Afterward - You Will Be Criticized and Vilified

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I recently had a conversation with someone in the music biz (a somewhat acclaimed producer) during which he made the claim that he hates music journalism because it is all bullshit. Our conversation then meandered into politics and he brushed off my feeling "sad and bad for womankind when Hillary lost" as being beside the point. I paused, the conversation moved onwards, days passed, and 2016 ended. Still, I am left with a lingering discomfort from his words. After dwelling on this unease for over a month, I now see a connection between his opinion that "all music journalism is bullshit," and his rationale of, "it didn't matter that she was a woman, she lost because her politics were just as questionable as Trump's." His opinions fail to acknowledge that 1) most music writing is done by men, and 2) Hillary was scrutinized and criticized in a way that only women are.

I think about 'girl power,' 'riot grrls,' and being a 'girl in a band' a lot. I wonder about the different roles women take on in pop, rock, hip-hop, and techno. Growing up in the '90s, the Spice Girls were not exactly role models, but flattened versions of confidence. I danced along to their concert footage and sang all the songs in the different Spice voices. Scary, Sporty, Posh, Baby, and Ginger. I identified with certain traits and disassociated from others. (Was definitely not a Ginger.) Now, later in life, I can look back objectively at what that group was —

nothing different from the girl groups of the '60s like The Chantels, The Ronettes, The Shangri-las, etc., et al, engineered by men in suits to sell images of renewable youth and beauty (and the products used to maintain that youth and beauty) to the world.

As a woman, perhaps it is an inescapable condition of existence to be always looked at. So early in life are we conditioned to self-police and coat ourselves with a self-reflexive layer; for better or worse, we sit in the Panopticon monitoring ourselves being watched. In the music industry, it has become a cliché for male dominated rock bands to have one (attractive) female member. Blondie, Talking Heads, Siouxie, Black Flag, The Pixies, The Smashing Pumpkins, Garbage, The Pretenders, etc. Who can forget Kim Gordon's shiny dead-straight blond hair jerk back and forth with her body and bass lines playing "Silver Rocket" on the short-lived *Sunday Night* series in 1989? In recent years, women musicians and music writers have become more vocal in speaking out against the misogyny in their field, and have opened up about obstacles they've been put through over their careers. In December 2016, Björk posted an open letter on Facebook, calling out the gender-bias against women :who write music outside of their love lives:

> women in music are allowed to be singer songwriters singing about their boyfriends. if they change the subject matter to atoms, galaxies, activism, nerdy math beat editing or anything else than being performers singing about their loved ones they get criticized.... as if our only lingo is emo.[1]

[1] Björk, "Dear little miss media," *Facebook*, December 26, 2016, retrieved January 17, 2017, https://www.facebook.com/bjork/posts/10154812739376460.

Madonna was awarded "Woman of the Year" at the 2016 Billboard Music Awards, and throughout her speech, declared many injustices of the music biz. She has always pushed against the status quo understandings of sexuality, empowerment, feminism. With deflated irony, the advice she gives to young women who aspire to pop greatness is:

> Don't act too smart. Don't have an opinion that's out of line with the status quo. You are allowed to be objectified by men and dress like a slut, but don't own your sluttiness. And do not, I repeat, *do not* share your own sexual fantasies with the world. Be what men want you to be, but more importantly, be what women feel comfortable with you being around other men. And finally, do not age. Because to age is a sin. You will be criticized and vilified and definitely not played on the radio.[2]

This contrasts advice Patti Smith has given to young artists:

> Build a good name. Keep your name clean. Don't make compromises, don't worry about making a bunch of money or being successful — be concerned with doing good work and make the right choices and protect your work. And if you build a good name, eventually, that name will be its own currency.[3]

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[2] Joe Lynch, "Madonna Delivers Her Blunt Truth During Fiery, Teary Billboard Women in Music Speech," *Billboard*, December 9, 2016, http://www.billboard.com/articles/events/women-in-music/7616927/madonna-billboard-woman-of-the-year-labrinth. (Even the title of Joe's article is filled with systemic misogny.)

[3] Patti Smith, interview by Christian Lund, "Patti Smith Interview: Advice to the Young," *Louisiana Channel*, August 24, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L2EO3aXTWwg.

All this gets my wires crossed — what comes after the feminist-rise to capitalist-power in our pop-culture industries? Madonna, Björk, and Patti Smith are distinct voices that have built impressively expansive bodies of work over their lifetimes. I don't like every single thing they've done, and I haven't read every work, paid attention to every interview, or listened to every song. Valuable progress in any art is made when boundaries and limitations are defied, broken, and reconstructed, but the overarching 'limitation' they have all expressed on their will to star-power has been the fact that they are women. Madonna and Björk have said it out flat. Patti Smith said that it took her so long to write *Just Kids* (HarperCollins, 2010) and *M Train* (Penguin, 2015) because for many years she was busy being a mother, a role she never wanted to take on, but did so because she loved her husband. In an interview with Alec Baldwin, she says:

> I just wanted to be an artist. I didn't want to have kids, and I came from a big family and I helped raise my siblings, so I just wanted to be free, and it was Fred who wanted children, and I loved him so much that I thought, well I can do that. I never expected to love my kids so much...and to just love being a mother.[4]

A few years ago, a friend lent me a copy of *Just Kids*. It's a first person account of Patti Smith's time in New York in the '70s with her friend and lover, Robert Mappelthorpe. It was beautifully written and gave me exactly what I wanted, a portrait of a time when the Lower East Side was an exciting refuge for kindred artist souls, when the "Bermuda Triangle

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[4] Patti Smith, interview with Alec Baldwin, *Here's the Thing*, podcast audio, MP3, accessed January 15, 2017, http://www.wnyc.org/story/patti-smith-never-wanted-to-be-famous.

[of activity] was Brownie's, Max's Kansas City, and the Factory, all located within walking distance of one another."[5] She recounts living at the Chelsea Hotel, where, in a jam, one could trade art for rent, and where the light through the building "was not natural light, spreading from the lamp and the overhead bulb, intense and unforgiving, yet it seemed filled with unique energy."[6] That time in New York is long gone, an ambivalent truth to behold; looking back into history is a tightrope walk between indulging in simplified narratives and fueling the fire for one's own vision. Patti Smith mentions Bob Dylan's name over 80 times in book and describes her Chelsea lobby encounter with:

> the guy in *Don't Look Back*. The other one. Bobby Neuwirth, the peacemaker-provocateur. Bob Dylan's alter ego. He was a painter, singer-songwriter, and risk taker. He was a trusted confidant to many of the great minds and musicians of his generation, which was just a beat before mine.[7]

They end up drinking at the bar together, and before they part he encourages her to write a song.

Patti talks and writes a lot about her relationships with men, how they have inspired her, shepherded her to her work. In her world, she does not acknowledge gender politics as something that has limited her output. And that is powerful, to know that it has been possible for a woman, for her to tell it like that.

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[5] Patti Smith, *Just Kids* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 116.

[6] Smith, 93.

[7] Smith, 141-142.

In recent years, memoirs written women musicians have exponentially gained more attention in the book market: Viv Albertine's *Clothes, Clothes, Clothes, Music, Music, Music, Boys, Boys, Boys* (Thomas Dunne, 2014); Kim Gordon's *Girl in a Band* (Dey Street, 2015); Carrie Brownstein's *Hunger Makes Me a Modern Girl* (Riverhead, 2015); Patti Smith's *M Train*; and Chrissy Hynde's *Reckless: My Life as a Pretender* (Random House, 2015) have all been published within the last three years.

In memoirs, writers reveal aspects of their lives that they have been able to recount and historicize in relation to the world that has received them. Unfortunately, some are written better than others, which leads this reader to conclude that in the end, the deadline for a paycheck is the most important factor in writing one's life into a neat, tell-all, hardcover story. My biggest disappointment was reading *Girl in a Band*; when compared to Gordon's collected essays, *Is it my Body? Selected Texts* (Sternberg Press, 2014), it reads so blandly that I can only hope an intern ghostwrote it. The first chapter starts off strong, as Kim recounts the last concert Sonic Youth would ever play together in São Paulo, following her break-up with Thurston. Her voice is commanding, unapologetically angry, poignant, funny. "Marriage is a long conversation, someone once said, and maybe so is a rock band's life. A few minutes later, both were done."[8] One can watch the concert footage and mark timecodes down to her play-by-play of the set. Following that, the rest of the book fades into a voice as deadpan and disaffected as Kim's singing voice, only without the attitude to back it up. It became a chore to finish reading, and in the end, I

[8] Kim Gordon, *Girl in a Band* (Dey Street, New York: 2015), 9.

really gained no insight into anything after the first chapter except for the fact that a sure sign your husband is cheating on you is that he starts smoking, or starts smoking a different brand.

But the point of this piece is not to call out uninspired writing by these queens who have influenced generations of kids, teens, and adults with their prowess as musicians, as celebrities, as idols, and yes, of course, as sex objects. There is no quantifiable proof to say that Hillary lost only because she is a woman, and that the majority (by a hair, by conspiracy) of the US public — always functioning as a placeholder for the whole of Western civilization — are sexists, but there definitely *is* a correlation between the powerlessness I feel when I see the most elite and successful celebrities (whether they are writers, actors, musicians, athletes, journalists, etc., et al) hashtag #imwithher from their comfortable dressing rooms, and when I read about Chrissy Hynde's gang rape by Hells Angels bikers in Ohio; Carrie Brownstein's disenchantment with the elitist punk scene; Kim Gordon's discovery of Thurston's affair; Viv Albertine's post-Slits job as an aerobics instructor; Patti Smith's romantic elegy for New York.

Perhaps it is the sense one gets, that at a certain level of success, one's political voice becomes neutered. One's past becomes a story that has been resolved, and the present is comfortable and easy. The line between the anonymity to live and the recognition to continue living — that is the struggle. Patti Smith notes that by 1979, with her hit song "Because the Night" (composed by Bruce Springsteen), she had become successful, but she "was doing less meaningful work, evolving less as a person and as an artist, and getting more successful."[10]

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[10] Patti Smith, interview with Alec Baldwin.

Over time, feminists in the media have shifted how women are perceived in popular culture, and with every speech, text, and public discussion, that perception is changed furthermore. What I am weary of is not this ongoing evolution in people's thinking and where that may eventually take our politics, but of the many uninspired commodities that will be made for consumption along the way. Equality, at the rate we're going, means at least twice as much stuff.







[Fig. 23 - 25] "Put a bird on it!" baseball cap, available on *cafepress.com* after Carrie Brownstein and Fred Armisen's sketch in *Portlandia*'s pilot episode (aired January 21, 2011); Hillary Clinton Soap Head, from *chocolateweapons.com*; Spice Girl dolls, released by Galoob Toys in 1997.