



Picture the scene, it's 1978 at the Hope and Anchor, the filthy North London venue, where a year before the Stranglers laid down their legendary bootleg. Johnny Rubbish, a twenty something, looking thirty something, try hard in a custom leather jacket, is spitting introductions like a bad vaudeville routine. A tubby kid mounts the stage. She wears a garish trouser suit and braces, and her curly hair is slammed down under a black trilby. The crowd heckles, and in a dirty East End accent, she tell them "Shut ya' mouth", and yells out, "Art-I-ficial!"

Janet Street Porter filmed the gig, an early X-Ray Spex show, for London Weekend Television; interviewing a shy and giggish 'Poly Styrene' (Marion Joan Elliot), then a baby faced 21 year old, on the eve of the bands debut album, 'Germ Free Adolescents', and the punk rock big time. "I know I'm artificial, but don't put the blame on me, I was reared with appliances, In a consumer society." Before Minor threat, before Dead Kennedy's and Earth

Crisis, before Rage against the Machine, before political punk became a cliché, a short hand for boringly earnest xFuckinx tatts and bat wielding Youth Crew militants, came a little known new wave punk band, with socially conscious lyrics and big ambitions. This is the story of that band, of it's head, a mixed race girl and a mess of contradictions, a trained opera singer and rampant creative, who would ultimately retreat from the world of consumerism, into the mystic promise of Krishna and the anonymity of the East. X-Ray Spex would produce just two LPs, and be all but forgotten; but in their brief time together the band, considered a fluffy novelty in the anarchic milieu that birthed the Sex Pistols, the Clash, the Specials and the Buzzcocks, would have an influence greater than many of their more 'credible' contemporaries.

"Wanna be instamatic." Poly sings, "Wanna be a frozen pea. Wanna' be dehydrated, in a consumer society." The tape is grainy and heavily interlaced, the crowd melting to a muddy sludge, but the band rise up, day-glo on the screen, pastel blurs streaking from the darkness. Her voice is husky, dark and cataclysmic, "Introducing worker clone, as our subordinated slave, his expertise proficiency will surely dig our grave." She drops words, keeping pace with the frenetic melody, yelling out like a proto Jello Biafra. Later, tilting her head shyly under the gaze of St Porter's camera, Poly flashes a knowing grin. She's well aware of the commodification already turning punk into just another product. Poly has

no pretensions "I just like to dress in bright colours and things like...Jolly." Her humour is a joyous counterpoint to the the bleak vision of her contemporaries. "I wanna be freeeee," she says, voice rich with self mockery. Street Porter, searching for feminist credibility, elicits a reluctant "What I write, you know, I think should be good, or should mean something anyway, should be relevant to whats happening now." Relevance was a feat X-Ray Spex managed easily, and their stark unadorned lyrics remain as current today, three decades later. The band seem to have sprung onto the music scene, fully formed. After only six rehearsals, a recording from their second ever gig appeared on 1977's 'Live from the Roxy' mix LP. They were to disappear just as swiftly, only two years later, with their first album still charting, and the record buying public readier than ever for their minty fresh brand of agit-punk.

As with Vivian Westwood's stable of pet punk rockers, X-Ray Spex unique visual impression was far from accidental. Poly had a stall on the Kings Road, designing and selling her own ironically synthetic clothes. Like the situationists of the 60's, Poly was an expert at detournement, the art of subverting the cultures iconic imagery. "If somebody said I was a sex symbol, I'd shave me 'ead tomorrer," she told 'Sounds' in '77, instantly turning herself into one. The Spex quickly built up a following, gaining a weekly residency at Chelsea's hip 'Man in the Moon' theatre. Lacking the obvious dub and reggae influences of later two-tone bands didn't stop them including a heavy dose of saxophone in their music. While escaping the defeatism of their contemporaries couldn't prevent their lyrics from being timely and even prescient. Poly's songs swing from the dangers of cloying consumerism, to genetic engineering, obsessive compulsive disorder, and media constructed narcissism; somehow always managing the perfect political pop hat trick of hummability, topicality, and originality. The Spex signed with Virgin to release their first single 'Oh Bondage, Up Yours!', and EMI for the LP 'Germ Free Adolescents'. After Janet Street Porters intellectual seal of approval, and an appearance on John Peels much lamented Radio One sessions, the Spex got their big break; a two week residency in CBGB's, a club that served as the beating heart of the nascent New York punk scene.

"Do you see yourself on the TV screen? / Do you see yourself in the magazines? / When you see yourself / does it make you scream?" Much of Poly's colourful aesthetic and politicised rhetoric would be borrowed later, by the 90's Riot Grrrl movement; while X-Ray Spex upbeat 'musical' sound, influenced much of the melodic punk and ska that was to follow. Yet somehow the band were doomed from the start. Their anti-consumerist bent and positive thoughtfulness, couldn't gel with a commercialising, darkening 80's punk scene. Tired of the jiggery pokery of their manager Falcon Stuart, and disagreements about their future direction, Poly left the band in 1979, and though a new line up struggled on for a few months, without their leading light and creative inspiration, the Spex were doomed. After leaving the Spex, Poly went on to produce her own music, and to join the International Society for Krishna Consciousness - rumour has it she's there, somewhere in the backing vocals of Boy George's Krishna kitsch flop 'Bow Down Mister' - to which she and her husband still belong. The band briefly reformed in '95 to produce a new LP, 'Conscious Consumer' (in an eerie quirk of fate, touring and promotion of the album had to end when Poly was dragged under a fire engine in central London). It wasn't the same. Like 'The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust', or Bjork's 'Debut', 'Germ Free Adolescents' is hooked in time and space, a memory of a moment of vibrant creative anarchy that has long since disappeared.

It's 1978, and the crowd at CBGB's are belligerent, perhaps



expecting Malcolm McLaren's media demon juggernaut 'The Sex Pistols,' to fire off a trade mark drunken set. Poly's on stage in a leather apron. She's curled her hair in 50's schoolgirl ringlets, pinned a couple of dominoes to her lapel, and hung a golliwog doll around her neck. Into the decades chaos, over the puking and fighting and fucking, she yells out "Some people think little girls should be seen and not heard, but I think..." And there's a pause, the crowd pull in closer - sure Siouxsie and the Banshees play here all the time, but a front-woman is still a novelty - and Poly yells again, "Oh Bondage, Up yours! One, two three, four," and the Spex break into their furious sax driven hit. The place goes wild. For a moment it seems the kids are listening. It seems like somewhere in the nihilism and self destruction of late 70's punk, there's room for a little black girl from Brixton with something important to say. Poly flaps her arms and bounces around the stage, hot and hip despite herself, leans into the mic "Chain-store chain-smoke / I consume you all / Chain-gang chain-mail / I don't think at all." Stop, freeze frame. Hold her steady now. There she is up above, mid-verse, iconic in black and white, twenty one forever.

**Gareth Stack**