in part to the influence of other female punk bands that preceded them, such as L7 and Babes in Toyland.

These bands, and other female hard-rockers that came before them, became

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<sup>17</sup> Joanne Gottlieb and Gayle Wald. “Smells like Teen Spirit.” *Microphone Friends: Youth Music & Youth Culture*. Tricia Rose and Andrew Ross ed. New York: Routledge, 1994. 255.

<sup>18</sup> Christina Werthman. “Q&A: Bikini Kill’s Kathleen Hanna- On leaving Kill Rock Stars, reissuing the band’s catalog and why she’d sometimes rather talk about the weather than riot grrrl.” *CMJ*. 7 November 2012. December 2013. <<http://www.cmj.com/feature/qa-kathleen-hanna-of-bikini-kill>>

associated with what was known as “angry girl band” culture, something that, according to Wald and Gottlieb, “foregrounds the fact that in the history of rock and roll, as well as in the dominant culture, anger has been largely understood as an all-male terrain.”<sup>19</sup> The dominant culture’s need to lump female musicians with *emotion*, versus simply identifying their music to a *genre*, as is done with most male-dominated rock, was absolutely influential in the emergence of Riot Grrrl feminist counterculture. Sara Marcus recounts in an interview with Hanna that, at one of the Babes in Toyland concerts she attended in the early 90s,

“Everyone was debating,” Kathleen said, “could they play their instruments, was it fucked up that they were pretty – what are they supposed to do, wear bags on their head? – was it fucked up that she was wearing a dress: All this kind of ridiculous questioning! And me and [fellow Bikini Kill members] Tobi and Kathi were just like, that’s the most amazing thing we’ve ever seen.”<sup>20</sup>

The marked difference in the way Hanna and her peers viewed these women – compared to the way the mainstream masses had come to view them – not only points to a distinct generational separation between the original punk scene and 90’s punk, but also explains the precedent that was set for those involved in the Riot Grrrl movement with regard to the performative assertion of their *own* gender ideals.

The notable discordance in society between the rock music genre and the way female punk musicians were received seemingly set “angry girl bands” apart as unique inspiration for Hanna and other Riot Grrrls. However, she reflects that, despite identifying with the musicianship and *aesthetic* that these bands exuded, their mindsets with regard to being identified as a female musician were significantly at odds. “At the same time that Bikini Kill was like ‘We want to talk about women,’”

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<sup>19</sup> Gottlieb and Wald. 254.

<sup>20</sup> Sara Marcus. *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2010. 45.

Marcus reflects, “L7 and Babes in Toyland were not giving interviews about that. And PJ Harvey was like ‘do *not* talk about me as a woman artist.’”<sup>21</sup> Thus, despite the fact that there *did* exist a small number of strong female role models in the rock music scene, the fact that Bikini Kill “not only operated in a time where there weren’t a lot of women bands [but also where] there weren’t a lot of women in bands specifically saying, ‘we’re feminists,’”<sup>22</sup> as Hanna herself comments, is crucial. Her opposition to this refusal to associate with gender, therefore, was seemingly as influential as her ability to relate to those who fuelled her artistic motivation; as Sara Marcus states, Bikini Kill’s assertion of gender “was almost a reaction to the people who were saying ‘don’t call us women.’”<sup>23</sup> Thus, without having individuals or bands that helped to define what she and the Riot Grrrls *didn’t* want to stand for, they may have not been as able to define what they *did* want in their careers from the get-go.

Though musical influences and inspiring individuals all played crucial roles in all three individuals’ decisions to become musicians, it is equally (if not *more*) important to look at the artistic and cultural communities that they operated within in their formative years: what was it about the artist’s surroundings and fellow peers that either allowed to develop individually, or perpetuated a sense of societal opposition to their ideals that fuelled certain personal and artistic decisions? In each case, the prevailing cultural environment and individuals within them were the backbone behind Smith, Jett, and Hanna’s cultivation of artistic motivation, personal ideals, and drive for self-expression as a whole.

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<sup>21</sup> Sara Marcus. Personal Interview. February 2013.

<sup>22</sup> Werthman. “Q&A: Bikini Kill’s Kathleen Hanna.”

<sup>23</sup> Marcus. Personal Interview.

## Chapter 2: A Product of One's Surroundings – Gender Construction and Community Context

One of the most elemental aspects of gender performativity stems from the idea that one can only cultivate a sense of selfhood within a community of like-minded individuals who both comprehend and express concepts of gender and individuality in a certain manner. In order to understand the way Smith, Jett, and Hanna came to perceive and express their roles as women, it is important not only to look at who came *before* them, but also who *surrounded them*, and the prevailing mentalities that allowed them (or challenged them) to be who they were. As Sara Marcus so accurately conveyed to me, “it’s hard to effectively call other people to community if it’s something that you haven’t known. You could call for it out of your great need for it, but if you don’t have a version of that inside your mind or inside your heart, how do you craft it for others?”<sup>24</sup> For Patti Smith and Kathleen Hanna, the group mentalities of their artistic communities proved to be the vessels by which both women were able to create their roles in society as both musicians and public figures. Joan Jett, on the other hand, began her career within a culture predicated on exploiting female rockers as commodity, and then had to work within that realm to effectively combat and rise above predetermined gender notions in the industry and the existing culture at large. Though each of these women had highly individualized and specific relationships with their environment, all three are undeniably the products of the culture in which their work and understanding of the self were bred.

Patti Smith’s artistic career emerged out of both an incredibly progressive and highly culturally transformative art scene in downtown New York in the 1970’s, a

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<sup>24</sup> Sara Marcus. Personal Interview. February 2013.

scene predicated on the idea that social status was determined not by wealth or nepotism, but by the specific intellectual capacity and avant-garde artistic style celebrated in Manhattan youth culture. Max's Kansas City, a nightclub downtown that was a hotspot for visual artists, musicians, writers, and socialites, was one example of a highly concentrated social epicenter that fuelled the artistic sensibility of the era, and provided a vessel for Smith to both explore her self-perception and become deeply embedded in the pool of like-minded individuals. Despite being a tough scene to enter into – as those who attended, mainly dominated by Andy Warhol and his “superstars,” tried to uphold a certain glamorous aesthetic that neither she nor Robert Mapplethorpe quite fit – their uniquely androgynous personas and persistent desire to be exposed to the scene eventually captured the attention of those around them. According to Victor Bockris, ““No one [at Max's] knew quite what to make of them at first. Were they lovers, siblings, or best friends? Straight, bisexual, or gay? Artists, writers, or groupies? Luckily, no one really cared: Max's housed a scene where such ambiguity was itself a form of cachet.”<sup>25</sup> Because it was considered trendy to both oppose and test the boundaries of mainstream society, especially with regard to gender construction, Smith was lucky enough to find herself in a position where her unique intellect and innate denial of femininity were admired. Moreover, the predominant subculture also thrived on the cultivation of the *spectacle*, as reflected in the concept of the “Outrageous Lie,” a cultural practice whereby each individual would invent outlandishly fabricated identities and personal anecdotes to

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<sup>25</sup> Victor Bockris and Roberta Bayley. *Patti Smith: An Unauthorized Biography*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999. 58.

further their cultural prestige and reputation amongst others in the art scene. As famed photographer Lee Black Childs recounts,

There was no possible reason that Patti should have been a great star, on the face of it. If you analyzed what she had going for her – nothing. Don't ever analyze! Because she had everything going for her – it was her brain. And she used the Outrageous Lie like we all did – to bridge the gap; to get in Max's Kansas City, to get into St. Mark's Church. Once she was there, there was no doubt in anybody's mind that there was some amazing something happening.<sup>26</sup>

The opportunity to manifest poetic intellect into a poetic and hyperbolic lifestyle provided Smith the ultimate vessel for outwardly creating the persona she had always felt was inside her. By pulling from her greatest creative influences and possessing the artistic freedom to express herself in whatever manner she chose, Downtown New York youth culture not only encouraged her to truly define who she was as an individual within the emergent scene, but also gave her the support and physical space to do so.

Another crucial location that fueled Smith's self-discovery and expression of identity was The Chelsea Hotel, which was not only home to many renowned writers, musicians, and artists, but was an iconic gathering spot for those who she most deeply admired. As Nick Johnstone reflects, "the cult of celebrity that grew around the hotel would have strongly attracted Patti, as it gave her opportunity to play being famous, while studying those who actually were."<sup>27</sup> Individuals like Bob Dylan, Allen Ginsberg, Andy Warhol, and William S. Burroughs – all of whose work was of substantial influence to her in her formative years – were at her disposal, and yet, as she reflects in *Just Kids*, they existed in an environment without a sense of pretention: "I stood there amazed, yet I didn't feel like an intruder. The Chelsea was my home...

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 63-4.

<sup>27</sup> Nick Johnstone. *Patti Smith: A Biography*. London: Omnibus Press, 1997. 40-1.

there was no security guards, no pervasive sense of privilege.”<sup>28</sup> The fact that The Chelsea provided easy accessibility to the most culturally influential individuals in an environment removed from elitist stigmas gave Smith not only a unique sense of freedom to explore her place in society amongst New York’s greatest public figures; by also removing the need for personal comparison between individuals, the crowd at The Chelsea allowed Smith to learn from others and cultivate her sense of being without judgment or cultural constriction.

Aside from her interactions with those involved in the scene in the early and mid 1970’s, her romantic and intellectually intimate relationships with photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, musician Bob Neuwirth, and playwright Sam Shepard exposed her to new ways of artistic thought and embodiment. More than anything, each of these relationships allowed her, as she had always desired, to transcend gender boundaries in search of and replaced by truly enlightened creative expression. These three men, ironically, allowed her to “transition from wanting to be a tragic mistress to aspiring to be an artist,”<sup>29</sup> as her romances were more of hyper-artistic partnerships than conventional male-female relationships. The first, and arguably most influential of the three, was Robert Mapplethorpe, who was not only her partner in self-discovery as they both came into their own in New York, but was also the individual who first fueled her artistic and poetic energy; her relationship with him “had been a catalyst for her, and the more enthusiastic he was about her work, the more she progressed.”<sup>30</sup> Saying that the influence of a male partner was the driving force

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<sup>28</sup> Patti Smith. *Just Kids*. New York: Ecco, 2010. 107.

<sup>29</sup> Johnstone. 41.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* 41.

behind her creative development and understanding of identity somewhat devalues her personal development in her own right. However, Mapplethorpe's encouragement of her pursuits in writing and art fulfilled her dream of becoming the "Frida to Diego, both muse and maker...[of finding] an artist to love and support and work with side by side," breaking preconceived notions of male-female relationships in place of a truly enriching and pivotal partnership.<sup>31</sup>

Her relationships with Neiuwirth and Shepard, though less publicly known than the one with Mapplethorpe, also exposed her to new forms of personal expression and allowed her to connect with those in the art and music world around her in momentous ways. As Victor Bockris explains, "If Mapplethorpe had been the one who championed her drawings and obsession with art, then it was her meeting with Bob Neuwirth that encouraged her to call herself a writer... his influence freed her from being seen as just another groupie, and suddenly she found herself introduced as an aspiring poet."<sup>32</sup> By taking the self-expressive and creative drive that Smith began to cultivate with Mapplethorpe and introducing her to individuals such as William S. Burroughs and Janis Joplin, he encouraged her not only to develop her own voice by absorbing the ones around her, but to see herself as a worthy contender amongst those who were already well known in the prevailing culture. Shepard, too, was an important individual in helping Smith cultivate her poetic voice: as Smith reflects,

I learned from Sam because Sam is one of the most magical people I've ever met. Sam is really the truest American I've ever met, in as far as he's also hero-oriented...His whole life moves on rhythms. He's a drummer. That's why Sam and I

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<sup>31</sup> Smith. *Just Kids*. 61.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* 42.



so successfully collaborated. Intuitively he worked with rhythm in his blood. I do it intellectually.<sup>33</sup>

He not only influenced and collaborated with Smith on a personal level, but exposed her to the world of acting and of performing to an audience, thereby encouraging her to enhance her skills of self-expression and development of personal voice, but to also communicate that sense of self *outward*, effectively sparking her desire to perform professionally.

Within the emergent art and music scene of New York in the 70's – and amongst those who influenced her and encouraged her personal development – Smith's ability to perceive the cultural transition that was occurring in rock music, and manipulate and alter her role in society to fit that transition, was elemental in her emergence as one of punk's most important formative voices. In an interview with rock journalist David Fricke, she recalls:

I seriously worried that I was seeing the decline of rock & roll. It was stadium rock and glitter bands... So I started aggressively pursuing what we were doing. But still not self-motivated – I don't care if anybody believes me or not. My design was to shake things up, to motivate people and bring a different type of work ethic back into rock & roll.<sup>34</sup>

Because she came into her own in an environment that not only removed itself from but *rejected* mainstream culture and the homogeneity it represented, Smith was both allowed the cultural space to develop her craft and her individuality within the present counterculture and was given ample exposure to the cultural environments she identified against. She explored and developed a distinct sense of selfhood through writing and performing poetry, and strategically did *not* pursue a career in music until

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<sup>33</sup> Bockris and Bayley. 69.

<sup>34</sup> David Fricke. "Patti Smith." *The Rolling Stone Interviews*. Jann S. Wenner and Joe Levy ed. New York: Back Bay Books, 2007. 383.

she fully understood how to express herself in a medium that both fit her sense of individuality and fulfilled her needs for self-expression within the context of 1970's youth culture. As Victor Bockris reflects,

Patti was eerily prescient about what the times required. The early seventies would be a confused transitional period for the rock musicians who had thrived in the sixties. A plethora of ambitious and talented artists would destroy themselves in their attempts to make themselves the stars of the early seventies. Patti had always been ambitious, but now she watched and waited for the perfect moment she knew would come.<sup>35</sup>

By taking the time to truly assess not only the artistic preferences of those around her but how she *herself* could appeal to and invoke those preferences, Smith was able to transcend the gender boundaries and societal expectations that preexisted for performers at the time, manipulating those around her to truly see the need for her work as an artist and transforming the notions of rock into the new and refreshing world of punk.

Unlike Smith, Joan Jett developed her sense of individuality and identity as a female rocker within a cultural environment that not only limited freedom of expression for female rock musicians, but also was entirely *predicated* on stereotyping and commodifying women in the genre. Jett solidified her affinity for rock music – particularly the “glam rock” subgenre – almost entirely of her own volition, though the glamorous chaos and magnetism of places like Rodney Bingenheimer's English Disco on the Sunset Strip. As Dave Thompson explains, “The day she discovered Rodney's was the day she discovered what rock 'n roll was really all about. Energy, electricity, and excitement,” as she found herself surrounded by young, like-minded individuals all equally magnetized by the aesthetic appeal of

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<sup>35</sup> Bockris and Bayley. 59.

the genre and culture that came with it.<sup>36</sup> For Jett, places like Rodney's filled the void she felt between feeling drawn to a specific rock culture and aesthetic and being too young and disconnected to be fully immersed within it; "a defining moment for any teen misfit," she commented, "is finding others like yourself, even if the only thing you share is the feeling of not belonging anywhere else."<sup>37</sup> However, the culture was heavily centered not simply on artistic ability and musical style, but also on the ability to *entice* through provocative clothing, youthful rebelliousness, and glorified sexual expression, epitomized by the likes of Gary Glitter and David Bowie. Jett appealed to this projection of cultivated image and raw appeal, however, as both a woman and a young teen; because most of her peers that fit this description were posited as *spectators* and *partygoers* – and rarely ever as the musicians, starlets, or objects of artistic admiration in the prevailing rock culture – Jett's desire to immerse herself in this environment as a musician herself automatically put her at odds with the vast majority of those who surrounded her.

The sheer unprecedented novelty of the idea that teenage girls would even *want to*, let alone *know how to*, play rock music was the driving force behind legendary manager Kim Fowley's creation of The Runaways, of which Jett was both a founding member and adamant creative influence. However, the fact that the band's members were both incredibly young and all female facilitated the marketing of The Runaways as a *brand*, and elicited such harsh stereotyping of them as individuals that they were pigeonholed as societal deviants and in complete discordance with other

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<sup>36</sup> Dave Thompson. *Bad Reputation: The Unauthorized Biography of Joan Jett*. Milwaukee: Backbeat Books, 2011. 21.

<sup>37</sup> Maria Raha. *Cinderella's Big Score: Women of the Punk and Indie Underground*. Emeryville: Seal Press, 2005. 22.

male rockers of their time, simply because of their gender. Jett recalls of the mainstream reaction to their roles as rock musicians:

It wasn't like we were killing people, we were playing rock and roll. They said, 'You shouldn't be doing this,' and 'that's not ladylike.' You know, 'you're supposed to grow up and have kids,' and that totally set me off. We got a lot of slut questions. We got tired of being asked about sex.<sup>38</sup>

The labels that were given to Jett and her fellow band members (“dyke,” “whore,” and “jailbait,” to name a few) are all examples of the reality that they were culturally confined by preexisting means of understanding and speaking of gender, a concept that was deeply set, as Butler explains, “within the terms of a hegemonic cultural discourse predicated on binary structures that appear as the language of universal rationality.”<sup>39</sup> Because they were operating within a society and music culture that had no grounds for understanding their roles as rockers *and* as young, sexually expressive women, it was almost fate that their image, rather than their music, would be the main focus of those perceiving them, as they posed a threat to standard perceptions of the rock genre and its usual icons.

The idea that The Runaways were destined to be at odds with other male rockers was further exacerbated by the fact that, at the time, they as individuals had no frame of reference for how to truly defend themselves or combat gender stereotypes. In Jett’s 1990 interview with Andrea Juno for *Angry Women in Rock*, she recounts that “there was such a stereotype of how you had to be if you were going to call yourself a feminist... [we were] all putting up barriers, all the time.”<sup>40</sup> Jett’s public dissociation with feminism, though an understandable means of defending

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<sup>38</sup> Todd Oldham and Kathleen Hanna. *Joan Jett*. Los Angeles: Ammo, 2010.

<sup>39</sup> Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge, 1990. 12.

<sup>40</sup> “Joan Jett.” *Angry Women in Rock*. Andrea Juno ed. New York: Juno, 1996. 73.

herself from further encouraging stereotypes, was yet another reflection of the “limits of gender discourse” that prevailed within the Los Angeles music scene she was operating in.<sup>41</sup> Though she was far from the first woman to play rock ‘n’ roll or the first person to represent gender discontinuity within mainstream rock culture, her reluctance to actively speak out *against* those who sought to prevent her from being successful in her own right reflected both youthful inexperience with feminism and the lack of any cultural precursor that would encourage her to do so. As Gillian Gaar notes, “the opportunity to comment on social and political issues [...] had been dormant in much of the music of the early ‘70s...the performers themselves weren’t necessarily outspoken on such topics [and] The Runaways distanced themselves from feminism [by way of] an ignorance-is-bliss stance.”<sup>42</sup> Without any form of support system keeping Jett and The Runaways from crumbling under the pressure that came with their exploitation as women – *despite* having unprecedented appeal as a group of young, talented female rock musicians – there was little that they could do to overcome the idea that “women are assumed to have little choice in the matter of selling out because they have long been commodities,” and to keep from disbanding as they did.<sup>43</sup>

The stringent culture of gender separation and female commodification that surrounded Joan Jett in her early years not only heavily impacted her ability to emerge as a solo artist after The Runaways disbanded, but also shaped her understanding of how to cultivate an identity and career that were more in line with

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<sup>41</sup> Butler. 12.

<sup>42</sup> Gillian Gaar. *She’s a Rebel: The History of Women in Rock & Roll*. Seattle, WA: Seal, 1992. 182-3.

<sup>43</sup> Neil Nehring. *Popular Music, Gender, and Postmodernism: Anger Is an Energy*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1997. 161.

what she sought in the world of rock 'n' roll. Many of the decisions she made with regard to managing, writing, and choosing band mates for her solo project, Joan Jett and the Blackhearts, were predicated on the idea that she did *not* want to relive her experiences from before. Because she was still formulating a sense of selfhood and public persona as a rock musician under almost completely similar cultural lines, many of the decisions she made leading up to and amidst her first few albums reflected the notion that she, as Sara Marcus explains, “just didn’t want to deal with being looked at as a girl guitarist anymore if it was being used in a demeaning or belittling way.”<sup>44</sup> Part of her means of coping within a notably misogynistic and limiting community was to purposefully enlist an all-male group as her band, both eliminating the possibility for those around her to turn her music into novelty, as had been done before, and to prove that she had every intention and capacity for playing hard rock music with her male contemporaries. This decision was also largely based on the mainstream response to the demise of The Runaways; Jett recalls feeling that, after the Runaways broke up, people were just laughing and saying, ‘we told you it wouldn’t work. We told you that you guys were no good’... I didn’t understand people’s reactions, and why they thought it was so strange for women to play music.”<sup>45</sup> Though the decision to make Joan Jett and the Blackhearts a male-backed band could, to some extent, be perceived as Jett conceding to the prevailing refusal in mainstream culture to accept female rock musicians as respectable artists, her resistance to further encourage attention to her gender was absolutely justified within her environment. By preserving the concept of The Runaways as a specific project

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<sup>44</sup> Sara Marcus. Personal Interview. February 2013.

<sup>45</sup> “Joan Jett.” *Angry Women in Rock*. 69.

and disassociating herself from the “female rocker as novelty” concept it created, she effectively allowed herself to reinvent and cultivate her selfhood on her own terms, maneuvering through and responding to issues of gender and rock as an individual rather than as part of a dehumanized cultural entity.

The most notable element of Jett’s reaction to the culture that continued to perpetuate gender stereotypes and reject her even *after* she broke away from The Runaways, however, was her ability to maintain her “indifference to traditional male power structures” while actively choosing *not* to antagonize those who didn’t accept her.<sup>46</sup> After being rejected by over twenty record labels, she set out with her manager, Kenny Laguna, to promote and publish her music *herself*, famously distributing her first single, “I Love Rock ‘N’ Roll,” out of the back of her van until she got enough positive feedback that she was able to sign to Boardwalk Records. Her insistence on cultivating both a public persona and identity as a musician on her own terms, as Kathleen Kennedy explains, was “a defiant reply to what she understood as the different codes of conduct applied to male and female rock performers,” as her conventionally uncharacteristic drive to control her own career as a rock musician was rarely seen or encouraged among other female rockers of her time.<sup>47</sup> Her enduring persistence to navigate through backlash and “brazen assertion of her right to do what the boys did” was ultimately what allowed her to be successful in her own terms, as she found a way to transcend the stereotypes that prevailed within the community around her and – as is immortalized in her song “Bad Reputation” –

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<sup>46</sup> Kathleen Kennedy. “Results of a Misspent Youth: Joan Jett’s performance of female masculinity.” *Women’s History Review*. 20 December 2006. 1 February 2013. 91.  
<<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09612020200200312>>

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* 89.

didn't compromise her own conception and expression of rock identity for those who narrow-mindedly discouraged her from doing what she desired.<sup>48</sup>

Of these three musicians, however, the importance of community environment in sparking Kathleen Hanna's career was not just a crucial influence and driving source behind her motivations as a feminist punk rocker; it was, more or less, the *reason* Hanna decided to pursue the artistic path that she did. The community of women that existed in Olympia when Hanna was growing up (and beginning her artistic career in college) possessed a collective mindset completely predicated on feminist ideals of girl power and ownership of femininity as a source of strength. As Sara Marcus explains,

A very affirmative conception of female community was operative in the Olympia DIY scene from the early 80s. That wasn't necessarily pertaining to people performing outside the Olympia scene, but within that bubble, like 'girl party,' 'girl radio,' 'girl store,' which were all about female artists, it was accepted. It was just what you did.<sup>49</sup>

Having that sense of solidarity, despite only existing in the "bubble" of her immediate surroundings, provided the validity and cultural support that fueled her ability to express feminist ideals in her work with Bikini Kill, as well as giving her an outlet for expressing and addressing issues pertaining to being both a female performer and a woman in male-dominated society. It was in this environment that she cultivated a sense of female empowerment and activism that not only was expressed through Bikini Kill and Bratmobile, the two bands most commonly identified as the musical roots of the Riot Grrrl movement, but also gave her the means for projecting those ideals outward and reach like-minded individuals *outside* this community. Hanna

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid. 89.

<sup>49</sup> Marcus. Personal Interview.



recounted in a personal interview that, because of those supporting her art and working with her in the Olympia, she learned early on in her career not to “sit around and wait for somebody else to write the song that you feel like should exist...start with where you are and do what you can and people will see that you’re engaged and excited and will want to be around you, they’ll want to support you.”<sup>50</sup> It can be argued, however, that Hanna wouldn’t have such an affirmative sense of self-expression had it not been for the community of Olympia itself that allowed her to cultivate it. Because repeated acts of gender performativity, as Butler asserts, are “at once a reenactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established,” Hanna’s overt willingness to address issues of heteronormative, patriarchal society are partly derived from existing within a community that was *not* politically and culturally structured in the same manner.<sup>51</sup> Though this wasn’t necessarily uniformly true for the whole of Olympia at large – as it is noted in *Girls to the Front* that the Riot Grrrls were largely misunderstood “outside the bands’ inner circle” – Hanna was still operating within a community that provided enough of a cultural cushion to enable women like her to think outside of those norms.<sup>52</sup>

The idea that the mental homogeneity of a community could stand as the necessary catalyst for one’s cultivation of the self is only further supported by Riot Grrrl’s extension into Washington DC, and the resulting musical and feminist activist movement that was facilitated through the interrelationship between these two locations. As Sara Marcus explains,

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<sup>50</sup> Kathleen Hanna. Personal Interview. 2010.

<sup>51</sup> Butler. 191.

<sup>52</sup> Sara Marcus. *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2010. 77.

Olympia and DC had very analogous scenes and there was a lot of back-and-forth between them... Calvin Johnson [of The Go Team] had grown up in DC and moved to Olympia, Kathleen Hanna had also done a couple of years of high school in Maryland... it wasn't just like Bikini Kill and Bratmobile moved to DC for the summer and that was the sole force, there were factors moving them there. But it wasn't just like it moved from Olympia to DC, it was sort of like a cell dividing, a mitosis.<sup>53</sup>

This “mitosis” of sorts provided Hanna and the Riot Grrrls the opportunity to network outside of their Olympia bubble, gaining both insight and traction from other like-minded musicians and fans. More importantly, it also provided an open channel of communication between the two coasts, spreading their ideals outward and eventually enabling Riot Grrrl “chapters,” all-women meetings, and communities to develop in places that they themselves didn't occupy. By beginning in a small, culturally supportive community and slowly spreading “Revolution Girl Style Now” outward, Hanna and her peers effectively broke down stigmas behind their feminism being “discontinuous” or “disruptive” to gender norms and created a highly transformative and empowering social movement.

The communities in Olympia and Washington DC not only heavily shaped Hanna's work as a whole, but rather became, in a way, the underlying source of thematic content for much of the music that Bikini Kill and other Riot Grrrl bands played. “Hanna didn't simply become an impressive lead singer,” comments New Yorker writer Sasha Frere-Jones. “Rather, she seemed to be living the characters who passed through the riot-grrrl community. The voices that came up in the group meetings came out through her lyrics.”<sup>54</sup> Hanna's relationship to her community, fans, and fellow musicians thus not only impacted the way in which she *herself* was

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<sup>53</sup> Marcus. Personal Interview.

<sup>54</sup> Sasha Frere-Jones. “Hanna and her Sisters.” *The New Yorker*. 26 November 2012. January 2013. <[http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/musical/2012/11/26/121126crmu\\_music\\_frerejones](http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/musical/2012/11/26/121126crmu_music_frerejones)>

able to express her gender, sexuality, and both political and personal values that were most important to her; within these communities, as it were, was an understanding that “people want to join something that seems like it’s really going, and Kathleen always had a really good sense of how to do that.”<sup>55</sup> By existing within these uniquely like-minded communities, Hanna and Bikini Kill, as well as other Riot Grrrl bands, were able to draw from and publically project the mentalities and beliefs of the women who supported them and aligned with them, expressing a strong feminist sense of self at both personally and universally relatable levels. The effect of this interconnectedness, too, was absolutely mutualistic, as the effect that Hanna was able to have on endless girls seeking an outlet like Riot Grrrl for self-expression was immeasurable. As Sara Marcus comments, “how could a new, energetic movement that promised – in an era of apathy – to make it cool for girls to give a shit, talk about politics affected their lives, and take action – how could such a movement possibly stay underground for long?”<sup>56</sup> The ability for musicians like Hanna to utilize small-community mentality to fuel such a massive cultural movement proves that, in order to break through cultural discordance and stigma behind gender identity and truly create an individual voice, that voice needs to germinate in an environment that both supports it and calls for it.

With an established understanding of the environments and influences that shaped the ways in which Patti Smith, Joan Jett and Kathleen Hanna were able to create their respective senses of individualism and artistic goals, it is easier to understand how they then projected those concepts *outward*. The ability for each of

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<sup>55</sup> Marcus. Personal Interview.

<sup>56</sup> Marcus. *Girls to the Front*. 114.

these women to not only *understand* gender but *express* gender within the framework of rock culture was heavily reliant on the community and culture that guided them, something that can be seen quite discernibly through the many facets of their performative self-expression. On the surface level, we can now see how these cultural influences allowed them to display their personalities, ways of viewing gender, and means of explaining their selfhood to others through personal appearance and dress. Because external appearance and self-presentation has always been one of the most accessible means of self-expression for those who operate within the public sphere, *especially* in the world of rock 'n' roll, analyzing Smith, Jett, and Hanna's deliberate expressions of personal image to those perceiving them is an incredibly important aspect of understanding their performative gender roles as a whole.

### **Chapter 3: Dressing the Part – Gender, Sexuality, and External Appearance**

One of the most fundamental ways in which Smith, Jett, and Hanna utilized Butler's idea of performativity to establish themselves as individuals within – and often in opposition to – homogenous culture was the manner in which each woman expressed their gender and sexuality through dress and external appearance. Looking beyond the notion that these women were simply “being themselves” – drawing from both their aforementioned personal influences and from the emergent community that supported them at large – one can determine that their manners of public presentation were, in fact, quite carefully contrived and articulated. All three of these women purposefully called attention to their personal appearance in some regard, be it Smith's conception of being “beyond gender” or Hanna's emphasis on the Riot Grrrl mantra “Revolution Girl Style Now,” through consistent (and often bold) opposition to society's desire for “regulatory practices of [female] gender foundation and division.”<sup>57</sup> Though each woman had her own take on the importance of acknowledging this opposition to the gender binary, it is undeniable that Smith, Jett, and Hanna made great strides in dissolving the expectation for women to concede to societal stereotypes that perpetuated the notions of gender “coherence and continuity” that Butler describes.

For Patti Smith, the idea that women could dress in a manner that combined masculine and feminine ideals and *not* be making some sort of statement regarding sexual orientation was unprecedented. She notes, however, that her attraction to such

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<sup>57</sup> Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge, 1990. 23.

androgyny stemmed from feeling clear opposition to female gender conformation as early as childhood. In *Just Kids*, she recalls a revelatory anecdote of such opposition:

“Patricia,” my mom scolded, “put a shirt on!”  
“It’s too hot,” I moaned. “No one else has one on.”  
“Hot or not, it’s time you started wearing a shirt. You’re about to become a young lady.” I protested vehemently and announced that I was never going to become anything but myself, that I was of a clan of Peter Pan and we did not grow up. My mother won the argument and I put on a shirt, but I cannot exaggerate the betrayal I felt at that moment. I ruefully watched my mother performing her female tasks, not her well-endowed female body. It all seemed against my nature. The heavy scent of her perfume and the red slashed of her lipstick, so strong in the fifties, revolted me.”<sup>58</sup>

Smith’s expression of an innate need to reject the conventions of femininity that her mother exhibited can definitely be traced as a root cause of the cultivation of her androgynous aesthetic, and was inevitably part of what drew her to the gender-rebellion of the New York punk scene in the 70’s. As Gottlieb and Wald point out in “Smells like Teen Spirit,” “the trajectory of the (male) rock up through the late seventies was marked by increasing androgyny and gender ambiguity.”<sup>59</sup> The leeway that the 70’s punk scene provided artists like Smith to freely blur the lines between feminine and masculine self-expression, and also allowed her to remove herself from feeling the need to identify with gender under definitive binary terms.

The cultural freedom Smith was allotted to experiment with gender expression also enabled her to consider herself more of an observer of the women in the social circles she followed – studying the cultural development of feminine identity at the time – rather than a woman partaking *in* them herself. She comments: “I would go to parties with Robert just to check out the dames. They were good material and knew how to dress... People took my interest in the wrong way. They figured I was a latent

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<sup>58</sup> Patti Smith. *Just Kids*. New York: Ecco, 2010. 10.

<sup>59</sup> Joanne Gottlieb and Gayle Wald. “Smells like Teen Spirit.” *Microphone Friends: Youth Music & Youth Culture*. Tricia Rose and Andrew Ross ed. New York: Routledge, 1994. 258.

homosexual, or maybe just acting like one, but I was merely a Mickey Spillane type, exercising my hard, ironic edge.”<sup>60</sup> This mental disconnection from associations with gender – and subsequent role as *spectator* rather than *participator* in emerging art and music scene that toyed with these public gender configurations – allowed her to create an aesthetic of dress and personal presentation that, ironically, set the precedent for punk culture and propelled the ideal of “female rebelliousness” into fashion.

Despite being surrounded by a close-knit, supportive community of like-minded artists, Smith recounts a few memorable moments in her formative New York years where even her fellow intellectuals and peers didn’t understand her. During her first encounter with progressive poet Allen Ginsberg, she recalls:

Allen introduced himself... he leaned forward and looked at me intently. “Are you a girl?” he asked. “Yeah,” I said. “Is that a problem?” He just laughed. “I’m sorry. I just took you for a very pretty boy.”<sup>61</sup>

Though she began gaining attention and respect for cultivating a look that was beyond recognizable gender identity, she still clearly operated in a culture affected by societal preconceptions of what is “male” and what is “female,” expressed even by the most open-minded thinkers of their generation. This, in addition to her upbringing and unique self-perception, was one of the main catalysts that drove her to identify herself as being “outside of society” in many ways, which she acknowledges in the song “Rock ‘n’ roll Nigger” on the album, *Easter*.<sup>62</sup> Rather than acknowledging the binary and trying to work either within it or against it, she chose not to acknowledge

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<sup>60</sup> Smith. *Just Kids*. 200.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.* 123.

<sup>62</sup> Patti Smith. “Rock n Roll Nigger.” *Easter*. Arista Records, 1978. LP.

it, to act as though societal constructs of gender were both fantasy and useless cultural fabrication.

Acknowledging this at both a conscious and subconscious level, Smith pulled from an array of inspiration from surrounding artists, public figures, and musicians (she recalls in a 1978 interview with Tom Snyder that she considered herself “an illuminated apprentice and [the people she looked up to] as [her] masters”), and cultivated an aesthetic and style of dress that was commonly referred to as her *uniform*: loose fitting blazers, men’s ties, silk vests over oversized blouses, and her infamously unkempt Keith Richards-esque shaggy black hair.<sup>63</sup> As Elizabeth Wolfson explains it,

Smith’s ‘uniform’ hinted at a vision of a new rock ‘n’ roll that maintained many of its touchstone elements of outsider rebelliousness and masculinity, while inserting the avant-garde, poetic aesthetic of Baudelaire into the mix. Smith claimed all these influences for herself and her work, wearing them not only on her sleeve but her entire, female, body.<sup>64</sup>

Establishing the look she created as her *own* to the public, rather than as a piecing together of the aesthetics and looks of her influences, both fully established her as an individual and completely perplexed those around her. In a 1975 article in *New Times Magazine*, Cliff Jahr asserts: “Her appearance is startling. Wearing a little black Chaplin jacket, a saffron scarf and denim pants that are pegged with the long laces of her shoes, she looks something like a medieval chimney sweep.”<sup>65</sup> Jahr’s lack of anything culturally relevant to compare her look to represented one of the main

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<sup>63</sup> “Patti Smith Interviewed by Tom Snyder, May 11 1978.” *tom51*. YouTube. 23 February 2009. December 2012. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iNg19CH9AwY>>

<sup>64</sup> Wolfson, Elizabeth. “Matching Bodies, Matching Souls: (re)constructing gender in Patti Smith and Robert Mapplethorpe’s Horses photograph.” *Queen’s Journal of Visual & Material Culture*. Issue 2. 2009. 1 February 2013. 12. <[shiftjournal.org/archives/articles/2009/wolfson.pdf](http://shiftjournal.org/archives/articles/2009/wolfson.pdf)>

<sup>65</sup> Cliff Jahr. “Patti.” *New Times Magazine*. 26 December 1975. 4 February 2013. <<http://www.oceanstar.com/patti/intervus/751226nt.htm>>



reasons Patti was able to break through societal gender constraints and operate within her own conception of individualism in the public sphere: there was simply *no one*, neither woman nor man, to liken her to at the height of her career. Smith stood alone as an artist and musician free to dress and carry herself as she pleased simply *because* society did not have an existing vocabulary or means for understanding her, and she effectively and confidently reciprocated that disconnect back. As Carola Dibbell aptly reflects, “It wasn’t like women had never worn unisex hair or little black vests before. What this skinny weirdo offered wasn’t androgyny per se but a new use for it: to cut a niche in the music that was neither sexual invitation nor sexual confrontation.”<sup>66</sup>

Joan Jett, like Smith, was an individual who, from the get-go, understood whose appearances inspired her and how best she saw fit to express her own conception of gender and sexuality. However, Jett was also thrown into a world where her role as public figure was used more as spectacle and novelty than respectable musicianship at a very early age in The Runaways, something that both impacted her aesthetic and forced her to learn how to combat – and rise above – stereotypes associated with certain types of appearance and dress. In an interview with PopCult, Jett recalls that, “being one of the louder ones [in The Runaways] with the leather jacket and the heavy eye makeup, I was just pushing the envelope. We were called sluts, whores, and dykes all the time. And we were constantly laughed at by bands we played with, by the crews, and by the press.”<sup>67</sup> Because Jett, as a member of the first (and highly commodified) all-girl rock band, both displayed a

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<sup>66</sup> Carola Dibbell. “Inside Was Us: Women and Punk.” *Trouble Girls: The Rolling Stone Book of Women in Rock*. New York: Random House, 1997. 279.

<sup>67</sup> Dave Thompson. *Bad Reputation: The Unauthorized Biography of Joan Jett*. Milwaukee: Backbeat Books, 2011. 1.

look that was intentionally distinguishable and completely contradicted almost all previous aesthetic examples of rock femininity, she was unfortunately destined to find herself at odds with a society who had little basis for understanding her. Though her manner of dress was neither disingenuous in nature nor discontinuous with what she as a consumer of rock music culture herself had grown to know and love, her punk rock aesthetic outwardly defied previous societal expectations, placing her outside the binary and thus making her vulnerable to scrutiny and typecasting by her perceivers.

As an attempt to break away from the stigmas surrounding The Runaways and cultivate her public persona as an individual, Jett, like Patti Smith, also came to describe her own personal style and manner of dress as her signature “uniform.” She used the term both consciously and subconsciously as a defense mechanism against mainstream attempts to categorize her or compare her to others, replacing the idea of her employing female masculinity with the concept of a completely individualized trademark. She comments that, though her career itself progressed from The Runaways into a more self-controlled project as Joan Jett and the Blackhearts, her “look” remained rather unwavering:

Really, I just wore jeans and sneakers and a leather jacket and a t-shirt, you know. But that leather jacket, dark hair, heavy makeup, it was kind of armoring because people were kind of afraid of me...I've never been someone to wear dresses. I kind of wish I did like to wear dresses because it gives you variety, you know? But it's just not me. So it's very easy for me to kind of create my own uniform. And I think that's what I've done over the years.<sup>68</sup>

Her appropriation of the very concept of the uniform *itself* can be viewed as a threat to typical societal conceptualization, as it completely combats the idea of depicting “a sense of obligation and a lack of choice,” that “one wears a uniform because one is

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<sup>68</sup> Todd Oldham and Kathleen Hanna. *Joan Jett*. Los Angeles: Ammo, 2010.

forced to by an authority, in order to erase individuality and make a group of people indistinguishable from each other.”<sup>69</sup> In this sense, Jett, too, declared her manner of personal presentation as “uniform” not as a means for conforming to gender roles and expectations, but rather as a tool for both freely expressing her sexuality and “fighting against the constructs forced on her by society, pushing back against dominant American culture.”<sup>70</sup> By boldly standing as one of the first and only female rock musicians of her time to sport the tight pantsuit, black leather shag, choppy black hair, and dark eye makeup, Jett’s performative use of her uniform was effectively one of the most important tools for marketing herself as the individual and rocker she wanted to be.

The idea of the tough-girl appearance that was her uniform being “armoring,” moreover, is crucial in understanding why she was at once revered as aesthetically inimitable and often misunderstood in the public sphere. Because Jett’s indisputable self-governance of her own gender identity didn’t submit to conventional standards of femininity, she was naturally presented as a threat within mainstream understanding. In Todd Oldham’s biography *Joan Jett*, she comments: “I am very intense. I am determined, but people might mistake that for being masculine or bitchy. That’s just me...people usually use the word aggressive to describe me. I somehow don’t think that’s the right word.”<sup>71</sup> Because there existed almost no cultural frame of reference for her depiction of gender at the start of her solo career, very few could understand that her interpretation of selfhood was “not an imitation of rock machismo but

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<sup>69</sup> Wolfson. 12.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. 12.

<sup>71</sup> Oldham and Hanna.

rather...[a] sexual identity outside the binaries that defined twentieth-century white middle-class sex/gender systems.”<sup>72</sup> Her willingness to operate outside these binaries and maintain a steadfast projection of selfhood, however, was absolutely crucial in her emergence as a powerful contender in the world of rock ‘n’ roll, as it was the very fact that she *couldn’t* be compared to others that allowed her longevity and notoriety.

Unlike Smith and Jett, who characteristically cultivated their own combination of male-gendered and female-gendered influences to create their individual aesthetics, Kathleen Hanna made a concerted effort to *reclaim* the feminine, to destigmatize female gender identity and styles of dress by confronting sexist and polarizing stereotypes head-on. As Evelyn McDonnell recounts, Hanna and the Riot Grrrls “called themselves *girls* with pride, to celebrate female identity, and then called themselves *grrrls* with added defiance...Decentralized and with no guiding dogma, Riot Grrrl [...] provided a channel to respond to the country’s conservative [patriarchal] backlash [against women].<sup>73</sup> Riot Grrrl as a culture prided itself on reinforcing the notion that to be female – and to express female sexuality – was not something that needed justification or that needed to be defended; if men could dress as they pleased and not elicit unwanted sexual attention, women sure as hell should be able to as well.

Much of this ideal was reinforced through certain purposeful repetitions of dress and presentation of the body in the public sphere, especially in the context of

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<sup>72</sup> Kathleen Kennedy. “Results of a Misspent Youth: Joan Jett’s performance of female masculinity.” *Women’s History Review*. 20 December 2006. 1 February 2013. 91. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09612020200200312>>

<sup>73</sup> Evelyn McDonnell. “Rebel Grrrl.” *Trouble Girls: The Rolling Stone Book of Women in Rock*. Barbara O’Dair ed. New York: Random House, 1997. 459.

refuting stereotypes about feminism and those who stood for it. In an interview with Andrea Juno, Kathleen asserts that

The notion that if you were feminist you cut your hair, you wear high pants, you hide your breasts, and you don't wear makeup, you wear Birkenstocks or some shit – I'm sorry, that is so boring. I'm not saying women who adopt that dress are wrong or bad in any way – I adopt that dress at certain times, and will continue to. But if sometimes I want to dress up and use what is *feminine drag* – well, *men* use feminine drag, so why can't I?<sup>74</sup>

The Riot Grrrl archives at New York University hold series of photographs of Hanna that display this ideal quite assertively. One contact sheet, entitled “Slut Porn Girl,” displays a sequence of self-portraits taken by Hanna in which she shows herself alternately with and without a stereotypical blonde stripper wig, making various faces and sexual gestures at the camera. The last in the sequence is her, standing visibly in a mirror, holding the camera and gazing at her reflection as her everyday self.<sup>75</sup> By dramatizing the heteronormative perception of female sexuality in “feminine drag” and juxtaposing it with her natural figure, Hanna at once satirizes the incredibly reductive ideal of what it means to be a woman and sexy in Western society, and confronts the stereotype *herself* within the context of her personal female identity before anyone else has the chance to. Though intentionally humorous and playfully self-deprecating, Hanna cultivated an image that both reclaimed and weakened male perception of the female as a means for defending her gender and her right to unapologetic self-expression of sexuality.

This insistence on reclaiming female gender identity through external appearance was most clearly articulated through Hanna's practice of writing on her

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<sup>74</sup> “Kathleen Hanna.” *Angry Women in Rock*. Andrea Juno ed. New York: Juno, 1996. 102-103

<sup>75</sup> Riot Grrrl Collection: Kathleen Hanna Papers. 1989-1996. *NYU Fales Library & Special Collections*. November 2012-February 2013.

body during performances, a statement that was perpetuated more and more by both other Riot Grrrl artists and fans on as time passed. Sara Marcus, in *Girls to the Front*, recounts this practice of Hanna writing on her body during a particular Bikini performance in 1992:

Kathleen turned toward the back of the stage at dc space and pulled off her T-shirt in a deliberate, prosaic motion. Bikini Kill had played its first few songs fully clothed, but now, wearing just a skirt and scalloped black bra, Kathleen turned to face the audience to everyone could see what was written on her stomach: SLUT. She'd begun doing this at shows in recent months, confronting audiences with what they might want to see (a topless woman) and what they might think of such a woman, all in one fell semiotic swoop.<sup>76</sup>

Hanna's bold assertion of her sexuality on-stage – and simultaneous confrontation of the implications of that assertion in homogenous mainstream American society – both granted her a certain level of control over her expression of gender and created space for those perceiving her to do the same. By beginning shows in an oversized “Riot Grrrl” tee, and then slowly stripping off layers to reveal the writing on her body, she effectively attacked conceptions of the male gaze and metaphorically stuck her middle fingers up to anyone in society who tried to tell women how to be or how to present themselves; as Neil Nehring so aptly reflects, Hanna presented herself as such as a way of acknowledging and rejecting “what a lot of men *already* see there,” addressing through her work and role as public figure how “‘normal’ guys have learned to look at women – as well as how *not* to hear them.”<sup>77</sup>

Though each of the “looks” that Smith, Jett, and Hanna created for themselves both drew from quite different cultural contexts and were expressed and utilized at

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<sup>76</sup> Sara Marcus. *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2010. 76.

<sup>77</sup> Neil Nehring. *Popular Music, Gender, and Postmodernism: Anger Is an Energy*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1997. 153.

the personal and interpersonal levels in highly individual ways, one fact stands true to each of these women within the context of gender performativity: in order to establish a personal and meaningful connection with each of their respective conceptions of the self, they all constructed their external image with *intent*. This purposeful self-expression not only enabled them to interpret themselves personally in the public sphere, but also elicited quite strong societal reactions that they paradoxically controlled and *didn't* control at the same time. This expression of gender and sexuality through dress and personal appearance is absolutely fundamental for analyzing the ways in which these women presented themselves through visual culture in various mediums, and how those mediums – be it album art, music videos, or zines – perpetuated their own notions of personal identity.

## Chapter 4: What You See is What You Get – Visual Culture and the Expression of Identity

In reflecting upon the ways in which each of these women cultivated and effectively expressed their own personal conceptions of identity, gender, and sexuality, one can begin to understand the motivation behind each musician's use of visual culture to purposefully project (and physically *distribute*) those conceptions to those perceiving them. For Smith, Jett, and Hanna, the decision to utilize certain physical mediums of self-expression was heavily dependent on what was considered most accessible and evocative within their respective cultures, reflecting highly upon the ways in which each woman sought to express herself aesthetically and professionally to others. Each of the artistic mediums that were most important with regard to self-expression in their music careers – be it Smith's album art, Jett's music videos, or Hanna's development of zine culture – were absolutely elemental in driving their public reception, either positively reinforcing an image that had already been cultivated for their audiences, or putting them at odds with those whose who didn't have a basis for understanding them as individuals.

For Patti Smith, the album artwork for *Horses* and *Easter* – especially regarding her self-representation through photography – are important examples of the way in which she cultivated her public image, incorporating her artistic influences to align her musical and poetic modes of expression with that of her physical appearance. The album art for *Horses*, which was the first important public depiction of her as a musician, pulled from an array of artistic and cultural influences to, rather intentionally, both combine and contort various conceptions of gender identity to create an image that was incomparable to any other artist of her generation.



As Gillian Gaar explains,

The cover [of *Horses*] itself made it clear Smith was no ordinary female singer: skinny, dressed in jeans and a white shirt with a tie draped around her neck, Smith faced the camera with a defiant, uncompromising stare. Her commanding, androgynous presence presented a view of a female performer that hadn't been seen on a record cover before.<sup>78</sup>

Every aspect of the photograph represents the dualism of both the feminine and masculine energies that she claims define her: her pose and facial expression are at once natural and intentionally powerful, the lighting is both direct and pleasantly soft, and her outfit simultaneously masculinizes her and subtly shows off the curve of her female form. These seemingly contradictory elements provide the viewer with the paradoxical idea that she defines herself through a lens that cannot be understood under conventional terms of discussing and perceiving gender, underscoring her performative reconstruction of her identity as being “beyond gender.” Smith herself comments that the image was not only a reflection of her own personal desire to transcend gender binaries that existed in mainstream culture at the time, but rather a depiction of the mentality of the scene she emerged from as a whole: “When I look at it now, I believe we captured some of the anthemic artlessness of our age. Of our generation. A breed apart who sought within a new landscape to excite, to astonish, and to resonate with all the possibilities of our youth.”<sup>79</sup> More than anything, the album art for *Horses* declares a need for personal honesty and a refusal to compromise self-expression by any means.

This same energy is palpably expressed on the cover of *Easter*, as Smith is photographed in a seemingly private and internal moment of thought, glancing down

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<sup>78</sup> Gillian Gaar. *She's a Rebel: The History of Women in Rock & Roll*. Seattle, WA: Seal, 1992. 197.

<sup>79</sup> Smith, Patti. *Patti Smith Complete: Lyrics, Reflections & Notes for the Future*. New York: Doubleday, 1998. 5.

toward the floor with both nonchalance and comfortability as her arms raise to expose an unshaven underarm, juxtaposing her transparent, form-fitting blouse. The image captures both the free-spiritedness and artistic empowerment of the counterculture that she and her fellow artists occupied, and expresses a blatant disregard for any need to constrain her self-expression in the name of the cultural expectations for a female rock musician. Like the photograph on the cover of *Horses*, Smith is shown “free of make-up; her hair is cropped short and mussed; there is the slightest trace of facial hair above her upper lip. In short, there is an ambiguity contained within this image that sets it apart visually from any album image of a female artist that preceded [her].”<sup>80</sup> The incredible ease with which she expresses a beautifully muddled notion of gender construction captures her unprecedented ability to express physically – as she does in her music – the artistic way of both existing in and perceiving the world around her through a lens that glorifies the elements of human existence that cannot, and do not *want* to be, explained within the context of mainstream culture and language.

Joan Jett, whose solo career emerged at the height of the music video culture, utilized the videos for “I Love Rock and Roll” and “Do You Wanna Touch Me” to both exploit and combat gender stereotypes within the rock genre, as well as to utilize body language and narrative to assert specific aspects of both her personal and public identity. “I Love Rock and Roll,” whose lyrics are a reappropriation of the conventional male-female rock ‘n’ roll trope (discussed further in Chapter 6), seeks to

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<sup>80</sup> Wolfson, Elizabeth. “Matching Bodies, Matching Souls: (re)constructing gender in Patti Smith and Robert Mapplethorpe’s *Horses* photograph.” *Queen’s Journal of Visual & Material Culture*. Issue 2. 2009. 1 February 2013. 5. <[shiftjournal.org/archives/articles/2009/wolfson.pdf](http://shiftjournal.org/archives/articles/2009/wolfson.pdf)>

fulfill the idea that, as Robin Roberts asserts in *Ladies First*, “music videos provide a site for the exploration of the ways in which female performers can deconstruct the dominant discourses of sexuality.”<sup>81</sup> In this video, Joan depicts herself pursuing the male object of her affection at a local dive, alternating between narrating the story of her sexual pursuit and uniting the members of the crowd in celebrating the youthful spirit of rock as she performs her song on stage. The video opens with her entering the bar, strutting inside dressed in all leather with thick black eye makeup and slick black hair, undeniably masculinizing herself and yet presenting herself with such unwavering self-confidence that she effortlessly redefines what it means to be strongly feminine. Her aggressive self-presentation is coupled by the fact that she almost *never* breaks eye contact with the camera, effectively telling her viewers that the moment she recounts is not private or personal, but rather metaphorically *universal*.<sup>82</sup> Thus, she uses the story to effectively prove that women, too, have the power to channel the cool magnetism of rock ‘n’ roll to not only capture the attention of others as a dominant sexual force, but to also incite and lead the members of youth culture that seek the energetic spirit and carefree nature that rock as a genre represents.

The video for “Do You Wanna Touch Me” takes on ideas of sexuality in a similar light, but utilizes montage and different projections of body image to further the idea that women have just as much right to express rock’s quintessential sexual drive as men. Jett once again maintains direct eye contact with the camera

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<sup>81</sup> Robin Roberts. *Ladies First: Women in Music Videos*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996. 59.

<sup>82</sup> “Joan Jett & The Blackhearts – Do You Wanna Touch Me.” *AlexParksFan*. YouTube. 23 February 2008. December 2012. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XELpxApT8Kc>>

throughout, which serves not only to personally engage the viewer and directly connect them to her lyrics, but also to underscore the unwavering sense of sexual confidence expressed in the lyrics. Moreover, Jett effectively “contradict[s] the stereotypical and limited depiction of women’s bodies”<sup>83</sup> seen in many other women’s music videos, as she syncs unapologetically suggestive footage of her flashing her body in a bikini with the lyrics, “Do you wanna touch? Yeah!” By doing so, Jett not only confronts rock gender stereotypes that claim aggressive sexuality is reserved only for men, but also asserts that female sexuality can be both glorified and exploited in rock by the female rocker’s *own* volition, and not just as the object of male attraction. This gesture, though often read as a “female appropriation of male movements,”<sup>84</sup> was a highly progressive decision on Jett’s part, as it paved the way for strong female voices to both openly express their gender in whatever way they saw fit, while simultaneously denying any need to conform to classic societal gender convention and binary opposition.

Kathleen Hanna, emerging from a close-knit community of female punk musicians who thrived on the ability to connect physically with both fellow artists and their fan base at large, masterfully spearheaded the feminist zine culture that surrounded the Riot Grrrl movement. She and a few of her peers used written word, collage, illustration and photography to underscore many of the themes that her music took on, simultaneously providing a space for like-minded girls of all backgrounds a space to speak their minds. As Kathleen recounted in her interview with Andrea Juno, “I want[ed] to share information with people so they [didn’t] have to reinvent the

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<sup>83</sup> Roberts. 69.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid. 65.

wheel.”<sup>85</sup> Much of the content created and distributed between these women in the form of zines such as *Bikini Kill* and *Jigsaw* lends itself to Sara Marcus’s ideas of community formation and group mentality, that in order to *feel* a sense of solidarity, it has to stem from individuals or a group of people who already have a frame of reference for that solidarity *within them*.<sup>86</sup> By surrounding the Riot Grrrl movement – the most important of which being that women have every right to express their gender, sexuality, and individuality without being scrutinized under heteronormative or patriarchal pretenses – Hanna and her peers effectively harnessed the sense of community that they had cultivated early on, and extended it outward to those who may have had a *need* for it, but lacked an understanding of how to find it themselves.

One of the most important elements of the early Riot Grrrl zines was the reaffirmation of relevant and personally relatable feminist ideals through written manifestos and other forms of prose, content that at once was constantly evolving and open to change and yet unwaveringly articulated what the Riot Grrrls stood for. *Bikini Kill No. 2* opens with a piece titled “Burn down the walls that say you can’t,” providing readers with a list of positively reinforced rules to live by, ranging from the simple to the revolutionary, the political, and the philosophical. With messages like “be a dork, tell your friends you love them,” “close your mind to the propaganda of the status quo by examining its effects on you, cell by cell,” and “resist psychic death” – a line that came to stand as one of the most important mottos for the Riot Grrrl Revolution – Hanna and her friends not only expressed awareness of the societal and interpersonal issues that most deeply affected them as women and as

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<sup>85</sup> “Kathleen Hanna.” *Angry Women in Rock*. Andrea Juno ed. New York: Juno, 1996. 102.

<sup>86</sup> Sara Marcus. Personal Interview. February 2013.

independent beings, but cleverly and articulated powerfully concise vows for themselves, and for those reading the zines, to strive to live by.<sup>87</sup> Moreover, she masterfully connected herself and her fellow musicians to their readers by calling *them* to action: “Make additions to this list and/or think about why you agree with some of what I’ve written.”<sup>88</sup> By doing so, Hanna perpetuated the idea of community beyond the physical space that she occupied; though it’s true that, as Sara Marcus states, the list “could perhaps be read as her reminders to herself,” Hanna clearly expands beyond the exclusively personal, holding all Riot Grrrls accountable for physically, mentally, and emotionally supporting themselves and those around them.<sup>89</sup> Another piece, entitled “RIOT GRRRL...Believe in me!” employs a similar strategy for self-expression and universal connection, stating:

We Riot Grrrls aren’t aligning ourselves with any one position or consensus, because in all likelihood we don’t agree on everything. One concrete thing we do agree on so far is that it’s cool/ fun to have a place where we can safely and supportively confront, express ourselves, and bring up issues that are important to us.<sup>90</sup>

By creating marked distinction between believing in a *cause* and being formed to think under one uniform umbrella, Hanna not only reaffirmed the importance of her ability (and the ability of *all* women) to have her own individualized opinions and take on the world, but underscored the importance that each individual voice that identified as a Riot Grrrl was to be dignified as such.

Another important element of the Riot Grrrl zine culture that Hanna helped construct was the incorporation of written word with photography and illustration,

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<sup>87</sup> Riot Grrrl Collection: Kathleen Hanna Papers. 1989-1996. *NYU Fales Library & Special Collections*. November 2012-February 2013.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> Sara Marcus. *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2010. 85.

<sup>90</sup> Riot Grrrl Collection: Kathleen Hanna Papers.

which, as Kristin Schilt notes, aided in the ability of Riot Grrl culture to be “both translocal and virtual,”<sup>91</sup> portraying personally specific yet universally relatable visual imagery to reinforce their ideals. An important example of this is the front cover of *Bikini Kill No. 2*, which depicts an image of Hanna herself: she is naked, one arm extended above her head, the other clutching a bundle of fauna to cover her breasts, with the word “GirlPower” written in large font under her figure. The image seemingly satirizes art-historical illustrations of femininity, falling somewhere between visual depictions of Eve and Venus; however, the sensuality and confidence of her facial expression (mouth open and slightly smiling, eyes closed and covered by her untamed bangs) boldly declares not only her right as a woman to express her sexuality, but her right to view that sexual expression as female *empowerment*.<sup>92</sup> Thus, the fact that this photograph is the first image introduced to readers before exposing them to the actual zine content *itself* sets the precedent for Riot Grrrls to explore the boundless possibilities for gender and sexuality affirmation, encouraging them to read on with a sense of liberation and authority.

Another key example of the incorporation of visual imagery and text is a piece from *Bikini Kill No. 1*, which couples the phrases “STOP the J word jealousy from killing girl LOVE; encourage in the face of INSECURITY” with an illustration of two female superheroes. The women are conventionally beautiful, both with long, flowing blonde hair and sporting semi-revealing one-pieces coupled with thigh high boots. However, instead of appearing at odds with each other or seeking to emphasize

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<sup>91</sup> Kristen Schilt. “‘The Riot Grrrl Is...’: The Contestation over Meaning in a Music Scene.” *Music Scenes*. Andy Bennett and Richard A. Pearson ed. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004. 116.

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

their sexualized appearance, they are both depicted as smiling as they gaze upon the words “encourage in the face of insecurity.”<sup>93</sup> By de-emphasizing conventional female competition, Hanna teaches fellow Riot Grrrls and readers that expressing a healthy sense of sexuality and encouraging inner self-confidence in fellow women do not have to be mutually exclusive concepts, and that the only way to encourage female strength is to abolish the propensity towards self-doubt.

In addition to the extraordinarily effective use of zine culture to both reinforce and expand upon the prevailing Riot Grrrl feminist mentalities, Hanna and her band Bikini Kill also utilized the practice of handing out flyers and lyric sheets to the girls in the front of crowds at their shows, both unifying them with their fans and encouraging voices *other* than those in the band to be heard. Sara Marcus recounts a specific example of this practice in *Girls to the Front*:

“Girl Gangs Must Rule All Towns,” read a headline on a flyer that would make rounds at Bikini Kill shows. It went on: *What if we decided that we HAVE to have places where we feel safe and can talk? What if we decided that ‘scenes’ can no longer be ruled by issues of coolness and hierarchy and instead are here to help us feel good enough about our identities as resisters that we can openly challenge racist/ sexist/ classist/ homophobic/ ageist standards? We need to start talking strategy, NOW.*<sup>94</sup>

By repeatedly using the word “we,” Bikini Kill emphasized the fact that the audience members – as both supporters and members of the Riot Grrrl movement – had a personal responsibility to change that which they viewed as unjust and limiting in their surrounding environment. Moreover, these fliers proved that Hanna and the other band members truly did desire and feel a sense of kinship with their audience and fellow women at large, giving them an opportunity to connect with them in a

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<sup>93</sup> Riot Grrrl Collection: Kathleen Hanna Papers.

<sup>94</sup> Sara Marcus. *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2010. 126.



meaningful and tangible way. Moreover, Hanna and her bandmates also frequently distributed lyric sheets with the songs that they would be performing at each specific show, an extension of sorts to Riot Grrrl zine culture in that audience members could both participate (in this case, sing along) and truly absorb the verbal content and messages of the songs themselves.

The utilization of physical material for expressing individual conceptions of gender, artistry, and selfhood for each of these women was invaluable, as it allowed those absorbing their work a means for interpreting each artist in a highly tangible manner. Beyond the fact that all three women respectively harnessed visual culture as a deliberate tool for physical self-expression, their use of lyric content, both to convey their own interpretations their roles within the rock genre and to verbally connect their manners of perceiving the world to that of their audiences', was also incredibly deliberate. Because language – its interpretation, its *misinterpretation*, and its ability to universally connect the speaker with the listener – is arguably the most elemental channel for interpersonal communication and performativity as a whole, the artists' use of verbal self-articulation through the *words* of their songs was the backbone and key mechanism for establishing their personal place as a woman and as an individual in the world of rock.

## Chapter 5: Not Just Words – Gender and Lyric Content

Beyond the physical expression of individuality through what one could *see*, Smith, Jett, and Hanna articulately expressed their selfhood, and more importantly their respective views of the world around them, through their lyrics. Spanning from Smith's use of metaphorical rebellion to Hanna's explicit confrontation of issues relating to the gender binary (and female opposition to it), lyric content has stood as one of the main vehicles for which each of these artists has been able to navigate and express opinions of their roles – and the roles of those around them – within their environments. Just as with the physical presentation of the self, be it on stage, on an album cover, or in a music video, each of these women used lyrics to both guide and underscore not only their artistic goals, but also their means of expressing their selfhood both internally and as public figures in the worlds of punk rock and rock 'n' roll.

Before analyzing Patti Smith's expression of gender and modes of operating in the world musically, it is important to acknowledge that she as an artist is, first and foremost, a poet. Her lyrics surpass previous conceptions of the rock 'n' roll form – and its conventional methods of handling gender as both subject and object – because the way she both sees the world and speaks of it are highly philosophical and laced with extensive metaphor. However, one can observe distinct themes in the songs on her first three albums, *Horses*, *Radio Ethiopia*, and *Easter*, that shed light on her ideas of the world and how she operates within it, and her methods of making sense of (and often rejecting) the society that surrounded her. Because she considered herself an individual who couldn't relate to normal conventions of societal thinking, she often

used lyrics and messages in her poetry that addressed her feelings of being an *observer* in the physical world; her work discusses crucial themes such as societal and spiritual rebellion, and the concepts of love, intimacy and desire in their many forms.

One of the most commonly explored motifs in Smith's work is her way of understanding religion as a means of dictating and guiding her own path as an individual. The most famous example of which, which opens the album *Horses*, is the beginning of "Gloria," which, as she explains it,

Gave me the opportunity to acknowledge and disclaim our musical and spiritual heritage. It personifies for me, within its adolescent conceit, what I hold sacred as an artist. The right to create, without apology, from a stance beyond gender or social definition, but not beyond the responsibility to create something for worth.<sup>95</sup>

The lines, "Jesus died for somebody's sins but not mine/ Melting in a pot of thieves, wild card up my sleeve/ Thick heart of stone, my sins my own/ They belong to me,"<sup>96</sup> not only stood as her own personal declaration of freedom as a woman, an individual, and as a member of the physical world, but explained to the masses that neither God, nor those who acted as regulators in society, could be held accountable for her actions. This notion defies Butler's idea that society's power structures, be it religious or political, have the ability to "limit, prohibit, regulate, control, and even 'protect'" the individuals that operate within them.<sup>97</sup> By claiming her sins, whatever they may be, as her *own*, Smith defiantly "honed her increasingly fierce ambition to simply *be*

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<sup>95</sup> Smith, Patti. *Patti Smith Complete: Lyrics, Reflections & Notes for the Future*. New York: Doubleday, 1998. 7.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.* 8.

<sup>97</sup> Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge, 1990. 2-3.

somebody,” both beyond binary understandings of gender and beyond what anyone expected of her.<sup>98</sup>

In addition to religious and political rebellion, Smith’s lyrics also attested to an even more personal idea of societal rebellion: the idea of being “outside society” all together, paving her own artistic path by proudly acknowledging herself as unexplainable in conventional cultural terms. This sense of rebelliousness, however, was in no way expressed in a manner that either alienated her or disabled her from being important as an individual operating *within* society; she both sought to declare herself independent from anything that might restrain her from full creative and artistic energy, to breathe life into the art world around her that “seemed self-absorbed and cliquish,”<sup>99</sup> and to express an uninhibited desire to explore the world around her in her own way. In the song “Rock n Roll Nigger,” she addresses the idea of being a pariah through the powerful, albeit controversial, metaphor through language:

Baby was a black sheep baby was a whore  
Baby got big and baby get bigger  
Baby get something baby get more  
Baby baby baby was a rock n roll nigger  
Oh look around you all around you  
Riding on a copper wave  
Do you like the world around you  
Are you ready to behave  
Outside of society they’re waiting for me  
Outside of society that’s where I want to be<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Deborah Frost. “Garageland.” *Trouble Girls: The Rolling Stone Book of Women in Rock*. New York: Random House, 1997. 270.

<sup>99</sup> David Fricke. “Patti Smith.” *The Rolling Stone Interviews*. Jann S. Wenner and Joe Levy ed. New York: Back Bay Books, 2007. 382.

<sup>100</sup> Smith. *Patti Smith Complete*. 89.

Her brazen reappropriation of the word “nigger” stands to *celebrate* the social outcast, emphasizing how limiting societal regulation can be when one blindly conforms to the ways in which we are taught to behave, be it through race, gender, expression of sexuality, or other methods of declaring selfhood. She asserts that, just as Jimi Hendrix, Jackson Pollock, and Jesus Christ were all “niggers” of society, she too feels the desire to spiritually rebel against, and separate herself, from mainstream ideas of acceptance in order to feel truly alive in the world around her. Though her choice to use a word with highly sensitized cultural and racial implications seems precarious, she commented that her goal in doing so was to create a sense of personal and universal liberation from negative implications of the categorized other; she commented in an interview with *Melody Maker* that “When I’m working and dipping as far as I can into my subliminal, I get to a point where race and gender and all that stuff no longer exists. When an artist is creating you feel let out of your cell.”<sup>101</sup> Replacing the negative connotations of the word with connotations of the artistic commemoration of the outcast, therefore, allowed her to glorify the rebellion and societal deviation that was commonplace in many of her songs. Moreover, in aligning herself with the aforementioned male “niggers” of society, Smith also calls forth an understanding of being a societal and cultural nonconformist as something that reaches beyond the confines of gender. Her steadfast “allegiance to the outcast” in this song, therefore, seeks to emphasize that which creates truly original character as

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<sup>101</sup> Maria Raha. *Cinderella’s Big Score: Women of the Punk and Indie Underground*. Emeryville: Seal Press, 2005. 19.

an *individual*, rather than attributes that lend themselves to the classification and labeling of human beings.<sup>102</sup>

The spoken word piece “Babelogue,” off the album *Easter*, expresses an equally fervent desire to shake things up and operate outside of conventional societal constraints. She boldly declares: “I haven’t fucked much with the past, but I’ve fucked plenty with the future. Over the skin of silk are scars from the splinters of stations and walls I’ve caressed...I have no guilt. I seek pleasure. I seek the nerves under your skin.”<sup>103</sup> Babelogue’s message is both personal and universal, as she encourages her listeners to heed her example and seek to gain experience through life by *living it*, rather than blindly following what others believe to be right or wrong, moral or immoral, worthwhile or not. She relates this desire for the tactile, for physical experience, to gender in the song “25<sup>th</sup> Floor”: “We explore the men’s room / We don’t give a shit / ladies lost electricity / take vows inside of it / desire to dance / desire to try / wrap my legs round you / starting to fly / let’s explore / up there up there up there / on the 25<sup>th</sup> floor.”<sup>104</sup> By dismissing societal constriction, such as entering the men’s bathroom as a woman, as mere “rules and regulations” (as the song “Gloria” states), she allows herself to express a certain freedom to fulfill more important needs than the mere need to explore her gender role in the world around her: to dance, to try, to explore, and to truly experience life in all the ways it is offered.

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid. 21.

<sup>103</sup> Smith. *Patti Smith Complete*. 85.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid. 96.

The ways in which Patti Smith explains and confronts feelings of love and desire are set equally within this frame of rebellion, insofar as she expresses an unwillingness to conform to classic Rock conventions of attraction, sexual desire, and gender roles expressed both before her and at the time she was making her own music. The second half of “Gloria,” her reinvention of Van Morrison’s original, confidently proclaims admiration for a girl who both fills a void for desire among the otherwise undesirable in the present youth culture and represents what it means to pursue and to feel love and passion in the truest way:

And I go to this here party but I just get bored  
Until I look out the window see a sweet young thing  
[...]  
Oh she looks so good,  
Oh she looks so fine  
And I got this crazy feeling that I’m gonna make her mine<sup>105</sup>

This expression of undeniably instinctual desire for another human being, while purposefully not changing the subject of the song, underscores Smith’s assertion that “human beings,” not the *gender* of human beings, “turn me on...I don’t think like it’s a boy or a girl doing it. I just don’t.”<sup>106</sup> The song “Ain’t it Strange,” off of *Radio Ethiopia*, expresses the idea that, just as she views the objects of *her* affection to be something that extends beyond the surface of gender and societal conventions, she teaches the subject of the song to love *her*, the object of affection *herself*, at a level that transcends normal human understanding: “Don’t you see when you’re looking at me / That I’ll never end transcend transcend / Ain’t it strange... Come and join me I

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid. 8.

<sup>106</sup> Cliff Jahr. “Patti.” *New Times Magazine*. 26 December 1975. 4 February 2013.  
<<http://www.oceanstar.com/patti/intervus/751226nt.htm>>

implore thee / I implore thee come explore me.”<sup>107</sup> This encouragement to seek truth and experience that which transcend normal understandings of what it feels to love – and what it feels to be alive – further underscores Smith’s life dogma that what is “strange” within normal social understanding is the most real, and that what is seemingly intangible on the surface is inevitably the most worthwhile.

Joan Jett’s work, like Smith’s, both actively addressed and rebelled against homogenous culture and the idea of one having predetermined roles in society, however her lyrics possessed a more explicit opposition both to gender in rock culture and preconceived notions of what it meant to be a woman making music. One of the most important factors in her work as a solo artist was the frequency with which she covered old rock and roll songs, almost exclusively originally done by men. Her biggest hit, “I Love Rock ‘n’ Roll,” off of her debut solo album *Joan Jett*, was actually a cover of The Arrows’ original. Her remake, however, takes the rather stereotypical rock music scenario – a man spotting a woman at a bar and seducing her with his rock ‘n’ roll charm – and switches the pronouns so that she, the female, is seducing a young man who falls victim to her sex appeal and the musical genre she stands for:

I saw him dancin' there by the record machine  
I knew he must a been about seventeen  
The beat was goin' strong  
Playin' my favorite song  
And I could tell it wouldn't be long  
Till he was with me, yeah me, singin'  
I love rock n' roll  
So put another dime in the jukebox, baby  
I love rock n' roll

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<sup>107</sup> Smith, Patti. *Patti Smith Complete*. 51.



So come and take your time and dance with me<sup>108</sup>

Her unapologetic willingness to express her commanding sexual power over the male subject in this song speaks to her assertion that “girls have to be allowed to be sexual too, because they are. And it’s wrong to say they can’t be and they can’t own it. It’s something people don’t accept...it’s about saying ‘I own it, and this is what I’m gonna do to you.’ Girls aren’t allowed to do that. But you see, I’m the other way around. I’m not asking permission.”<sup>109</sup> By switching the gender pronouns in this song – and enforcing them with her signature howls in between words – she leaves no room for anyone to question the ability for women to be contenders in the world of rock, bringing as much raw and sexually-charged energy as any of her male contemporaries.

Jett plays with gender roles even more indubitably in her covers of Gary Glitter’s “Do You Wanna Touch Me (Oh Yeah),” off the album *Joan Jett/ Bad Reputation*, and Tommy James and the Shondelles’ “Crimson and Clover,” off the album *I Love Rock ‘n’ roll*, as she leaves herself as the singer in the role of “he” pursuing a female love interest. The former of the two is more aggressively sexual, with lines like “I’m a natural man / Doin’ all I can / My temperature is runnin’ high... Talkin’s fine if you got the time / But I ain’t got the time to spare / Do you wanna touch?”<sup>110</sup> In this song, Jett steps beyond a willingness to assert her right to overtly expressing rock sexuality often associated with men; she herself reinforces Judith Butler’s notion that “that gender is a choice, or that gender is a role, or that gender is

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<sup>108</sup> Joan Jett. “I Love Rock n’ Roll.” *I Love Rock ‘n Roll*. Boardwalk Records/ Blackheart. 1981. CD.

<sup>109</sup> Todd Oldham and Kathleen Hanna. *Joan Jett*. Los Angeles: Ammo, 2010.

<sup>110</sup> Joan Jett. “Do You Wanna Touch Me (Oh Yeah).” *Joan Jett/ Bad Reputation*. Self-released. 1980. CD.

a construction that one puts on, as one puts on clothes in the morning.”<sup>111</sup> Joan, in this case, ignores predetermined societal gender roles, and simply takes on the male role that suits her in the song, as an artist, and as a serious contender in the rock genre. A softer, less overtly sexual version of this is her cover of “Crimson and Clover,” where she sings “I don’t hardly know her / but I think I could love her / crimson and clover / now when she comes walking over / now I’ve been waiting to show her / crimson and clover.”<sup>112</sup> Though Joan does not herself identify with either a male or female role as the voice in the song, she *does* express a certain universality in her expression of affection for the girl she sings about, opening up the possibility, as Kathleen Hanna reflects, for “a world where sex was as gorgeous as Joan’s round, smoky, perfectly pitched voice and gender could move and change like the signs along the highway.”<sup>113</sup> By expressing love for another female as a female voice herself, and yet simultaneously disassociating herself from conventional gender relations of the original version, Jett effectively reinvents the concept of love, creating a sense of endlessness to the possibilities for human connection.

In addition to Joan Jett’s innovative methods of covering male-oriented rock ‘n’ roll songs, she also used the lyrics of her own original songs to both confront and dismiss the judgments and stereotypes made against her that she never allowed to affect her career. The song “Victim of Circumstance,” off of *I Love Rock n Roll*, asserts that it was never *her* gender, *her* role as an artist and musician in the public eye that attracted negative attention or opposition, but rather the heteronormative and

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<sup>111</sup> Butler. 94.

<sup>112</sup> Joan Jett. “Crimson and Clover.” *I Love Rock ‘n’ Roll*. Boardwalk Records/ Blackheart. 1981. CD.

<sup>113</sup> Oldham and Hanna.

closed-minded social environment around her that made her a source of antagonism and tension in the industry. She sings:

Really gets you down when you don't belong  
An' everyone around says you grew up wrong  
But why do they resent it, I ain't doin' anything  
They say that I'm demented an' I never could sing  
Then everywhere I went I caused them such alarm  
You know I never meant to cause anybody harm, no  
[...]  
I'm just a victim of circumstance  
Wherever I go  
Just a victim of bad reputation  
I go no chance of shakin'<sup>114</sup>

The societal victimization she sings about, however, is not a vocalization of her submission to the powers that be. Rather, she refuses to take ownership for the fact that her reputation as a woman playing rock is misconstrued, and questions why it is that simply being who she is has elicited such turmoil in the media and the music industry at large. A more confrontational version of this is conveyed in “Bad Reputation,” whereby she overly exclaims that none of this turmoil will ever be able to change her: “I don't give a damn 'bout my reputation/ you're living in the past, it's a new generation/ a girl can do what she wants to do and that's what I'm gonna do.”<sup>115</sup> The former expresses a universalized awareness of the ability society has to make one feel out of place when, as Judith Butler puts it, “the very notion of ‘the person’ is called into question by the cultural emergence of those ‘incoherent’ or ‘discontinuous’ gendered beings who appear to be persons but who fail to conform.”<sup>116</sup> However, “Bad Reputation” acknowledges that, despite causing a stir

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<sup>114</sup> Joan Jett. “Victim of Circumstance.” *I Love Rock ‘n’ Roll*. Boardwalk Records/ Blackheart. 1981. CD.

<sup>115</sup> Joan Jett. “Bad Reputation.” *Bad Reputation*. Boardwalk Records/ Blackheart. 1981. CD.

<sup>116</sup> Butler. 23.

with her gender and societal “incoherence,” she was “never been afraid of any deviation”<sup>117</sup> and had no intention of conceding to or allowing backlash to stop her from being herself.

Of the three women, however, Kathleen Hanna used lyric content most unequivocally as a tool for expressing both female strength and an unwillingness to submit to the cultural constraints of predetermined gender roles in society. Because Bikini Kill’s performances aimed so intensely to both connect artist to audience and to speak simultaneously personal and political opinion as a means for creating feminist solidarity, the actual *words* of their songs served as a crucial element for getting their messages across. In an interview for the zine Bikini Kill no. 2, the band’s drummer, Tobi Vail, remarks that “when [the band] plays live we try to make sure the vocals are loud enough to be heard in the mix and sometimes Kathleen passes out lyric sheets. Obviously, a lot of Bikini Kill’s political content comes in through the lyrics.”<sup>118</sup> The importance placed not only on being heard through the lyric content of their songs, but on *connecting with* and *relating to* those who were listening, had a tremendous impact on Hanna and the Riot Grrrls’ ability to effectively spread feminist ideals and to inspire women worldwide to do the same.

One of the most central themes that runs throughout Kathleen Hanna’s work in Bikini Kill is the recurrent use of lyrics as a feminist “call to action,” encouraging her fans and fellow women in general to seek out life beyond the borders of what

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<sup>117</sup> Joan Jett. “Bad Reputation.” CD.

<sup>118</sup> Riot Grrrl Collection: Kathleen Hanna Papers. 1989-1996. *NYU Fales Library & Special Collections*. November 2012-February 2013.

male-dominated society tells us is right or acceptable. The song “Double Dare Ya” is the clearest example of this, as Kathleen wails:

Hey girlfriend  
I got a proposition goes something like this:  
Dare ya to do what you want  
Dare ya to be who you will  
Dare ya to cry right out loud  
[...]  
You've got to know what they are  
Fore you can stand up for your rights  
Rights, rights?  
You DO have rights  
Double dare ya, double dare ya  
Double dare triple fuckin' dare ya girlfriend<sup>119</sup>

By “daring” her fans, fellow feminists, and the girls of her generation not only to *know* their rights and be aware of the role they hold in the world around them, but to *do something about it*, Hanna forcefully leads by example in creating the gender “discontinuity” that Butler speaks of: taking societal risks and fighting back against those who try to use gender power constructs to hold her down, and most importantly pushing through when that discontinuity is perceived as a threat. The song “Resist Psychic Death,” though sung in the first person, removes the “I” in the title, encouraging listeners once again to find strength in the vows Hanna makes for herself in both thinking about and acting against conventional understanding of gender: “I will resist with every inch and every breath/ I will resist this psychic death/ there’s more than two ways of thinking/ there’s more than one way of knowing/ there’s more than two ways of being/ there’s more than one way of going somewhere.”<sup>120</sup>By presenting “thinking” and “being” as conventionally understood only *two* ways – and “knowing” and “going somewhere” as uninterpretable outside of *one* frame of

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<sup>119</sup> Bikini Kill. “Double Dare Ya.” *Bikini Kill EP*. Kill Rock Stars. 1991. CD.

<sup>120</sup> Riot Grrrl Collection: Kathleen Hanna Papers.

understanding – she expresses the belief that the stringent binary opposition created by societal conceptions of gender has effectively blinded women within that mindset to both mentally and physically exist in the world outside of them. Hanna, through acknowledging this and devoting herself to fighting against it, sought to prove that this mindset *could* be resisted with conscious effort and an unwillingness to concede to mainstream mentality.

Another way in which Kathleen Hanna uses lyrics as a means for conveying feminist mentality and activism is through the set-up of an “us vs. them” or “me vs. you” scenario, something that reinforced the separatist nature of the Riot Grrrl movement that so often spun them into controversy in the public eye. In “Don’t Need You,” originally released on 1991’s *Revolution Girl Style Now!* Hanna declares:

When it gets right down to the bottom of it all  
When it gets right down to the heart of the matter  
You’re dumb and I’m not  
[...]  
You don’t make all the rules, yeah!  
I know what I’m gonna fuckin do  
Me and my girlfriends gonna push on through  
We are gonna stomp all over you, yeah!  
You’re dumb I’m not  
You’re fucked I’m not<sup>121</sup>

Through these steadfast and self-confident assertions, she not only tells men that have done her wrong – and those who have wronged the women that her voice represents – that they don’t have the power to control them or make them feel differently about themselves. More importantly, though, the assertion that *she* has the upper hand, *she* is in control, and *he*’s the one who loses in the end flips the politics of mainstream gender formation on its back, reducing heteronormative ideas of male dominance and

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

manipulation as nothing more than unviable and outdated ignorance. The song “Don’t Need You” addresses this concept even further, stating “Don’t need you to say we’re cute/ don’t need you to say we’re alright/ don’t need your protection/ don’t need no kiss goodnight...does it scare you that we don’t need you? does it scare you boy that we don’t need you?”<sup>122</sup> Hanna not only breaks down the possibility for male dominance and power like she does in “This is Not a Test,” but suggests that the “threat” posed by those who “fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility”<sup>123</sup> is simply based on an institutionalized fear of losing power to the female population.

Arguably the most famous of all Bikini Kill songs, however, combines many of the aforementioned lyrical elements in celebration of the archetypal Riot Grrrl, the girl who defies gender boundaries, the girl who is brave enough to see past cultural restrictions and is a force of nature worthy of true admiration: the “Rebel Girl.” With lines like “that girl she hold her head up so high / I think I wanna be her best friend” and “When she walks, the revolution’s coming / in her hips, there’s revolution / when she talks I hear the revolution / In her kiss, I taste the revolution,” Hanna unwaveringly expresses the way a Riot Grrrl, or any girl for that matter, should seek to set a societal example, both for her own self-preservation and for that of those around her.<sup>124</sup> The “Rebel Girl” is uninhibited by political and societal constraints, refuses to doubt herself or stand for anything less than taking full ownership of her actions, demands to make a positive impact on the world, and represents the change

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Butler. 23.

<sup>124</sup> Bikini Kill. “Rebel Girl.” *Pussy Whipped*. Kill Rock Stars, 1993. CD.

that is absolutely necessary in order to break down outdated conceptions of power and gender. Moreover, she does not hide her sexuality, nor does she allow anyone to tell her how she should express herself; as Sara Marcus states, “in that revolutionary kiss, there may not have been any tongue. As for third base – well, there is that line about hips, but we have to look at it in context...these hips are not made for fucking [...] but for walking. And that’s just what they do – *When she walks the revolution’s coming*.”<sup>125</sup> The subject of the song is at once a specific individual and a universal archetype of the Riot Grrrl, aligning Hanna and her fans on a level plane in the personal desire to “be [her] best friend” and spread her revolutionary mindset through the Riot Grrrl ideal of *girl love*.

By using lyrics to reinvent the concept of gender in rock, reinforced with specific musical gestures and physical presentation, Smith, Jett, and Hanna leave little room for interpretation in terms of how they define themselves artistically and as individuals in their own right. The gradual development and expression of individuality and gender expression – be it through lyrics, physical appearance and dress, or the use of visual content and various marketing mediums – all came to head, however, through the most important platform available to the rock musician: the *stage* itself. Taking the aforementioned factors of gender expression and performativity, we must now look at how each artist utilized those expressive elements to build their personas as they brought their craft to life, as the stage remains the ultimate liaison for both controlling and connecting what they saw in themselves with what others saw in them.

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<sup>125</sup> Marcus. *Girls to the Front*. 110.



## **Chapter 6: Gender Performativity and the Live Stage – Vocal Technique, Performance Style, and Stage Presence**

Within the multitude of tools for expressing their understandings of personal individuality as a woman, as an artist, and as a public figure in the world of rock ‘n’ roll, there is no doubt that the concept of performativity took its form for these three musicians most literally, and most effectively, on stage in live performance. By harnessing the energy of those who inspired them, the environments that either supported them or tested them, and the various mediums that allowed them to express themselves through their music, Smith, Jett, and Hanna alike used the stage as the pinnacle platform for defining and reaffirming their selfhood. The stage, as it were, proved to be the most important space for truly refining and mastering their roles as female musicians, as all three women developed such deliberate and distinguishable vocal styles, instrument-playing techniques, and stage presences that there was little room from the viewer’s perspective for misinterpreting how each artist wanted to be perceived.

For Patti Smith, body language, movement, and external self-expression were elemental in shaping her image through live performance, as the stage provided her a crucial space for expressing the persona she had spent years cultivating throughout her late teens and early twenties. The most formative of Smith’s musical performances in terms of her projection of selfhood was her performance of “Gloria” on Saturday Night Live on April 17<sup>th</sup>, 1976. She appeared in her trademark “uniform” – loose-fitting white silk blouse, black trousers, a thin black tie, and infamously tussled short black hair – presenting herself almost exactly as she did on the cover of *Horses*, almost treating herself as both muse and maker by bringing that still

photograph to life. Gesturally, she deliberately divided the song into distinct sections, varying her levels of articulation and motion based on certain musical movements and lyrical tone. She begins her performance by standing completely still in front of the microphone, staring unwaveringly at the audience as she declares, “Jesus died for somebody’s sins but not mine...thick heart of stone, my sins my own, they belong to me.”<sup>126</sup> By presenting herself in this manner before the music itself escalated, she resolutely asserted her right to, as the song implies, hold *herself* accountable for her personhood, her beliefs, and her actions. She then transitions into moments of more flamboyant and expressive bodily movements: flailing her left arm dramatically over her face as she wails, “I look up into the big tower clock and say ‘oh my god, it’s midnight and my baby is coming to the door;” forcefully throwing her hands toward the audience while singing “you whispered to me and we took the deep plunge;” thrusting her hips as the lyrics describe Gloria’s affect on her as the storyteller.<sup>127</sup> Her unmatched ability to both channel and reinvent conventionally male rock ‘n’ roll performance techniques – while also fully utilizing her body as a mechanism for emphasizing the words of the song she sings – exemplifies her ability to replace fixations on her expression of gender with a focus on her masterfully performative declaration of individualism. As Cliff Jahr observed of her in his 1975 article for *New Times Magazine*, “Patti jabs and swings and slams home a songs like a contender for the flyweight crown... it is her overarching and her skinny frame that help audiences accept her omnisexual swagger;” she is *so* notably cognizant of how to use her body and appearance to align with her artistic aesthetic, *so* in control of herself in front of

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<sup>126</sup> “Patti Smith, Gloria.” *JC Stolen*. Vimeo. 2010. February 2013. <<http://vimeo.com/5456823>>

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid*.

her audience, that there is almost no room for misinterpretation or wrongful comparison.<sup>128</sup>

An important extension of the “omnisexual swagger” that she exuded on stage was her method of playing guitar, which served less as an addition to the music itself than both a dramatization and reinterpretation of rock ‘n’ roll paradigms through her own personal lens. Her performance of “Horses/ Hey Joe” at Old Grey Whistle Test in 1977, for example, explores the use of guitar to mimic and explore the visual expression of anarchy and freedom. As Sheila Whitley recounts, her method of playing the instrument, much like her external self-presentation and on-stage body language, “was raw and primitive, a reminder that punk rock was essentially about confrontation... her gestures mimic the words to effect ‘a double transgression – of language by the flesh and of the flesh by language.’”<sup>129</sup> Two particular moments in this performance portray Smith’s utilization of the guitar to fuse language and flesh. The first is incorporated into the spoken word interlude between the two songs: Patti speaks, “if you are male and choose other than female, you must take the responsibility of holding the key to freedom,” subsequently locking eyes with the camera and sharply rubbing her pick on the guitar’s strings, producing atonal but aggressively precise rhythmic bursts of noise.<sup>130</sup> The coupling of her brisk, repetitive picking and forceful stare metaphorically emphasize her belief that the emotional and performative choices we make as individuals are only perceived as honest if we carry

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<sup>128</sup> Cliff Jahr. "Patti." *New Times Magazine*. 26 December 1975. 4 February 2013.  
<<http://www.oceanstar.com/patti/intervus/751226nt.htm>>

<sup>129</sup> Sheila Whitley. “Patti Smith: *The Old Grey Whistle Test*, BC-2 TV, May 11, 1976.” *Performance and Popular Music*. Ian Inglis ed. Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2006. 83.

<sup>130</sup> “Patti Smith – Horses – Hey Joe (1976 Old Grey Whistle Test).” *Maya Sabbatini*. YouTube. 13 May 2011. January 2013.  
<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kx99Bmy84IQ&feature=endscreen&NR=1>>

them out with intent and without self-doubt, those being the “keys to freedom” that she addresses in her lyrics.

The second comes to head in the musical climax of “Hey Joe,” a song that, in and of itself, seeks to explore the existential American need to eradicate that which restrains us in our surrounding environment, metaphorically dramatized through the story of a man who frees his soul by shooting his lover who had an affair with another man. Smith ends the lyrical narrative as she sings, “You know I’ll be no fool/ on my knees/ waiting around for you to make something happen/ I cannot be waiting for your queue... I gotta be free baby,” subsequently launching into wildly untamed guitar strumming that ends with her on her knees: back arched, eyes closed, body submitted to the complete freedom sought by the character in her song.<sup>131</sup> Her use of unrestrained body language and guitar playing to mimic the lyrical desire for freedom exemplifies the “sheer physical abandon” she mastered as an artist on stage, as she possessed the unique ability to blur the lines between privatized and publicized expressions of selfhood through unapologetic visceral release. Moreover, her “thrashing, flailing, and twisting herself around during instrumentals,” as Maria Raha explains, “meant she never had to stop speaking,” as she utilized her personal interpretation of rock movement and guitar style as an extension of her artistic voice itself, emphasizing the importance of utilizing every component of the physical body to express meaning on stage.<sup>132</sup> The tangible manner in which she both internalizes and expresses this, therefore, taught her audiences that above all associations with

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Maria Raha. *Cinderella’s Big Score: Women of the Punk and Indie Underground*. Emeryville: Seal Press, 2005. 20.

gender, art form, and societal niche, Smith's appeal as a rock musician lied within her ability to, as she says, "not be afraid of anything except for fear," and to express individualism through vulnerability, honesty, and undeniable credence to her art.<sup>133</sup>

Arguably the most important element of Smith's live performance persona, however, is her inimitably demagogic use of vocal manipulation to invoke authority on stage. Her stylized means of vocal manipulation in singing, in spoken word, and through true poetic performance technique – combining musical and lyrical gestures with simultaneously deliberate and unhindered improvisation – allowed her transcend the stereotypes tied to mainstream conceptions of the passive or predictable female rock vocalist. Her performances of "So You Want To Be a Rock 'n' Roll Star" and "Rock 'n' Roll Nigger" for Germany's Rockpalast TV clearly exemplified the full range of her vocal techniques to, in her own words, strengthen performance by channeling "both masculine and feminine rhythms."<sup>134</sup> In the former, her cover of The Byrds' 1967 classic, Smith intentionally uses vocal inflection and tonal control to mimic the song's lyrical satirizing of rock 'n' roll culture. The line, "In a week or two / if you make the charts / the girls will tear you apart," perfectly exemplifies Smith's stylized vocal manipulation to mold the lyrical message to fit both her artistic goals and her personal self-assertion: half-spoken, half-sung, she uses the booming intonations of her voice – coupled with a lightheartedly flippant laugh on the line "tear you apart" – to both underscore the comical predictability of the rock 'n' roll lifestyle she sings about, and to cleverly assert herself as an artist who, by nature,

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<sup>133</sup> "Patti Smith – Interview, Stockholm 1976." *AssGrassProduction*. YouTube. 29 January 2012. January 2013. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=37w96lUcjmY>>

<sup>134</sup> "Patti Smith about the Gender Question (Cologne 2002)." *atropina76*. YouTube. 24 October 2008. 1 February 2013. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TSW4ONnQfJE>>

proudly deviates from the cookie-cutter male rocker identity that the song itself addresses. In the instrumental break, Smith then adds her own original material as she shouts: “I have some information for you/ a real promise to be true,” singing the line with such authority that one cannot help but accept her for all that she stands for as a rock performer and individual “beyond gender,” acceptance that is only further validated as she repeatedly wails, “true to you/ true to you/ true to you!”<sup>135</sup> Smith, therefore, uses vocal technique to emphasize her promise to earnestly express her art and her individualism through the realm of rock ‘n’ roll, emphasizing the fact that, when the practices of the genre called forth in the lyrics are carried out with volition and unabashed honesty to *herself*, her work and self-representation can then be taken at face value as her unfiltered and unapologetic truth.

Her performance of “Rock ‘N’ Roll Nigger” on the same program uses similar beat- and punk- infused vocal techniques to perpetuate her expression of authenticity and individualism. However, instead of aligning herself *with* a rock ‘n’ roll identity and means of operating within society, she uses various vocal gestures to articulate, as the lyrics state, a need to move “outside society” in order to be true to herself and encourage others to follow suit. In the first verse, which uses an underlying narrative of the celebrated anarchical “black sheep” to question the validity of conceding to societal expectation, Patti takes on the voice of a messianic authority figure, dropping her voice low as she bellows, “look around you, all around you/ riding on a copper

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<sup>135</sup> “Patti Smith – So You Want To Be A Rock and Roll Star.” *Bognar Regis*. YouTube. 24 September 2007. January 2013. <[www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cppyn-u3Djw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cppyn-u3Djw)>

wave/ do you like the world around you?/ are you ready to behave?”<sup>136</sup> Though this vocal technique undoubtedly channels the masculine and feminine rhythms she seeks to explore, her tone and manner of conveying the lyrics to her audience surpasses that of a gendered being, lending itself more to that of an empowered source of authority and enlightenment as she extends her arms and beckons her viewers to resist conformity. Furthermore, it is completely evident that she is not only acutely aware of how to control her voice – her volume, her tone, and her transitions from speaking to singing – but also how to guide manipulate the band’s instrumentation to compliment her decisions. This artistic agency allowed Smith to disassociate from the notion articulated by Mary Ann Clawson that “women vocalists must overcome or address a devaluation that that derives from two mutually confirming identities: that they are women, and that they sing – ‘naturally.’”<sup>137</sup> Because the band is so hyperaware of and sensitive to her vocal gestures and poetic timing – especially evident during the instrumental break as Patti moves through the audience, loosely improvising over the lyrics “Jimi Hendrix was a nigger, Jesus Christ and grandma too”<sup>138</sup> – she defies the expectation that female rock vocals merely seek to serve the music they are contributing to, reversing that by creating a performance where the music is merely an additive compositional layer to her artistic expression.

For Joan Jett, the stage was also a crucial platform for her artistic exploration of the rock genre and rock genre practices, but it was, more importantly, a space in which she could defy gender binary opposition and prove herself a worthy contender

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<sup>136</sup> “Patti Smith: Rock N Roll Nigger (1979) Germany at Rockpalast TV.” *PretzelFarmer*. YouTube 14 May 2009. 4 November 2012. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VgNeBNMJFZs>>

<sup>137</sup> Mary Ann Clawson. “Not Just the Girl Singer: Women and Voice in Rock Bands.” *Negotiating at the Margins*. Sue Fisher and Kathy Davis ed. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993. 237.

<sup>138</sup> “Patti Smith: Rock N Roll Nigger (1979) Germany at Rockpalast TV.” YouTube.

in a field more or less only known to men. The cultivation of her so-called “tough-girl” reappropriation of masculinized rock performance was exhibited most clearly in external self-presentation, distinguishable vocal technique, and a manner of both holding, moving with, and playing guitar on stage that quickly came to be recognized indubitably as her own. Her manner of dress, displayed in her videos and as her “uniform” in every day life, was at once intrinsically organic and intentionally provocative, as she sought to prove that her appearance and expression of identity *did* combat mainstream expectations of her role as a woman in the world of hard rock. Her external appearance, though not outwardly stated or contrived, was absolutely influenced by her conception of “cock rock performers,” which, as Simon Frith asserts,

are aggressive, dominating, and boastful, and they constantly seek to remind the audience of their prowess, their control. Their stance is obvious in live shows; male bodies on display, plunging shirts and tight trousers, a visual emphasis on chest hair and genitals.<sup>139</sup>

More often than not, Jett was seen on stage in tight leather pants and jumpsuits, heavy black eye makeup, teased black hair, and studded jewelry, a look that allowed her to stand out as one of few female rockers of her time that dared to combine hard rock edginess with in-your-face sexual assertion. Moreover, her manner of dress complimented her incredibly commanding stage presence – usually characterized by an uncompromising stare and aggressively sexualized mannerisms – to create her persona as a true female “cock rocker,” a woman who had no problem asserting herself as a true force among her male predecessors and contemporaries. Jett’s look,

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<sup>139</sup> Frith, Simon and Angela McRobbie. “Rock and Sexuality, 1978.” *On Record*. Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin ed. New York: Pantheon Books, 1990. 371-389. 374.



though only a small part of her dynamism as a performer, set the initial precedent for the way she was perceived by her audience for the remainder of all of her shows, as she presented them with a true individual and hard rocker that unwaveringly and unapologetically understood how she wanted to be seen as an artist.

Along similar performative lines, Jett's vocal delivery – especially with regard to the manipulation of emotion through tone and the incorporation of male rock-influenced grunts, screams, and howls – played up her unwillingness to concede to the idea that, at the time she emerged with the Blackhearts, “you couldn't have it all. You couldn't have a great voice and also, if you were a woman, be thought of as sexual and beautiful.”<sup>140</sup> She combined naturally tonal vocal lines with intentional moments of fervor and aggression to create a metaphorical palate of honest self-expression, as her vocal manipulation not only helped her explore her public persona and voice as a rock musician, but also lent itself quite effectively to the narrative of her songs. For example, in her performance of “Bad Reputation” in 1981 recorded for BBC Urgh! Live, Jett not only manipulates and controls the inflection and volume of her voice to dramatize her lyrical dismissal of those in society who rejected her deviance from conventional gender norms, but also utilized vocal aggression – and what she referred to as her adaptation of the Marc Bolan scream<sup>141</sup> – to underscore her confidence as a force to be reckoned with in rock 'n' roll. Her vocal emphasis on the line “I don't give a damn 'bout my reputation” that repeats multiple times throughout the song – half-sung, half-shouted in trademark Joan Jett fashion – metaphorically underscores her abolishment of any personal insecurity that could

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<sup>140</sup> Joan Jett. “Joan Jett.” *Angry Women in Rock*. Andrea Juno ed. New York: Juno, 1996. 70.

<sup>141</sup> Todd Oldham and Kathleen Hanna. *Joan Jett*. Los Angeles: Ammo, 2010.

have come with societal and corporate judgment of her sense of selfhood.<sup>142</sup> She sings the line with such visceral and passionate rawness that it is almost impossible as a viewer to do anything but stand beside her on her quest for individuality and acceptance of those who, as Judith Butler states, create mainstream social disruption. This aggression is later accented as she shouts, “hello boys!,” tilting her head and widening her eyes as she leads the band into the instrumental break.<sup>143</sup> Though playful and sarcastic in nature, the conviction with which she delivers these two simple words is unwaveringly powerful, as she so effortlessly announces how unthreatened she is by those who tell her she cannot be a woman and be successful rock musician. Finally, she ends the work by repeating “not me!” three times, each time throatier and louder than the one before, throwing her fist in the air with each assertion.<sup>144</sup> Her effective means of using vocals to guide the emotional development of the performance as a whole is what makes this last gesture so effective, as she leaves her viewers at a tangible peak, persuading them to celebrate the concept of individualism without compromising an affinity for the existing practices and appeal of the rock genre.

Arguably the most important element contributing to her self-expressive performance technique was the development of a highly discernible guitar stance and way of moving as she played on stage. This aspect of her performative self-assertion was – subconsciously and consciously – one of the most crucial ways she was able to break away from her reputation as a female rocker impersonating male rock

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<sup>142</sup> “Joan Jett- Bad Reputation (Urgh! Live)” *Rocco Valentino*. YouTube. 1 March 2010. January 2013. <[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_S7MIEBKB0k](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_S7MIEBKB0k)>

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*

paradigms, moving her into an unexplored category of her own: a woman who was both self-determinedly sexualized *and* a confidently effervescent musician and performer, unlike anything anyone had seen before. As Jett asserts herself, ““I hold my guitar really low. The pickup... that part sits right on my pubic bone. And there’s something about hittin’ a chord and that power goes through your pubic bone. It’s definitely very sexual, and it’s powerful.”<sup>145</sup>The unapologetic sexuality she associates with her method of playing and holding the guitar can, of course, be traced back to some of her greatest male musical influences mentioned in Chapter 2. In practice, however, the interplay between guitar licks and vocal lines, articulated gestures and mannerisms, and the incorporation of her instrument as an extension of her “uniform” amalgamated to project such a strong sense of personhood that she was able to, in effect, redefine what it meant to be both masculine *and* feminine.

In reflecting upon Jett’s formation of a distinct rock ‘n’ roll identity through the guitar, two live performances are clear examples of the instrument being an additive element to her invocation of a powerfully inter-gendered and individualized rock identity: her performance of “I Love Rock ‘N’ Roll” at 1980’s Lochem Festival, and her performance of “Crimson and Clover” in 1982 for Germany’s Rockpop TV. The former aptly showcases Jett’s ability to use guitar licks and simple, aggressively played bar chords to accent vocal lines, a structural element that runs throughout much of her work as a whole and is undoubtedly a testament to the male-dominated rock music and performance technique that influenced her early on (Keith Richards, Tom Verlaine, etc.). However, she utilizes this structure on stage to play up her own

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<sup>145</sup> Oldham and Hanna.

understanding and interpretation of the fact that, “instrument playing,” especially the electric guitar, “is replete with the imagery of an implicitly masculine dominance.”<sup>146</sup> She starts the song with a wide, sturdy stance, holding her guitar low as she plays the song’s infamous three-chord progression. As she sings the line, “the beat was going strong/ playing my favorite song,” she intentionally lingers on the corresponding bar chord, manipulating the notes in whammy-bar fashion, underscoring both her complete control over the situation she sings about and the playfully devilish sexual undertones of the music she praises.<sup>147</sup> Though this method of playing is innate and characteristic of her music as a whole, the dynamism she projects through her guitar, coupled with her fixed stare into the crowd and effortlessly intimidating body language, only furthers her ability to assert how naturally and earnestly she fits within the framework of male-dominated hard rock culture. This fluidity of identity is only further emphasized in the chorus, as she maintains her steadfast stance and rocks back and forth, emanating personal authority as she fervently strums her guitar, metaphorically mimicking the message of her lyrics: she loves the music she plays, and she refuses to allow misplaced notions of gender to keep her from doing what she believes in.

The complete sense of ownership and control over her identity that Jett emanates through guitar playing is a huge part of what made 1982’s performance of “Crimson and Clover” for Rockpop TV such a magnetic and effective display of selfhood, as she so confidently muddled the lines between masculine and feminine

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<sup>146</sup> Clawson. “Not Just Girl Singer.” 237.

<sup>147</sup> “Joan Jett & The Blackhearts – I Love Rock ‘n’ Roll (HQ – Live at Lochem Festival).” *Michael Nichols*. YouTube. 7 November 2012. 10 December 2012. <[www.youtube.com/watch?v=kw0J4y-IZWs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kw0J4y-IZWs)>

means of expression to explore the rock ‘n’ roll paradigm of love in its most raw and true form. Her delicate vocal delivery in each of the first verse’s lines (“I don’t hardly know her/ but I think I could love her”) are juxtaposed with passionately strummed three-chord guitar phrases, invoking two seemingly opposing and naturally gendered means of expressing the same sentiment – the natural sweetness of the vocals being stereotypically female and the aggressive, primal nature of the guitar being stereotypically male. The artful musical delivery of this juxtaposition serves to combine, as Patti Smith would say, an effective amalgamation of both masculine and feminine rhythms into one form of expression, proving that she, as a female and as a serious rocker, did not have to compromise either gendered aspect of herself in order to perform and present herself organically. As the song builds energy and her guitar lines build speed, Jett’s style of playing and body movements become one, as she nods her head as she strums and then explodes into a liberated yet imperturbably confident manner of moving around the stage with her guitar in the instrumental break. It is this example of her coupling “the Joan stance – totally confident, tough and in charge, her guitar hanging down like she’s the lost member of the Ramones”<sup>148</sup> with earnest and heartfelt lyrical expression of selfhood and of love that exemplify her unmatched ability to transcend stereotypically gendered mannerisms and rock performance techniques to express a truly individualized sense of musicianship and rock ‘n’ roll identity.

Though Smith and Jett clearly utilized the stage as an important means of personally and honestly asserting their individualism and values as musicians,

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<sup>148</sup> Oldham and Hanna. Foreward.

Kathleen Hanna's performative use of the live stage was incomparable to any other female rock musician, as it served as a crucial platform for expressing every aspect of herself and her feminist ideals far beyond anything she produced in print or through recordings. For Hanna, the stage provided her an opportunity to connect with those who's ideals aligned with theirs, to address and combat individuals and ways of thinking that they deemed unacceptable, and most importantly, to be *present*, physically displaying her need for revolution in an interpersonal and confrontational manner. As Sara Marcus recounts in *Girls to the Front*,

Kathleen cut a fearsome figure onstage. With her pale skin, jet-black bob, and faded black T-shirt, she looked stark before she even opened her mouth. Singing, she became utterly magnetic. "Dare to do what you want!" she roared, her entire torso rising with each breath before she bore down on the next line, "Dare to be who you will!"<sup>149</sup>

Her vocal technique as undoubtedly one of her most powerful tools for expressing her personal and artistic goals as a musician and voice for young women, as she artfully combined passionate screams and dramatized inflections to express the fact that, musically, "the point [for Riot Grrrls wasn't] letting it out and feeling better (or a catharsis) but enlisting other screamers – and doing it in the public eye."<sup>150</sup> Her performance of "Rebel Girl" at The Sanctuary Theatre in Washington DC in 1992, for example, showcases her ability to call attention to certain lyrical phrases and musical moments by changing the volume and tone of her voice. She sings the line, "when she talks, the revolution's coming / in her hips there's revolution," dipping her voice to emphasize the word "hips" as she, herself, moves her hips in a slow, circular

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<sup>149</sup> Sara Marcus. *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2010. 51.

<sup>150</sup> Neil Nehring. *Popular Music, Gender, and Postmodernism: Anger Is an Energy*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1997. 154.

motion.<sup>151</sup> By doing so, she satirizes the narrow-minded reduction in heteronormative society of women who openly assert their sexuality, utilizing the double entendre of the word “revolution” to demand that this “revolution” as physical motion and “revolution” as progressive need for change are not mutually exclusive. She then builds musical tension in the second half of the verse, eventually screaming, “in her kiss / I TASTE THE REVOLUTION!” as she explodes into the chorus, throwing her whole body into the air and singing, “rebel girl, rebel girl / rebel girl you are the queen of my world!”<sup>152</sup> Her aggressive performative use of vocals to both celebrate and ward off societal degradation of the proverbial “rebel girl” she sings of not only allowed her to assert her right as a woman to express her *own* selfhood, but encouraged others to do so themselves, and to confidently rise above those around them who sought to discourage or repress them.

One of the most telling aspects of her performance technique and performative expression of selfhood, however, was her willingness to directly link herself, her band, and her music to those in the audience, breaking down barriers between performer and perceiver either in celebration of their fans or in opposition to their adversaries. She not only spoke to her audience members as if they were friends hanging out in her room, but would actively encourage girls to move towards the front of the stage as she addressed them, making sure they understood that “Kathleen [was] one of theirs, and they [were] hers.”<sup>153</sup> Her performance of “Don’t Need You” at Los Angeles’ El Macondo in 1993 perfectly exemplified her strive for interpersonal

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<sup>151</sup> “Bikini Kill – Suck My Left One & Rebel Girl (live 1992).” *prophetofog*. YouTube. 7 August 2008. February 2013. <[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_iiOsdSaSW4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_iiOsdSaSW4)>

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid. 17.

connection, as she directly addressed audience members to reinforce the idea that her role as performer, elevated physically by the stage, does not mean that her artistic self-expression sought to create disconnect between performer and perceiver. In preparation for performing the song itself, she takes off her skirt and stands on stage in her underwear and a small cropped tee, stating “I’m gonna show you my cellulite now...this is cellulite, this is what it looks like, it’s real. You don’t see this on MTV.” As the music begins, she jumps around, shaking her whole body, fists extended and head whipping back and forth, singing the lyrics “Don’t need you to say we’re cute / don’t need you to say we’re alright / don’t need your atti-fuckin-tude boy / don’t need no kiss goodnight.”<sup>154</sup> Hanna’s assertive use of physical self-presentation and body language to play out her rejection of mainstream conceptions of gender roles provided her audience with a tangible visual connection to the message she conveys in the song itself, challenging the idea that “American performance, in general, lends itself to the idea of taking on another personality when you’re onstage.”<sup>155</sup> Her ability to lead by example, to actually *live* and express which she expressed through her lyrics and writings, taught those perceiving her to, as Sara Marcus explained in our interview, “go toward their fear and embrace it.”<sup>156</sup> Hanna’s unparalleled utilization of performance space to align herself with her audience, therefore, exemplifies the impact of performativity in allowing her to successfully express herself and connect to others in the public sphere.

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<sup>154</sup> “Bikini Kill – Don’t Need You – live El Macondo, LA 1993.” *MsCherryBombshell*. YouTube. 19 July 2009. December 2012. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zQ8-9CTH9C4>>

<sup>155</sup> “Kathleen Hanna.” *Angry Women in Rock*. Andrea Juno ed. New York: Juno, 1996. 88.

<sup>156</sup> Sara Marcus. Personal Interview. February 2013.



Arguably the most effective example of this, however, was her performance of “Suck My Left One” at The Sanctuary Theatre in 1992. She incorporated a recording of an interview she conducted as an emotional catalyst for her musical and physical performance on stage, exploring multiple mediums of performativity to underscore the ideals that she and her fellow Riot Grrrl musicians sought to confront through their feminist activism. Before playing the song itself, she announced to the crowd that she “wanted to share something with everyone,” holding her microphone up to a tape recorder which played an interview with a man who expressed the right he thought he had to cat-call and womanize girls because “most of the time, they are asking for it.”<sup>157</sup> She calmly dedicates the song to him, and then subsequently screams “SUCK MY LEFT ONE!” as she holds a tightly-clenched fist to her chest, hurling her entire upper body back and as she leads into the first verse. She repeats these performance techniques several times throughout the song itself, and though she couples these movements and vocal lines with playfully confident dancing and dramatized facial expressions, her visceral manner of expressing intolerance to men like the one in the interview only becomes increasingly more fervent and aggressive. Her body language, used to both react and incite reaction to the recording and the lyrics of the song itself, underscores the idea that her screaming, as Gottlieb and Wald note, represents the “shocking juxtaposition of sex and rage” of her music and public persona, “going well beyond the evident assertion of a form of expression both denied to women in public (screaming is unladylike) and devalued in private (woman are so

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<sup>157</sup> “Bikini Kill – Suck My Left One & Rebel Girl (live 1992).” YouTube.

emotional).”<sup>158</sup>By connecting this performative method of confrontation to a tangible source of antagonism and tension, Hanna exemplifies the power that both stage presence and vocal style had in conveying specific lyrical messages to her audience, simultaneously summoning an emotional response from the audience to align her ideals to that of those perceiving her.

The various performance techniques explored by Patti Smith, Joan Jett, and Kathleen Hanna are a testament to their ability to absorb the cultural influences around them, define their individualized goals as artists, and take their cultivated senses of selfhood and project them into the public sphere. Above all else, what set these women apart as female rockers – and what stands as discernable common ground between them – was their dedication to expressing personal and artistic honesty to those perceiving them, and their willingness to embrace and utilize the vulnerability that came with it. Their steadfast dedication to individualism and creative self-assertion, though undoubtedly influenced by those around them, was what made them inimitable throughout their careers, allowing them to transcend societal boundaries and limitations in the male-dominated world of rock to truly hold their own as women, as artists, and as magnetic and inspiring individuals in their own right.

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<sup>158</sup> Joanne Gottlieb and Gayle Wald. “Smells like Teen Spirit.” *Microphone Friends: Youth Music & Youth Culture*. Tricia Rose and Andrew Ross ed. New York: Routledge, 1994. 155.

## Conclusion

Though it may seem pessimistic to say, one fact remains true about gender expression in rock 'n' roll: as long as stigmas regarding male and female performative roles exist within the genre in prevailing mainstream culture, the female rocker's public persona will inevitably be juxtaposed with paradigms of the male rocker, rendering her responsible for actively defining personal values in order to project her desired sense of individualism. As Patti Smith, Joan Jett, and Kathleen Hanna have shown, this assertion is not only contingent on the artist's past and present cultural environment, but on the ability for the artist to assess how they must work within and, more often than not, test societal limitations based on their own cultivated sense of self and artistic preference. However, none of this is to say that heteronormative gender conception within the rock genre must restrict or alter the female rocker's ability to be successful as a musician while remaining true to themselves as artists, as women, and as figures in the public sphere. As Butler teaches us, we may not be fully in control of how the emerging culture around us shapes who we become as people, but we *do* thrive as individuals on the ability to identify what it is about us – our gender preferences, our personal aspirations, and our ideal means of operating in society – and repeatedly express those assertions through daily personal action.

Modes of female gender performativity within the world of rock 'n' roll, though predicated on a history of specific cultural aesthetics and discernable characteristics, *are* in fact subjective and well within the realm of control of the artist expressing herself. For Patti Smith, the disassociation with conventional gender was,

ironically, an incredibly important part of her gender identity. Denying conventional female behavior through dress, through external appearance, and through multilayered forms of artistic expression allowed her to move “beyond gender” and transcend conventional notions of essentialism, ultimately leading her to cultivate an inimitable magnetism as a musician and as a performer. For Joan Jett, the importance of reinterpreting and utilizing the influence of rock masculinity was key in developing personal and musical preferences, and in refining how she, as one of the first female hard rockers, was to assert her right to perform those ideals as a woman. Though labeled as a sort of social deviant for expressing masculinized femininity with unwavering confidence, her steadfast dedication to remaining true to herself allowed her to surpass gender binary restrictions and rendered her successful as an entirely new type of female rock musician. For Kathleen Hanna, the willingness to address injustices within patriarchal conceptions of gender roles facilitated her drive to assert her right to control her own femininity through feminist activism and musical performance. Her ability to pull from societal influence and personal experience not only reshaped conceptions of gender expression for herself and those in her immediate circle, but also allowed her to lead by example and provide a constructive outlet for girls at large to assert their femininity with confidence and with conviction.

The examples that these three women have provided future female rockers cannot be reduced categorically or conceptualized universally, as so many have attempted to do in the past. However, if we can take anything from analyzing their careers and their means of constructing individualism, it is that one must view mainstream mentality not as cultural inhibition, but as a healthy challenge to push

those who seek to become female rock musicians to truly define what it is they want to become, and to find strength in personal vulnerability to create an honest and purposeful sense of self.

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