

The Stepney Sisters

I kept a detailed daily diary during the time when I played in the Stepney Sisters, on which I have based this history of the band. Of course, this is my own personal account and my perceptions at the time were inevitably coloured by my own experiences.....

We called ourselves the 'Stepney Sisters' because the band had been born in Stepney. But the naming happened several months after the birth – which was marked by a late night conversation, just before Christmas 1974, between Caroline, Benni (Marion) and myself. This took place in the Stepney squat where fate had thrown us together after we had all migrated to London after leaving York University. Caroline said she thought that a women's band was not only possible, but should be a definite project for the New Year. Benni and I, perhaps more tentatively, agreed.

So it was that on 5th January 1975 we met for our first rehearsal: Caroline singing, Benni on bass, me on guitar and Sharon (Shaz) – another ex-York Stepney squatter – playing piano. My reflections after the rehearsal were: *'Reasonably productive, but I shall have to learn bar chords and electric style....'*

We had a few songs between us, which formed the basis of a very short set. This was just as well, because even before the inaugural rehearsal we had been half-promised three gigs at the Women's Arts Alliance open week. We had a connection through Benni, who had been constructing a musical sculpture there from various pieces of furniture and kitchen equipment; women at the exhibition would be invited to 'play the instruments of their oppression'. One week before D-day we got to hear about Susy, sent a deputation round to visit her and persuaded her to drum for us – and to lend us some band equipment to which she had access.

To our own amazement, we acquitted ourselves quite well at the first gig, which took place on St Valentine's Day, 1975. We played under the name 'Girl Guides' to a somewhat bemused group of women and men (the Arts Alliance allowed mixed audiences in those days). Let us be honest, the main reason why we made an impression was because of the band's novelty rather than its musical skills. The second gig was more fraught – my borrowed electric guitar was stolen and panic ensued, a replacement arriving only minutes before we were due to go on stage.

After these gigs, Ruthie – who was squatting with Benni, Caroline and myself – said she was interested in joining the band. Along with Benni and Caroline, she had sung in a soul trio in York fronting a soul band, Expensive – which was still getting the odd gig in London. The possibility of more vocal harmonies excited us and so Ruthie was welcomed into the band – to sing and play 'interesting percussion'.

We had come together with very different musical experiences. Susy had previously drummed with several rock bands. Benni, Shaz and Ruthie all had

degrees in music and were classically trained, as was Caroline. I had taught myself acoustic guitar and done some singing. None of us had played electric instruments before, apart from Benni who at the age of 14 had been the bassist in a band. We had to learn as we went along, pooling this hotch-potch of musical experience and learning from each other as best we could.

The next gig was due to have been a benefit for the local squatters' union, but that was called off at the last moment because the treasurer ran off with all the money. So we next came to play towards the end of March, now under the name 'Medium Wave Band', at a benefit for the Tolmers Square squatters, in a line-up with Expensive and one other band. This was an eventful gig. We counted in one of our numbers at double speed and tied it off in around 45 seconds. A PA speaker fell on top of my second borrowed guitar and broke it. The sound quality was atrocious and we began to realize that if you want to be sure of your sound, you have to buy and control your own gear.

All through this period, our personal lives were in a greater or lesser state of chaos. At the squat where most of us lived together, we had been served with eviction notices. The household had split up, some moving on to a different house where more squatting mishaps were to befall us, others taking refuge in a rented flat. There was more than one pregnancy. Between us and for a range of reasons, we were experiencing a lot of emotional fragility; for my part, I struggled with the dynamics of the band, often feeling peripheral and insecure. But we had all begun to be quite profoundly affected by the women's movement, which was then blossoming in London. We began to realize how crucial was the support that we could offer each other in the band. We did a lot of talking at rehearsals, sometimes more talking than playing, often specifically debating the band itself – where it was going, what music we played, whom we played to. Sometimes difficult and painful, these discussions established themselves as part of the rehearsals and in some respects we became as much a consciousness-raising group as we were a band. And dungarees began to feature in our stage wear!

April 1975 was a watershed. We were invited to play at the Manchester women's liberation conference and began to appreciate that we were in a particular position as one of very few women's bands in the country. It seemed like quite a responsibility. Over-sentimental lyrics in some of our songs were hastily revised on the journey up north and words like 'baby' were removed. For the first time, we met the Northern Women's Liberation Rock Band and the redoubtable Susan Straightarrow, who identified themselves as feminist performers. Only one of us had been to a WLM conference before and we found it a powerful (and in some cases overwhelming) experience. The conference was buzzing with the issue of women's autonomy and a lot of anger was being directed against the idea of male 'support' for feminism. The gig itself, although marred by Shaz's borrowed piano blowing a transistor, was enthusiastically received and left us in no doubt that we had become a 'women's movement band'. This awareness had an effect on all of us.

In the days that followed, we critically reassessed our set. There was a further overhaul of song lyrics and certain songs were abandoned altogether

because they did not present a strong enough image of women. New songs would be written which reflected a more overt feminist ideology. And we *had* to find a new name! Susy thought up 'Stepney Sisters', which we all liked because the band had after all been born in Stepney – and so Stepney Sisters we become.

At this point there followed a series of gigs around the East End of London, mostly benefits, which supported causes ranging from the Claimants Union to the Angry Brigade. The latter led to some soul-searching on my part: '*Benefit for the Stoke Newington 5 – the Angry Brigade. Don't agree with them but it's only for reading matter in prison which is OK.*' We still had to borrow gear and this hustling around sometimes seemed to take up as much time and energy as rehearsing. We began to feel that we were limiting our potential for improvement by the conveyor belt of gigs onto which we seemed to have landed. There also began to be some tensions in the band – we had diverse ideas and personalities, and perhaps we all tended to take ourselves rather seriously during that period.

Although women's movement ideology had become very important to us, in practice the band was fraught with contradictions. We acquired a male roadie and at a women-only gig, a benefit for Red Rag, he took it upon himself to stand at the door and yell 'Women only!' at any male hopefuls who attempted to come in. Some band members also began playing with a few local male musicians, perhaps as a reaction to the Stepney Sisters' limited music. (On one occasion when we listened back to a recording of a Stepney Sisters gig, I wrote: '*Tape greeted with wincing all round.*') For there were no female role models – we existed in a vacuum. We also began to suspect that when playing to women only, as increasingly we were called on to do, we played more complacently because it was a more accepting audience. Yet it was at this time that one of us began her first lesbian relationship – an important event for the whole band. We started to realize that our careless heterosexism had to be challenged.

Rotterdam – another watershed. We were invited to play at the 'Thema: Vrouw' festival along with other British female performers such as the Sadista Sisters and the Women's Theatre Group. Susy was by now eight months pregnant, and so she stayed behind. Caroline learned to play the drums in record time to take over from her during her 'maternity leave'. For most of us, Rotterdam had an unreal atmosphere. Although supposedly focused on women, the festival had been organized by men, as though they had constructed a stage and set women upon it to perform for them. This dynamic was strangely reflected in a show by the Phantom Captain Theatre Group, called 'Charm School'. The audience, largely female, was taken inside a salon by male attendants and invited to scrutinize their image, then given help to 'overhaul' it. Those of us who passed through the Charm School found it an upsetting experience and we gave our second performance at the festival very much under its shadow.

But our stay in Rotterdam had positive aspects too. In some senses it brought us closer together, making us more keenly aware of our strength as a

group. It gave us time to sit around in hotels and cafes, talking through questions such as whether we were feminists who played music, or musicians who were also feminists? In my diary I noted that that in this particular discussion we asked ourselves *'how far we should aim to go commercial and seize every opportunity regardless of whether it tangles us up with the sexist, exploitative side of commercialism..... This is the question that will probably rent the band asunder: no joke.'*

Susy had her baby in September, and by October she was back rehearsing with us. It wasn't easy having a baby in the band, particularly when we did gigs out of London. But we did genuinely try to share some of the responsibilities and it certainly brought it home to us what the realities of childcare meant for women. Having a band baby also brought some unexpected advantages, like the time when the floor of our roadie's van caught fire on the way to a gig in Birmingham, also igniting the bottom of the bass speaker: we doused the flames with a bottle of the baby's milk!

At around this time, the issue of our relationship to the local community resurfaced within the band – and whether we should play outside the women's movement at all. We were still frequently called on to perform at local benefits, yet our songs reflected very few of the community's struggles. We concluded that we did want to play more widely and we started to include songs in our set which, although not specifically feminist, addressed political issues which were important to us, such as squatting. But just how widely did we want to play? We had a fraught debate about whether we would accept an invitation to play to après-ski audiences in the French Alps, an invitation that we eventually turned down. It had become clear that our novelty value as a women's band could take us a long way, but we had to be careful about the extent to which we let this happen.

But as well as presenting us with these vexed issues, the band also brought us all a lot of laughs. We had some hilarious gigs – like the time when Ruthie, who had been held up on her return from Bristol, flung herself dramatically through the door of the pub venue just as we were launching into our first number: 'Knock knock, knock on the door....' At smaller venues, the lack of physical boundary between ourselves and our audience sometimes caused problems; when we played at Centreprise, a bottle of beer got kicked over onto the stage area and, mid-number, one of our friends swiftly arrived with a squeegee mop to wipe up the puddles from between our feet while we played on. At the same gig, a member of the audience sat on the switch of a power socket and plunged the whole band into silence apart from Susy and myself.

There was also the memorable occasion when we did a benefit for Gay Switchboard at Hammersmith Town Hall, playing support to a gay band called Handbag. Our set was interrupted by a bomb scare that led the building to be evacuated, after which Handbag refused to let us finish our set. They had their come-uppance, however: an irate audience booed them off stage for the 'ungayness' of their macho sexual imagery – this being followed by a second bomb scare and a further evacuation. Afterwards we dubbed the gig 'Gay Plugboard' because someone had helped themselves to our treasured

plugboard in the general chaos. A lunchtime gig at Willesden Tech was another comical affair: *'We played for half an hour before we had to stop because The Authorities were complaining about the noise. By that time we had attracted a **huge** audience of spotty youths, faces still coated in chip grease, who were gaping and pointing at us. I think we won them over by the end....'*

At the beginning of 1976, things seemed to be moving very fast. On the positive side, we started acquiring some new gear and Ruthie bought a saxophone, which was quickly incorporated into the music. But the frequency of gigs was increasing, at one point reaching four gigs in five days. With the jobs, courses and childcare we were holding down as well, this began to create problems of sheer exhaustion. Conflicts began to surface between some of the band members. When we had an invitation to give an interview for Spare Rib, this seemed to give us the opportunity to slow down for some self-assessment.

The interview was published in May 1976, in issue 46 of the magazine. Our sound and our songwriting were among the topics that were discussed. As Caroline commented: *'.... it turned out somehow, by some miracle of chemistry, that the last few songs we've put together do have quite a cohesive sound – a Stepney Sisters sound, kind of bouncy and a bit souly.... [we've] tried to stop doing songs which reflect women in weak or passive positions, because there are quite enough songs about women being trodden on and men being aggressive sexual athletes.'*

In the spring of 1976, we were still very much in demand within the women's movement, and accepted that playing for women was an important part of our role. (By this time, we had taken to using a female roadie for women-only gigs.) But some of us felt troubled by the fact that we were attracting women followers who appeared at each and every gig. We were only too aware of the gulf between performer and audience, which we were trying hard not to widen – yet our 'fans' seemed to raise us onto a pedestal without our consent. Part of the problem was that we were never very certain how a feminist rock musician projected herself on stage. But in a bid to redress the balance, we made a decision to have a few 'pro-men' songs in our set – to make it clear that we did not wish to exclude men altogether.

In April 1976, we played at the Newcastle women's liberation conference and were given an amazing reception by the women there. For us, it was a tiring gig: we had undergone a long journey, followed by hours of hustling borrowed gear so that we could play. That weekend, the most important issue was the role of lesbians within the women's movement – there seemed to be much confusion and conflict on this issue. On the Sunday morning, we led a workshop on women and music, out of which emerged the idea of women's music workshops (these were to happen later that year). We had produced a pamphlet containing the words of our songs, and many women bought copies at the conference and at later gigs.

At around this time, a second member of the band began a lesbian relationship. The four who still identified ourselves as 'straight' felt confused and threatened, not so much because of their lesbian sisters in the band but because of assumptions now being made by other people (both men and women) that we were a lesbian band. All of us to some extent experienced a crisis of sexuality during that period and it remained an unresolved debate within the band. But we at least felt able to unite behind the words of our song supporting the sixth demand of the women's movement, which called for women to have the right to define their own sexuality.

With so many gigs under our belt, our playing had made a lot of progress and our songwriting had become more sophisticated. But there were occasional biting reminders that we were still no virtuosi in the rock world. In April 1976, after a gig for the University of East Anglia women's group, a couple of men came up to us who *'gave us a whole list of things that were wrong with the band – too much tambourine, introverted vocals, over-simple guitar and sax etc etc.'* The following month we were filmed playing some music for an Open Door TV programme made by the local claimants union and the producer made us the double-edged compliment that we played 'surprisingly well'.

Frustrations began to emerge that we were not making the progress that some of us wanted, partly because of the other commitments preventing us from making the band our priority in life. Was it really better for women musicians to play in a 'bad' women's band if they had the option of playing in a 'good' mixed one? Should we have more music and less politics at our rehearsals? These and other questions came to a head at the end of June 1976, when two women decided to leave the band and the rest of us, reluctantly or otherwise, agreed that the band had to break up.

Our last gig was at Maidstone College of Art on 2nd July 1976, supposedly playing support to Desmond Dekkar. Susy got the day wrong and didn't come back from holiday in time, so Caroline had to make an unexpected return to the drum kit. For some undisclosed reason, Desmond Dekkar was a no-show. It was a huge hall with a very hostile, largely male, audience who had expected Desmond to be playing and were highly dissatisfied about settling for the Stepney Sisters. 'Middle class lesbians! Talentless posers!' they heckled. 'What's wrong with being a lesbian?' Caroline bravely shouted back through the microphone.

So that marked the end of the band. During those intense 18 months together, we played nearly 50 gigs at benefits, conferences, pubs and festivals. Between us, we penned well over a dozen powerful feminist songs. No-one was more amazed than we were that the Stepney Sisters took off in the way that it did. It was a pivotal experience for all of us, both personally and musically.

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