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## DISBAND

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It's 2012, and the pussy riot is louder than ever. Alaina Claire Feldman interviews a No Wave feminist band and finds out about its early rumblings.



Hot on the heels of Pussy Riot's condemnation of Russia's politicized justice system and suppression of freedom of expression, millions of young women have been caught donning balaclavas in solidarity with feminism for the first time. Echoing scenes of riot grrrl rebellion and Guerrilla Girls anonymity, certainly, the call to charter communities of supportive and creative women via music is nothing new. An

apartment on the edge of Prospect Park in Brooklyn now serves as host to infrequent practices for [DISBAND](#) members Martha Wilson, Ilona Granet, Donna Henes and Diane Torr (a rotating membership, which at one moment also included Barbara Kruger, Ingrid Sischy, Barbara Ess, Daile Kaplan and others). Amongst the numerous No Wave bands in New York in the late '70s and early '80s who predicated on negation, DISBAND represented one of many new spaces for women who rejected the mainstream culture of the time.

DISBAND did not come out of any specific tradition, but instead, members made their own by blurring the lines between performance art and live music. None of the members were technically skilled in music, and as Martha Wilson states in the *Martha Wilson Sourcebook: 40 Years of Reconsidering Performance, Feminism, Alternative Spaces*, "We did play some instruments: plastic bags, newspapers, hammer, Col. Sanders chicken buckets, bed sheets, hotel bells".

In contrast to No Wave peers like Rhys Chatham or Glenn Branca, who performed politically rather than performing political lyrics, DISBAND tapped into each band member's feminist issues, allowing lyrics to subvert rhythm. While Glenn Branca's practice was more concerned with playing music politically—that is, not traditionally and experimenting with sound, structure, cacophony, etc.—DISBAND's practice, which toyed with sound and recuperated structures (camp songs, for example), went even further by using lyrics and language as a political tool. Furthermore, DISBAND's earlier songs (e.g., "Girls' Bill of Rights," "Look at My Dick") have indisputable relevancy today. One might argue DISBAND'S collective performances allowed the artists to work beyond identity in an attempt to dissolve it. Collective music making is a re-definition and sharing of power—an idea that is still unreasonably new to both contemporary music and art audiences.

In 2008 the band reunited and are now performing in venues such as MoMA PS1 and AUX Performance Space in Philadelphia. 2009 marked the release of their debut album on Primary Information. DISBAND are currently launching an official website that will serve as an archive for their past and present work. A unique interview with today's present members follows.

## How and when did the group begin?

**Diane Torr:** 1978. Martha Wilson invited me to participate in the all-girl band, DISBAND. It was her concept.

**Martha Wilson:** It was 1978, and every artist was in at least one band. But I didn't know how to play any instruments, so I called my girlfriends, who were long on concept and short on skills, and DISBAND, the all-girl punk band of women artists who didn't know how to play any instruments was born.

## Who was your audience? And when you first got together and began to collaborate, did you think about who your audience was going to be?

**Martha:** Our audience consisted of other artists like ourselves. As Laurie Anderson famously said, "The same 300 people went to everything." We didn't know we were making art history, didn't care if the scene where music and art intersected was called "No Wave" or what. We did want to change the world, though. We were creating art against the black wall of the Vietnam conflict, racial discord... and were frustrated by the lack of change for women. Finally, we were fed up by the insularity of the art world itself. Minimalism was all about form, not about real life, so the Postmodern generation started in frustration to create politically and socially engaged work.

**Ilona Granet:** I think our audience was the art community. As I came through the New York art world and was in another band "con-iced," started by two artists, myself and Cara Brownwell and a musician Jules Baptiste (he played with Glenn Branca, etc.), we thought we were going to get out of the art ghetto at least into the "bigger" music world. We played at NYC music venues, and as a solo art performer, I had performed at wider multimedia places where big bands came and therefore large audiences. However, often who arrived at the bigger and broader venues were mostly a larger art audience, or so it seemed. I could be wrong. Certainly, I wished to reach every person in the world (as I tried to direct my own artwork)! But I think basically, we were concentrating on our "songs." I do not actually recall trying to plot expanding or managing our audience.

**Diane Torr:** The audiences varied. We performed at PS1, TR3 (a punk club in TriBeCa), The Kitchen, and elsewhere in downtown Manhattan.

## Did DISBAND ever perform outside of NYC, or was there something very local? Was it tied to a milieu of the city?

**Diane:** DISBAND did perform elsewhere. We were known as an all-female art band, and our songs reflected our experiences. I wrote various songs; for instance "I dinnae wanna be on Hudson Street," which was about the alienation of living in a strange city (I was coming from the UK), which at that time in the late '70s was also dangerous. We also performed elsewhere. I remember being on tour in Italy when we went to Florence and Rome in 1980 with other American performance artists, including Laurie Anderson, Paul McCarthy, Chris Burden, Duka Delight [a.k.a. Julia Heyward], among others.

**Donna Henes:** Yes, we played in Ithaca, Toronto, Chicago, La Jolla, Philadelphia, Rome, Florence, and Seoul.

**Iona:** But I do think we as feminists had “I dinnae wanna be on Hudson Street,” etc. (a song about a young Scottish woman who was killed in New York City on Hudson Street).

**No Wave actually opened up a generous amount of space for strong, straightforward women who wanted to perform and make political statements. I’m thinking of bands like the Bush Tetras, Mars, Lydia Lunch, etc. (Barbara Ess from DISBAND also later branched out into Y Pants and some other groups). This is a considerable drift away from the masculine rock that had dominated just before. Could you speak to this a little?**

**Martha:** It was great that there were so many women on the No Wave music scene! Performance art and music both served as free zones where women could “color outside the lines” of traditional painting and sculpture. De-skilling was part of this process, in that the concept was the heart of the work. If the concept was strong, it didn’t really matter if the technical skills were lacking. Punk took full advantage of this!

**Iona:** Yes, very important, as was the beginning of performance art, which also interested women. Is it because we are moving, fluid, sing, dance tell stories, like to play and work together? Women in music, to me, were also interesting writers and made interesting use of their voice; less so to me than the men. And if you (we) were interested in influencing culture, pop culture certainly seemed a more sensible approach. And women, I think, were obsessed with being their own person, with their own voice and life and choices. The personal is the political. To speak out strongly in a wild media; rock and roll: what is more thrilling, like the Salem girls singing and dancing together at night. What is more natural? What a break we were making from our poor mother’s time, when every man was the ruler of his house(hold), when he was the spokesman and we were his support system. Now we had the microphone and the moves with a little tune.

**Diane:** Perhaps it was a punk attitude at the time that enabled women to feel that they really didn’t give a fuck about male approval. Feminism had been around for a while, and many of the songs of the various groups, like Bush Tetras’ “Too Many Creeps,” reflected anger about male predatory behavior, for instance. Punk style was about being tough, wild, anarchic, and holding the middle finger up to the Establishment/the Status Quo. As these are male-dominated institutions, both in the music industry and in general, it followed that punk women in performance would take the opportunity to harass, chastise, attack, mock, and challenge male authority and masculine rock-style. So-called No Wave also gave space for women to write songs about issues that concerned them. In DISBAND, I wrote a song with the words “being taken care of... I feel so alone,” which was about the situation of old people or anyone confined to an institution. This song became a part of DISBAND’S “Sad” song, which was a collaboration with the whole group.

DISBAND, "Sad"



**What was the first piece of music that really influenced you?**

**Martha:** Not sure about the first piece of music that influenced us; rather, I would say we found the form known as a “song” to be a wonderfully malleable and expressive container to use. Camp songs, hymns, national anthems, opera, and traditional and popular music provided starting points for many songs. Others, like “Sad,” “Every Day Same Old Way,” and “BLACK LUNG” are more like chants.

### DISBAND, "Every Day Same Old Way"



**Diane:** Hard to say. I grew up in Aberdeen, Scotland, listening to traditional Scottish music like Jimmy Shand and his band and [to] my mother, who used to sing Kathleen Ferrier songs. My father played 78s on our gramophone of [Pyotr] Ilyich Tchaikovsky's Swan Lake, Beethoven's 5th Symphony, and Johann Sebastian Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D minor. My father was a big fan of classical music, but looking back now, it seems that his choice was the double espresso variety rather than the milk-coffee! I had a gay brother who was 15 months older than I was. He would sing and dance around the living room to songs from musicals and films like “Some Day my Prince Will Come” from Disney's Snow-White and the Seven Dwarves. Growing up, I was very impressed with Donald and his music choices through the years. My father forbade us to listen to pop music. This was the late '50s/early '60s, and my brothers and I discovered that we could listen to pop music on the pirate radio station, Radio Luxembourg. The BBC did not play pop music at that time. We discovered Radio Luxembourg on the radio dial, but we had to listen in secret, when my father was not around and with ears pressed to the speakers. The first pop song that I remember that influenced me was “Greenback Dollar,” by the Kingston Trio. The lyrics included:

I don't give a damn about a green-backed dollar, spend it fast as I can for a wailin' song and a good guitar, the only things that I understand, poor boy, the only things that I understand. / When I was a little baby, my momma said, “Hey, son. Travel where you will and grow to be a man. / And sing what must be sung, poor boy. Sing what must be sung.”

## Kingston Trio - Greenback Dollar



This was an early protest song, and the passion and vehemence with which it was sung really appealed to me. As a 12-year-old girl living in a family under the rule of a very strict father who demanded obedience, I also liked the idea behind the lyrics “sing what must be sung”.

**Iiona:** I think sitting in temple somewhere. Was someone getting married? The cantor started singing, and I started singing with him as if I knew the song, the tune, the timing, the heart. I think I started crying and laughing. It was so beautiful. It felt like my song. I did not go to temple growing up except for once, and there was no cantor. Felt the same way when I went to hear Romanian and Hungarian gypsy music at Symphony Space. The whole Romanian village, I think, was on stage in their second-hand American polyester wardrobe. I felt the same way about the Romanians. However, I don't have a memory of thinking Wow, that sound, that piece, I am going to use it, extend it, bounce off of it, etc. I first loved Buffy Saint Marie and Tim Buckley and could not stop playing them, waking up all through the night to play them over and over again, and as a cheap, poor girl, bought most of their records. Also fell in love with Nina Simone and saw her five times (I went to see almost no one). Loved choruses of children singing, camp songs (OBSESSED!), early blues, and first loved the Detroit girl group's “Pain in My Heart.” They and camp songs together made my childhood. Not exactly your question, but ask me in a couple of years.

**I want to talk a bit about technical vs. non-technical skill and whatever—”deskilling” in musical practice. This was very much a red thread in No Wave: to completely refuse the technical and the “professionalization” of the music world and economy. Can you speak a little more about this? Was it a response to what you saw going on in the visual arts, or were you speaking to something beyond the arts?**

**Donna:** We were/are a band, and none of us plays a musical instrument. In a couple of songs Martha played a toy piano, and I played the radio. But what was important to us was our words, our message, our energy.

**Iiona:** Well yes because of the visual arts, which technically had given up skill way back with Duchamp and Picasso-time. The minimalists exaggerated it, restricting their art practice to the thinking and hiring out of technicians if needed or wanted... or just the bare bone script of an idea. Adding the irrelevance of selling it opened up all activity. Happenings introduced “theatre.” I wanted my work to be authentic. The feminist “The personal is the [sic] political” and a stint with an Italian Reichian therapist, who was also a writer. Both powerful instigators and roots. [In] Reichian therapy, you are supposed to be screaming and beating a pillow; instead I sang, and as a lifelong drawer, I saw the singing as line drawings punctuated with images and stories. I sang when alone at night, walking down the street (softly), in the privacy of the country loudly, later in the old empty warehouse/office building on the river, roaming room through room.

I also thought as an artist to follow my own nose, rather than some traditional technical activity. So as both singing and dancing were my favorite things, along with drawing and ranting, I combined them all, tossing in whatever skill I had any semblance [of]. I had seen or heard of kabuki, and all theatre Japanese and loved their equality of all arts (my interpretation), so I thought of that as part of my overall aesthetic as being the glue but was obsessed with bringing out the soul, the honest-to-god truth as seen by me, the very moment of thought, glee, tragedy, silliness, loss, etc. Raw. Not studied, not fussy, not repeated. N O T P E R F E C T. Brave to be a real character. Wanted to be

an example so I could enjoy a world of other lively, real characters. The end of the Victorian Age, repetition, propriety, shame and arrogance, etc. I think Antonin Artaud was a hero of mine. And Vito Acconci.



**Diane:** None of us could play any instruments. But in No Wave, there was an idea that nobody needed to really know how to play an instrument. You could learn three chords on the guitar and create a song around that. It was about energy. I think DISBAND was speaking to the energy of the time. That was the zeitgeist. With DISBAND, we were all more interested in performance, I think, than actually being professional musicians. We sang songs and created costumes/props with which to perform the songs. I think all of us had a sense that we had free rein to do what we wanted, and we ran with it. It did cause a certain amount of conflict within the group because we didn't all appreciate each other's aesthetic. But somehow we worked it out.

## Was DISBAND an extension of your individual practices or was it a means to try something completely new within a collective?

**Iiona:** Well, it was an extension, of course, but also something new in that I was able to choreograph, which as a solo is a little complicated (dancing props?), which I loved ("Everyday Same Old Way" with the nuclear cooler factory. It was based on a song of mine in a performance "Is it war or is it work or are we just waiting for the goof fairy?" The factory, not the chant). I also had lots of little songs that I could do or could invent that didn't have to be part of a serious solo performance. Also, working with others was beyond grand, watching us build songs together.

**Donna:** I love working/playing in groups of women. Feminist consciousness groups played a very important role in my life. I was also on the Heresies collective for The Great Goddess issue, which was a fun and agonizing experience. But very fruitful. Today I am part of several women's groups that meet for discussion, information exchange, and mutual support. So it was a natural for me to be in DISBAND.

However, as an artist/writer I work alone. My experience with DISBAND made me much more comfortable being in public with an audience. And that has had a big impact on the public rituals that I perform. I can think and act on my feet and feel very secure in improvisational situations.

**Martha:** DISBAND was a way for me to take the plastic bag of individual practice off my head and breathe again with the perspectives of other artists. This was an essential stage of development for me, a chance to feel sadness, for example, but through another woman's experience of it—a way to break out of solipsism. By the end of DISBAND, we were addressing the larger political world: the presidency of Ronald Reagan, climate change, nuclear holocaust. Perhaps we never managed to change the world, but it was not for lack of trying!

**Diane:** DISBAND was for me a means to try something completely new within a collective. I was trained in dance and studied the Japanese martial art of aikido and visual art. I did performances that included dance and film and were reviewed at that time by dance critics like Sally Banes and Noel Carroll in the Village Voice and SoHo Weekly News. DISBAND offered a new opportunity to play with

ideas in a group and assemble songs from improvising and brainstorming. Much fun and laughter, but also dissent and criticism. We all fought—no doubt about it—but we also enjoy and appreciate each other's contribution.

## **There is no definitive song or performance for DISBAND. There is a CD and a DVD of previous performances but no definitive version. Were your performances different every time? Were you ever aiming for a perfect sound or look?**

**Donna:** I don't think perfection was ever an option for us!

**Diane:** Ha ha ha. The performances were different every time. But that is always the case with performance, anyway. I think we were all attracted to the immediacy of performance as a medium for our ideas. Coming from dance, I always liked to rehearse, and it irritated me incredibly in the early days that the others were lackadaisical about rehearsing. However, that has changed especially with our resurgence! There is an insistence that we all know the words to the songs and know what we are doing. That suits me!



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