Journal of American Studies of Turkey
42 (2015): 249-297

Book Reviews

Violence Girl: East L.A. Rage to Hollywood Stage. Alice Bag. Port Townsend, WA: Feral House, 2011. p/bk 384 pp. ISBN 9781936239122. Price $17.95.

Alice Bag's memoir, *Violence Girl: East L.A. Rage to Hollywood Stage* (2011), is an enlightening piece that recounts the author's life growing up as a Mexican American in East LA, to becoming one of the most innovative punk musicians during the 1970s. Alice's biography is not only an entertaining and historical page turner, it is also a revelatory piece that sheds light on the often ignored influence that women and people of color had on punk music. One of the book's' many strengths lies in Alice's effort to contest the conclusive notion that the innovators of punk were all white and male and that New York City and London were the only cities at the forefront of the movement. In fact, one of the main lessons that can be taken from Alice's sincere and broad-minded autobiography is that life is full of dualities and is more multifaceted than society often acknowledges.

Alice Bag (Alicia Armendariz) was born in Los Angeles, California in 1958 to parents who had migrated to the United States from Mexico. The first part of *Violence Girl* consists of Alice's experience growing up in a Spanish speaking household, her parent's thriftiness due to their poverty, and the domestic violence that occurred between her father and mother. One of the central themes of *Violence Girl* is Alice's family. Ironically, Alice was very close to her father: a man who physically and mentally abused Alice's mother. As an adolescent Alice describes herself as a social outcast, fat, and nerdy and it isn't until she discovers her love of rock music (primarily Elton John) that she begins to form her true identity. As Alice's love of music grows, she meets other like-minded girls and they start an all-female band. The rest of the book is centered on Alice's involvement with punk. In 1977 Alice and Patricia Morrison formed what would be Alice's most well-known band: The Bags. As the punk scene reaches its height, Alice finds herself wrapped up in a fast paced lifestyle laden with

alcohol and drugs. Ultimately, she searches for peace and reconciliation with her father and eventually discovers her love for teaching.

What is so compelling about Alice's memoir is that it focuses on the influence that female musicians had on the punk scene in the 1970s. After attending a Patti Smith concert in 1976, Alice learns that what makes Smith's performance so provocative is her "raw sexual androgyny" (136) and not a sweet voice and a conventional appearance. As the founder and lead singer of The Bags, Alice is also credited for being one of the first punk singers to adopt a hard core style of singing. As Alice explains, the group's' music was "loud, belligerent, and frenetic" (283). Alice's uncharacteristically feminine approach to performance and feminist philosophy are what make *Violence Girl* such a powerful and liberating read.

Another positive aspect of the book is the effort that Alice makes to bring attention to the overlooked importance that non-Anglo culture had on the punk scene. As a child, Alice Bag grew up speaking only Spanish in her home and it wasn't until she went to public school that she learned English. As a family pastime, the Armendariz family would go to the movie theater to see classic Mexican films. Actors and singers such as Pedro Infante and Lucha Villa influenced Alice's music and she accredits her "emotive style of singing" (42) to them. Often the individuals that are most famous and acknowledged for being the founders of the evolution of punk are white men. However, Alice successfully shows in *Violence Girl* that it is also hispanic women that deserve to be recognized as the early founders of punk.

As much as Alice, her family, friends and fellow punks make up the long list of characters in *Violence Girl*, it is also the city of Los Angeles that is one of the principal characters in Alice's memoir. Alice skillfully brings the reader into the Los Angeles punk scene by vividly describing places such as Hollywood, Whittier, the Canterbury apartments, and the Sunset Strip. Furthermore, just as Alice reveals the forgotten influence that women of color had on the punk movement, she also aims to inform the reader that LA was a burgeoning cultural Mecca in the 1970s despite its reputation as a superficial, celebrity playground.

There are life events and anecdotes in *Violence Girl* that are repetitive and make the memoir longer than it needs to be. However, criticizing Alice's memoir for not always following standard writing techniques would

be like criticizing a punk song for not adhering to the traditional criterion of composing music. In fact, what is admirable about Alice's autobiography is that it was written similarly to a punk song: straightforward, energetic, the chapters are short just like most punk songs, and Alice is not afraid to throw in her share of vulgarity.

Despite the many serious events that occurred in Alice's life, she is a woman with a witty sense of humor and this is noted throughout *Violence Girl.* Her ability to address her disturbing past while simultaneously maintaining a steady sense of humor is courageous and uplifting. *Violence Girl: East L.A. Rage to Hollywood Stage* is a book that I highly recommend.

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