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## Will that be cash or consciousness: The Moral Lepers discuss feminism and the music scene

Diamond, Sara

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THE  
MORAL LEPERS  
DISCUSS  
FEMINISM  
AND THE  
MUSIC SCENE

WILL  
THAT BE  
CASH  
OR  
CONSCIOUSNESS

AN INTERVIEW BY SARA DIAMOND

The Moral Lepers is a five piece all-women's band, which has been together for two years playing clubs, concerts and benefits in Vancouver, Victoria and Seattle. In December 1982 they released a six song e.p., after which guitarist Bonnie Williams left the band and Janet Lumb joined on sax. Elaine Stef (guitar), Rachel Melas (bass), Conny Nowe (drums), Janet Lumb (sax)

and Marian Lydbrooke (vocals, percussion and synthesizer) will be contributing to a *Women's Compilation Album* (produced by *Voicespondence*) and will be performing in *WOMENSBANDS*, a women's music series sponsored by *A-Space* in Toronto. Sara Diamond interviewed the *Moral Lepers* on August 31st at Conny's house in Vancouver, B.C.

SARA: What kind of themes recur in your lyrics?

MARIAN: I suppose I write mostly about things that other people aren't writing about, a view of women's experiences which comes out of my own experience, and some anti-nuke stuff. Rachel writes lyrics too.

RACHEL: Once a year I write a song that's good.

MARIAN: I do songs like "Family Love", which have to do with violence and abuse in the family, which isn't written about that much — and is something experienced by women primarily. I don't know any other band that has written about the abuse of women and children.

SARA: Quite a few of them encourage it.

MARIAN: Immigration is another [issue]. And after the arrests of the *Vancouver Five*, I wrote "Burden of Dreams", inspired by a Werner Her-

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Barbara Pratt

CONNY: "We all work part-time or are on welfare and we're scavengers..."

zog movie. It's about how we have these creative visions and we fall over ourselves trying to get them achieved. I suppose it's basically, 'Is this what we're living for?' Sometimes I feel like a maniac trying to achieve stuff and not being able to... being totally bogged down by everyday details that

drive me crazy. But I have great faith in dreams — I suppose that's what the song is about too. Five years ago I was sitting in London and I had this idea, I really wanted to be in a good all women's rock band, and I had the belief that I could do it. And now I'm in a very good all women's band!

SARA: Do you have favorite songs, either as a band or as an individual?

ELAINE: We've got some songs that have lasted a long time. We are able to continue to play them, and not get sick of them at all which in my mind makes for a good song. Each time it's a challenge to play it.

SARA: Which songs are those?

ELAINE: For me, "Music is your Body", "Beryl Bean", and "China Rag".

SARA: Which do you write first, the music or the lyrics?

MARIAN: I suppose the music starts and then I write some lyrics to

**Uncle Jim, he grabs your dress,  
He wants to fondle and carress  
Dad says you're telling lies  
Mum's suffering emotional stress.**

—excerpt from *Family Love*



Barbara Pratt

**MARIAN:** "It's nice to see punks and dykes and all these people in the same room..."

it. It has happened that I've written lyrics and then we write music to it, or I fit them into a riff that's suitable. Some of them have a melody line of their own. The lyrics just come into my head, the music invokes them. I prefer it if the music can make me want to write some lyrics.

Sometimes I try to avoid just writing something that comes off the top of my head; I try to be a bit more conscious about it. I try and write lyrics that people can understand, that aren't too obscure.

**SARA:** *Do you work as a consciously political band? Do you try to develop anything in people's experience of your music beyond sheer enjoyment?*

**MARIAN:** I think that happens. I don't know if everybody sees it that way. Five women getting up on stage and playing music, the way that we work together cooperatively, is definitely something that comes from my political background.

**CONNY:** We are five politically conscious people who conduct ourselves in a politically conscious way. This comes out in our music as much as anything else.

**MARIAN:** I've been a political activist for fifteen years on and off. When I got into music it was a really useful release for me.

**ELAINE:** As a band we work as a political unit as well. We're concerned about certain issues and we have done benefits ever since our inception. Our first gig was a *Women Against Prisons* gig, to help raise money for a bail fund for women prisoners, because there's a lot of women prisoners who, for instance, can't get a few hundred dollars bail together and end up in Oakalla [B.C. prison] and their kids get taken

away from them while they're waiting for their trial to come up. Just because they're poor.

**MARIAN:** And we've done benefits for Lesbian Information Line; The Service, Office and Retail Workers Union of Canada; eviction parties; a squatters' benefit, *Free the Five* — we've done lots of those things and we're going to do more!

**SARA:** *Could you review the issue of the Vancouver Five. It's clearly a central concern of yours.*

**MARIAN:** Five people have been arrested and charged with the bombing of the B.C. Hydro sub-station, the Red Hot Video [video porn outlets], conspiracy to sabotage the military base at Cold Lake — where the Cruise Missile is about to be tested — and other charges related to environmental, anti-nuke and women's issues. They've also now been charged with the Litton Systems bombings, where the parts for the Cruise Missile are made.

Their trial is happening right now in B.C. They're having to go through four trials here in B.C. It's going to be one of the most important political events of our time.

**SARA:** *So the benefits have been part of a defense campaign to get them out of jail and the charges dropped.*

**MARION:** The legal fees are huge, as well as costs for things such as mailing and printing. We need hundreds of thousands of dollars.

**CONNY:** It's basically consciousness raising.

### ***Will that be Cash or Consciousness?***

**SARA:** *How do you see playing benefits and playing the commercial market fitting together?*

**MARIAN:** We like playing benefits. Sometimes we feel that we haven't really been appreciated financially; people expect us to play for free because it's a benefit and we have been a bit pissed off. That's improved recently, now we usually get a set

amount of money.

**SARA:** *That is an issue for a lot of political artists and musicians, because there's an assumption sometimes that if it's creative work, it doesn't take hard labour to put together.*

*Where do you locate yourselves commercially? Do you try to work for money and where?*

**RACHEL:** A band needs money; to record and to do projects and to travel, so we have to generate money somehow or it comes out of our pockets.

**CONNY:** We play in commercial venues also, but we don't want to compromise ourselves to the point of playing in clubs where people expect us to look a certain way or act a certain way. We're totally willing to play in clubs where people are looking for something different and they have to pay to get in and aren't necessarily looking for something political.

**RACHEL:** They're going to get it whether they like it or not if they come near us.

**CONNY:** They are looking for something musically non-commercial.

**RACHEL:** Being in a band though, you also have the pressures of the public to contend with because the public wants a certain thing from you and they want to hear songs they're familiar with and they want to hear them over and over, plus you have a gig happening maybe in a week or three days and you're really dissatisfied with what you're doing and you want to be writing some songs or jamming or getting into some new area, but you have this gig in three days so you have to practice for it.

**MARIAN:** It's a constant struggle between doing gigs and writing new material because it takes time with new material and as soon as you get a gig BANG! you've got to practice.

**SARA:** *Where have you been performing in the last while?*

**ELAINE:** We're going to play in Seattle for the third time tomorrow and we've played Victoria a few

times, as well as Vancouver. And we have a gig in Toronto in October.

**RACHEL:** We hope to have a gig in New York soon too because we brought a band up from New York, *3 Teens Kill Four*, and did a gig with them at City Space: one of them runs a club down there so they said that they'd give us a gig there.

**SARA:** *Do you consider your music Canadian in its content?*

**CONNY:** I'm personally not so nationalistic about whether what I do fits into what people in northern Alberta like. We're North Americans and we are very much a product of that culture. Well, Marian's from England, but she's been here for four years. I was born in Holland, Janet's Chinese, Rachel's from New York — I would say that we are North Americans.

**RACHEL:** I think we're really west coast. We're so isolated out here because we're a thousand miles from the nearest Canadian city. We're isolated, we're in the basement. We create our own stuff. We're not listening to synthopopbands.

**ELAINE:** There's no formula to what we're doing, we just cook it up in the basement.

**CONNY:** I asked one of the people from *3 Teens*, "Well, how do you find the West Coast scene in comparison with what's going on in New York?" because there's 13 million people in New York and 1300 bands. They told me that they found it very innocent and unto itself. The fact that we're bushed here doesn't stop us from being creative. There's no "Well, this is what they're doing now so we better go and create that guitar sound." I don't think that we're really that influenced although all of us have listened to different kinds of music like reggae, African, blues, punk, British and American pop.

**MARIAN:** I think that we're more or less aware of the state of the art, though. That's important; we're not doing something that was done ten years ago.

**SARA:** *One of the things that has been said about the Vancouver scene is that it's heavily influenced by the American West Coast. Do you agree?*

**CONNY:** I don't think that's true. There's a big hardcore scene down there and that's not true here. I get a decayed feeling from some of the stuff going on in Los Angeles. The city is so decayed and dirty and I think it really



"Collectively things take longer, but in the long run it's a success." (l to r) Rachel, Conny, Janet, Marian, Elaine

## Janet Lumb talks to Sara later...

**SARA:** *How did you join the Moral Lepers?*

**JANET:** I ran into them on the street and they asked me to come to a practice and whether I'd be interested in joining the band. I came to the practice and I stayed. I really hadn't thought about joining them before although I had a lot of respect for them as musicians.

**SARA:** *What was it like coming into a band that had been together for a long time?*

**JANET:** I came in at a good time. A band is like a relationship. The first year and a half to two years are like a honeymoon and then you start to run into blocks. If you can get through them you can move into new levels and complexity. The *Moral Lepers* has had the best of both worlds in the sense that they were together for that period, took a break and reformed. They've been able to build on the past but they have the freshness of a new band. I was doing well, then about a month ago I went through a hard period for awhile. The social scene that I'm used to and that of the *Lepers* is quite different, both in terms of friends and the music that I've exposed myself to. I went through some alienation.

**SARA:** *How is it different playing essentially rock music instead of the*

*music you were playing, with more of a folk influence?*

**JANET:** When I joined I was really excited because I thought that there would be less structure to follow and I could be more creative because the music is so complex. Instead it seemed that if anything, I had to be tighter in what I played in order to follow. Now I'm able to let go more. I have yet to come to the band with a piece of music to start a melody line. I'm looking forward to being able to do that.

**SARA:** *Is it different playing in the Lepers rather than a band oriented towards the women's community?*

**JANET:** In the sense that the *Moral Lepers* are all feminists: no! But I'm playing for a different audience than I'm used to—more punks and in different places.

**SARA:** *What kind of politics do you bring to music?*

**JANET:** When I write songs they tend to be about the personal political process. The ways that individual women experience and change their lives.

**SARA:** *Do you work for money outside the band?*

**JANET:** I've been a childcare worker for eight years now. I'm losing my job because of the cutbacks in the new budget, so I'll have to do something else.



**I saw a boy with a plastic gun  
He was playing war to have some fun  
He said: I'm only eight will they let me fight  
When they drop the bomb will it be alright?**

—excerpt from *Plastic Gun*



Barbara Pratt

**JANET:** "When I write songs, they tend to be about the personal, political process..."

influenced people. Look at that film that came out of there, *The Decline of Western Civilization*. All those bands are so stoned out and drunk that you couldn't hear a word that they were saying into the microphone.

**SARA:** Do you think that you could break into the commercial market?

**RACHEL:** I don't know. We do covers, we do other people's music, people recognize that music and they like that; we're not a bad dance band actually.

**MARIAN:** Our sound could be commercial though. I think we're not particularly marketable, as a band, which I'm glad about.

**RACHEL:** We get really tired of playing songs although everybody likes them. We start wanting to do something else and not do our covers and our schlocky songs, so that sort of prevents you from being able to fill a whole night, which is a real commercial trip, doing three sets, six nights a week.

**MARIAN:** We would want control over a record that we put out, and that's not okay in the commercial market.

**ELAINE:** The commercial market — are we talking about the Top Ten?

**CONNIE:** I'm not interested in that. I would prefer to do a record on a local alternative label and make that competitive with the commercial market, as opposed to going through the commercial market. That way, maybe ten years from now, all the small alternative labels will be right up there, be interesting, and have a large audience like major labels. *MO DA MU, Alternative Tentacles* and whoever would be right up there.

**MARIAN:** Or like *Gang of Four*, that managed to record on Warner

*Brothers* and still have control over their material.

**RACHEL:** They're playing our record in England.

**CONNY:** We're trying to get our record pressed again and released in England as a domestic release, as opposed to them importing it from us. One of the things that happens to bands sometimes that are as isolated as we are, is that people on the other side of the world hear their records by accident and they generate this following that's 10,000 miles away which is great. But at the same time we'd like to have a lot of local and Canadian support.

**ELAINE:** We're talking about doing a tour down the west coast next spring. A lot of people come to our gigs here, but you can only do that so long.

**CONNY:** The music industry is so controlled by men. It's hard for a group of five women to function in that reality. We say that on one hand we'd like to support ourselves and make a living through our music, but at the same time we're not willing to compromise ourselves, to wear tight little dresses so that we could make more money.

**MARIAN:** What ever happened to the Gogos?

**CONNY:** Look at the Slits. On their cover they take their clothes off and do mud wrestling.

**RACHEL:** We got our model for our last cover out of the graveyard, made of stone, a carbon-monoxide covered dead statue, that's fashion for you.

**CONNY:** It's hard for us to make a dent in the music industry in the sense that we want to do things the way we want to right now — not the way they want us to do it. So we cover ground slowly. We're extremely limited by our funds. We're not in a position where we can do a high quality recording, production and release, which we would like to do.

**SARA:** What would you ideally like to do?

**CONNY:** I would like to see us make a sixteen track recording with

good graphics and good sound quality and press two or three thousand copies and distribute them in the States, Canada and Europe.

**ELAINE:** I think of the music industry as those humungous corporations who give you a contract and you have to put out ten albums whether you feel like it or not in five years. The only way that alternative stuff gets out in the major media is if you sign in blood, or if somebody somewhere sees that they're going to make some money off of radical stuff.

**MARIAN:** Maybe it's time for there to be more women's bands.

**RACHEL:** We've got to hang in there and try to be more and more creative. I think that we will definitely make our dent on the market, whatever that's worth. Meanwhile, I'm just doing things that I want to do.

**CONNY:** Obviously in the future we'd love to have a record and have 20,000 copies out and if that needs to be distributed by a major label we'd love to have that kind of help, but we do want artistic control. But the way that the music industry is going right now with digital recordings — it's such high tech stuff that we aren't even in a position to know about that.

**ELAINE:** I don't know if I'd love it. As a band, some good things are happening for us, and if we stay together and keep doing things more attention is generated, but I think that we're obscure and that we're probably just going to be obscure in more places.

**SARA:** Getting back to this issue of high tech. There seem to be art forms based on a live audience that are a kind of counter to mass culture. As the technology gets more capital intensive, a lot of that may be excluded from recording, but that may, in turn, create more space for a 'live scene' precisely because the music is not available in recorded forms.

## **Punk, Dykes and Other Tykes**

**SARA:** My perceptions are that the *MORAL LEPERS* have had a positive and fairly strong impact on the punk

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scene and people who listen to alternative music, in terms of opening a real space for women musicians and women's political music. Do you agree?

ELAINE: We played in Victoria with the Dead Kennedys. It was a benefit for the Five and one of us heard from somebody who lived there that there was not one woman musician within the punk scene in Victoria. They liked us, we were playing with two local bands as well, but I noticed a lot of women right up front watching us play.

CONNY: It's 1983 and people have been pogoing now for five years. Punk is alive and well but at the same time all those punks' girlfriends are a little tired by now of having their boyfriends slam-dancing back and forth while they sit at the sides to keep their bodies from getting bruised. It's a very violent male thing.

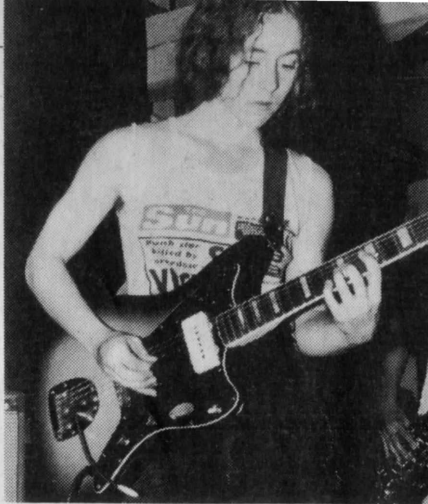
ELAINE: The music that we do reflects our lives; relaxation might not be the actual reflection of your life. That's what punk is about — that this is not a very relaxing time to be alive in the world, that things are really heavy and flipping out. To be sixteen in 1983 — it's a hard time to be a young person in the world. It's an emotional response to being alive now. We're as much involved in that kind of feeling and relationship to the world as we can be in doing what we do.

CONNY: Music comes from a creative force, not out of being relaxed and having time to be creative. It's striving to express yourself and often times it comes out of the oppressed and minorities.

MARIAN: We've been some kind of a bridge between the punk and the women's movement to some extent. A lot of women started coming out to gigs to see us and rubbing shoulders with punks. There's really a diverse audience. We've had some gigs that have had every type of person imaginable there. It's nice to see punks and dykes and all these people coexist in the same room together and everything's fine. And they have a good time.

CONNY: We're not trying to win punks over as an audience. If they listen to what we have to say and like our music and who we are, I think that's great. We've covered ground if we've succeeded in doing that, and in bringing different audiences together.

RACHEL: We used to be a lot



Barbara Pratt

ELAINE: "I don't think a dictator would survive in this band..."

punkier ourselves. We still have a punky attitude, but our music is getting a lot more varied. It's getting more complex.

MARIAN: I think the great thing about punk is that people who could never play an instrument before could just get up on a stage and do basic 4/4 time; that's how I got started. Everybody else was doing it so I could do it too. As you play for longer and as you get better, your different musical backgrounds come out and you get more complex, more harmonic and melodic and change time signatures.

RACHEL: We don't have any stuff that's just one groove; we don't have any one-riff songs. Maybe we should have one.

MARIAN: The punk movement did help to launch us, combined with the women's movement.

SARA: Do you think that you've encouraged other women to play music?

CONNY: Yes. We've had women walk up to us and say, "If they can do it, I can do it too", and two days later they're going down to the pawn shop and buying a bass or drum sticks.

MARIAN: There's a new all woman band that's started called the *Industrial Waste Banned*.

RACHEL: There's *Bolero Lava*.

CONNY: I got a lot of my inspiration from seeing your band *The Visitors*, (Rachel, Marian and Annie). I didn't know anything about playing drums and I was inspired by seeing other women.

MARIAN: It's great to have that community of women musicians, to swap notes and support each other, that's what we need to build up a bit, it's sort of small.

SARA: Do you work with women technical people?

CONNY: We do, but we also work with men. We try to work with someone who we get along with and trust and who knows what they're doing, whether male or female. I'm more temperamentally inclined to work with women if they are qualified.

SARA: Are you trying to learn the sound technology that surrounds getting a record out or your music to the audience?

CONNIE: Being a sound technician is a very specialized field and I'm more concerned with being a better drummer.

ELAINE: I learned a lot through the process of recording our EP. Connie, Bonnie, Cece and I worked on producing and mixing it in the studio and there were both good and bad things about it. To make our sound better requires learning what's available in recording technology to create the effect that we want.

SARA: What kind of impact have you had on male musicians in terms of their perceptions of women as musicians?

ELAINE: Some men are threatened by women doing anything, and some think it's great; it varies. The male musicians I know respect our band and the amount of energy we put into it.

CONNIE: I've had a lot of support from male musicians. I know men drummers who are really excited about women playing drums.

MARIAN: Rachel and Conny have had a lot of influence because they play in other bands and with men, and they have had a lot of influence on their music.

CONNY: One of the men in *Junco Run* has said that he'll never play in a band without women.

RACHEL: It's so unbalanced. It doesn't reflect the population of the world. These white male people under thirty on the stage time and time again, it just doesn't make sense — it's ridiculous. It doesn't reflect the reality of life.

ELAINE: It does in a certain sense. It depends on where you're looking. It's not the reality of my life.

RACHEL: It's changing. I was at a gig recently where there were six bands. Three of them had women musicians in them. Some of them were singers, but most of them were playing instruments.

SARA: What other local music scenes have you had a relationship

with, in terms of working with both musicians and audiences?

CONNY: We've played at a place called City Space several times, which is a privately run artists' space that presents local and out of town musicians and has some theatre happening. It's an alternative to either a commercial or political venue. In that place we play with all kinds of bands and for different people.

SARA: Your music lately seems more coherent, rhythmical and tighter. Do you feel that that's true?

RACHEL: Our song writing is getting better over the years.

MARIAN: If what you're trying to say is that we're more funky, I think that's true.

CONNY: The band has been through a few ups and downs and basically the rhythm section has stayed together through thick and thin. Especially since the band has gotten back together as a new format, we've been writing more as a band as opposed to a person writing a song and presenting it.

ELAINE: We're more of an ensemble in our current form. It's not like you take a solo here and it's my turn to take a solo there. There's space given to everyone to do what they're doing.

MARIAN: We're getting away from the one person being the front person. I'm still doing much of the singing, but I'm not so much the "singer of the band".

CONNY: We're not side musicians backing up a singer, we are a band of five people that all play an equal role. Marian's playing synthesizer now, so we're all playing instruments.

RACHEL: I'm singing as much as I used to, but I'm doing more back up vocals.

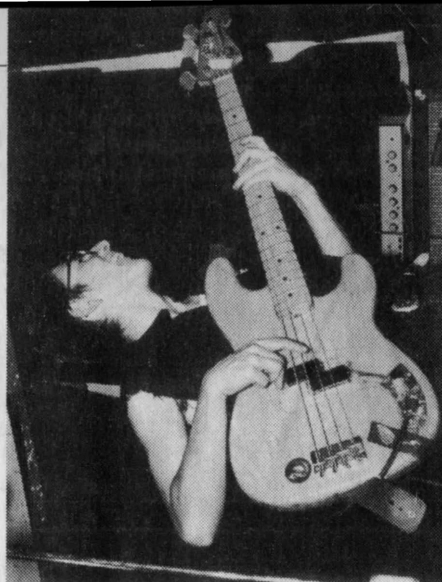
## Working Together

SARA: How do you work as a collective?

ELAINE: It's like being in a daycare full of hungry children.

MARIAN: Some of the collectives I've worked in have been everybody hating each other and a lot of angst. We have problems, we have fights, but I think on the whole that we want to get on with it, and we really have to get on with it if we have a gig coming up.

CONNY: We're at the point now where things are snowballing in the sense that we've put out one record and we've done this recording for a



RACHEL: "We don't have any one-riff songs..."  
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compilation album of women's bands. We tried to produce it ourselves and none of us are experienced producers and we all have our own ideas on how we want to produce things, so that's a bit of a problem. It takes us a little longer than usual because of trying to please everybody and then we do it once and listen to it again and decide things aren't right and we have to do it again. Collectively things take longer, but in the long run it's a success.

RACHEL: It's much better to have everybody have their hand in it than have one moron who's a scapegoat and a frontperson. A lot of bands have this one human being who writes all the songs and all the lyrics and lays it down, produces it and then you shit on that person.

ELAINE: I don't think a dictator would survive in this band.

SARA: Your band has been together for about two years; that's a fairly long life for a band. Has the process of working together gotten smoother? If so, how?

CONNY: We've had one member change; Janet joined six months ago.

RACHEL: I was getting into this thing for awhile, where we'd have some kind of issue happening, and my ego would get so attached to my particular side of the issue, it would become impossible for me to disassociate myself from the thing at hand. Like if we were trying to decide whether or not to do a gig or play a song in a set, it would be like "this is MY part in this and if it gets put down, it's ME, it's a blow to me." I've really been trying to get away from that lately, so I go, "Well this is the situation," and step back and go, "What is better

for the group? Alright, I really like this song, I like singing it but I have to put aside what I really like and not add my personal existence onto it."

MARIAN: It's hard to replace an individual ego with a collective one. It's hard because it's obviously a collection of personal egos that makes the Lepers good and if you assert yourself, you really believe something should happen and you're excited. Sometimes it can be really hard. I like to try and step back a bit.

CONNY: That is a hard lesson that we've learned and are still learning every day.

SARA: Does each member bring a certain kind of influence with them?

ELAINE: Depending on what's happening with any particular person in the band at any given time, we throw in new influences. A lot of what I play sounds semi-classical to me. I thought that I had gotten rid of a lot of that but it came back, so it gets in.

SARA: Do you decide to go in a certain direction with your music, to study and develop?

CONNY: No, we just jam on the different ideas and it moulds itself.

MARIAN: I think the idea of doing a live gig does actually influence us to a certain extent; there are times when we may think that a piece of music is a little too mellow. If we're going in that direction we'll think, "Well, people can't dance to this or people are really going to get bored with this."

ELAINE: Or we're gonna get bored. That's more where I'm at. There are certain things that I want to avoid, like being too commercial.

CONNY: I'd say that we're definitely into reaching a wide audience, which is greater than just a women's audience. Maybe we lose some of the women's audience because we're a bit raucous. But I think they're getting used to us. Initially a lot of people didn't like us because of that.

MARIAN: We've broken ground through that. We've actually convinced some women that rock music isn't so terrible just by watching us. We're not the only ones that have done it but I think that we've helped.

SARA: Can you support yourselves playing music?

MARIAN: We can't support ourselves as a band.

CONNY: We all work part-time or on welfare and we're scavengers.

RACHEL: We eat from big gardens and garbage cans. Sarah Diamond