Poets, Guitarists, Songwriters, TV Stars, Provocateurs, *Riot Grrrl* founders, the authors in this study challenge perceptions of punk music and politics. Viv Albertine, Alice Bag, Pauline Black, Carrie Brownstein, Kim Gordon, Nina Hagen, Chrissie Hynde, Patti Smith, Brix Smith Start, and Cosey Fanni Tutti have been breaking new ground in writing about their lives. They fill gaps in the historical record, back catalogues and perceptions of how music works as politics. They provide fans and music scholars with a corrective to androcentric studies of punk as a DIY politics of resistance to the mainstream. M.I. Franklin shows how they do this, along with ways to hear the personal and world politics inherent in their musical output.

**M.I. Franklin** (PhD) is full professor and chair of media, cultural industries and society at the University of Groningen.

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1. INTRO

To the Front

It is since 2010, with the publication of Patti Smith’s prize-winning *Just Kids*, that a string of memoirs from an extraordinary group of female musicians has been grabbing centre stage. Spanning personal lives and public careers from the 1960’s to present day, these accounts are an unapologetic recalibration of the burgeoning literature on *punk*; as an *ethos*, a self-identified sociopolitical *movement*, type of *music*, live *performance practice*, rebellious *subculture*, sonic and sartorial *aesthetic*. Like representatives of any cultural wave spearheaded by that era’s youth, musicians whose careers straddle the official punk timeline have grown older. Some of those who made their way on stage – as part of punk’s Do-It-Yourself (DIY) challenge to the commercial music establishment – are now published authors. Their public personae and creative output are integral to punk narratives of origins and disruption identified with high-profile acts, then and since. As part of an emergent cluster of singular writing these authors have bumped the music memoir business off its male-centric axis, redirecting public and critical attention from those penned by male (punk) music celebrities such as Peter Hook (Joy Division/New Order) or John Lydon/Johnny Rotten (Sex Pistols).

As an audible breakaway from the professionalized studio production values dominating pop music, in the 1970s, punk heralded a wave of sea changes in the sonics, performance practices, business model and audience expectations of mid-twentieth century Anglo-American music cultures. Characterized by the cliché ‘play fast and loud’ and the motto ‘die young’ (preferably before 25) punk, however defined, has diversified musically and geographically. Its proponents now span generations, as do audience demographics along race, class, gender, and religious lines, and across the spectrum of political affiliations. Literature about punk encompasses categories known as new wave, experimental/avant-garde electronica, post-punk, afro-punk, riot grrrl, and other derivations as these have flourished in their Anglo-American-European heartlands and around the world. Academic studies have also started to gather momentum with an increasing number from (former) punk exponents, if not fans, publications that work as a sort of meta-memoir to the first-hand narrative accounts. The study considers women’s
music memoirs as formative contributions to shifting perceptions about women in public life after decades of studied disinterest, from mainstream academe and the music press. Considered together rather than pitted one against the other, the books are timely correctives to academic and trade literatures on the sociocultural, let alone political significance of any given musical moment that scandalously underplay the contribution of women who were there, making it happen. Such first-person accounts can inform debates about what it takes and means for a woman to make her way in any masculinist domain. The numerous, sometimes ironic, recollections of what it feels to be type cast, e.g., as girl-in-a-band, girl-band, woman-with-guitar, speak to the limitations of prominent recollections of the androgynous, gender-bending personae made famous by male celebrities and their bands.

In order of publication, here are the ten author-musicians: Patti Smith, Nina Hagen, Pauline Black (Belinda Magnus), Alice Bag (Alicia Armendariz), Viv Albertine, Kim Gordon, Carrie Brownstein, Chrissie Hynde, Britt Smith Start (Laura Salinger), and Cosey Fanni Tutti (Christine Newby). As women remain a numerical minority in all aspects of the music business, arts criticism and analysis, the authors revisit and so redress the standard historical narrative of punk rock: as white, working class (British in particular) aggressively ‘male’ rebelliousness, encapsulated in the very short, loud, fast, lo-fi and non-virtuoso track with brash, anti-establishment lyrical content, accompanied by the equivalent in confrontational behaviour on stage. As musicians their careers span the timeline demarcating the broadening out of punk music after its, for some, halcyon years in the late 1970s. The jury is still out on whether punk could ever have fulfilled its claim to be a revolutionary cultural vanguard. Women’s punk memoir-writing opens up a rich vein of inquiry for students of politics, culture, and society into the gendered and, by association, intersecting race and class dimensions of punk’s public archive (recordings, live shows, video footage, other memorabilia) and historiography (academic and journalist literatures).

The fifteen memoirs make for fascinating reading in their own right, as narratives – of intimate lives and public experiments in musicianship, artistic and professional collaborations – that buck the norm. But they are much more than stories of single-minded women achieving success in hostile domains. The study considers the authors as creative agents, and through the prism of their own words it listens to some of the sounds they made. Taken together, the accounts make a substantive contribution to the sonic and literary archives of punk’s pushback against the techno-economic values driving the business model through which the global cultural industries came of age in the twentieth century. High-profile acts from the UK and US punk scenes that have become anchored in popular imaginaries belie the depth of punk music’s back catalogue and broader cultural legacy when considered through the eyes and ears of female musicians. Through the memoir
idiom, authors evoke these intellectual concerns in a number of registers through their experience of punk’s challenge to the sexual politics and political economic power that undergirds the Anglo-American music industry.

Figure 1: Carrie Brownstein
Artist: Mauricio Escobar (all rights reserved)

Beyond Fanstalgia

Punk rhetoric, ironic and serious, postures its challenge to the status-quo at full volume. Punk *musicking* remains indebted to articulating some sort of countercultural position and commitment to the communities that underpin the music-making, live and in the recording studio.¹ The first objective of this study is to listen more closely to some of the music the authors discuss. The memoirs are embedded in the process of making music itself, what it meant for authors as they challenged conventions about what counts as art, who gets to articulate the political moment, mood of the day, and who gets to play. The sonics and tools of musicological analysis tend to be avoided in studies of culture, society and politics
conducted through the prism of the performing arts. Such an elision, empirical preference perhaps, belies how these scholarly and real-life domains are, in practice, intimately connected, despite an institutionalised separation into discrete disciplines. After all, historians also study musical topics as do media scholars, philosophers, psychologists, anthropologists, sociologists, and political scientists. Music researchers have been taking up a comparable interest in studying musical objects of analysis through the lens of culture, society and politics. In short, the overlaps between terms of reference and ways of conducting research offer more opportunities for garnering new knowledge and insights than do arcane divisions of labour and accreditation.

That said, the argument still needs reiterating, the public knowledge that emerges from questioning received wisdoms still needs pointing out, academic terms and references to scholarly debates do need introducing for other readerships. Not unlike how ‘genres’ sort diverse popular, and classical art music into recognized (and marketable) categories, disciplinary demarcation lines distinguish one academic research tradition from another; the division between the Humanities, Social Sciences, and ‘hard’ Sciences like engineering or physics is the most obvious though not the most insidious. When self-identifying as multi- or interdisciplinary a study (this is one such study) draws on and addresses more than one research tradition. Taking as a starting point that the interconnections between the study of culture, society and politics requires cross-disciplinary engagement is part of burgeoning university teaching and research that pushes back against disciplinary rigidities; against ‘genres’ so to speak. When it comes to explorations of the culture-society-politics nexus, the case of music for instance, the working premise is that the constitution of any political order, at the national or global level, includes the institutionalization of so-called norms and values (e.g. the civilizational, modernization ideals that undergird the former British Empire, Cold War standoffs, American hegemony, or the European Union’s stress on liberal democracy and fundamental freedoms). Macro-level processes do not develop in a social, or cultural vacuum, however. It does not take long to notice the micro-level processes, sinews that connect political peaks ‘upstream’ to domains considered further ‘downstream’; outside the purvey of political and economic power residing in legislatures or intergovernmental institutions, banks and stock markets. In some versions of the narrative-sweeps that populate work on ‘Big History’, ‘Big Business’, and ‘Big Science’, processes and relationships considered to take place ‘downstream’ become mere functions of such events ‘higher up’; everyday life, cultural practices, familial or community relationships for instance.

Music making exemplifies the empirical interconnectivity between society, culture, and politics that academic ‘disciplinary parochialism’ cannot countenance. It does not take long to see and hear how powerholders are continually interfering in the lives and creative work of artists considered dissident or socially
subversive. Those in power, governmental and cultural gatekeepers are prone to co-opt artists, musicians and composers in particular, for any number of political agendas; the exercise of ‘soft power’ through cultural diplomacy programmes has been the cornerstone of twentieth century geopolitics, and the precarious existence of the performing arts in times of war, civil strife, or militarised nationalism is all too palpable in the first decades of this century. Since its inception, punk’s reception by incumbent powers-that-be and various moral guardians has epitomized the interplay between cultural politics and the (geo)politics of culture. Taking on board an auditory sense of how politics works in the world, as it co-creates the power dynamics framing people’s lives, means taking the authors at their musical word by considering the sonics, the musicalities at stake. This is a departure from studies that impute political meaning directly from the lyric sheet, auto/biographical script, as analogy or metaphor in light of public-policy or political rhetoric. It means spending less time on the lyrics, as important as these can be for indexing content as political, on tabulating studio production values or theorizing about punk’s psycho-emotional affect from the mosh pit.

Second, addressing punk as sound and politics, musical form and substance, performance and lifestyle recognizes the viscerality of how punk sets out to challenge any number of musical, societal and cultural norms. This is even more acute in the case of female exponents of punk repertoires and embodiments; e.g., the sexualized misdemeanour that may be attributed to a woman brandishing an electric guitar – lead or bass – on stage, or not singing ‘nicely’. The authors have quite a lot to say about such stereotypes. In so doing they articulate, even if they do not answer, questions about whether the skewed sex-gender hierarchies in the arts – and in the political domains of public life and culture – can be undone by changing corporate ownership and control of recording, public attributions for the creative act (e.g. credits on album covers), copyright, and royalties. Accounts written by the women who wrote the songs, played and produced the records, organized the gigs, did the publicity, and formed the bands articulate the interconnections between the politics of everyday life, creative work, and current events; protagonists are the main acts in a shared, public retrospective. Episodes from the memoir-set capture women making music differently, against the norm, as well as making music on their own terms, despite but also with men. Their experiences challenge assumptions about whether music making and performance cultures like punk, which turn up the physical and emotional volume based on confrontational and physically ferocious forms of delivery are fundamentally male preserves.

The memoirists offer any number of viewpoints on such issues, adding grist to the mill of debates about how best to address the gender geopolitics of (mis)representation in public life. They throw into relief how women who persist in the music business do so against the odds, in an industry based on communities of practice that are skewed in favour of male proponents, and in literatures that
focus on masculinities of performance, male-centric understandings of androgynous countercultures. They make their music, careers and relationships in the face of global, corporate forces of ownership and control that can appropriate and then remarket moments of resistance, artistic experimentation and innovation all too quickly. This genus of literature, first-hand accounts as, and of, performance articulates the ongoing disparities between how women in the political and cultural spheres are positioned and then portrayed by others vis-à-vis how they may regard or choose to depict themselves. The memoirs offer an additional dimension to inquiries into the ‘norm or standard to which women’s difference is being measured and so often found wanting. … [and the work that] women do that is not typically regarded as political or politically interesting’. This has relevance for how pundits and academic researchers consider the achievements of ‘ordinary’ (white) women, a minority, as opposed to ‘exceptional’ (black) women – even more a minority – who become famous at the intersection of cultural and political careers: for instance the former US Secretary of State under George W. Bush, Condoleezza Rice or Nina Simone both of whom had the talent and ambition to become a concert pianist (see Chapter Five).

Third, the study considers the memoir-based evidence in light of the incipient sex-gender stereotypes that continue to permeate music research and work on popular culture. Successive waves of feminist approaches alongside literary, cultural, or sonic ‘turns’ have shifted the terms of reference in longstanding discussions about whether a particular compositional or performance style can be regarded as intrinsically ‘gendered’; innately ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’. As the debates about equal billing in music festivals and programming across the cultural spectrum continue, the authors’ accounts, past and ongoing creative and public work have implications for how women’s role in the cultural history and sex-gender politics of music-making can be reassessed. Hence asking questions such as ‘where are the women?’ and ‘what do they have to say about punk as a cultural and political moment?’ is a start, not an end in itself. The last decades of feminist-inspired music research include investigations into women as a demographic category of ‘absenting’ in the history of (western) popular music, gender as an analytical category (not simply a synonym for women), race/ethnicity and sexuality as constitutive components to making music, and writing about music; topics that all implicate a more rounded understanding of politics as a multidimensional study of power.

It is precisely because they are penned by musicians talking about lives spent carving out an alternative, counter-intuitive place as independent artists, that the memoirs go further than affirming the need to address the entrenched absenting of “women as a group” from the official historiography and discography of any musical form, let alone self-identified, politically conscious ones such as punk. Abigail Gardner in her overview of a small selection of memoirs considers their
primary drive as one of ‘settling scores’ in this regard. But this evaluation only works up to a point. There is a lot more going on within the pages, between the lines, and how the books speak to each other as authors address the work and public personae of any number of other, male, celebrities from their respective, and shared scenes. It is too reductionist because the tone of the publications taken as a composite whole is more exuberant than resentful. Women working as cultural agents in male-dominated fields, in this case music making, tell us something about how artists and/as consumers – fans and audiences, ‘hear’ and respond as gendered beings albeit in ways that cannot be reduced to biologized notions of sexual politics alone. Writing as musicians, audience members, fans and pundits the narratives resist and recalibrate received wisdoms, they do not merely reflect the sexualized and racialized dividing lines characterising the publishing and music business. These tensions, for artist and analyst alike, include the dynamics of denial, collusion, and confrontation given the geo-economic clout wielded by the global arts and entertainment industries, a domain in which streaming platforms have now staked their own, planetary claim for capturing artists’ audiences and distribution channels. Music making, for commercial and non-commercial ends, and the blurred line between for what counts as success, is a political-cultural constellation that bespeaks multi-dimensional gatekeeping powers between state agencies, cultural institutions, and global corporate powers.

Fourth, the study considers the seemingly intransigent imbalance in who writes about, and about who makes what music in journalist and academic modes of analysis. To reiterate (repetition has its uses), making music and writing about music is, predominantly, still a male preserve. One way to get past this androcentric inertia is to take seriously how women’s accounts change the terms of reference – and reverence – for their male counterparts. More so in the case of punk, however defined, which was – and continues to be – a musical form and cultural practice that embodies a politically charged sensibility, as sound, movement, and stage presence. However well it does or does not make good its ambitions to counter the power of the music majors, or to forge a space for gender/race and class-inclusive artistic practices, making music ‘punk’ implies a political stance, a project. After more than four decades of music making, fashion-lines, and material culture based on the improvisational, DIY, shoestring ethos that is intrinsic to punk, as a self-identified movement if not a brand, saying things out loud – loudly is but the start to figuring out why it matters to speak one’s truth to power, at home, in the community or global spaces power is wielded. Authors like Carrie Brownstein, and Alice Bag who published her diaries of time spent with the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, put these levels of engagement into words as well as in their theories of punk musicking. Moreover, like the Clash, the Slits, or Sleater-Kinney and Sonic Youth in their day, members of the Pussy Riot collective mounted in 2012 a direct challenge not only to political but also cultural power in Russia through their deployment of punk idioms in theatre and sound.
Given that women – whether it be in the arts and literature, in international affairs or business – are still in the minority it is really an ‘open door’ to want to look more closely at how women practitioners of punk idioms have managed to stand up to the bastions of power, of good taste (artistically), propriety (how should a grrrl in a band look or behave?) along the fracture lines of gender-race-class lines of acceptability. A study such as this one cannot answer these questions. Rather, it takes the authors and their complex subject matter as evidence of what it means to be part of a minority at the epicentre of malestreamed culture and politics.

What Makes Punk Music (Not)?

There have been many attempts at defining punk, as musical form and performance, ‘style’, counter-culture and, as it remains for a substantial section of academic and trade literature, the soundtrack of a social movement with roots in left-wing, anti-capitalist and anti-racist mobilization against the rise of the neoliberal, neo-conservative politics of Thatcher and Reagan as the 1970s morphed into the 1980s. Gzowski recognizes as soon as 1977, for instance, that in a 1976 article, journalist Caroline Coon was one of the first to use the term ‘punk’ to describe Britain’s emerging underground rock scene. ‘Punk rock’ was initially coined in 1970 to characterize a group of late-1960s American rock bands.

Helen Reddington, in her interview-based recovery of the ‘lost women of rock music’ during what she calls the ‘punk era’, refers to punk in a number of ways: as a sub-culture headlined by the Sex Pistols within a delineated time-period (1976-78); as a subculture with a ‘uniquely therapeutic nature … for a generation of unemployed people’ made up of diverse ‘micro-subcultures’ that developed a ‘musical and political interpretation of the punk idea which embraced a wide variety of people of both genders and varying ages; as a moment – a space – into which women in particular found their ‘noisy’, ‘angry’ voices, brandished instruments usually reserved for male (punk) rockers by giving women “unprecedented access to a voice and a platform.”

Allusions to whether punk music is an American or British invention notwithstanding, Iggy Pop (born, James Newell Osterberg Jr.), object of desire, admiration, and disappointment for more than a couple of the authors here, had his tongue firmly in his cheek in an early interview on Canadian TV, recorded at the height of media headlines about punk rock’s negative influence on youth. This is what Iggy had to say about definitions:

‘Well, I’ll tell you about punk rock. Punk rock is a word used by dilettantes and heartless manipulators about music that takes up the energies, and the bodies, and the hearts, and the souls, and the time, and the minds of young men [sic] who give what they have to it, who give everything they have to it. And it’s a term based on contempt, it’s a term that’s based in fashion, style, elitism, Satanism, and every-
thing that’s rotten about rock ‘n’ roll…. You see, what sounds to you like a load of trashy old noise is, in fact, the brilliant music of genius, myself and that music is so powerful that it’s quite beyond my control…’ (Iggy Pop, 1977)

Iggy’s disdain remains alive and well today, as does his ironic ‘humble-bragging’ as he takes to task the industry of genreification linked to commercial success against which ‘first generation’ punks railed. The role of dress, bodies, and movement on stage are not absent from the memoirs, nonetheless. Reflections on punk adornments (‘clothes, clothes, clothes’ as evoked in the title of Albertine’s first memoir), body image, or musical aptitude feature. But a sartorial – image or branding – aspect is but one. The weight of analysis, retrospection engages the reader with the tracks: short songs where performers revelled in, or agonized over their rudimentary technique (beginner guitarists); acoustics based on volume up loud; lyrics shouted or sung deliberately out of tune about topics that were anything but love songs and which included odes to (violent) insurrection, refusal to conform, calls to revolution, political stances on current events of the day (anti-war, anti-establishment, anti-monarchy). The cast of personae whose monikers have become synonymous with punk also feature: e.g. Johnny Rotten, Poly Styrene, Sid Vicious as do prototypical bands with names conjuring up bodily fluids (the Buzzcocks), decay (Rancid), sex (the Sex Pistols), confrontation (the Clash), nihilism (the Damned, Bikini Kill) and death (Dead Kennedys), body parts (the Slits, Stiff Little Fingers). The musician-authors of the books in question here provide fresh insights and energy into a period, and its afterlife in music journalism, including the never-ending release of manmoirs from pop-punk-rock male celebrities.

Punk as a musical expression, and demarcated timeline of sonic revolt since its public entrée in the 1970s, is straightforward in its ideal type; locatable in those first years as based on less than three-minute tracks (sometimes less than a minute), fast, thrashed guitars, three-chord (max) harmonies for bass or lead guitar. Vocals less sung than yelled, staging basic, audience and performers interacting through the mosh-pit, mixed spittle, flying beer bottles, mutual gestures and verbalizations of abuse, sweat and physicality in which bodies crashed into one another, crushed forward, jumped up and down. Yet this very image is, in itself, a form of fanstalgia. Ian Penman is one pundit who exemplifies this tension between punk as a generic or exclusive term. He cites Solange Knowles, who evokes punk as a form through which artists are ‘allowed to be and rage and express anger, be anti-establishment…’ in his review of the book Why Solange Matters by Stephanie Phillips. Penman sees such evocations as the antithesis of punk which for him conjures up the ‘glowing skyline of a 1970s UK council estate.’ In this view, more inclusive evocations of ‘punk’ is what ‘punk’ is ‘not’. Penman laments, in effect, that punk “means now whatever anyone wants or wills” particularly when African American artists from the post-rap/R&B artists generation such as Sol-
ange Knowles take the term on to describe their own sense of non-compliance. Penman overlooks that punk’s ‘towering skylines’ of working-class British (male) culture is also an ideal type. As punk era artists-cum-authors such as Helen Reddington, Cosey Fanni Tutti, Alice Bag, and Pauline Black point out, punkish attributes emerged from a range of skylines, suburban or inner-city poverty, race and gender lines of experimentation and demarcation. For Penman ‘it may come as a surprise to some that ‘punk’ can still be brandished like this, as an outsider ethic, a gloriously unsafe safe-place for experiment and play, rage and reclamation.’ It bears noting that rap and hip-hop artists, who emerged in the same decade as British punk acts such as the Sex Pistols or the Clash, were also generating their music from a DIY, not-strictly-commercial sensibility. In their historical synchronicity we can hear echoes of Solange’s appropriation of the term punk to denote a particular attitude, one that pushes back against entrenched societal and industry norms across race, class, and gender lines.

By the same token the diversity and stubbornness of the authors’ personal accounts, and their public output cannot be confined either to reductionist tropes around femininity versus masculinity, or the policy politics of demographic representativeness. How they made, and still make music, alongside their many other pursuits resonates with successive generations of academic debates about how sex-gender roles can be seen and heard at work in public life and culture. Which leaves us with an open-ended query; do any of these women and the bands they took part in, founded and led, really qualify as strictly-punk? Which definition best encapsulates these diverse acts if not punk (sub-categorizations aside)? Anglo-centric critics such as Penman would say not. Indeed, he questions whether American acts such as Sleater-Kinney (Carrie Brownstein) or Sonic Youth (Kim Gordon) can be termed punk at all. Yet this he does whilst decrying the dangers of ‘purism, a conservatism that repels anything new or different and instead fetishizes micro-differences of style and caste.’ Debates, ongoing, about commercial but also political and philosophical definitions pivot on the understandings that culture matters. Moreover, the links between punkish-sounding bands, right-wing skinhead scenes, left-wing politics, and religious fervour are also a part of punk discographies. This too is a question about the intimacies between culture and politics, society and the arts along the sinews that connect the local and global dimensions of action.

Where punk begins and ends as a political sensibility in the literature to date tends to rest on odes paid to the engaged lyrics and public positions of male figures in the punk pantheon, such as Joe Strummer from the Clash. The women whose music features in the memoir-set are lyricists as well as composers. Viv Albertine notes, in a reflection on what she thinks the Slits stood for, how their ‘lyrics were very carefully thought about and scrutinized. No peddling clichés and lies for us. No lazy escapism. Words have to be true to your life. Write about what you know. And make people think.’ Later generations of punk artists are less focused on about political delinea-
tions along the lyric sheet alone, Katie Alice Greer, for instance, from Priests, an exponent of the ‘new “new wave” of self-identifying punk bands, argues that ‘everything is political, and music is inherently part of politics.’ Helen Reddington’s account, her own and that of her interviewees, of punk as *synonymous* with ‘music-making by empowered women’ is tinged with disillusionment in light of how the music press, at the time and since, is steeped in a ‘male memory’ that is, moreover, ‘metrocentric.’ Her critique is also aimed at high-profile scholarly and journalist chroniclers of the punk period that continue to ignore, mute, or under-estimate the role that women have played as musicians, producers, and writers. Reddington devotes her penultimate chapter to this issue of male/masculinist gatekeepers who continue to dominate the historiography, play lists, and airtime; Anglo-American interlocuters in particular. How exactly some music is consciously, or unintentionally positioned as “political.” the sex-gender power relations inherent in respective appellations, is an historical as well as an analytical question since the first wave of feminist revisions of the classical music canon in the 1990s. Engaging with how musicians, particularly those seldom given any airplay or column-space such as women (sad but true), discuss these issues as first-hand accounts provides a fresh impulse, some additional complexity to these debates.

![Figure 2: Brix Smith Start](image)

*Artist: Mauricio Escobar (all rights reserved)*
Reader Notes

Four points of entry frame the study: the books, their authors, the historical context, and musical output. It includes some focus on the musical material to get closer to the authors’ own accounts of how they made their music as beginners and more experienced musicians. Whilst a memoir is, by any definition, a manufactured reconstruction of a life or stage in one’s life the authors do focus on the music they made, when starting out as, nominally, punk acts and the ways in which they and their creative practices developed over time. Hence music making, and attitudes to the business and creative impulses feature in different ways and at different levels of formal writing about technical production values and processes, learning how to play, and then perfecting a particular technique on an instrument – usually the (bass) guitar, or discovering vocal attributes. Authors span the spectrum, celebrated and heralded by punk, as absolute beginner, relative adept in another instrument; for instance, Pauline Black, frontwoman and vocalist from the 2-tone band, the Selecter played piano at quite an advanced level when starting out.

But why does it matter to incorporate close listening time into the study? I would argue that getting inside the way a piece of music is put together does change the way you hear and so experience its sonic composition. Some may argue this analytical focus affects the enjoyment of the listening experience or is too strenuous for lay people. It need not. Nor does it mean having to have a music degree, be able to read music, or be a virtuoso performer. Punk’s breakthrough was to claim creative and performance space for the novice musician within its sonic register and despite the demands of professionalized music promotion. As proponents show, making music can also break through the sound barriers of expertise based on racialized and sexualized hierarchies of cultural worthiness. So can listening.

There are some conceptual lines of inquiry, familiar to academic readers, which will make their appearance in each chapter. One notion that undergirds the methodological approach for this study is the notion of intersectionality: a way to connect often disparate topics through unpacking the multiple dimensions to how individuals and communities make sense of their worlds and, conversely, can become defined in powerful others’ preconceived ideas; such as those about sex-gender roles. Considering how racialised and sexualized stereotypes combine in lived lives, and institutions, generates work on the multiplicity of discriminatory sites and discourses, towards a group (e.g. black queer women), a demographic (e.g. women in the arts let alone women from ethnic minorities in the arts), or a scholarly discipline. References to intersectionality are not to imply a flattening out of distinct, embedded power differentials along singular axes such as race (prominent in US debates) or class (a focus in the UK). Rather, the term
highlights the *nuances* of experience and success, commercial and critical, that the artists have experienced, as individuals and communities. These turn differently on crisscrossing, always moving contexts of possibility around race, class, wealth, and networks in the case of women in music, whose ‘gender and sexual [and racial] unruliness’ becomes political subject matter, to paraphrase Judith Peraino.¹⁹

Memoirists Chrissie Hynde, Nina Hagen, Alice Bag, Pauline Black, Patti Smith to some extent, and Carrie Brownstein in particular, write about the interplay between the historical times, local and global political events, and respective sex-gender power dynamics that formed them as well as those mentors, musicians and artists that influenced them when considering their own creative practices and pathways. Rather than infer official ideological positions from any author, when not stated explicitly (more on such points in Chapter Five) I draw out some of the conceptual connections between the music-making, historical and political contexts to which the author may, or may not refer, and wider debates around the politics of art, art and politics, and music as a vehicle for social change.

**Which Books and Why**

It is a booming corner of the publishing industry, the *femoir* and in particular the *rock-femoir*. So which books to consider, which to leave out? The selection here is not entirely arbitrary. Chapter Two looks more closely at similarities and differences (in authorial voice, style, narrative structures) and deployment of an author’s personal papers – diaries, photos, fan memorabilia- along with other secondary sources reflect the thirty years spanning the authors’ ages, *geocultural* locales and their own sense of, well, destiny (if you like). That said, this is not a comparative study. Nor is it a critical review. References to other prominent memoirists such Nina Simone (born, Eunice Kathleen Waymon) and Simone de Beauvoir offer some additional lateral insights into first-hand recollections of being there, at the time.

Around 2014 the music press, and major public cultural spaces such as the Tate Modern in London, were gearing up to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of punk rock’s ‘arrival’ in the late nineteen-seventies, sweeping away the hi-fi production values, virtuosity and long windedness of ‘prog-rock’, the slick studio recordings of the pop-music charts, in its wake. Much has been written about punk in the mid to late seventies as it emerged in the UK through the fame of the Sex Pistols, and its centres of gravity in the US, New York and Detroit, with acts such as the New York Dolls, Iggy Pop and the Stooges around the same time, followed closely, as standard accounts go, with bands such as Blondie, Talking Heads, Devo, and others.²⁰ Here too differences exceed similarities. The fifteen memoirs studied were published between 2010-2022 with nearly half of them appearing in
2014-2016; a steady flow of memoirs annually for twelve years in this sub-category, of women writing about music as musicians, alone.

So, let’s start at the beginning in terms of publication dates: In 2010 Patti Smith’s memoir, *Just Kids*, of her early years living with the photographer Robert Mapplethorpe (1946-1989) as a budding romantic/beat generation poet and starting-out performance artist/rock vocalist, won the 2010 National Book Award in the US. The celebrity status of both Smith (b. 1946) and her former life-companion Mapplethorpe in American mid-20th century high-pop cultural life, set the bar for memoirs from women in punk/rock from that point on. It also sets out the lines of demarcation about how best to define ‘punk’, as discussed. For while Smith is considered the ‘godmother’ of punk rock, her music is not, strictly speaking, punk; at least not when compared to the output of others in this study. In addition, Patti Smith features as an object of desire, fandom, and aspiration in several of these books; her influence, and stage persona are immortalized by Viv Albertine, Chrissie Hynde, Alice Bag, and also Nina Hagen, as a performance role-model, proto-punk icon. Smith considers herself, at least in *Just Kids*, as a poet first, a singer in a rock ‘n’ roll band second. It is her second book, *M Train*, that makes clear how she sees her music career in light of her poetry, visual practice (photography and painting), and writing. Her personal life is less enunciated, alluded to by names and events (often their death). Subsequent memoirs, such as *M Train*, published in 2015, and *Year of the Monkey* from 2019 take on a more meta-level approach to the act of ‘memoirizing’, with the creative act of musicking, and those musicians with whom she has worked (including her late husband Fred Smith, and daughter, Jesse Paris Smith) more as backdrops to the topic at hand; the act of writing itself in the autobiographical voice.

Viv Albertine’s first memoir, of her time with the Slits, considered one of the UK’s most significant bands of punk’s establishment in the late seventies-early eighties, *Clothes, Clothes, Clothes, Music, Music, Music, Boys, Boys, Boys* was published in 2014. Her second book, focusing on her relationship with her mother, father, and sister, *To Throw Away Unopened*, came out in 2018. In 2015, Kim Gordon, bassist in the American, ‘indie’, or ‘alt-rock’ band, Sonic Youth, published her memoir entitled *Girl in a Band*. 2015 saw the publication of *Hunger Makes me a Modern Girl* from Carrie Brownstein, from a prominent band in the US-based *riot grrrl* (punk-inspired) musico-feminist wave from the nineties, Sleater-Kinney. And in 2016 two memoirs emerged; first Brix Smith Start’s reconstruction of her time before, during, and after playing, and living with the indefinable Manchester-based, meta-punk band, the Fall and its frontman Mark E. Smith (1957-2018) in *The Rise, The Fall, and The Rise*. Second is Chrissie Hynde’s account of her beginnings, and subsequent rise to fame in *Reckless: My Life as a Pretender*. Both Smith Start and Hynde made their professional lives, as Americans, in the
UK. By 2017 Cosey Fanni Tutti (the stage name for Christine Newby) had published her memoir – Art, Sex, Music – on life as a member of the performance art/experimental sonics collective of counter-cultural ‘noiseniks’, Throbbing Gristle, based in from Hull (UK) and her later career as part of the electronic duo, Chris and Cosey.\(^{21}\) Cosey’s second book, Re-Sisters, was published in 2022. Musically the authors and their various bands span the spectrum of what could be considered ‘punk’, if not in form and delivery then in attitude towards the mainstream music industry. Some are close friends and collaborators, others know (of) each other from a distance, have toured and played together, been at each other’s gigs.

Three other musicians’ memoirs complete the set with books published in 2011; Alice Bag (stage name for Alicia Armendariz, born 1958) who fronted the LA based punk band, the Bags with her first 2011 memoir entitled Violence Girl: East L.A. Rage to Hollywood Stage, a Chicana Punk Story. The other memoir from that year, also following close behind Patti Smith’s Just Kids, is Pauline Black’s Black By Design: A 2-Tone Memoir. Black (born Belinda Magnus in 1953) recounts her life as front woman of the 2-tone (ska) band, the Selecter from the perspective of a mixed race performer who, like Bag, made her mark in music scenes dominated by (white) men and, as is the case with our other memoirists, white women. Third, Nina Hagen’s memoir, not available in English, takes the reader through her upbringing in an artistic, non-conformist family in East Germany to her rise to fame in western Europe and her encounters with the first generation of British punk bands in London. Patti Smith is the oldest, born in 1946 with her first memoir published when she was in her sixties. Brix Smith Start and Carrie Brownstein are the youngest, born in 1962 and 1974 respectively. Chrissie Hynde, Cosey Fanni Tutti, Kim Gordon, Pauline Black, and Viv Albertine were all born in the early-to-mid fifties (1951, 1951, 1953, 1953, and 1954). Nina Hagen was born in 1955, Alice Bag in 1958. Dates of birth clustered around the early ‘fifties notwithstanding, this line-up places Brownstein’s memoir from 2015 as the one penned by the youngest memoirist, barely in her forties at date of publication. As authors, and exponents of first-generation (1970s) and second/third generation (1980s hardcore/1990s riot grrrls) punk, these ten women lend their authoritative voice to the burgeoning literature on punk countercultures and music scenes.

Who does not make this cut? The most prominent in terms of global reach is Debbie Harry’s Face it: A Memoir from 2019 which is about her band Blondie, neither a self-authored nor a substantial autobiographical narrative. Rather it is a compilation of conversations with Sylvie Simmons fleshed out with copious photos and fan-portraits of Harry, from Harry’s personal archives. Even though Harry (born Angela Trimble in 1945) is the same age as several other authors, marginally older than Patti Smith, and Blondie is considered by pundits as one of the most iconic US punk/new wave bands, a line in the sand has to be drawn somewhere. By the
same token I draw on Nina Simone's memoir, also ghost-written but, nonetheless, a substantive autobiographical account of Simone's creative and political vision. Why Simone, a Black political activist and innovator of socially conscious blues, jazz and gospel crossovers from a previous generation, features in a study of punk women's memoirs will be explained in due course. Included in this written text is a gallery of portraits from the French-Columbian artist Mauricio Escobar. Working on the basis of public domain images as ‘found’ source material, Escobar has allowed himself to be inspired by the musician-memoirists’ public personae; not only in their younger years but also in more recent times. He has worked with charcoal and a primary colour palette developing his own vision of the memoirists as a group. Escobar notes that as we worked together, he:

‘opted for a simple technique, basic materials such as charcoal and darker colours, working in a figurative style that does not copy public images but, rather, works with my perception of each woman’s, each musician’s personality through the photographic medium. ... I chose two or three for each individual from different periods, synthesizing certain characteristics – not to reproduce the shot as an exact facsimile – but, most importantly, to convey my sense of their personality, always a complicated and complex notion, that they exude from the images, and that speaks to me.’

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Figure 3: Diptych – Cosey Fanni Tutti and Viv Albertine
Artist: Mauricio Escobar (all rights reserved)
Escobar's work provides a visual dimension to the thousands of words under examination here alongside the many hours of music recordings, video footage and other creative work in the public (online and offline) domain. The portraits have been curated as an ongoing conversation during the conception and writing of this book, a form of mutual inspiration to get things done on the basis of intuition and increased knowledge of what animates the authors in all their endeavours. I am indebted to Mauricio for his commitment and contribution to the study with a visual artist's impressions of the musicians.

**Chapter Outline**

The next five chapters proceed as follows: Chapter Two delves more into the form and substance of the memoir-set. Clustering fifteen memoirs from ten authors, already marketed as a subset of the rock memoir genre, together for the purposes of study begs comparisons. Contrasts in style, aesthetic and political sensibility, musical tastes and attitudes to commercial success, or lack thereof are also considered as a composite portrait of the books. The argument is that these publications need to be treated as a substantial public archive for scholars of the politics of contemporary musico-cultural movements, of which punk is one. In an industry dominated by men, the publication of first-hand accounts by influential, and high-profile musicians who are women about a shared period of musical innovation matters for public record, and for scholarship. Politically this is a feminist issue as much as it is an empirical shift in the timeline and point-of-view for punkographies to date. The selection criteria, and how I curated themes for the subsequent chapters provide the research rationale (more in Chapter Six for the methodologically curious). In Chapter Three, *voice* is the main theme for considering how Patti Smith, Nina Hagen, Alice Bag, and Brix Smith Start write about finding their own voice; as vocalists and figuratively as they strike out into public performance. Passages from the respective memoirs provide insights into how they developed their own performance repertories, usually through trial and error. We pay a first visit to the thought of Roland Barthes, a philosopher who was writing about music as art and practice in the same period that Patti Smith was first performing her Rimbaud-inflected spoken-word, proto-punk shows in New York.

The guitar, and women playing guitar, is the main theme for Chapter Four. Authors have a lot to say in this regard as they confront their own preconceptions about female bodies on stage, as guitar players and learning to play the instrument of popular music's male guitar heroes for the first time. Roland Barthes' ideas about music as an *embodied* practice provide ways into thinking about why punk made such a mark at the time and women playing guitar fast and loud in particular; commonplace now but in the 1970s and 1980s not the case. What constitutes
‘good’ punk performance values provides a counterweight to some of the mythologies about punk through how prominent exponents changed the way guitar was played, and how it sounded. The penultimate chapter, Chapter Five, considers several not-strictly-musical themes, including more recent undertakings from the authors since publishing the memoirs in the set. We return to the question about whether aging, for women in particular, plays a particular role for women looking to have their say in public recollections, if not commemorations of the hopefulness for sociocultural change that punk, along with concomitant music scenes such as reggae, ska and 2-tone sounded. Topics such as loss, sexual mores, racism, discrimination in the artworld and public media, and gender-based violence return from initial considerations in Chapter Two. All the authors have continued to create, music and literature, and in other formats such as the visual arts, television, theatre, and poetry. The chapter ends with a reflection on why Nina Simone is pertinent to the study. I consider her as the one who did it first in terms of the punk attitude to audience, public approval, and fame, all of which comprise combative relationships between the artist, her audience, fans and critics. Some recapitulation, some extrapolations, and some further delineations are the themes in Chapter Six, the outro.

**Setting Out**

Much more than a publishing gimmick, the music memoirs – a subset of a larger literature – penned by these women provide new knowledge of how the music was made in the ‘punk era’. They offer fresh insights into the process of song writing in terms of lyrics, melody, and sound production; from a formulaic ‘pop-song’ approach to the improvised and experimental. We are reading about music-making from inside the process. The authors are not onlookers. They are describing the emotional, physical, and creative paths they took to make their music, and what making that music meant to their lives, at the time and since. They are also providing a multi-layered account of overlapping cultural and political movements that are embedded in their respective musicking. Reading the books together, as a complex whole but also each on their own musical and lyrical terms, provides a rich vein of inquiry for further research. But they are also a treat for fans and pundits; past, present and future.