

“Not-So-Typical-Girls: Skirting the Boundaries of Punk Rock with the Slits”

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The “invention of tradition” is a familiar concept in the social sciences and in popular music studies (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983, Peterson 1997, Berríos-Miranda 2002, Wald 2004). But there has been much less attention given to the “invention of innovation” and the desires, anxieties, and power dynamics that underlie claims to innovation. This is unfortunate given that innovation as a concept is central to genre—its presence or absence is a key defining trait of the “genre cultures” that shape “where, how, and with whom people make and experience music” (Holt 2007:2). If the concept is present, a given genre culture is often distinguished in terms of how innovation is understood and undertaken, why it is valued or why it is avoided within the culture. Then there is the question of how musical innovation is linked to wider cultural values—is it associated with freedom, progress, protest, domination, self-indulgence, or other traits? In addressing these questions, it is the tensions, frictions, and contradictions around innovation that are often the most telling. These stress points in a genre culture may be the most vulnerable yet dynamic points within the culture, where genre boundaries are continually negotiated and contested.

It follows from this last point that genre cultures are rarely monolithic. When it comes to innovation, there is often disagreement as to how innovation is to be defined and delimited. In this paper, I will examine a genre culture—punk rock—where innovation is a lightning rod, provoking debates and divisions within the loosely-affiliated culture. Next, I will consider how one punk group, the Slits, frequently credited as the first “all-girl” punk band, have negotiated innovation in their music and career, and how this negotiation overlaps with notions of gender in

punk rock and beyond. Complicating any such attempt is the masculine gendering of innovation itself, a concept that has been shaped by the assumption that “female is to male as nature is to culture” (Ortner 1974). Innovation, of course, is conceived as “cultural” and not “natural.” Given the constraints of this norm, males are left free to innovate while females merely fluctuate.

In punk rock cultures there is often a profound anxiety when it comes to innovation, a fact that hints at the politicized nature of innovation itself. Setting aside gender for the moment, this anxiety stems in large part from a perceived class division within punk culture. According to the typical narrative, there are “populist punks” on one side of the spectrum and “avant-garde punks” on the other. The former are linked with hardcore punk, a sub-genre whose relative stylistic conformity is said to reflect similarly dogmatic political views, whether aligned with the political Left or the Right, together with working-class identity. In contrast, avant-garde punks are more often linked to privileged environments such as art schools. The sound of avant-punk (which overlaps with “new wave”) is marked by deliberate aestheticism, disorienting stylistic shifts, and an anti-dogmatic worldview whose unifying themes are alienation and irony. Punk culture has repeatedly been portrayed as a productive collision between these two sensibilities and their attendant class affiliations. In 1976, *New York* magazine was already pointing out “the collection of SoHo intellectuals and street urchins [gathered] at CBGB” (Jacobson). Ellen Willis credits the über-proto-punk-band the Velvet Underground for making this “fateful connection between two seemingly disparate ideas—the rock and roller as self-conscious aesthete and the rock and roller as self-conscious punk” (1996:72). In the London scene, Jon Savage credited impresarios like Malcolm McLaren and Bernard Rhodes for bringing together different social types, quoting the

latter's claim that "you need the mix of working-class roughage with middle-class kids to make a group work" (1992:71).

Whereas punk historiographers often point out these contradictions, as they do above, contradictory views on innovation are usually left unstated. In fact, punk histories are routinely structured around two seemingly opposed narratives in relation to innovation. First, punk's lineage is traced through retrospectively labeled proto-punk bands such as the Velvet, Stooges, New York Dolls, MC5, and Roxy Music, making a case for the genre's development out of various strands of garage rock, glam, and art rock. But just as often, the birth of punk is portrayed as "year zero," where the past is cast off and a musical *tabula rasa* results. In the UK especially, with the help of the music weeklies, rock history was neatly divided into two distinct eras—before punk and after punk—with the sharpest boundary drawn between the immediate past of the early 1970s, portrayed as a musical wasteland of dinosaur rock band and vapid pop.

The boundary drawn between punk rock and progressive rock is of special concern here given its centrality in early 1970s rock culture. In progressive rock, as the name implies, innovation is at the very center of the genre culture. The DIY, or do-it-yourself, rallying cry of punk explicitly positioned the genre in opposition to the innovatory impulse of prog rock. Ironically, it was the dismissive attitude towards innovation that produced a new basis for innovation in punk. Lacking theoretical expertise and technical chops, novices were forced to come up with new ways of playing their instruments and structuring songs. This approach to innovation stood in stark contrast to the musical and cultural signifiers of "progress" as developed in prog rock: elaborated forms, extended solos, complex progressions, florid lyrics, and contemplative audiences.

Innovation in punk was defined in just the opposite terms, and in often contradictory terms, aiming for a *studied* amateurism, *cultivated* spontaneity, and a “tribal” sound rooted in so-called modern primitivism.

The Slits, perhaps more than any punk band of the time, played on this modern-primitive dynamic to provocative effect. The band formed in 1976 through a chance meeting at a Patti Smith concert between 14-year-old German-born singer Ariana Forster, who became Ari Up, and 21-year-old Spanish-born drummer Paloma Romero, stage name Palmolive. The Slits’ lineup was solidified with guitarist Viv Albertine and bassist Tessa Pollitt. From early on, the band was on the inside track of the nascent London punk scene, and in 1977 they went on the road with the Clash on the now legendary White Riot tour. According to popular lore, the tour’s bus driver had to be bribed to let the Slits on the vehicle each day, offended by a girl band who behaved similarly to their male peers. The Slits were ejected from numerous hotels based on Ari Up’s shock-effect fashions of underwear-as-outerwear (many years before Madonna) and tangled, tied-up dreadlocks. In a 1977 *Melody Maker* profile, Caroline Coon describes how “much to the surprise of all concerned, the Slits cause more consternation [on the tour] than the Clash, Subway Sect and the Buzzcocks combined” (1978). With Ari Up portrayed as “all girl even though she flagrantly disregards anything remotely feminine,” she concludes that “it is what the Slits represent...that gets up people’s noses” (ibid.). What they seem to represent, according to the profile, was a disruption of clear and established gender boundaries. Equally upsetting was the band’s name itself. As Albertine recalls, “taxidivers, our mothers, feminists, men—no one liked it. It was obscene to everybody” (Garratt and Steward 1984:18). This at a time when bands with extreme names like the Stranglers, Penetration, and Throbbing Gristle were commonplace. In

contrast to these names, “the Slits” is neither inherently violent or obscene. Instead, the abject impact of the name comes from what the image represents—not only as slang for female genitalia, but also as something that unsettles established boundaries. In the terms used by Julia Kristeva, a slit “collapse[s]...the border between inside and outside” (1982:53) and thus “disturbs identity, system, [and] order” (1982:4) leading to the dual fascination and revulsion that is the hallmark of the abject.

It was not only the Slits’ disturbing of gender boundaries that was viewed as an abject violation, but also their disturbing of musical boundaries, which provoked similarly conflicted responses. In 1977 and 1978, the band recorded two sessions for BBC DJ John Peel. These recordings and early shows earned them a reputation for taking DIY to new heights, or new lows, depending upon one’s perspective. As Simon Reynolds put it, “whereas other punk bands talked about not being able to play but were secretly competent, the Slits were genuinely inept. Some people reckon the ‘true’ Slits sound is their early naïve cacophony, the glorious racket of girls struggling with their instruments and vocal cords, impelled forwards by sheer glee and gall” (2006:45). The Slits would later refine the lurching rhythms, playground chants, and tonal shifts heard on these early recordings, but at the same time they moved away from familiar punk stylistic traits. In these terms, they “progressed,” even if they were a long way away from anything that could be labeled “progressive rock.” This progression led to a counter-discourse portraying the Slits not as naïve noisemakers, but instead as deliberate and thoughtful innovators. In the words of one critic, “the Slits were one of the most original bands to come out of the British punk scene. Their combination of guitar primitivism, jungle drums and dub reggae was about the weirdest thing happening in 1979” (McGuirk). In the liner notes to the 2005 re-release of *Cut*

on CD, rock journalist Mark Paytress writes that the Slits were “boundary-stretching sonic sophisticates...[who] formed part of a vanguard intent on altering the course of rock forever.” Most of this praise, though, came long after the fact. At the time, despite their close ties with the Clash and the Sex Pistols, the Slits had difficulty establishing a relationship with a record label. Their first official single and album finally came out almost two years later—right around the time punk was being declared dead in the UK. The single was “Typical Girls,” backed by a cover version of “I Heard It Through the Grapevine” (1979), and the album was *Cut*, released on Island Records (1979).

The infamous album sleeve for *Cut* was a photograph of the three remaining Slits (Pamolive had been replaced by future Siouxsie and the Banshees drummer Budgie) caked head-to-toe in mud, topless and wearing only loincloths and defiant stares, standing in front of the rose-covered white walls of an English cottage. The image neatly encapsulates the modern-primitive dichotomy of the Slits, the self-conscious aesthete and self-conscious punk colliding in one striking image. This ambiguity extends to gender as well. While using female eroticism as a marketing tool may seem regressive, Albertine later insisted that “nobody could see the strength, the joke, the little twist that we were all a bit fat” (Garratt and Steward 1984:55). The Slits’ presented their unmistakably female bodies with a masculine lack of self-consciousness, and their intense stares frustrated the male gaze that would seek to turn them into passive objects. Thus the image was a bit too unsettling to turn the Slits into conventional sex symbols, even if it matched the unsettled, boundary-crossing music found within. On its release *Cut* only reached #30 on the English charts and came nowhere near charting in the US, leading Albertine to conclude “you get a lot of shit for not fitting into a box” (ibid.). Two years later they released their second and final album,

Return of the Giant Slits (1981), which introducing African-style “tribal” rhythms and more open-ended song structures but failed to find much of an audience. The Slits broke up in 1982, remaining defunct until 2005 when Ari Up and Tessa Pollitt re-formed the band with new collaborators.

As pointed out above, contemporary critics are apt to make a case for the Slits being “ahead of their time,” anticipating everything from riot grrrl to current disco-punk-dub hybrids. If “Vindictive” (on the *Peel Sessions*) anticipated the former, their radical re-working of Marvin Gaye’s “I Heard It Through the Grapevine” anticipated the latter—but, as always, with an arresting ambiguity. In their rendition of the Motown classic, Ari Up’s vocal performance lacks a clear center. She alternates between a conversational and a highly stylized delivery, pleading with and goading the addressee in equal measure. Likewise, she seems to alternate between inhabiting the role of the heartbroken male narrator, and taking on the role of critical observer (perhaps the addressee of the song) mocking the singer’s insecurity and the egotistical sense of romantic entitlement.

While more recent critics may praise the Slits’ innovations, these innovations gave many of their contemporaries reason to doubt the authenticity and motives of the Slits. Male rock artists are routinely praised for radical innovation and musical boundary crossings, even when these innovations break radically from their own past output. The Beatles demonstrated “artistic growth” in their stylistic about-faces from album to album, and David Bowie has been granted genius status for his auteurist role-playing. But for female rock group like the Slits, or pop artists like Madonna, the same strategies can backfire, critically or commercially. On *Cut* for instance,

it was rumored that producer Dennis Bovell masterminded and played all the instruments on the album, a rumor categorically denied by the band. And while Bovell certainly played a role in shaping the sound of the record, the same can be said for George Martin with the Beatles' output, and no one accused them of not masterminding their own albums. Other critics have questioned if there were "two different Slits," with their earlier more amateur style being "more real," to which Ari Up responds "it's not more real, it's different real...punk to me was the freedom of doing whatever the fuck you wanted, not following a pattern. We needed to change. I don't think a male band would have got the same criticism" (Dayglo 2006).

Judging by song lyrics and published interviews, innovation was nothing short of a political project for the Slits. In the opening of their first single "Typical Girls," Ari Up speak-sings in a deep admonishing voice: "Don't create. Don't rebel" going on to catalogue "typical" personality traits and defense mechanisms of girls whose potential is stunted. Lyrically, *Cut* is a virtual concept album to female discontent and the contradictory expectations that produce this state of being. Typical girls are variously described as "sensitive and emotional" and "a femme fatale." In another couplet: "typical girls are so confusing / typical girls you can always tell." One could guess that the double binds of these lyrical subjects were inspired by direct experience, as the Slits were alternately censored and praised for their amateurism, and likewise censored and praised for their innovations. Mavis Bayton, a former punk rocker and subsequent academic, reads the double-bind of women in rock as "a manifestation of the wider contradiction within feminism of, on the one hand, wanting to do what men do, and, on the other, wanting to create something altogether different which expresses women's 'femaleness'." Bayton calls this the "sameness/difference debate" (1993:186), a debate that is also at the heart of innovation as a

concept—which seeks to differentiate “sameness” from “difference.” In this way gender and innovation are inextricably linked—linked through contradictory expectations that assure criticism for being either too conventionally feminine or too daringly masculine, too boldly innovative or too predictably conventional.

As a step towards examining these contradictory tendencies, I will briefly analyze one example of marked innovation in the Slits’ music. This can most effectively be accomplished by comparing the multiple recordings the Slits’ made of many of their own songs. “Love and Romance,” for instance, was included on the 1977 Peel Session and a couple years later on *Cut*. The earlier recording combines a cymbal-free drum line comprised of tom-tom patterns and snare rolls, with an enveloping cocoon of dissonant guitar. Ari’s vocals are alternately incantatory and insistent, set against a background series of trilling, burbling, squealing vocalizations. Pollitt’s bass line snakes up and down the bottom half of a B minor scale, briefly transposed down a whole step to A minor at periodic intervals. Viv Albertine’s guitar part, however, does not modulate, evoking both tonalities at once with her droning, swerving bent-pitches that give the impression of a warped vinyl album left out in the sun.

In the version of “Love und Romance” on *Cut* (re-titled with the German conjunction), the dissonant noise of the guitar line is absent with Viv Albertine instead opting for a clean, brittle timbre in keeping with both reggae and post-punk guitar style. Dissonance is largely displaced from the guitar to the atonal piano flourishes heard throughout. Drummer Budgie makes use of high-hat and crash cymbals, with rhythms and inflections that directly allude to reggae. Also, in typical reggae and post-punk style, the melody is carried by the bass, although this is consistent

with the first version. In comparison to the earlier version, Ari's singing is more controlled, and the backing vocals are coordinated to a greater degree with the lead.

Based on these recordings, over the course of two years, the Slits went from being on the vanguard of punk to being on the vanguard of post-punk, while also moving from a more traditional feminist to a post-feminist perspective. As indicated by its very name, the genre culture of post-punk re-claimed the mantle of progression, but it drew upon different signifiers of innovation than prog rock—focused instead on timbral novelty, minimalist forms, harmonic stasis, African-based polyrhythms, manipulation of textural space and density, producer-based sound sculpting, and lyrics imbued with irony and alienation (Reynolds 2006:1-11). A similar shift can be witnessed when it comes to gender. Early in their brief career, the Slits seemed to out-do the male punk rockers at their own game, producing sounds and performances that were arguably noisier, messier, more amateurish, and more exciting than their male peers. Later, on *Cut*, the Slits played off and adapted more “feminine” sounds and associations. In an interview, Viv Albertine put it this way, “As we become more aware, we didn't want to follow male rhythms and structures...we consciously thought about getting girls' rhythms into music and concluded that female rhythms were probably not as steady, structured or contained as male rhythms” (Raha 2005:83). Likewise, Ari Up maintains that “there's a very systematic pattern to boys' music—it's very like A-B-C...but when you hear girls stuff, it's like an ocean of emotion, it comes in waves...[not to] sound like I'm trying to categorize us being emotional and the boys are the logical...[but] in musical approach, they are ruled by rules more than we are” (ibid). While such statements comes perilously close to reinforcing stereotypes of the irrational and inconsistent female, the Slits' deployed these stereotypes in strategic fashion. In creating a

deliberately unruly and distinctly feminine sound, they re-situated “inconsistency,” which is really just a pejorative feminizing of “innovation,” and thus found an innovative way to innovate—differentiated from masculine-coded innovation. In conclusion, the Slits undertook the difficult project of disassociating innovation from masculinity, a project that undermines gendered conventions of rock and roll. The persistence of these gendered divisions—the masculine gendering of both innovation and rock—may provide some explanation for the Slits’ continued relevance and resonance.

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