

## PUNK PIONEERS: CHICANA ALICE BAG AS A CASE IN POINT

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This study aims to present Chicana punk musician Alice Bag as one of the main female figures who exerted a great influence on the early punk scene of Los Angeles, California, and thus helped to pave the way for a wider influx of female musicians within punk and to put some feminist issues at the forefront. By doing so, we will try to broaden the social and cultural understanding of punk music. Both Bag's autobiography *Violence Girl, From East L.A. Rage to Hollywood Stage* (2011) and her last LP, self-titled *Alice Bag* (2016), cover relevant issues related to Chicana women's condition, thus turning punk into a powerful platform to articulate feminist and ethnic concepts.

KEY WORDS: Alice Bag, Chicano, punk, feminism.

### **Pioneras del punk: el caso de Alice Bag**

El objetivo de este trabajo es presentar a la música chicana Alice Bag como una de las figuras influyentes en la temprana escena punk de Los Ángeles, California, quien ayudó a abrir el camino a una afluencia mayor de mujeres en la música punk, poniendo así algunos temas feministas en primera línea. De este modo, trataremos de ampliar el ámbito de estudio del punk. Tanto su autobiografía *Violence Girl, From East L.A. Rage to Hollywood Stage* (2011) y su casi recién estrenado LP *Alice Bag* (2016) abarcan temas relacionados con la condición de las mujeres chicanas, convirtiendo al punk en una poderosa plataforma de la que se ayuda para articular conceptos feministas y étnicos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Alice Bag, chicano, punk, feminismo.

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From where I stand, punk is about challenging the status quo,  
not reinforcing it. I don't want to knock the contributions  
of white males, I just want to see parity.  
—ALICE BAG (2014)

The notion that punk music is a masculinized category where gender roles come pre-packaged and always already intensely distinct can be considered up for

debate. The number of women getting involved in the production, creation and diffusion of punk music, whether as singers, songwriters, instrumentalists or sound assistants is significant enough to affirm that women have played—and still play—an important role in punk music. However, it could be maintained that when punk music began to get some recognition in academia it was still understood as a predominantly male genre—individual men and all-male bands were the main object of research for the first scholarly revisions of punk music.

Women have been historically excluded from artistic canons and, as a result, they do not enjoy a tradition informed by other female models and acknowledged by mainstream culture. In punk music that has also been the trend. Female musicians, in general, do not have a proper historical background to identify themselves with singer-songwriters or instrumentalists that came before them. Yet, as Susan McClary states, “over the course of the 1990s, feminist scholars... have transformed radically the goals, methods, and subject matter of the academic discipline of musicology—a field hitherto devoted to upholding the all-male canon of European art music” (2000: 1283). The same can be said specifically for punk music. In general, women’s absence in music history gives us clues about the place to which women have been relegated, both in the music world and in relation to their political and/or social position within society. However, there were always women creating, and there were always women in punk music. There was and there is a female side to this music style that has been traditionally portrayed as male.

In her book *The Lost Women of Rock Music: Female Musicians of the Punk Era*, Helen Reddington, for instance, not only provides an efficient survey of all those women who were somehow erased from the history of punk music, but she also explains quite well how punk cannot be framed by the narrow span of those two years in which London and the Sex Pistols took over the label of “punk” forever. On the contrary, punk is still very much a lively culture that enjoys multiple and diverse renditions. Reddington, thus, shows how punk was—and still is—complex enough to accommodate many and disparate histories: “I contend that punk, by its anarchic nature, existed in many forms long before and long after this; it existed and continues to exist as a self-definition by certain people regardless of location” (2012: 1). In this context, Alice Bag’s music, along with her autobiographical writing, challenge narrow and fixed definitions of both punk music and the standardly gendered demarcation of roles in the arts. Bag confronts ethnic standards as well, exerting a strong emphasis on gender difference. Thus, her contribution to punk music displays a significant commitment to political and social discourses, calling into question ethnic models and paying special attention to gender inequality. Punk becomes much more when analyzing her writing and her music in combination and from a broad angle.

The so-called Riot Grrrl movement started in Olympia, Washington, United States of America, in the early 1990s. It was characterized by the presence of

women involved in the production and performance of music, sharing a strong feeling of collaboration and bonding:

Tired, also, of encountering situations where their participation was limited by male contemporaries jostling for attention and undermining female expression by casting women in the role of follower and followed, the ideal of female collaboration and a stated desire to function as a community of women united against male oppression in all areas attracted hundreds of girls on the punk scene who no longer tolerated this shortchange (Corrigan, 2007: 150).

Riot Grrrl was also characterized by the strong feminist and political undertones of this otherwise musical movement. As Beth Ditto explains, “Riot grrrl was by far one of the most undeniably effective feminist movements, turning academia into an accessible down-to-earth language, making feminism a trend for the first time in history” (2007: 8). Both the music and the lyrics written by the many bands that were labeled with this tag (and the important fanzine-writing covering that accompanied the scene) were charged with a strong political and feminist drive.

Riot Grrrl cannot be understood without being read in connection to punk music. It was years after the peak of this underground movement, when scholars and writers looked back to provide a narrative of its history in the 1990s, that, by extension, other female punks in the United Kingdom and the United States of America started to be richly documented. Still, these studies have been mainly focused on the American and British scenes, leaving out a more complex understanding of punk music that was and still is a transcultural phenomenon. Other (individual) scenes were also relevant even if they still lacked a solid record to position them at the same level that the more visible and commercially successful scenes in London and New York. And that narrow vision did also skip other portrayals of punk that could illustrate how diverse the movement was in terms of gender or ethnicity. Not surprisingly, women’s contributions to those other punk music scenes were not registered.

Even though punk music has been usually distinguished by its revisionist and alternative spirit, some scholars, critics and active punks have argued that, in fact, punk has been mostly marked and represented by male and (mainly) Anglo protagonists, making it extremely difficult to set up a powerful role-model for those non-Anglo women who were getting involved in the scene. As a matter of fact, Fiona I.B. Ngô and Elizabeth A. Stinson vindicate the use of the term “punk anteriors” in the process of “excavating and capturing punk’s blowback and debris, including past and present critical race and feminist artefacts and performances so often left unaddressed, despite their centrality to the making of punk, its politics, its scenes, and its forms of resistance” (2012: 165). In this sense, and as a result of the small and still growing body of scholarship which examines the

topic, the task for academic studies is still to take “minor” female voices into consideration when analyzing the history, roots and traces of punk music. Thus, this study responds to this call and focuses on one of those examples. In this study, as pointed out before, we place Alice Bag in the early L.A. punk scene to explore cultural and gender divisions during the 1970s. As we have already underlined, Bag’s contribution, along the same lines that Gaye Theresa Johnson describes in her work on music, race and spatial entitlement in Los Angeles, offers a rich and fresh perspective both for feminist studies and for punk studies:

The narratives offered by Black and Chicano punk musicians and audiences transform the historiography of punk, offering a unique optic through which to understand alternative modes of self-representation and cultural expression. They provide us with alternative understandings of social and discursive space and reveal the sources of collective power that have generated new racial, sexual, and gender identities among marginalized youth. (Johnson, 2013: 127)

The beginnings of punk music in Los Angeles disclose a complex assortment of urban spaces and individual scenes that were affected by different economic, political and social circumstances. For the sake of brevity, we could encapsulate that diversity by focusing on two different punk scenes emerging in Los Angeles during the 1970s. Of those two scenes, the bands in the East side of the city condensed the highest presence of Mexican-American members in their line-ups, even if those musicians showed a wide range of different levels of awareness of their ethnic heritage. However, as Richard C. Davila states, we may get the idea that Chicano/a (and Latino/a) contributions were more perceptible and patent in East L.A., but “a closer examination of the historical record, however, reveals that Chicana/o and Latina/o participation in punk stretches back further, continues much longer, and is generally much wider than such accounts allow” (Davila, 2016: 52). Also, there are still contradictory and complex versions regarding the scene divisions in L.A. Some of the bands coming from East L.A. claimed that there were certain racial prejudices in the scene during the decade. Racism issues in the early L.A. punk scene are even today subject to fervent discussion. In fact, some say that the alternative club The Vex opened in the Eastside to take in minorities and bands that had been shut out from Hollywood scenes, thus enabling a crossover between bands from the West and East sides (Davila, 2016: 1). It is also true that members of The Brat, The Stains or Thee Undertakers reported experiencing difficulties getting gigs in West L.A., an area with several popular venues, including The Masque (Davila, 2016: 51). For instance, Teresa Covarrubias, Bag’s contemporary and lead-singer in The Brat, evokes that period of time with the following memories:

We started playing a lot of gigs on the East Side. And I remember it was really almost impossible for us to get any shows on the West Side... And I don't want to say that it was racist or anything but it might just be like... every scene has a clique. You know, there becomes like these cliques of people and they only kin-, I mean they see each others' shows. And I guess within the East L.A. scene, too, it was like a clique of bands from the East Side ... It was kind of sad, you know, like it had to, we had to get our foot in through somebody that was already, you know, a part of that scene. So it had already closed up to that point that unless you knew somebody that could get you in... people didn't really want to know. (Covarrubias, 2017)

When asked, Alicia Armendariz, a.k.a. Alice Bag, denies experiencing any racial prejudices and she disputes the belief that there was any kind of contention between the scenes. Bag, in fact, highlights the egalitarian nature of the early scene in which she played an important role (1976-1979). In other words, she suggests that she herself did not experience racism for being Chicana or gender bias for being a woman. However, she acknowledges that other women may have experienced it:

Some of the punk bands that came along a little later felt that they were being discriminated against on the basis of race and somehow that got blamed on the Hollywood scene. Most of the people I know who were playing at the Vex didn't have those racist experiences, but some people did and I don't want to negate or make light of their experiences... So, I'd say that the rivalry is a myth, but allegations of racism in punk at large are possible. (Bag, 2014: n.p.)

Born in East Los Angeles, Bag is the daughter of Mexican immigrants. A punk-rock singer, musician and activist, she is also the author of two books, *Violence Girl, From East L.A. Rage to Hollywood Stage* (2011) and *Pipe Bomb for the Soul* (2015). In the second one, Bag narrates her teaching experiences in post-revolutionary Nicaragua.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, she is best known for being the lead-singer of The Bags, one of the pioneer punk bands in L.A., becoming one of the most relevant figures in the first-wave punk scene of the 1970s. Owning a reputation after being a member in bands such as Masque Era, Castration Squad and Cholita, Bag played an active role in that initiatory wave of punk in California.

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<sup>1</sup> That is why, in this study, we will focus on *Violence Girl, From East L.A. Rage to Hollywood Stage* (2011). Our aim is to provide a significant examination of Alice Bag as a musician and a writer, and to compare her writing and her lyrics. That is why we skip this second memoir and focus only on her first published memoir.

Her performances on stage contributed to the visibility of women and Chicano culture.

Bag is still active today. Her solo debut album *Alice Bag* (2016) has been positively welcomed, mainly for her overt depiction of Chicano identity and her discourse on racial and feminist issues. Quinn Moreland, writing for *Pitchfork*, for example, reviewed the album in the following terms: “Alice Bag feels like effortless self-expression that simply needed an outlet. Alice Bag promises to introduce its namesake’s work to a new generation of radicals, and luckily, her words are a revolutionary rally cry” (Moreland, 2016: n.p.). Again, in 2016, Moreland focuses on the ideological or political charge of Bag’s music. Even if, in his review for *Pitchfork*, he affirms that “sonically, Alice Bag is as diverse as her aforementioned musical interest” (Moreland, 2016: n.p.), what pervades and surfaces in his review is a conventional reference to Bag’s past and her relevance in a specific moment and time. Performing an active role as a (song)writer in the literary and musical fields, Bag foregrounds Chicana and female identity, contributing in such a way to broaden the U.S. punk scene and to illustrate the multiethnic character and diverse image of the punk scene in L.A.

Published in 2011, *Violence Girl, From East LA Rage to Hollywood Stage* is a memoir whose structure is made up by short stories in which Bag explores, among other topics, her willingness to become a punk artist at a time when gender was not such a powerful bias. Bag’s autobiography is an anthem to punk rock music. In the book, she attempts to show her first-hand experiences and observations on the early punk scene in East L.A. Not being a professional writer and not possessing an ambitious and all-encompassing motivation, Bag focuses on her development as a musician and the different and prominent stages that shaped her identity, rather than conveying a thorough perspective on the whole context and period. She speaks of her role as a vocal leader but also as an independent and powerful woman.

In a colloquial and direct linguistic style, she explicitly explores some of the most shocking passages —domestic violence, drug dealing or self-harm— that shadowed her childhood and that turned her pain into personal empowerment. The effects of these conditions can be easily perceived in her peculiar style of singing and in her performances but also in her peculiar musical style, a blending of different traditions with a dash of contemporary booster. Francisco A. Lomelí, in his work *Artes y letras chicanas en la actualidad: Más allá del barrio y las fronteras*, argues that Chicanos have maintained their traditions but that they have incorporated new influences as well: “en cuanto a lo musical, los chicanos han mantenido una férrea tradición única al conservar ciertos ritmos y gustos propios de sus antepasados mexicanos a la vez que han asimilado influencias instrumentales” (Lomelí, 1996: 14). Lomelí underlines how chicanos have constantly merged an inclination for traditional rhythms with newer patterns in music taste. He highlights precisely what seems to be Bag’s own personal under-

standing of music. Her Mexican roots had a real impact on her vocal style, which is influenced by the “canciones rancheras”, giving to her performances on stage a novel twist.<sup>2</sup> The use of this genre is not whimsical. Ranchera music is a style with a long and substantial musical tradition in Mexico. It has acted as a channel of cultural perpetuation and it was used as a popular tool to enact folk wisdom and to artistically deploy the depiction of ordinary lives:

La canción ranchera (“ranchera” song) is one of the most powerful musics of our time, with a following deeply rooted in the songs’ poetic imagery and musical expression. Families and communities transmit the musical refrains, sentiments, melodies (and life stories associated with various songs) across multiple generations and across the geographies of long migrations criss-crossing the Americas... (Broyles-González 2006: 352)

Bag finds here a perfect space for her music. For instance, she will use Cuco Sanchez’s ranchera “No soy monedita de oro” or the classic ranchera “Cuando el destino” by Jose Alfredo Jiménez for live performances. In this way, she is able to create a new punk subgenre (punkchera) in which she mixes the standard ranchera rhythms and the generic punk conventions: “By taking *estilo bravío* out of the mariachi ensemble and placing it within a punk ensemble, Alice both punkified *estilo bravío*, and *estilo bravío*-fied punk, creating a brand-new subgenre of punk” (Habell-Pallán, 2012: 258). As a matter of fact, in her autobiography, we find many different musical references in which she focuses on her performances to unconsciously disclose her particular style and her personal way of making music: “Seeing and hearing the performances of such greats as Lucha Vialla, Pedro Infante and José Alfredo Jiménez almost certainly influenced my own peculiarly emotive style of singing” (Bag, 2011: 42). All these artists that she straightforwardly mentions in her book show how she was influenced by the musical genres of ranchera and corrido. In fact, we could more strongly affirm that she consciously rejected the narrow limits of genre conventions. Her repudiation of “dualistic resolutions” takes her to defy institutionalized genre constructs:

During a recent lecture, Alice recounted that it wasn’t until she started rehearsing for a show for the opening of the Vexing exhibit that she

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<sup>2</sup> In “Ranchera Music: A Mexican National Symbol”, Katherine Andrews explains how *ranchera* is “a style of music that grew out of the Mexican revolution” and how it “highlights the beauty and simplicity of Mexican life for all citizens” (2017: n.p.). As she explains, this music style has always been linked to Mexico and to essential patriotic feelings: “Ranchera music developed and gained popularity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century due to its relatability in speaking to the patriotism and passion felt by many Mexicans” (Andrews, 2017: n.p.).

made the visceral connection between punk and ranchera in stage performance. This prompted a decision to fuse these two genres that she loved, one she helped to create and one she grew up with in her immigrant parents' home, into a new genre called punk-chera in which she performed traditional Mexican rancheras in a raw and aggressive way. (Habell-Pallán, 2012: 259)

But, without any doubt, what characterized her music in a stronger manner was her performing style, her aggressive and powerful attitude on stage, which, to a certain extent, opened the way to hardcore music, a new version or style of punk music that won popularity in California during the second half of the twentieth century. Hardcore, in fact, as Steven Blush explains in *American Hardcore: A Tribal History*, was something other than just a musical style: "Hardcore was more than music—it became a political and social movement as well. The participants constituted a tribe unto themselves" (Blush, 2010: 9). In the same way, Bag's involvement in music does also go beyond music itself to become a personal and spiritual choice, bringing forward overtones of ideological and social transcendence. As she mentions in her autobiography, her performances were not "ladylike" and that led to comments on her attitude on stage: "I was often accused of being too masculine in my performances. It wasn't that I was too sexual; rather it was that I was too aggressive, too violent, too in your face for a girl" (Bag, 2011: 221).

The punk scene in the late 1970s and 1980s was characterized by its underlying proclivity towards innovation, transgression and deviation. Punks valued innovative expression more than instrumental or vocal skills. Sonically, punk was characterized by the use of fast and aggressive rhythms: short songs that evoked immediacy and urgency, usually based on a simple combination of chords. In what regards the lyrics, these were usually understood as a potential opportunity to target political issues and social conscience. If this was punk in general, the specifics, in this case, fit with the pervasive connotations: Bag's lyrics disclose her commitment to different social issues. Plus, the musical arrangement in her songs would follow the standard pattern of composition for a punk song, even if she then would take a detour towards a more personal execution. The uniqueness of her songs, however, comes from a personal source: her personal life and her intimate experiences exerted a very important influence on her writing and on her performing style. Her autobiography, apart from sharing the same language and attitude with which she built her performative style, develops, this time in narrative form, the topics that she would also use to write her lyrics. Both her memoir and her latest album (*Alice Bag*, edited by Don Giovanni Records in 2016) are artistic expressions covering topics such as domestic violence, the Chicano Movement, sexual abuse or the process of acculturation into white American society. Still, Bag declares that when she started playing gigs and making music she felt no need to display her ethnicity or sexual tendencies as people only



viewed her as a punk: “In those days, I didn’t think of myself as a female, Chicana, bisexual musician because within the punk scene I felt like we all just interacted as creative individuals. It was only on the outside that those things could make you the subject of stereotypes or discrimination” (Bag, 2014: n.p.).

Within all these tangled issues that complicated her own concept of self and her music production, there is a revealing note of significance. In this study, in order to keep the coherence of our text, we will only cover two of the many topics that Bag develops and combines in her lyrics and in her autobiography. Specifically, we will analyze her depiction of the acculturation process and her portrayal of domestic violence, but we could have focused on other topics that she covered both in the lyrics and in her book and that illustrate how she contributed to complicate the standards of punk music. We chose these two for their strong connection to her identity-building through lyrics-writing.

These two topics can be seen in many of her songs. For instance, in songs such as “Programmed” (Bag, 2016) the audience is exposed to the emotional dissection of formative acculturation.<sup>3</sup> According to her own words, Chicano people are still fighting a never-ending struggle that started long ago, and that she herself has suffered since childhood. Speaking in first person and preceded by a strong drum beat and guitar riff, Bag’s voice in “Programmed” straightforwardly screams words that testify to her own memories of tough days at school, when her English language acquisition was “slow and painful” (Bag, 2011: 39). She describes being treated like an idiot or how she had to obediently learn by heart the teacher’s words. A close reading of the lyrics reveals how she locates herself in a physical and emotional space in which she becomes a container, a pan to be “filled” with American history and American values. Not only in the song’s title but all through the song, she describes herself as a passive subject that was the object of a cultural and formative programming, whereas her own perspective (on culture and identity) was forcibly put aside:

Drifting back to my days at school  
where I was treated like a fool

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<sup>3</sup> Another example that could be provided to illustrate this topic is older and it comes from the Demo version for the Chicano Moratorium “White Justice”, released on 3 October 2016. It commemorates the organized Mexican-American opposition to the Vietnam War (August 1970). Addressing a second person, Bag denounces the alleged colorblindness of white people within a parody that she defines as “white justice”: This march feels like a parade / My neighbor and her children came / No one could stay away / [...] / Oh no, storm troopers in uniform / Are swinging their batons / Black clubs / Blue collars / Blood red / Silver dollars / You say justice is colorblind / But I know you’re lying / I know you’re lying / White justice / Doesn’t work for me / White justice / Is a travesty / [...] / I still choke when I stop to think / Our struggle then was here at home / And it’s still going on. (Bag, “White Justice”, 2016)

I memorized what the teacher said  
 No one ever asked what was in my head

I learned to color in the lines  
 I learned to spit back all the lies  
 Their values and their history  
 were deposited in me

We're on an ocean and the boat is sinking  
 No knowledge without critical thinking

Education be damned we are being programmed!  
 [...]
   
 I shine a light that's not reflected  
 'cause I have got my own perspective

Fuck your Scantron tests and drills!  
 I'm not a vessel to be filled!  
 (Alice Bag, "Programmed", 2016)

The strong rhyming pattern and the solid drumming scheme of the song strengthen the resolute quality of the lyrics. The same tone and angle can be found in her personal writing. In her book, she also compares herself with a product, an objectivized prospect. A test on the English immersion system in California dazed her language development and, according to her own speech, "it was the first-generation Americans, like myself, or the recent immigrants — anyone struggling to understand the lessons— who bore the brunt of Miss Gibbons's ethnocentrism. She treated us like idiots, talked down to us and gave us easy work, as though our lack of English fluency implied we were mentally deficient" (Bag, 2011: 38).

In any case, years later, and after succeeding in her venture through the educational system, Bag enjoyed the opportunity to teach in Nicaragua, an experience that helped her understand how fortunate she was for having grown up in East L.A. (Bag, 2011: 371). Today, she teaches at Chicas Rockeras SELA,<sup>4</sup> giving back to her community and "re-programming" education in order to, in a way, turn her musical message into practical punk pedagogy. It is also in this sense

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<sup>4</sup> "Chicas Rockeras promotes healing, growth, and confidence for girls through music education while building self-esteem and encouraging group collaboration" ("Chicas Rockeras SELA").

that music in general, and punk in particular, is strongly linked to her personal life and her activism. Using music as a powerful instrument and lyrics as a strong statement, she vindicates changes in different political aspects.

As we mentioned before, there are other themes that she develops in both her lyrics and her narrative mode. A second example that we want to explore here concerns the intimate domain of couples. Domestic violence, groping, sexual harassment, rape... all became a usual concern in the American society of the twentieth century (as well as within third-wave feminism) and all of them play a very important role in the ideological angst and critical depth found in the works by Alice Bag. Domestic violence was a tragic experience that marked her life and consequently it is one of the most vivid parts in her memoir, in which the reader finds several explicit scenes. For example, Bag narrates a time when her mother was in a neighbor's yard asking for help while her father grabbed her hair and dragged her down the street (2011: 32): "I felt completely powerless to stop him from killing her, and I prayed to God that someone would help me" (2011: 33).

Likewise, this topic has a strong presence in her lyrics. When performing, the stage becomes a public platform that Bag employs to provide her own engaged reaction to that personal experience, encouraging other victims—or groups of victims—to be proactive and courageous, leaving abusive partners behind. In her song "He's So Sorry" (Bag, 2016), for instance, Bag talks about agency and the necessity to stand and fight back. She tries to provide the audience with illustrative examples, suggesting a moral position in which she advocates for refusal and strength; in other words, she says that despite being asked to forgive, one should stay no longer by an abuser's side:

Bam, came the punch to the eye  
 You provoke him he says  
 Don't you know how he gets?

Thud, when your head hits the wall  
 Oh no, you're starting to fall  
 [...]

He won't do it no more  
 You really want to believe him cause he's sorry (he's so sorry)  
 [...]

Crack, boots and your ribs collide  
 Hush, quietly bleeding inside  
 As you fade from the scene  
 You hear the sirens scream  
 [...]

How many times do you touch a hot stove to see if the flame  
will burn?  
[...]  
How many times will he beat you senseless, oh baby when will  
you learn?  
[...]  
Just because he's sorry doesn't mean he's gonna change  
Just because you love him doesn't mean you've gotta stay.  
(Bag, "He's So Sorry", 2016)

The use of direct addressing in the song opens up possibilities for interpretation but, as Bag herself has asserted, it was a violent situation that a friend of hers was experiencing that inspired her to write the song (Tully, 2016: n.p.). The song is built upon the contrastive force of the sweet melodic fabric and the harsh and unfeigned content of the lyrics. The vocal harmonies are slow and gentle, reaching into the standards of soul music, finding strength on the supporting chorus, and thus contrasting with the powerful diction and straightforward imagery of the lyrics.

Bag has been involved in the fight against these practices and she has used her lyrics as a way to transmit her feminist ideas. Bag's messages, thanks to her songs, have reached girls of all ages who may identify with the words preached in those songs. Undoubtedly, she became one of the most famous female figures to exemplify the rejection of patriarchal attitudes that segregate and damage women socially, physically and emotionally.

This solidly feminist attitude is evident throughout the book. Bag describes in an explicit way the vulnerability and helplessness that she felt when she witnessed her father being so abusive to her mother. All these experiences taught her that women have to fight for empowerment in all aspects of life and to refuse to be victims of a system that oppresses them. Certainly, she devoted her life to punk music and this, in exchange, became a way of escape and a source of empowerment to release all the rage that she could not free in any other way: "Music always seemed to be there, lighting a path for me, helping me get beyond the limitations of my left-brain thinking. It was a source of power for me and a way to express the ineffable, even before I knew I had anything to say" (Bag, 2011: 380). Indeed, her agenda or underlying goal for writing the book was, as she mentions in the following extract of an interview, a "therapeutic issue":

So I started blogging [...] I also realized that I had a lot of issues that were right under the surface that I hadn't really... I thought they got away, but as soon as I started, with the memories starting coming back I

felt like I needed to deal with this, I needed a way to challenge this, so the book was somewhat therapeutic for me. (De Fen, 2011: n.p.)<sup>5</sup>

It was after she started blogging and publishing posts related to her life that Bag realized that a lot of people were interested in what she had to say. She decided then to write a memoir. Among other reasons, she wanted to leave physical proof of her memories in the form of words and with additional documentation, helping her to overcome her past and enjoy the lessons that her many experiences had provided her with. Actually, Bag straightforwardly acknowledges having limited skills for music, which did not discourage her from playing gigs, so when she is asked about her aptitude as a writer she extrapolates the punk commandment that claims “Thou Shalt Not Need To Know How To Play Before Starting a Band” (Bag, 2011: 336):

A lot of times I say I’m not a writer because I don’t think of myself that way [...] I don’t have to be the best musician to get up there and sing or play the guitar or play bass or whatever it is I’m playing. I always felt like I don’t have to master that particular instrument to make it say what I wanted to say, and it is the same with writing [...] I know that a lot of young kids have the same problem, they feel like they can’t write or they won’t post because it doesn’t meet certain standards, so one of the reasons I say I’m not a writer is because I want people to know that they don’t have to be writers to write and you don’t have to be a musician to play. (De Fen, 2011: n.p.)

In her work, she discloses the beginnings of a new generation of feminists. In spite of lacking a strong literary and musical formation, this generation challenged social norms by conceiving a feminist creative outlet based on the punk ethos of D.I.Y. (Do It Yourself!). Challenging ethnic standards and exerting a strong emphasis on gender difference, Alice Bag’s contribution to punk music should be accompanied by a global recognition of her performative style, her committed content and her complex political and social discourse. Indeed, the absence of women in music history reveals how they have been secluded in a narrow and limiting space, both in the music industry and in relation to the position that they have been forced to keep in society. Their unquestionable participation in punk mirrors a claim of belonging also within those discourses, and within this framework.

For some critics and scholars, it would seem accurate to say that the presence of Chicanas —and Chicanos for that matter— in the punk scene was subtle and

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<sup>5</sup> This bibliographic reference comes from an audiovisual product: an interview made to Bag on 27 November 2011 at Dr. Strange Records, in one of the many events that she attended to promote her autobiography.

minor. We believe that their presence has been undeniable and influential. Probably not so visible but still worth noticing. There is a need to consider the impact of these minor female voices in punk's history. With the inclusion of minor voices into the generally accepted definition of punk, music opens itself up to more complex and interesting approaches. Diverse perspectives provide an understanding of punk music that goes beyond the standards of British and American popular music, bringing a new and rich perspective onto punk analysis and, at the same time, complicating traditional approaches to Chicano culture.

The attention being paid to the presence of Chicanas in punk music is gradually increasing. Exhibitions and all-female festivals—which usually include talks or panels on the topic—have been recently organized and they illustrate the growing interest that academia has shown in punk, women and music, or more specifically, Chicana women and/or punk. On 17 May 2008, an exhibition named *Vexing: Female Voices from East L.A. Punk*, coordinated by Colin Gunckel and Pilar Tompkins, opened at the Claremont Museum of Art in Claremont, California, with the aim to investigate and make visible women artists and musicians in the history of the punk scene of East L.A.<sup>6</sup> Also, on 27 January 2017, the second edition of a women-led music festival entitled GIRLSCHOOL took place in L.A., connecting women artists from different backgrounds.<sup>7</sup> Also, there are many different events being publicized on the internet, such as the Xicana Punx Night. Some of these events have organized fundraisings for the globally celebrated Ladyfest.

Punk is global. Some of the racially-inclusive bands mentioned in this study (The Brat or Thee Undertakers) testify to this. Minorities do reveal how punk is complex, flexible and, again, global. Punk is a multicultural phenomenon, and it has been so since its early years, benefiting from different individuals, being shaped in different contexts and absorbing concurrent scenes. In Golnar Nikpour's words, "*as early as the late-'70s, there were fertile punk scenes in any number of major global cities [...]. From NYC to London to Warsaw to Tokyo to São Paulo to Istanbul (yes, the first Turkish punk record is from 1977/8!) to Stockholm to Manila, punk as a phenomenon was global from its inception*" (2012: n.p., emphasis in the original).

With no doubt, Chicana punk performer, writer, activist and musician Alice Bag contributed to the visibility of women and Chicano culture through her

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<sup>6</sup> More information can be found at the museum website

<<http://claremontmuseum.org/vexing-female-voice-from-east-la-punk-exhibition/>>.

<sup>7</sup> "Originally founded by Anna Buldbrook (The Bulls, the Airbone Toxic Event, Edward Sharpe & the Magnetic Zeros) in response to how few women she saw onstage in the alternative rock world, GIRLSCHOOL has grown into a vibrant volunteer network of women in music who connect to create an empowering community for one another while supporting women and girls" ("Girlschool, About").

performances on stage. Her work brings forward an opportunity to explore how women played an active role in the cultural and social movement of the 1970s and 1980s that we call punk, especially since they are usually neglected and omitted. Additionally, it also brings up ethnic overtones. Bag, with her musical example, vindicates the relevance of minor groups and their contribution to the growing influence and success of the punk and hardcore scenes in Los Angeles. Music, in the United States, is a matter of cultural mix and constant conversation.

Thanks to her first-hand experiences and how these were translated into songs that became striking performances, Bag offers a rich and unpracticed angle to the understanding of popular culture, feminism and music. In her autobiography, she explores those experiences, songs and performances to elaborate on a new approach to her own work and contribution and thus puts forward an approximation to how punk rock music became a significant cultural movement for generations. Bag helped to pave the way for a growing number of female musicians within punk, putting women's issues and empowering messages on the forefront. Her roots had an impact on her distinctive vocal style and her music became a source of power. Within the ideological and spiritual freedom advocated by punk philosophy, she found a perfect platform to release her feelings without rules or limitations. A sense of freedom overwhelmed her punk spirit, a spirit that some people may catalogue as "too violent for a girl".

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