How hard is it to remember Bananarama? The perennial forgetting of girls in music

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Introduction

Increasing scholarship on female performers has uncovered their agency, and the negotiations they have had to make within the fault lines of both the music industry and the politics of representation. However, it seems once these women performers have been recovered by scholarship, that they are quickly returned to their place, forgotten, and re-hidden from history. As many cultural historians and feminist music scholars have noted it is not a coincidence which stories stick in popular historical memory, how, where and when. I want to situate the hearing and unhearing, remembering and unremembering of female pop musicians within the broader project of feminist and identity histories; that if we claim to be seen in the past (then), we can demand to be seen in the present (now). The relationship between how women have been not heard in the past and the ways in which they are unheard since, is acutely gendered. By refusing to take women performers seriously, they are left to be remembered through their insignificance.¹

Bananarama act as an example of girls working together, within the fault lines that simultaneously gave them a voice, and unheard them. Furthermore, Bananarama provide their own cultural analysis of the music industry and of their representation in the press and media, through their interviews, lyrics, videos, style and performance. Since they first formed in 1981, the band’s different incarnations represent different moments in the music industry. The band first started when friends Sara Dallin and Keren Woodward met Siobhan Fahey at London University of Arts. The band’s second incarnation saw Jacqui O’ Sullivan recruited when Fahey left. (Fahey went onto to form and recently reform the duo Shakespeare’s Sister with Marcella Detroit). In the next stage of their career Dallin and Woodward worked as a duo. The original trio reformed and toured to mark the band’s 36th anniversary before reverting to their two woman line up and played the Glastonbury festival’s Avalon field in the Sunday afternoon slot in 2019. My assertion is that Bananarama mattered then and left their traces everywhere, but their refusal to take the pop machine seriously meant that in turn they

¹ Thanks to Chris Warne and Mike Riley, Catherine Garabaldi, Bruno Tonioli, and The Bugle Babes for their help with this article. It is written with love and gratitude to Lady Vegas Honey for inspiring me to think about why people hate things girls like and in sisterhood with any woman who has ever been ‘educated’ about music by a man.
could never be taken seriously either then, or now. Despite this assertion, I concede that not everyone knows the ins and outs of Bananarama’s career so a narrative overview of it would be useful.

Originally part of London’s Post-punk DIY scene Bananarama first recorded with Paul Cook from the Sex Pistols, their first single sung in Swahili was released as a demo and reached number 92 in the UK charts where it attracted the attention of BBC DJ John Peel and Terry Hall, from the Specials/Fun Boy Three. That led to collaboration with Fun Boy Three. During this stage of their career Bananarama replicated the pared back ska sound popular on the back of 2-Tone. When the band began working with Stock, Aitken and Waterman for their PWL label in 1991, their music consolidated the Hi-NRG camp sound of London’s gay pubs and clubs.

Over their career they had 32 Top UK 40 Hits, released 10 albums and sold over 40 million records. According to the Guinness Book of Records they are the most successful girl band in history. They are recognised in VH1’s 100 Greatest Songs of the ’80s and in Billboard’s list of 100 Greatest Girl Group Songs of All Time. This success has not, however, been maintained in their memorialisation. The Daily Mail called Fahey ‘one of pop's forgotten women’. (Thrills 2010) They are remembered for having been forgotten. The more successful that they have been, and the more traces that they have left, the more work has gone into actively unremembering them. Their values, associated with pop, commercial litheres, humour, politics, and sisterhood, are not those that stick. My starting point therefore, is that like Bananarama, women and girls do not speak out, but that when they do they are closed down and actively unheard in ways that tie together their status at the time (then) and in popular memory (since).

**Unforgetting**

Whilst female musicians have been consistently unheard, feminist historians of popular culture have been actively working to listen to them again. The history of women as cultural agents and their musical production has been uncovered and reheard in numerous ways; from work on Ivy Benson, leader of the all-female band who were the BBC’s official orchestra

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[^1]: http://www.bananarama.co.uk/biography/ For ease of access web links will be footnoted throughout this chapter.
during the Second World War (Bailey 2013), or the uncovering of the ‘real voices’ behind the recording of musical soundtracks (Neville 2013)iii, or the recent writing of punk women like The Slits into the 40th Anniversary of punk’s celebrations (Robinson 2013; 2018), or recent focus on riot grrrl as a marker of subcultural DIY’s legacies (Cofield and Robinson 2016).

As Jenna Bailey (2013) points out however, this work must be done over and over again, it never seems to make its mark in the cultural circuits which frame our memories of the past.

Once written into History these women are reforgotten and are returned to their role of surprising novelty act, or subsumed into a meta narrative, for example, of the generic commodified girl band (‘The Dream Girls’). Bananarama are lost in such a metanarrative of girl groups, compared, contrasted, read against in the continuum of visibility and being unheard. In Catherine Strong’s (2014) work on Chrissy Amphlett she explains how individual exceptional women who are allowed to seep into public memory but both the number and space they are afforded are finite and limited. Individual exceptional women are up against each other to cat-fight over historical space. Women playing music together therefore are historically either markers of exceptionality or uniformity.

The Dream Girl narrative was set up around The Supremes. Its cultural circuit moved across the theatrical and film adaptation of the 1981 play Dreamgirls, and into Mary Wilson’s (1987) memoir Dreamgirl and Supreme Faith: My Life as a Supreme (See also: Benjaminson 20019). Like the Supreme Dreamgirls, Bananarama took their place on the unsisterly list alongside The Spice Girls, All Saints, SugarBabes, and the Three Degrees. As Bananarama’s creative input was unheard, what has been left of the band’s biography is a string of emotional fall outs; Siobhan fell out with Waterman, then fell out with the rest of the band, then fell out with Marcella Detroit, her collaborator in Shakespeare’s Sister. (Thrills 2010).

Bananarama knew this heritage, and what to do with it. They often incorporated codes, styles and moves from the classic girl bands, rubbing off the edges of the Dream Girl narrative with their own camp pastiches and the sisterhood of the eyeroll. Bananarama were simultaneously honed professionals and just girls having a laugh. In their publicity interviews, they shared body language; their movements appeared both uniform and individual as they would sit swinging their chairs awkwardly but in collective security and unity, they rolled their eyes – acknowledging to each other what is actually happening in the room.

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Bananarama’s ability to be unheard and unremembered is exacerbated by the gendered nature of the music market, and reproduced in academic work on popular music. Bananarama moved from DIY subcultures to mainstream pop culture aimed (predominantly) at teenage girls as fans. Diane Railton (2001: 321) explains, the more popular a group is, particularly if it is popular with girls, the less likely it is that it will be taken seriously by academic work: ‘Just as this music is perhaps the only form of popular music to have a predominantly female audience, the threat that it poses is the threat of the feminine and of female encroachment into what is still predominantly a male, and masculine, world’. Or in other words, if girls like it, it must be shit. When they pop into view, their visibility is explained away as the product of a manipulative Svengali, given unearned space through male patronage, and incapable of working harmoniously together. Remember, Bananarama, like many other female musicians, only exist to be unremembered.

Furthermore, as Negus (1996: 243) explained, the work that historicises pop has tended to uncritically reproduce the industry’s myths and clichés. The uncritical short-hand of these myths and clichés from the time (then) end up reproduced in the contemporaneous commentary that follows into the historiography that follows (now). In short, the histories that we write, and where we write them, reinscribe the positions of the time about which we write and carry them into our present.

**Cultural Circuit**

For students of media studies, the term ‘cultural circuit’ has a particular meaning. For those analysts of the cultural economy, the term ‘cultural circuit’ focusses on the relationship between the producer, and the audience, or fan; bringing together the different contributors to ‘musicking’ as a practice, rather than music as an object (O’Reilly et al 2013; Crossley 2015). This version of the concept was rooted in the 1970s in the work at Birmingham’s Centre for the Study of Contemporary Studies. Based on the work of Stuart Hall and others, this version of the cultural circuit provided a way into understanding the contested meanings of media objects. Hall’s (1973) formulation that cultural production is coded in production and decoded in reception, acknowledged that audiences did not always receive what had been intended. This was later mapped into a circuit of production, identity, consumption, representation, and regulation by du Gay (1997). For both Hall and du Gay, meanings could
be unmade as well as made. This understanding of the cultural circuit helps us to capture the circuit between unhearing Bananarama ‘then’, and relistening to them ‘now’. This ‘cultural circuit’ therefore helps us pin down why some aspects of popular culture, for example the ‘serious’ music press, were accorded value in the circuits, then, and why the magazines that marketed Bananarama to predominantly teen girls were not.

For historians however, the cultural circuit has a temporal formulation. For historians, particularly of popular culture, the directors of the circuit are the past, present, experience and memory. This ‘cultural circuit’ traces the loop between ‘personal accounts and public discourse’, in ways that can have a life of their own (Dawson 2013:25). Thus this ‘cultural circuit’ lets us think about the relationship between memory, experience and popular cultural representation, in our case the relationship between Bananarama’s apparent transience ‘then’, and the potential to hear to them now. It draws on relationships between what is represented in a given historical context, and what sticks in the popular historical memory. The examples historians use to explore the ‘cultural circuit’ have typically been masculine and focussed on memories of war and of combatants. Historians Penny Summerfield and Corinna Peniston-Bird (2000; 2004; 2013) have suggested some tactics for relistening to women’s experiences left out of the ‘cultural circuit’ when they don’t fit into a big picture, and that the process of retelling is key to that of remembering. Marsha Houston and Cheris Kramarae (1991) mapped the variety of ways in which men have ‘muffled’ women’s voices, arguing wherever women found a space to be heard, they would be matched with a way of unhearing them. Thus what can be seen and heard of the past in the present, is a way into retrieving the structures of seeing and hearing in the past. Bananarama’s switch in the cultural circuit takes the traces of the past left behind seriously. Like Hall and Du Bray’s concept, this cultural circuit troubles stable meanings, and draws together both the production of media texts and popular culture, but with a focus on the relationship between the past and the present. The ‘cultural circuit’ helps us to understand how popular culture tells and untells its own history.

A combination of both concepts of the cultural circuit, reminds us that we do not simply remember the past: we compose it (Summerfield 2004). Composition of the past is never fully complete, as Tess Coslett (2002: 92) explains, there is always at least a bit of space in which to intervene in the circuit, and to write ourselves back in to the past, then, now. Not just in the sound of Bananarama, but in the ‘musicking’ traces that they left, beyond their songs as objects (Small 1998:2). In the same way, if we relisten to Bananarama’s traces in the
cultural circuit, be it in the retro TV clip shows, quizzes or film soundtracks and documentary references, acknowledging the gendered value of these as sources, we can capture the ways in which those traces have been unremembered. By thinking about the relationship between Bananarama being unheard in the past, and unremembered in the present, we might get to the circuit which captures both their marginalisation and their agency, and that remembers that women have been both silenced and spoken, shouted, and sung in public.

Fun Boy Three and the Sexual Double standard

If we compare Bananarama with another band; The Specials and their later incarnation as Fun Boy Three we can map a cultural circuit of the sexual double standard, in terms of who is heard and who is unheard. Fun Boy Three are stuck in the cultural circuit of the 1980s ‘then’ and ‘now’. Bananarama certainly left their traces in the circuit, ‘then’, in every format, across different forms of press, but they have not stuck in the contemporary memories of the 80s. The comparison works, not least because the bands intersected professionally at the time, but also because of the very different ways in which they have been valued ‘then’ and remembered since.

The Special’s track ‘Ghost town’ is the ubiquitous song of the eighties then, as attested at the time by Simon Frith in Marxism Today (1983). By comparison, Bananarama’s traces are marginalised or frivolous. They were ridiculed at the time in satirical form on Spitting Image as pop star robots produced by a three headed Stock, Aitken and Waterman robotic Frankenstein’s monster. Tracey Ullman played all three of the band on the Three of a Kind sketch show, in which she renamed them ‘Bunchananas’, where they were incapable of the simplest choreography and sang:

But now we’ve made a big sell
By getting into hair gel.

‘Ghost Town’ and The Specials are stuck in the historical narrative as the song of the period, whilst the girl band and their songs get little recognition now. Bananarama are the most successful girl group of the period, but the former gets taken seriously and the latter does not. They share much in common: the two bands are historically woven together, and the value accorded to them both ‘then’ and ‘now’ clearly maps the circuit through which value is accrued
and transferred over time. Terry Hall formed Fun Boy Three in 1981 after he left The Specials. He was already familiar with Bananarama having seen a photograph of them in *Face* Magazine and been impressed by their style and had heard their first track when John Peel played it on his radio show. Hall invited them to sing on ‘It Ain’t What You Do’. Fun Boy Three returned the favour and were Bananarama’s backing band for ‘Really Saying Something’. Bananarama have writers’ credits on the ‘Funrama 2 Theme’, and two other tracks on Fun Boy Three’s first album and appear in the video for ‘The Telephone Always Rings’. In the popular narrative however, Hall was the star maker, and it was Bananarama’s association with his band that ‘elevated them to stardom’ (Barrow 2002: 167). Both of the bands were associated with a label and a brand, but one had subcultural capital, 2-Tone was important, and one, PWL, was not. Both bands recorded cover versions, both with a similar style, shifting around the punctuation of the original titles, translating their musical heritage into their own recognisable style, but it is only Bananarama that get accused of being unable to write as a result.

The ubiquitous sound track for retrospective documentaries, particularly those that emphasise the 1980s a time of conflict. (Petridis 2002) On the BBC’s supernatural TV programme, *Being Human*, for example, listening to ‘Ghost Town’, signalled the character Gilbert’s melancholia. (BBC3, 2009) More recently the song has broken through into the ivory tower of academia. It can be found on university reading lists for undergraduate and masters courses. Bleakness is important and remembered it seems, whereas humour, especially the humour of girls being together is not. When Bananarama tracks do turn up it tends to be in in TV clip shows about the 80s generally, in programmes about other artists or as the answer to daytime quiz shows. They are not historical agents, they are trivia. Apart from their use in adverts for No 7’s anti-ageing cream or the occasional football chant, Bananarama’s music rarely speaks of anything else. When they appear in soundtracks it is for soap operas like *Coronation St* or *Doctors*, to signify unruly femininity of shoplifters or hen parties. (ITV 2015)

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iv Modules include Anarchy in the UK and Noise Annoys at Reading University, Youth culture and popular music in twentieth century Britain (3rd year History module at Wolverhampton University), and 'History and Analysis of Pop/Rock in the UK' postgrad’ seminar: University of Orléans, France for example.

It is not as though Bananarama did not matter, then. In 1984 they were presented at international events such as MIDEM – an annual event at which UK, US and French music publishers and record companies showcase the bands that they identify as having the potential for international success. They opened the 1988 Royal Variety Performance in the presence of The Queen Mother and Princess Margaret. Bananarama appeared on every music TV opportunity, from The Tube, to Saturday morning children’s television and The Terry Wogan Show. In 1987 the band had left their mark on each and every new media form that developed; on new channels for example, acting as VJs for Sky or on small pirate radio stations. Their music was released on EPs, (extended players), that Pete Waterman (from SAW) had developed as a 12” for home stereos (Gold 1982). ‘Do Not Disturb’ was released as a series of special issue picture discs, one shaped like each of the band members, designed to stand up. They released video albums, with added tracks, single videos on 8” CDV and used night club video tours to promote their albums. Global media opportunities spread their music in new markets. MTV helped with their ‘media blitz’ in the US (Terry 1983). Despite their more recent relegation to daytime soaps and face cream ads, Bananarama songs appeared on film soundtracks such as ‘Cruel Summer’ in The Karate Kid. Bananarama songs also appeared in Valley Girl (1983), Fraternity Vacation (1985), Disorderlies and The Secret of My Success (both 1987). ‘More than Physical’ was included in Rita, Sue and Bob Too (1987) the ultimate film celebrating sex positive sisterhood.

The founding feminist historiography noted the importance of where and how to relisten to women in the past. Dale Spender and Nola Bardin (1985), for example, drew out the historically gendered values of different forms: poetry, public and masculine, was valuable; diaries, or intimate letters, were private and feminine, and therefore lacked value. Men talking to the public matters, women talking to each other does not. (Spender & Bardin: 194) These gendered values of form can be further transposed on to a different set of textual categories in the 1980s; the division between the established ‘serious’ ‘inkie’ music press like NME, Melody Maker, or newer style led magazine The Face which was launched in 1980 and glossy teenage magazines, like No 1, Smash Hits or Just 17 culture (Toynbee 1993; Shuker 2013; Kirkham 2017).

It is not just what you say therefore, but where you say it, that structures the way that women and girls are unremembered and unheard. There is a relationship between the breadth of the market and different technological forms through which the band left their traces, and with the ease with which they can be unremembered. Just as with women’s texts that ‘fade’, and are
allowed to go out of print, the adjudicated gendered value of the text is reinscribed in the process of unhearing it (Spender and Bardin 1985: 194).

Just as some bands mattered, some publications mattered more than others too. It was magazines like *Smash Hits* that made space for Bananarama rather than *NME, MM* or *The Face*. *Smash Hits* was a fortnightly music magazine aimed at younger teenagers. *Just 17* was launched in 1983 and combined music with fashion and feminist informed relationship advice. Both publications shared an irreverent, cheeky tone, aimed to deflate the over inflated egos of pop and rock stars. (Simpson 2018) These magazines were also loyal supporters of their favourites. Bananarama appeared in *Smash Hits* 15 times in 1984 and 1985, in interviews, reviews and photographic features. It was the tween pop magazine *No 1* that asked Karen questions about the band’s creative process (although it was on a set up blind date with George Michael) (Simper, no date). There is a fit with the structures of feeling in girls’ magazines like *Smash Hits, No 1,* and *Just 17* that championed them and Bananarama’s emotional landscape.

The success of the girls’ magazines provided a space for scholars to think about gender. Janice Winship (1987) and Angela McRobbie (1991;1997), for example, used them to map changes in girls’ affective bonds and identify a shift in girls’ worlds in the 1980s; a ‘decline of romance’ and ascendancy of pop and fashion (McRobbie 1991: 135). The girls reading the magazines therefore became the subject of debates amongst cultural studies feminists – between the possibilities of resistance within or against commercial popular culture. There was ambivalence over the pop scene’s commercialism which meant that girls’ weekly pocket money could make or break a star (McRobbie 1991: 191). But scholars also recognised that these publications provided space for explicitly political discussion. Bananarama were the perfect fit for these new spaces. The band shared the self-satire that McRobbie showed was central to how girls’ magazine’s and their readers negotiated the value structures that derided their tastes. Like girls’ magazines Bananarama simultaneously constructed and deconstructed the celebrity star system, and the tropes of the pop music industry. And, as I shall demonstrate, Bananarama also engaged with explicitly political discussions of key issues of the time, notable around sexism, the politics of representation and race and nationalism, particularly as we shall see, in their discussions of the conflict in Northern Ireland.

Pop music is what happens in between the big important records and canonical moments of rock. Pop wilfully. ‘accepts and embraces the requirement to be instantly pleasing and to
make a pretty picture of itself” (Hill 1986:8). The discourse surrounding pop assumes that it is manufactured, ergo it values commerciality over aesthetics, and it is this that differentiates between ‘particular forms of musical cultural capital’ (Shuker 2013: 8). Whereas some other genres of music can be elevated through subcultural capital, authenticity, innovation, artistry, and cleverness, it is precisely pop’s commercial litheness, perceived in Gayle Wald’s (2002) term as ‘fickleness’ associated with the transience of girls’ taste that excludes it from categories through which it is constructed as something more valuable, either then or now.

In fact it is Bananarama themselves who best analyse the tension between the traces pop left, then, and its unremembering now, and inflect it through the sisterhood of the eyeroll and the protection and a joy of what they called their ‘dancefloor mentality’ (Hibbert 1998). Girls have each other’s backs on the dancefloor, keeping an eye out for predatory men, and rolling their eyes at cheesy chat up lines. A shared kitty funds the night, as they dance, together, facing each other. Bananarama’s dance floor mentality seeps through the structures of the music industry, their press representation and their political context. Bananarama poked fun where the music press had been so quick to judge; competing egos within the band, the ridiculous set piece dance moves, and the generic formulaic music videos. Bananarama happily, and knowingly sent themselves up in cameo appearances on the sit com Benidorm in 1995 in which they were mistaken for a cheap cover band, who weren’t very good because there was only two members. In the 1989 Comic Relief single Help! they appeared alongside French and Saunders and Kathy Burke. The live performance as part of the Comic Relief broadcast descended into a grinding conga line and a custard pie fight. Girls on the dancefloor know humour matters; they also know that the dancefloor mentality does not get to be taken seriously. Bananarama, know the cultures and structures of derision, and work them for themselves, with a nod to the other girls in the know,

*Unheard Then*

The press representation of the band, helps to materialise the ways in which Bananarama were positioned in the cultural circuit in their original context and think about how that is re-remembered in the present, now. Their first appearance on stage was dancing with maracas for the band Monochrome Set. They said ‘We were allowed to dance around and shake maracas, but nothing else’ (Quoted in Kinnersley 1982). They were stage dressing. The
producers of their first album refused to back them as songwriters. Creem journalist Imam Lababedi wrote ‘they don’t play any musical instruments’ and their songs were either covers or collaborations with their male producers (1986). ‘Who the hell do Bananarama think they are?’ asked Q magazine in 1988. ‘You nip into the studio, warble a bit, nip out and embark on a fresh round of televised formation jigging, giggling press encounters, hazy photo opportunities and all-purpose blotto behaviour passed off as “promotion” – and then whinge about lack of artistic credibility’ (Hibbert 1988). Journalists suggested that Bananarama should ‘crawl off and die slow and painful deaths’; they were ‘just girls who live in a flat’ who ‘could not write, could not sing, could not dance and they looked a bit of a state [a] bunch of shoddily heeled, ancient fag ash Lils’. (Simper 2017; O’Hagan 1987) Black Echoes only reviewed Bananarama in order to say how bad they were. Mike Stock recalled the band being booted off the stage and pelted by DJs at award shows. (Cohen 1984; Stock 2004: 50) Bananarama were shorthand for low quality, mass produced pap. When the House of Commons discussed the implications of extending the UK radio broadcast license provision, the Home Affairs Committee used Bananarama as the exemplar of the dross that commercial radio would encourage. (1987-1988: 38)

The press collated stories of their celebrity pairings whose value was accrued through their romantic connections and patronage by men. Bananarama were ‘talentless groupies’ according to both NME and Sounds. In 1986 Lababedi, wrote, ‘Bananarama’s business life has been supported by hand-me-downs from men higher-up the rock hierarchy’ and wondered which rock star Keren would marry’. (1986) Interviews would end with the journalists speculating which member of the band would sleep with/marry which male pop star The press would fabricate its own romances; Number One magazine set up a blind date between Woodward, and George Michael asking ‘Has George found true love?.... Will this be the beginning of Whamarama!?’ They were only visible through their male connections.

Sound and musicking then

Women are perennially criticised for their tone, for how they sound as much as what they say (Brooks 2010: 45; Thompson 2016: 875). Bananarama’s tone and sound therefore traced the
cultural circuits in which they performed, and were unheard. They sounded like girls together, singing democratic three-part harmonies, strictly in unison, without a lead. (Tennant 1983; Williams 1984) Bananarama’s pop sound was rooted in their DIY roots, however; ‘We were breaking the rules of being in a band’, said Fahey. ‘We all just wanted to be vocalists, so we said: “Let’s just be vocalists”. And that was very against the grain.’ (Nicholson 2017) Indeed their individual voices were irrelevant, interchangeable. It was not so much their post-Punk roots that made them sound ‘outrageous’, but the way that their sound confounded categories.

In the band’s first phase they sounded like little girls, with their waif-like, wafer-thin pipes’. As the band moved into its more glamourous phase with SAW, their voices were identified by their breathy and sighing sound. Their vocals sounded more harmonious, but were criticised for being artificially reproduced. Their ego-free melding of voices, found a 'comfortable common pitch’, which made it all look too easy for music journalist’s elevated taste. (Cohen 1984) They were booed for lip syncing their early performances and later criticised for sounding exactly like the vocal tracks on the records live. But their sound also complicated the narrative. Throughout their career their sound epitomised ‘the awesome strength of Girls Together Outrageously’ to Melody Maker journalist Caroline Sullivan. (1990) They footnoted the sound of the ‘Dream Girl’. But these girls singing together, refused to perform to please. Bananarama sounded as though they ‘couldn’t be bothered to raise their voices – [as if it ] just [was] not worth it’. Repressively gendered, these were the cool girls, who made the boys feel left out. Their music had ‘curves, not edges’. Rather than the sound of the sixties girl group, their tone is that of the girls on the back of the bus that made the journalist boys feel uncomfortable. (Cohen 1984) They produced the sound of a shrug accompanied with a sigh.

By understanding music as an embodied activity, rather than sound alone we can explore ways to read meaning into Bananarama’s self-representation, aesthetics and performance (Small 1998; Crossley 2015). Their choreography matched their sound. Their DIY choreography was part of their DIY post punk pull that really annoyed people. Bruno Tonioli became their choreographer for the videos for ‘Na Na Hey Hey Hey’, and from, ‘Venus’ to ‘Movin On’. He also appeared in the videos for ‘I heard a Rumour’ and ‘Rough Justice’. Tonioli’s own career blurred the categories of serious art and commercial pop. He had been a member of the Lindsay Kemp’s dance company. According to his memoir, Bananarama employed him based on his reputation ‘for being able to choreograph anyone’ (2012, 211-236). Elsewhere, he explained Bananarama’s values ‘Having fun, doing something like they
were, accessible, everyone felt they could do it, everyone felt they could join in, pure pop, pure fun’. (2017)

Bananarama confounded two major narratives of popular cultural history in the 1980s, then and since. The first is that of the punk DIY to mainstream success, the sell out or incorporation narrative. The second is the PWL’s pop factory as a Thatcherite dream.

Punk to Popstar

Bananarama were ‘the punks who became pop stars’ (Nicolson 2017) and in the process broke the rules of both. Malcolm McLaren had once asked them whether they wanted to be The Slits or Bucks Fizz. (BBC4 2018) The division is telling: be respected or be commercially successful. Bananarama have punk heritage, but they have not been remembered in the punk canon. They started whilst living in the building that had housed the Sex Pistols; ex Pistol Paul Cook’s recording studio in Denmark St, who co-produced and played drums on their debut single. They sang backing for Cook’s band The Professionals. Their names are written on the Denmark St wall alongside Johnny Rotten’s drawing of Sid and Nancy in what is now an official heritage site, but that is not Bananarama’s story.

Bananarama confounded frameworks of value, with the commercial and gendered nature of pop. They were as likely to appear on the BBC’s Top of the Pops as on pirate radio (Reynolds 1982). Many subcultural bands made it into the mainstream during the 1980s, as the new formats and marketing models let the DIY bleed in; Fun Boy Three, Adam and the Ants, Depeche Mode, etc. Accusations of the ‘sell out’ were ubiquitous. But few bands had their DIY roots as vehemently expunged from the narrative as Bananarama. Rolling Stone’s Encyclopaedia described them as the most successful British girl group in pop history (Romanowski et al 1995: 132). The entry also made the point that this success was despite the original trio’s inability to play instruments and refusal to do concert tours’ who ‘pale in comparison’ to the original girl groups of the 1960s. Their DIY roots and ethic were unremembered. Their crime was to take the tenets of punk - Doing it Yourself, Doing It Together, make do with what you’ve got, cut, n’ paste - and apply it to the most wilfully commercial and popular formats, mediums and spaces.
Pete Waterman’s Pop Factory

One way to unhear women’s voices is to subsume them into meta narratives. Bananarama became part of other people’s stories of the 80s; of their producer, of narratives of sell-out and success and of interchangeable groups of girls, singing and dancing in unison.

The narrative that dominates the ‘cultural circuit’ around girls groups, then and now, for example is the ‘Svengali’ Girl Group Narrative. Bananarama worked with Stock, Aitken and Waterman from 1986 until their work with Killing Joke’s Youth, for the 1991 album Pop Life. Alongside the teen glossy press, SAW marked a shift in the status quo. SAW was formed in 1984 – a point when record labels were in crisis. According to his own narrative Waterman had learnt how to run a factory, problem solve and strategize in his work for the General Electric Company’s telecommunications department in Coventry which he combined with his experience of the Philadelphia music scene where he worked as an A&R man and was inspired by Warhol and Studio 54. His work ethic honed his approach to sound: great pop was made by people who took it very seriously (Waterman 2000:58). In monetarist logic, the maths was simple. ‘Most producers try to please the music industry not the public’ (Stock 2004: 23). Instead, SAW aimed to make music ‘for smart working people who like to dress to go out’ – the yuppie and the teenage girl (Stock 2004:81SAW celebrated disposability and claimed pop’s transience as its value. There is an art to creating disposable pop, he said, but it is this same transience that makes it so easy to unhear Bananarama?

The ‘inkies’ that largely ignored Bananarama hated SAW. As SAW explained back to NME: ‘[T]he average NME reader – long coats, shop in Camden Market, listen to The Smiths on their own... they think we’re aliens! We make loads of money selling records to people who aren’t like them.’ In 1989 SAW had 27% of the UK record business’ market (Stock 2004: 94; O’Hagan 1987). Bananarama were unruly products, constantly measured against artificial constructions of femininity and found wanting. Whilst on the one hand they were puppets, at the same time they were criticised by men for being difficult if they had an opinion.

Nicknamed ‘Bananadrama’, Pete Waterman called them ‘impossible, they were a brick wall’. The band was a ‘fearsome pop trio’. (Channel 4; 1998; BBC4 2008; BBC4 2018) They were banned from some TV shows, once for falling into the set and knocking it over during a live broadcast. (Nicholson 2017) By underplaying their own artistic contribution, Bananarama were not just harpies, they were ungrateful harpies. In their memoirs both Stock and Waterman emphasise their own input into the creative process (Stock 2004: 64). SAW,
presented themselves as the real producers, which the band recognised as a way to ‘diminish [their] own role in our own records’ and on top of that to emphasise the added labour that SAW had to put into dealing such with unruly women. (BBC4 2018)

Really Saying Something

Sometimes the political implications of music are apparently, ‘beyond doubt’ – in the case of Bob Marley in Jamaica in 1978 or when U2 provided the soundtrack for the ratification of the Good Friday Agreement for example. Bono and Marley were unequivocally adjudicated as political. It helps if you are male, it helps if the politics you connect with is party political. Just as popular music could be defended by its proximity to art and art school aesthetics, in other cases it could be defended by its proximity to formal politics (Robinson 2011). The best way to defend pop music’s value has generally been to argue that it is more than that, and to accept the value judgements but challenge the process of categorisation – Dylan is poetry, the Specials are social commentary, etc. There is little space to argue that popular music matters because ‘silly little love songs’ matter. There is little room for the dancefloor mentality so central to Bananarama’s music as activity.

Bananarama did engage with political discussion. The instrumental track, ‘Give us back our cheap fares’ on Deep Sea Skiving was aimed at the cuts to travel subsidies by the Greater London Council [GLC]. Like Madness, Bananarama talked about the issue of racism in Number One magazine. Members of parliament were filmed dancing along to Bananarama to promote their record-breaking Greatest Hits album. ix We could see them as part of a broader movement to use popular music to encourage, or normalise, political engagement in Red Wedge, or when Labour leader Neil Kinnock appeared on Tracy Ullman’s music video for example (Robinson 2011). They sang songs about AIDS, attended fund raisers for the Terence Higgins Trust and appeared on numerous television campaign shows about HIV awareness for young people. (Capital Gay 1991)

The band were heard enough to use them as shorthand for complicity and insignificance, but not heard when they were talking explicitly about politics. Bananarama could use the space

ixhttps://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9I2L_sRSc3s
afforded to them by their pop celebrity to talk about the politics of their experience, of the
music industry, of sexism and of more public politics around nationalism and militarism. But
the spaces, experiences, and assumed audience made sure that their analysis could not stick in
the circuit. They experienced the sexual double standard of the music industry; ‘They don’t
put glitter on Echo and the Bunnymen, [they told their fans] yes its sexist’. The band got
involved with anti sexist projects in schools, joined in GLC’s war on sexism called ‘Girls are
cleverer than boys’. Bananarama would call out the press for fixating on their love lives.’
(Page 1991) Bananarama also occupied the contradictions of feminism at the time. They
performed at international beauty competitions, and also criticised topless models in tabloid
newspapers (Page 3) and attended the annual Women of the Year banquet. (Roy 1985) They
invented themselves, and styled themselves, and they managed themselves - all the things
that feminist cultural scholars have argued that made Madonna significant beyond pop
(Paglia 2012).

Bananarama were a useful foil for other gender performances and the difficulty of what
Marie Thompson (2016:86) has identified as the relationship between ‘feminised’ and
‘feminist’ music. The press would contrast photographs of Miss England, Miss UK, and Miss
Scotland in their swimwear with Bananarama who posed for the cameras in denims, woollen
sweaters and baggy shirts. They were criticised for allowing themselves to be exploited and
promoted with ‘nauseating imagery’. (Kupfermann 1987) Railton (2001:301) identified the
license to be crudely sexualised and sexist when talking about female musicians in the music
press. Bananarama were the stuff of masturbatory fantasy. One review said they should hand
out a free plastic glove with every single, and turn off the life support (Simper no date).
Siobhan Fahey remembered that ‘I was so angry and hurt. Hand out a wanking glove with
every single? Fuck. Off. How fucking dare you? We were young girls at the time, being
talked about like that.” (Quoted in Nicolson 2017). Paul Lester in Melody Maker also
described her as ‘gimpy dancer and erstwhile adolescent masturbatory fantasy’. (1992) They
were called out for being unsisterly, not being nice to the receptionist at Polygram, or friendly
enough to interviewers, and unfavourably compared to The Bangles who were ‘charming’.
(Lababedi 1986) Bananarama did not take the political significance of being an all-girl band
seriously enough for Britain’s long-standing feminist magazine Spare Rib, which criticised
them for making their music in ‘a vacuum’. Spare Rib thought that Bananarama, along with
Kylie Minogue, were ‘downright annoying’. They were criticised for not being the authors of their own exploitation and were simultaneously held responsible for it.

Bananarama understood the politics of what you are heard to say. At some points in their career they did not want to sing the word ‘love’ (Waterman 2000:194). Fahey rejected the lyrics in one of Waterman’s proposed recordings for being too capitalistic (Waterman 2000:195). They changed the words from ‘brother’ to sister on their acapella version of the gospel folk song often sung in school assemblies and Sunday School, ‘Michael Row Your Boat Ashore’ on Saturday morning kids TV.¹ Dallin explained that the song ‘Cruel Summer’ ‘played on the darker side [of the standard summer love song]. Instead ‘Cruel Summer’ conjured the oppressive heat and ‘misery of wanting to be with someone as the summer ticked by. We’ve all been there!’ (Rogers 2009) Music journalist Mitchell Cohen recognised it as a ‘a ”hands off, I’ve had it with men” song,’ in the lineage of the Shangri-Las. (1984) ‘The thing I’m proudest of’ [Fahey explained], is that we made quirky pop. The lyrics were much darker than you’d imagine. ‘Robert De Niro’s Waiting’ is about date rape’. (Nicholson 2017) The song was an exploration of the psychic cost of sexual violence, but most reviewers consistently described it as a generic fantasy about an Hollywood star chosen for no other reason than his ‘name scanned’. The press could not hear the content. Variety magazine assumed that the band were just were cashing in on general celebrity ‘on the back of [the success of the single by] Madness’s Michael Caine’.²

The videos produced during their SAW period, utilised the politics of camp with touchstones of popular cultural history to negotiate the impossibilities of owning their own sexual objectification. Andy Morahan who directed their videos between ‘I Heard a Rumour’ and ‘Preacher Man’ also produced Videos for Wham!, Elton John and The Communards. ‘Love in the First Degree’ was set as Jail House Rock. ‘I want you back’, cut them as the Supremes. ‘Cheers Then’ was a pastiche of the Sound of Music.³ We might see this period as their ‘glamourous turn’. The video for Venus was a series of pastiches of different Hollywood clichés, vampires, goddesses, French seductress, the devil in a red PVC cat suit. The video can hardly be taken seriously, particularly as each piece is intercut with the three girls

¹https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6jvammYE5bY
²“International Music Notes.” Variety, 1984, 28/03.
³https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=99mg440wRtI
dancing together with less than serious intent, girls dancing for each other, lots of eye contact between them with shared signature moves.

From ‘Venus’ onwards, the topless muscle man body count became a regular trope in their videos. Professional dancers were choreographed around the band’s bedroom dance moves. When Bananarama performed ‘Love in the First Degree’ at the 1988 BPI awards, they had ‘an army of greased-up musclemen behind [them]’. They exemplified and embodied the ways in which girls and gay communities have told their histories with their movements. They may dance like girls in their bedrooms, but their choreography footnoted the girl groups of the Sixties and Vogue moves and hi-NRG sounds from the gay disco scene (predating Madonna’s own appropriation of the scene in 1990) Their hi-NRG dance tracks averaged 130 bpm, whereas their pop hits slowed the energy down to 120bpm. (Stock 2004: 46). If you break down the band’s sales in different types of charts and publications, they appear even higher and even more often in dance and club charts, and in charts in the gay press than they do in the mainstream charts in the UK or US. So once again, it was not as though Bananarama didn’t make their mark in the cultural circuit in terms of production, but were unheard in the circuit between representation then and remembering now.

*Rough Justice*

One example of a political issue, closer to the traditional cultural circuit’s themes of military conflict and national identity, helps us to look at the work that goes into unhearing women’s personal political labour. There is much recognition of the role of other popular music in narratives of politics in the 80s. Unsurprisingly, the war in Northern Ireland was played out by musicians of all genres. Musical ‘Irishness’, in either content, form or style brought gravitas to popular music. Thus Paul McCartney, U2 Gary Moore, Elton John, the Cranberries, the Pogues, Van Morrison, Clannad, Corrs, Stiff Little Fingers, Christy Moore, the Dubliners, had a variety of ways of claiming or being being designated as Irish and ergo political. Political points could be earned through sonic and aesthetic Irishness, in lyrical content, public statements in the music press or claims of Irish heritage.

In the canon of political Irish music, there was little room for the pop girl’s critique. Political music about Northern Ireland had to have the right sort of voice behind it to be heard. Although Bananarama talked about Northern Ireland a lot in their interviews, when the group
produced explicitly political music they were unheard (Lababedi 1986). Like so many of the male musicians listed, and lauded, in the literature on Northern Ireland, Bananarama used their position in the mainstream music press to reach a different audience and raise awareness of the conflict there. Their friend and road manager Thomas Reilly was shot dead by a British soldier in Northern Ireland in August 1983. The younger brother of Fahey’s boyfriend, SLF’s second drummer, Jim Reilly, Thomas Reilly had been Bananarama’s road manager and slept on the sofa in the band’s shared council flat for six months when he had been setting himself up in London. Private Ian Thain was convicted of his murder. It was an important case as it was the first time a soldier had been convicted of murder whilst on patrol in Northern Ireland. The judge had rejected Thain’s defence that he had thought that Reilly had a gun. (Kay 1984)

Fahey told NME journalist that she ‘despises’ the sort of people who join the army’. Keren pinpointed the impact of the cultural representation of the Catholic community. They talked to Smash Hits about the impact of the press coverage of their attendance of Reilly’s funeral. The coverage combined demonising the victim and obsessing on Bananarama’s celebrity status. It was following this point that the band took more control over their self-representation. Reilly’s death changed their relationship with the press. They dedicated their second album ‘to our friend Thomas ‘Kidso’ Reilly. R.I.P’. The album track ‘King of the Jungle’ and their b-side ‘Rough Justice’ were both responses to their loss. ‘King of the Jungle’, told the story of the man behind the gun, who first makes a martyr of his target, before himself becoming a martyr for his own cause. NME journalist Susan Williams recognised the dissonance between the expectations of pop to be ‘fun’ and frivolous and the ‘grief and outrage’ the band experienced in the wake of Kidso’s death and the press coverage surrounding it. (Williams 1984)

Bananarama talked about these as political songs in the press. They told Smash Hits how they had ‘all br[oken] down and cried’. Fahey described ‘King of the Jungle’ as a song ‘about how ridiculous it is that eighteen year old boys are given guns and are endorsed by the government to go out and kill people’. (Bananarama 1984) The song has been briefly included in the histories of music about Northern Ireland, by musical sociologist Rolston. But in ways that demonstrated why it is that women singing pop to girls cannot stick in the cultural circuit of serious music about politics. He argued that the lyric’s references were so oblique that they audience were unlikely to pick up on the song’s meaning (2001:55). So although boy rock fans could decode the lyrics of Bono, SLF etc, Bananarama fans could not be trusted to understand
what a song called ‘Rough Justice’ was about. Instead Rolston reads it as a generic song about
kids being hassled on the street. (2001: 50). Yet, ‘Rough Justice’ was denied radio and TV play.
Some voices could be more comfortably ignored. ‘Rough Justice’ wasn’t political enough to
count, but it was political enough to be banned.

The press happily handed over the band’s comeuppance. The political releases failed to do as
well and two years without a hit, led them back to pop via SAW. ‘[T]hey’d have to be a much
better pop group than they are to get away with the pretentious rubbish they sprout in their
interviews’, wrote Lababedi in Creem before going to the default question of which rock star
Kerin will marry’ (1986). The work to unremember Banarama’s political intent, replaced their
agenda with the heteronomic fantasy; that a girl only matters because of the men she associates
with; whether that is Terry Hall or Pete Waterman.

**Conclusion**

My conclusion therefore is to remind you of Bananarama and acknowledge the active
unremembering that has been directed at the most successful girl band of their time. We don’t
remember Bananarama’s critique of the music industry, the politics of representation, or even
of the conflict in Northern Ireland because we are not given a space to. Their traces in the
cultural circuit have reinscribed that work to unhear them, then and now. The more successful
Bananarama were, the harder it has been to remember their agency; that they were not
puppets, and that they wrote their own songs. Niche post punk DIY authenticity was one
thing, but credit for actual commercial and popular success was unimaginable, it had to be
unknown.iii Pop provides brief moments where girls are allowed to get on stage and see
themselves reflected there (Railton 2001: 330). Even when utilising every new form of
media, leaving traces in as many places as possible and when they have managed to get past
the gatekeepers, the music industry, the music journalists, these moments are glimmers of
history indeed, and need to be grasped over and over again. Their musicking left traces in
every format, in every medium, in sound, style and performance, thus they have had to be
unheard in each. It is not that they, and women and girls before them, have not spoken, have
not said things that matter, nor does women’s cultural production only have value when it is
officially designated important. It is not that women do not speak. It is that if their words do

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[iii](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cFGgBpmJpks)
stick in the cultural circuit, they are unheard. ‘Women’s silence in many places is so accepted that many do not even notice it’ (1991: 394) wrote Houston and Kramarae in 1991. Dale Spender and others have reminded us that whilst women have been muted historically, they have also spoken and written themselves into visibility. If women’s humour, music, sisterhood and aesthetics can be trivialized they can be unheard and unseen. (Spender & Bardin 1985; Robinson 2018; Houston 1991:395) Bananarama teach us that we might not be able to solve the never-ending circuits of finding a voice and being unheard, but the glimpses through which women see each other can seep into the cultural circuit if we look for them. We can listen to them again, in singing together, with the sisterhood of the eyeroll, and the dancefloor mentality, both then, and now.

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