

“When She Talks, I Hear the Revolution”: Rebel Girls, Punk Rock, and Uncommodified Dissent

“Some people think little girls should be seen and not heard. But I say....Oh bondage! Up yours!” –X-Ray Spex

With her famous rebel yell--seemingly about sex but actually a critique of consumer culture--Poly Styrene, the nineteen-year-old founder and singer of X-Ray Spex, brought nuance and satire to punk music. Styrene's braces and synthetic, day-glo attire set her apart visually from other performers; more importantly, her identity as a mixed-race woman from a working class background made her uniquely positioned to provide a necessary alternative to punk's predominantly white, aggressively masculine presence.

Almost a decade earlier, in 1968, the family band The Shaggs formed at the insistence of their father. Different in nearly every way from Poly Styrene (small town residents, white, insular, disconnected from any musical culture), these women have been heralded as “grandmothers of punk” for their peculiar, associative music that has had an influence on artists as varied as Kurt Cobain, Frank Zappa, and The Dead Milkmen.

In this paper, I'll explore the way that these performers have shaped and continue to shape youth culture. In particular, I'll examine the treatment the two have been given in recent collections about “rebellious” women: Pénélope Bagieu's 2017 graphic collection *Brazen: Rebel Ladies Who Rocked the World* that includes an entry on The Shaggs and Kate Schatz and Miriam Klein Stahl's 2016 *Rad Women Worldwide* that includes Poly Styrene. These collections are part of a growing, but by no means new, trend to introduce women-centric history to girls by compiling short, biographical sketches about women's lives. As with other similar collections (*Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls 1 and 2* in 2016 and 2017 and *Rad Girls Can* in 2018), these books make use of an expansive and sometimes unclear rhetoric of rebellion. This paper will ask what we gain by presenting certain women as models of rebellion—and what such depictions are meant to inculcate in young readers. In tackling these and other questions, I will also be attuned to the ways canonical understandings of punk rock are shifting in light of contemporary feminist and youth activism.