

"Beginning to See the Light" (Village Voice, 1977)
from *The Essential Ellen Willis*

Beginning to See the Light

On November 7, I admitted I was turned on by the Sex Pistols. That morning I had gone from my shrink to my office and found that a friend who takes an interest in my musical welfare had sent me a package of British punk singles and albums. He had been urging me to listen to the stuff, and I had been resisting; I was skeptical about punk, in both its British and American versions. The revolt against musical and social pretension, the attempts to pare rock to its essentials, the New York bands' Velvetesque ironic distance had a certain déjà vu quality: wasn't all that happening five years ago? When I had first heard "God Save the Queen" on the radio, my main reaction had been, "They sound like Mott the Hoople—what's the big deal?" And the Ramones bored me; I felt they were not only distanced but distant, apologists for coldness as a worldview. I had dutifully gone to see them at CBGB's and bought their first album, hoping to be interested in what they were trying to do, but duty goes only so far. I was also put off by the heavy overlay of misogyny in the punk stance.

In October I had gone to an art show opening in Queens and had run into another punk evangelist, Bob Christgau. He argued that people who put down the punk bands as "fascist" were really objecting to their lack of gentility. The English bands, he said, were overtly antifascist, and after all it was in England that fascism was a serious threat, not here. I wasn't so sure, I said, either that fascism wasn't a threat here or that the punk rockers were incapable of flirting with it.

I wasn't referring to the swastikas or sadomasochistic regalia that some punk bands affected to prove they were shocking, though I felt that to use Nazi symbolism for any purpose was both stupid and vicious. I meant that sexism combined with anger was always potentially fascistic, for when you stripped the gentility

from the relations between the sexes, what too often remained was male power in its most brutal form. And given the present political atmosphere, that potential was worrisome. The American right was on the move; the backlash against feminism was particularly ominous. Jimmy Carter, with his opposition to abortion, his fundamentalist religion, and his glorification of the traditional (i.e., male-dominated) family, was encouraging cultural reaction in a way that was all the more difficult to combat because he was a Democrat and supposedly a populist. Closer to home, I found it deeply disturbing that so many liberal and leftist men I knew considered Mario Cuomo¹ some sort of working-class hero—that they were at best willing to ignore, at worst secretly attracted to, Cuomo’s antifeminist attitudes. The punk rockers were scarcely defenders of the family, or of tradition, but like pseudopopulist politicians they tended to equate championing the common man with promoting the oppression of women. That the equation was as inherently contradictory as “national socialist” was unlikely to deter men from embracing it.

The following week I went hiking in the Blue Ridge Mountains. At the inn where I was staying I took a lot of more or less friendly kidding about being from New York, to which I responded with more or less friendly defensiveness; no, there had been no looting in my neighborhood during the blackout, and yes, I walked around at night by myself. Back in the city, in the early morning, my clock radio clicked on to wake me up. I lay in bed drifting. The deejay delivered a commercial about a *Voice* article on punk rock: “A cult explodes and a movement is born!” Then came the news: the West German commandos had made their triumphant raid on the terrorists at Mogadishu. I lay in bed confused. Were the punk rockers the terrorists or the raiders?

Some friends of mine were giving a Halloween costume party. I decided to go as a punk. I wore a black T-shirt that read in yellow letters “Anarchy in Queens” (I would love to be able to say I found it somewhere, but in fact I had it made up), a huge safety-pin earring, pasty white makeup, green food coloring on my teeth, and fake vomit that I had bought in a magicians’ supply store.

Around the same time I was beginning to emerge from a confusing and depressing period in my life. I had a problem I needed to face, a painful and scary choice to make, and I had been refusing to think about it. In such circumstances, music was my enemy. It had a way of foiling my attempts at evasion; when I was least prepared, some line or riff or vocal nuance would invariably confront me with whatever I was struggling to repress. And so I had simply stopped listening. I told myself that the trouble was I was tired of old music, and there was no new music that excited me. I wondered if I were coming to the end of an era—was rock and roll no longer going to be important in my life?

Then I gave up trying to censor my thoughts. Immediately there were plenty of records I needed to hear: *Blood on the Tracks*; *Loaded*; *Heat Treatment* and *Howlin’ Wind*; *Astral Weeks*; *Exile on Main St.*; *The Bessie Smith Story, Volume 4*, which includes “Send Me to the ‘Lectric Chair” and “Empty Bed Blues.” I real-

ized with a shock that although I'd listened to "Send Me to the 'Lectric Chair" hundreds of times over the years, I had never really heard it before. It was a fierce, frightening song: a woman described how she had killed her lover, reeling off the brutally graphic details with almost casual defiance, saying in effect, "I lost my temper and I blew it and I'm sorry now but it's too late so fuck it." Bessie had concentrated more intensity in that one song than Janis Joplin had achieved in her whole career. I played it over and over.

And now I had all these punk-rock records, by the Sex Pistols, the Clash, Slaughter and the Dogs, the Unwanted, Wire, the Adverts, Johnny Moped, Eater, X-Ray Spex, the Buzzcocks, Chelsea, the Rezillos. I liked them; they made most of what passed for rock these days sound not only genteel but out of focus. And I was knocked out by the Sex Pistols. How could I have denied that they had a distinctive sound? I knew I might react differently if I saw them live, or if I could hear more than about 1 percent of their lyrics, but for the moment—as had so often happened in the past—my conceptual reservations were overwhelmed by the immediate, angry force of the music. WE DON'T CARE!—but they cared about not caring.

Later I listened to my Ramones album and found that it moved me more than it had before. It seemed that the British had done it again—beamed my culture back at me in a way that gave it new resonances. The last time (when "swinging London" was prosperous and euphoric) they had done this by achieving an aesthetic distance—based on their detachment from America's racial history—that was also a kind of innocence. This time (when England was in deep economic and political trouble) they were doing it by ignoring—or more precisely smashing—the distance the American punk bands had taken uninnocent pains to achieve. It was not that groups like the Sex Pistols and the Clash had no irony of their own, that their punk persona was not a calculated creation. But the passion with which they acted out that persona reflected England's unambiguously awful situation; the Ramones were stuck with the American dilemma, which is that the system is bad enough to piss us off, and not bad enough so that we can make up our minds what to do about it.

Months before my capitulation to the Sex Pistols I was talking to an editor and we got on the subject of pop music. I said that I still felt involved with the increasingly distinct subgenre of contemporary rock and roll, but there wasn't that much of it around, and what there was was often disappointing. The editor asked what sort of music I was talking about. "Well, the bands that play CBGB's . . . Graham Parker . . . Springsteen . . ." "Patti Smith?" "Yes." The editor shook her head. "All these people," she said, "are still caught up in the past, in the myth of the sixties." "I disagree," I said, feeling a bit prickly because I'd had this argument before. "It's just that they *acknowledge* the sixties, instead of trying to pretend all that stuff never happened."

The argument bothered me. Talk about irony: the worst insult you could

throw at those of us who had been formed by the sixties was to imply that we were living in the past; not to be totally wired into the immediate moment meant getting old, which we hoped we would die before. The thing was, I really felt not guilty. In the past couple of years, especially, the sixties had seemed very distant to me. When I thought of the person I had been in 1967, or even 1970, she was almost as much of a stranger as my college-student self. I rarely played music that had been popular in the sixties; most of it lacked a certain dour edge that felt necessary in this crabbed decade. It was nevertheless true that many of my favorite records had been made by veterans of the sixties, just as it was true that I was still interested in my past, felt a continuing need to understand and absorb it. Was this need regressive?

I had once raised the question in a letter to Greil Marcus, and he had replied:

Well, we're caught in our own trap. We promoted and got across a myth of the '60s and now we're paying for it—having it thrown back on us as some sort of strange aberration that we all caught a disease from—i.e., it wasn't a real era, wherein real things happened, it was some giant anomaly. Well, it can seem like that, because so much of such intensity happened so fast. . . . more happened in rock and roll in six months of '65 than in all of the '70s. . . . More happened politically in 1968—in terms of stuff we will live with and think about all our lives with great emotion and puzzlement—than since. Etc.

That was part of the problem—too much had happened to assimilate all at once. Culturally and politically, the seventies had been at best dull, at worst grim, yet for me the retreat into work and introspection had its positive side; it was a chance to consolidate what I'd learned, live down some of the egregious silliness I'd been party to. How else was I to figure out where I was heading? Feminism, drugs, Vietnam, the flowering of pop culture had changed me. They were no longer “the sixties”; they were part of my luggage.

Yet what was finally most insidious about the whole “You're caught in the myth of the sixties” business was not its denial that the sixties were real—and therefore consequential—as well as mythical, but its use of *the sixties* as a dismissive label with which to quarantine certain ideas and attitudes. What, for instance, did it really mean to relegate Patti Smith or the Ramones to the sixties? True, seventies rock and roll had roots in the sixties, but then so did disco, which editors and other cultural arbiters agreed was quintessential seventies music: the original disco audience—middle-class blacks who retained a black cultural identity rather than imitating whites—had been created by the civil rights movement and black nationalism. The difference was that rock and roll, as a musical language, was always on some level about rebellion, freedom, and the expression of emotion, while disco was about cooling out as you move up, about stylizing and containing emotion.² I knew I was supposed to consider the

first set of concerns as outdated as the miniskirt. Yet owing to the parlous state of New York's economy, I was, for the first time ever, somewhat downwardly mobile; I aspired to have less control over my feelings, not more; liberation was still a potent idea for me, not because I was clinging to the utopian sixties but because I was still oppressed as a woman—and still angry about it—in the conservative seventies. In short, though I had nothing against disco, rock and roll had a lot more to do with my life. And I couldn't help suspecting that "You're still living in the sixties" was often nothing more than code for "You refuse to admit that what really matters to you is to stake out a comfortable position in the upper middle class." Well, not only did I refuse to admit that: I didn't even think it was true.

I was grappling with my uncensored thoughts, finding them no less scary and painful, the night I went to see Ms. Clawdy at the Women's Coffee House. Ms. Clawdy is a singer-songwriter from Oakland. In the early seventies she managed and wrote songs for an all-female rock-and-roll band called Eyes; later she sang with another women's band, Rosie and the Riveters; now she performs alone, accompanying herself on the piano. She has a local following, particularly though not exclusively in the San Francisco Bay Area's lesbian/feminist/alternative-women's-culture community, but she is unknown outside California. I've rooted for Ms. Clawdy for years, not only because she is good but because of what she is good at. Her music successfully combines two of my main passions: feminism and rock and roll. The Women's Coffee House gig was her first performance in New York, and to see it I had passed up Graham Parker at the Palladium.

For those of us who crave music by women who will break out of traditional molds, write and sing honestly about their (and our) experience, and create art so powerful that men and the society in general will have to come to terms with it whether they want to or not, the seventies have offered scant comfort. Though many women performers give me pleasure, few have touched those specifically feminist yearnings. There is the Joy of Cooking, whose music endures but whose lyrics seem dated and sentimental now; Joni Mitchell's *Blue*, ditto; some of Yoko Ono's stuff; great songs here and there like Helen Reddy's "Summer of '71," Carly Simon's "You're So Vain," Patti Smith's "Redondo Beach" . . . give me an hour and I'll think of a dozen more examples, but that only proves my point.

As a woman who has made a significant contribution to what I've called contemporary rock and roll, Patti Smith stands alone. Her best songs are as good as any in rock and roll, and she is capable of an electrifying live performance. But she is erratic; in concerts she has a habit of generating enormous energy, then diffusing it with rambling, pointless raps. I've always wondered if she were afraid of her considerable power. I'm also uncomfortable with her androgynous, one-of-the-guys image; its rebelliousness is seductive, but it plays into a kind of misogyny—endemic to bohemian circles and, no doubt, to the punk-rock

scene—that consents to distinguish a woman who acts like one of the guys (and is also sexy and conspicuously “liberated”) from the general run of stupid girls.

So Patti Smith may be a rock-and-roll hero, but she is not quite a feminist heroine. Ms. Clawdy, on the other hand . . . I watched her with an avidity that came from discovering someone who was distinctively herself yet fit my generic fantasy. Her style was at once functional and matter-of-factly sensual; her plump, womanly body was encased in red mechanic’s overalls. She was funny, ironic, passionate, self-deprecating without being masochistic, vulnerable without being pathetic, and political in the best sense—that is, willing to tell the truth about the conditions of her life. I enjoyed her funny songs—especially a discourse on compulsive eating called “Ice Cream Cone”—but I liked her best at her most serious. Of her newest songs the one that most compelled me was “The Dark Side,” which she introduced by noting that Chairman Mao had urged revolutionary artists to emphasize the bright side of life and that she hadn’t followed his advice. But my favorite was still her signature song, “Night Blindness.” Whenever she sang it I heard something new. This time, the lines that got to me were “We all need love, it’s worth any price you pay / That’s what my mother said, and she lives alone today.”

I had gone to the show with a woman friend, and afterward we were so high that we ran down the street, shouted, and hugged. Some weeks later, I had dinner with Ms. Clawdy, aka Ella Hirst, and we talked about the possibilities for an alternative women’s culture. I had once been attracted to the idea but had long since become convinced that it was unworkable and even reactionary. It was, I believed, inseparable both in theory and in practice from political ideas I had rejected: that sexual and cultural separatism were a solution to the oppression of women or an effective strategy for ending that oppression. For me feminism meant confronting men and male power and demanding that women be free to be themselves everywhere, not just in a voluntary ghetto. Separatists argued that a consistent feminist had to break all sexual and emotional ties with men, yet it seemed to me that not to need men for sex or love could as easily blunt one’s rage and pain and therefore one’s militance; I also had the feeling that there was a lot of denial floating around the separatist community—denial that breaking with men did not solve everything, that even between women love had its inescapable problems. I suspected that a culture based on separatist assumptions was unlikely to be angry enough, or truthful enough, to be revolutionary.

I had arrived at these conclusions not by thinking about the issue abstractly, but by trying to answer a specific question: why did I like so little of the women’s-culture music I had heard? The feminist music scene had two main tendencies. One was a women’s version of political folk music, which replicated all the virtues (simplicity, intimacy, community) and all the faults (sentimentality, insularity, heavy rhetoric) of the genre. Some of it was fun to listen to, but the idiom was too well worn to promise anything exciting or original. The other tendency actively turned me off: it was a slick, technically accomplished, rock-influenced

but basically conventional pop. I believed that this music could be a commercial success; supposedly the product of a dissident culture, it struck me as altogether compatible with the MOR blandness of most white pop music.

What disturbed me most about both brands of women's-culture music was that so much of it was so conventionally feminine. Years ago Ella Hirst had told me that she thought most female performers did not have a direct line to their emotions, the way men did—they were too busy trying to please. It seemed to me that too many of the women's-culture people had merely switched from trying to please men to trying to please other women.

A couple of years ago I had gone to see the feminist folk-rock group the Deadly Nightshade at a lesbian bar in Boston. They sang "Honky Tonk Women" with rewritten, nonsexist lyrics. Someone in the audience sent them an outraged note, attacking them for singing an antiwoman song. The lead singer read the note aloud and nervously and defensively complained that the writer hadn't been listening. The incident had helped me understand why I wasn't enthusiastic about the group. They did not have the confidence, or the arrogance, to say or feel "If you don't like it, tough shit." It was not that I thought performers should be indifferent to the response of their audience. I just thought that the question they ought to ask was not "How can I make them like me?" but "How can I make them hear me?"

Ella protested that I was harder on these women, who were at least trying to create an alternative system of values, than on traditional female performers. She had a point. Why did the Deadly Nightshade's wimpiness bother me more than Linda Ronstadt's sex-kitten routine? For the same reason, probably, that the radical left's offenses against women always incensed me more than everyone else's.

But rock and roll, as always, posed a more troublesome paradox. Listening to the Sex Pistols, trying to figure out if "Bodies" was really an antiabortion song, I discovered that it was something even worse. It was an outburst of loathing for human physicality, a loathing projected onto women because they have babies and abortions and are "a fucking bloody mess," but finally recoiling against the singer himself: "I'm not an animal!" he bellowed in useless protest, his own animal sounds giving him the lie. It was an outrageous song, yet I could not simply dismiss it with outrage. The extremity of its disgust forced me to admit that I was no stranger to such feelings—though unlike Johnny Rotten I recognized that the disgust, not the body, was the enemy. And there lay the paradox: music that boldly and aggressively laid out what the singer wanted, loved, hated—as good rock and roll did—challenged me to do the same, and so, even when the content was antiwoman, antisexual, in a sense antihuman, the form encouraged my struggle for liberation. Similarly, timid music made me feel timid, whatever its ostensible politics. What I loved most about Ms. Clawdy was that I could have liberating form and content both; I could respond as a whole person. Listening to most rock and roll was like walking down the street

at night, automatically checking out the men in my vicinity: this one's okay; that one could be trouble, watch out. Listening to most feminist music was like taking a warm bath. Ms. Clawdy did not make me wary—but that didn't mean she let me relax.

The other day, I was sitting on a bench in front of the laundromat on my corner. While I waited for my wash, I thought about the choice I still had to make. For some reason I happened to glance upward, and my eyes hit a stop sign. I laughed; if my life had to be a series of metaphors, I ought to pick some better ones. Like, say, the last verse of "Night Blindness": "I never thought that anyone would know me like you do. / If I let you make me happy you could make me unhappy too. / I told my friend, she said she knows just how I feel / But I have to take a chance and find out if it's real."

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NOTES

1. A candidate for mayor of New York in 1997.

2. While this is all true as far as it goes, it is a bit beside the point. Despite its base in minority subcultures (black and gay), disco is a mass cultural phenomenon and so inevitably embodies the spirit of the times in a more immediate and central way than rock and roll, which has become a somewhat abstracted comment on itself and (like jazz in the fifties) an essentially bohemian taste. In any case, seventies rock and roll is obsessed with its formal tradition, a concern that links it to the past in a special way. Finally, there are distinctions to be made: Bruce Springsteen is far more tied into the sixties than the punk and new wave bands. (For elucidation of these last two points, see my essay from *Stranded* on the Velvet Underground.)