



GIRLS LIKE US

PUNK ICONS THE SLITS DRESSED, SANG, AND MADE MUSIC HOWEVER THE HELL THEY WANTED, SIMPLY BECAUSE THEY HAD NO OTHER CHOICE. THIS FALL, THEIR FIRST ALBUM IN 3 DECADES SEALS THE BAND'S STRIDENT ROCK LEGACY AND ADDS A CHAPTER TO IT

The Slits are sort of feminist. "Not in a politically correct sense, more in a lifestyle sense," says Ari Up, the lead singer of the first female punk band, whose new album, *Trapped Animal*, is out this fall. "We were in an explosion where we didn't have time to follow rules. We were too busy fighting for our identity." That explosion was the British punk scene of the late 1970s, which centered around a gang of spike-haired amateurs raising their fists against corporate culture. Their ammunition: a style of shocking non sequiturs and an unprecedented degree of nihilism. Because the movement erupted quickly and was relatively small, Up and her cohorts thought more about everyone involved and less about themselves as the only girl group. In spite of touring with punk royalty like the Clash and the Buzzcocks, they never attained the same iconic status. "We were written out of history," she says.

Up and her crew were among a handful of female artists (Patti Smith and Chrissie Hynde among them) who broke with pop archetypes, wrote their own songs, and played music that captured their experiences as distinct from men. Women in the punk movement either fell into the lot of stupid girls or gained respect by acting like one of the guys. The Slits mocked the former category, but didn't conform to the latter. Their name served as a taunt, both

a reference to genitalia and an intimation of violence. Where the Sex Pistols' "Bodies" detested the human form because childbirth and abortions are a "fucking bloody mess," the Slits' "Love und Romance" satirized how men ridiculed love. "Call you every day on the telephone, break your neck if you ain't home!" yelled Up. On "So Tough," they mocked Sid Vicious's failing, junkie posture, "He is only curious, don't take it serious," then delivered the knockout, "Don't fuck things up by getting sick...again!"

The Slits don't sound like other punk bands. Up's voice possesses the pitch and clarity of a manic opera singer, ranging from a quavering bray to a Nico-esque drone. At 15, the German expatriate pushed her way to the center of reggae parties in London, and, with guitarist Viv Albertine, bassist Tessa Pollitt, and then-drummer Palmolive, incorporated those sounds into her music. The band swapped reggae mixes while on tour with their friends the Clash, who are credited with inventing the hybrid. But where the Clash browsed the genre, covering Junior Murvin's "Police and Thieves" and recounting nights at the Hammersmith Palais, the Slits forged a singular mix. Speaking with an inscrutable accent of German, British, American, and Jamaican, Up insists, "We invented world beat without knowing it." Their second album, *Return of the Giant Slits*, delved into African rhythms and free jazz.

The Slits were, and continue to be, instinctive arbiters rather than visionary plotters. As the first punk girl group, their ethos of caring about not-caring was complicated by the gender barrier: they had to work harder than their male counterparts to gain recognition, which meant caring more intensely about being apathetic. This paradox is explored in their hit "Typical Girls": "Don't create/Don't rebel/Have intuition/Don't drive well," a lone imperative flanked by admonishments. At a time when Farrah Fawcett's tawny look defined beauty, the Slits wore lace gloves and tutus and socks in their matted hair, paving the way for '90s riot grrls and fashion eccentrics like Madonna, Björk, and Chloë Sevigny. On the cover of their 1979 debut, *Cut*, the band appeared topless, slathered in mud and dressed in loincloths. Some feminists maligned it as a primitivist pinup, while others lauded it for the same reason. The editor of the British music magazine *Melody Maker* said of them, "They look terrible. They're fat, they look disgusting." But Albertine contends that the image's sexual nature was an afterthought. In Zoë Street Howe's book *Typical*

Girls? The Story of the Slits, out this September, she says, "We didn't think of ourselves as sexy at all. I mean, my little girl's 8 and she's aware of sexuality and how to flounce and flick. We weren't aware." Though theoretically liberating, she added, "You can see...we'd eaten quite a lot."

Punk delights in a conspicuous pastiche of the outlandish (rubber tights) and unremarkable (safety pins). Likewise, the Slits assert they had no choice but to play by their own rules. Malcolm McLaren and Island Records labelmate Bob Marley were apprehensive of them because they were the first self-created girl group, not an industry concoction. McLaren wanted to outfit them as a disco troupe. Marley initially name-dropped them on "Punky Reggae Party," but took them out when he discovered they were women. As a result of such prejudice, the band's slopy determinism persists today. They still insist that they knew how to play, when most punk bands didn't know, and celebrated the fact. Albertine offers Howe this apology: "We couldn't play what men could do, those sort of 4/4 times, never speeding up, never slowing down, couldn't do it! I don't know if women really can."

The years of attacks, bouncing between labels and managers, and various creative differences took their toll, and the band split in 1982. Up resurfaced in the '90s as a dance-hall queen in Jamaica under the name Madussa, and has shuttled between Kingston and Brooklyn since 1987. She and Pollitt reunited as a new incarnation of the band in 2006, with the Sex Pistols' drummer Paul Cook's daughter, Hollie, on keyboards, drummer Anna Schulte, and a guitarist named No. They released an EP the same year, and *Trapped Animal*, their third full-length, continues their funky punk-dub, with added elements of hip-hop, electronic music, and dance-hall. Up is now 47, and the shrieks of her youth have melted into assured raps. But she remains as paradoxical as ever. "I am the essence of punk," says Up. "But I'm uncomfortable calling myself that. It's unacceptable to shock today. If I did now what I did back then, I'd be thrown in jail." **Blythe Sheldon**

The Slits (from left: Bruce Smith, Tessa Pollitt, Viv Albertine, Ari Up) in New Mexico, 1981

Trapped Animal is out in October 2009 from Narnack Records. *Typical Girls? The Story of the Slits* is out in September 2009 from Omnibus Press