

Lift up yur skirt and speak

by María José Belbel Bullejos

I

The Sex Revolts: gender, rebellion and rock'n'roll by Simon Reynolds and Joy Press was published in 1995 by Harvard University Press (USA), the cover made by Barbara Kruger, and Serpent's Tail (UK). Reynolds had already published in Serpent's Tail *Blissed Out: The Raptures of Rock*. Years has passed since the *The Sex Revolts* came into being and it has proved very difficult to interest any Spanish publishing firm in its publication. According to many cultural theorists, Angela McRobbie among them, this book offers the best analysis on popular music and gender that has been written so far. *The Sex Revolts* is divided into three main parts: the two first are dedicated to male musicians and the third one is about music made by women. The first part, titled "Misogynist Rebels" analyses the way the male rebel has dramatised himself in opposition to that of the female one. The second part, "Toward Mysticism" depicts the idealization that certain male rock musicians have made of women and femininity. And finally, the third part, "Lift up Your Skirt And Speak" from which this review takes its title, written by Joy Press, discusses four different strategies that women musicians have set into practise to imagine and create a rebellion that stems from the specificity of women.

Press acknowledges how difficult it is to find many examples of women forerunners that had preceded the women's rebellion in rock, when compared with their male counterparts. According to her, women's rebellion may be

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compared to a subterranean river that overflows and comes to the surface, only to go underground again. Similarly to what usually happens when women begin a new activity, as soon as some all-female bands started playing music, the media went crazy to talk about "women rock", without realising that the role of women artists have always being precarious, in the artistic space dominated by men, being irrelevant for that reason if the movement was rock or surrealism, the beat generation or counterculture. Women that are present in rock spaces have often been labelled as groupies, and its role has been reduced to being women that wanted to achieve fame and money by going to bed with male musicians. This argument doesn't take into account that most of the time, groupies were, and still are, artists that wanted to build a connexion with the creative scene, so the label of groupies often include photographers, fashion designers, musicians, poets, rock writers and some other kinds of creative women.

There are many women bands at present, particularly in Anglo-Saxon countries. It certainly seems very difficult to create an all-female band in Spain, looking at the few all-female rock, pop or punk bands that exist. We have to bear in mind what happened to The Vulpes when they performed on TV their song I like being a bitch, a remake of Iggy Pop's I wanna be your dog, and to the TV program that invited them.

According to Press, rock culture has offered women from its inception, two binary roles to identify with: the maternal figure that cancels out her sexuality or the wild and free libertine that run many risks in her pursuit of freedom. It is hardly surprising that both models were seen as highly conflictive for women in relation to sexuality and

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generated the construction of two identities that were mutually exclusive. Women musicians have managed to deconstruct these fix notions and the author discusses four categories to depict the different strategies rebel women have articulated in their struggles to form part of the rock scene. She makes it clear that these categories aren't obviously exclusive, many women have used a variety of them, so these categories often appear blended in their work.

The first role is the straightforward: "everything men can do, we can do it too". This tradition encompasses different generational bands from Suzi Quatro to L7; it consists on playing hard rock, have a punk attitude and imitate men's gestures like rudeness, independence and irreverence. So, their aim is to achieve success by suppressing their femininity. The problem is that this attitude sometimes includes copying the male's rebellion in a literal way. In this instance women risk becoming as misogynists as men in rock often are, when their sole aim is to be accepted in the rock scene as "one of the boys".

The second role attempts to infuse rock with "feminine" qualities, so instead of imitating the boys, this strategy attempts to generate a female strength, equal to men but different. "We are equal but different", as the band the Au-Pairs used to sing in their song It's Obvious. Examples of this can be seen in the passion and tormented character of the music made by Janis Joplin and Lydia Lunch, the social commitment found in the work of Tracy Chapman and Natalie Merchant, and the autonomy and freedom to express their ideas present in the work of Sinead O'Connor and Queen Latifah. This vindication of qualities traditionally associated with women aims at creating a sort of specific

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identity, to face the attacks women musicians get from the conventions of traditional society and from the rebel counterculture. The problem is that when we try to stress the value of "female" qualities we risk confirming once again a set of patriarchal rules about a certain essence of femininity (i.e. we are fragile, caring, emotional, maternal, etc).

A third strategy entails celebrating the rich iconography and imagery of the feminine, but to do so in an ironical and provisional way, full of postmodern innuendos. For these artists, femininity would not consist on a set of fixed and unchanged categories, it would rather be like a closet full of poses and masks one can take or leave as one pleases, womanliness as masquerade, as the psychoanalyst Joan Rivière coined it as early as in 1929. In this way, artists such as Annie Lennox, Kate Bush, Madonna or Siouxsie Sioux have adopted a good number of different female stereotypes, they have used certain clichés without getting trapped into them. This approach is based on dressing up, and on plundering history and mythology. It aims at pointing out the provisional and changing character of identity categories. Categories and stereotypes are sent back to the society that created them. Some women artists have criticised these practises arguing that they lack authenticity since female identity is defined as an evolving representation.

The fourth strategy is followed by artists who consider womanliness is not an essence nor a set of strategic characters but the tension that arises between the two. For them, being a woman means to be divided in between biology and the fiction of femininity. This tension reflects the impossibility to sort out the debate that opposes, in a

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binary way, culture and nature. This position is found in the work of Mary Margaret O'Hara, Rickie Lee Jones, Patti Smith and Throwing Muses and it questions the very same category of identity. Press believes that this is perhaps, the most radical way to rebel, for the danger and self-confusion that it conveys. Life is understood as a process, not as a set of identities. Life lived this way conveys a great sense of freedom, although it often proves to be strategically inefficient when we take into account that we live in a world whose base for functioning lies in fixed identities and different positions that are clearly articulated.

It is interesting to point out at the way Joy Press compares the conclusions of her theoretical effort to the book of Susan Rubin Suleiman *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics and the Avant-Garde*. The writer discusses how difficult it was for the women surrealists to create different images of the female body that were a counterpoint to the images presented by their male colleagues, which were certainly powerful. Press and Reynolds state that women in rock face the same problems as the female surrealists women had, the problem one has when confronted with a double allegiance: on the one hand, these women are experimental artists, so they share the same formal experiences and some of the cultural goals of the avant-garde, whose leadership has historically been male for the most part; while, on the other hand, they need to build themselves up musically confronting the domineering sexual stereotypes and making a feminist critique of them, which entails being critical of these same avant-garde movements. In any case, it is a matter of finding out if it is possible for women to successfully work in a musical format as male focussed as rock is, while realising at the

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same time, that rock has also been a radical way of expressing rebellion and social unrest. The big question is: how to undermine rock's music and performance from its patriarchal values when it is often there where the strength of its subtext lies.

The Sex Revolts is a book that helps us in this quest.

II

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María José Belbel Bullejos published this review and discography in the lesbian zine Non Grata, Madrid, 1997.