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Viv Albertine, *Clothes, Clothes, Clothes. Music, Music, Music. Boys, Boys, Boys*, paperback, 421 pages, London: Faber & Faber, 2014. ISBN: 978-0571297757; £14.99.

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It is a truism that history is written by the winners, and even in the punk period this tended to be the men. Jon Savage's exhaustive account of the period *England's Dreaming* (1991) is great on the ale figures, the theories and the art of manipulation, but less good on the women of the period; only Vivienne Westwood comes across as an engaging and engaged figure. All the more reason to admire to Viv Albertine's new book, which is honest, informative and entertaining. As she says: 'I'm too outspoken for most people, they think you're rude if you tell the truth' (407).

Albertine was the eldest child of a single mother; she grew up in Muswell Hill, made it through the secondary schools of the time into the relative haven of Art School. She got a job at Dingwalls, a key music venue of the seventies. She met Mick Jones, shared a squat with Paul Simonon, made friends with Sid Vicious, failed with the first band and then joined The Slits. This then is an account by someone who was there at the beginning of punk:

I've crossed the line from 'sexy wild girl just fallen out of bed' to unpredictable, dangerous, unstable, girl'. Not so appealing. Pippi Longstocking meets Barbarella meets juvenile delinquent. Men look at me and are confused, they don't know whether they want to fuck me or kill me. This sartorial ensemble really does mess with their heads. Good. (112)

Being a woman in the music business in the 1970s was tough; The Slits crashed time and time again into prejudice against punk as well as having to deal with everyday chauvinism. Condescending bus drivers, snobbish hotel managers, and know-all record company executives were routinely dispatched by the increasingly assertive Albertine assisted by the band's joyously anarchic singer Ari Up. The Teds

and skinheads, who in 1977 were still a large presence, offered a more dangerous threat. Ari, fifteen at the time, was stabbed twice in this period. The book does not flinch from depicting the violence of the period, both on the street and on stage. In 1979 they made an album, now considered a key piece of post-punk along with Public Image's *Metal Box* and Joy Division's *Unknown Pleasures* (also both 1979). It is an important piece of music because it is an all-woman band playing what they want and presenting themselves as they wanted to be seen. It made the UK Top 30 Albums for a week.

In his chapter 'The Spoken and the Unspoken' Pierre Machery writes that 'it seems useful and legitimate to ask of every production what it tacitly implies, what it does not say' (1978: 85). There are so many female artists of the period who are simply not mentioned in the book. What the book does not say is where The Slits or Albertine herself stand in relation to people like Kate Bush or Siouxsie Sioux who come from the same period and are similar in their individualism, challenging in their music, and yet have much greater commercial success and contemporary critical regard. Albertine sets out her caveat on page one by saying that hers is a subjective book.

The second half of the book is the more interesting. What happens when a first career is over and you are wondering what to do with the rest of your life? As with the sportsman or actor who has had success when young, the search for meaning and a role in later years can either lead to fulfilment or enduring disillusion. In Albertine's case there was initially a sense of rootlessness, a searching for something to do that could match the excitement and friendship of being in band. She taught aerobics, went to film school and worked for the BBC and Channel 4 writing scripts. Then she got married and for several years made a go of it. The strongest section comes in her account of IVF and later cervical cancer:

Night-time is the worst though. Death waiting patiently just outside the half-open bedroom door. I know he's out there, and he knows I'm in here. Even if I beat him and get another night, he's not bothered, he's knows his time will come. 'I'm scared'. (296)

The depression that follows this is honestly described, the sense of time lost all too familiar to anyone who has experienced long-term recovery from a serious illness or injury. Having spent ten years working in psychiatric services, I can testify to the veracity of Albertine's description. The starting point for her recovery, picking up a broom and sweeping the floor, may seem trite; actually it is based on solid occupational therapy practice.

Albertine's recovery was not immediate, but she gradually became more creative until an encounter with Vincent Gallo got her back into the music business. She started performing again in 2008 and recorded her album *The Vermillion Border* in 2012.

All autobiography is going to be subjective; we shape and record the facts that will present us in the best way we can and ignore those that we wish to. Nonetheless this seems a deeply self-serving memoir, but at least she wrote it herself. This is no ghost written production like Keith Richards's *Life* (2010). Albertine takes great pride

in writing her own book; sadly, what follows is too lightly edited and confuses times, dates and the length of her marriage. The book is written in the first person present tense; there are issues with her father, difficulties in relationships with peers and a lifelong desire to be managed by nobody but herself.

In one of the later chapters she writes about the death of some of those close to her over the years. One of these is Ari Up who died from cancer in 2010. Ari was a much loved musician; a colleague of mine at the time was very upset to hear of her death, and at least one pub in Moseley had a minute's silence to remember her that night. Albertine also takes a stand for John Beverley, better known as Sid Vicious. Her memories of him may stretch the credulity of anyone who has read anything of the scene but then I would guess that such is the risk of depending on male writers with their own agenda to present. Her opinion is unexpected and non-judgemental and, apart from the memories of Anne Beverley, is one of the few accounts to try and see the whole Sid. The fact that the two most rounded accounts of Sid Vicious both come from women may not be coincidental.

Viv Albertine as a creative force has always wanted to confront and provoke, to ask the questions and let us work out the answers. But as noted above, there are silences within the text which ask the reader another question: how successfully does Albertine justify her life and career? This may seem harsh, but if punk set out to challenge the icons of the sixties, then should we not now question the icons of punk?

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