Today marks the debut of a weekly feature about independent, punk, import, and non-mainstream music. Although this slot will usually be devoted to reviews, occasional biographies or interviews will appear about musicians of particular interest.

This week's feature combines biography with review and discusses an important (and ignored) act: Siouxsie and the Banshees.

On September 20, 1976, Siouxsie and the Banshees played their first gig at the 100 Club Punk Festival in London, supporting the Sex Pistols, the Clash, and the Subway Sect. Siouxsie then just plain Suvi was backed by guitarist Marco (now with Adam and the Ants), drummer Sid Vicious (previous to his stint as Sex Pistols bassist), and bassist Steve Severin (then Steve Havoc).

After one evening's worth of rehearsal, the Banshees tore through a twenty-minute medley that included "Suede Shoes" and ended with The Lord's Prayer.

Soon afterward the Sex Pistols became infamous for launching into a swaying fit while being interviewed on the BBC, the cause for their outrage was the interviewer's attempt to get a Pistols fan to say something controversial. That typical fan was Siouxsie—chosen because of her striking appearance. These initial appearances brought Siouxsie and the Banshees into the public eye, a position they have occupied ever since. In England, here in the States, the Banshees suffered in obscurity, known only to the growing body of punks and trendies. The band's first two albums, The Scream, (with help from Polydor Records), and Suicide (produced by John Peel), received minimal airplay despite the presence of some excellent singles. The situation changed last year, however, when the Banshees made their first tour of America, an event which prompted PVC Records to release the two most recent Siouxsie albums (Kaleidoscope and Juju).

The most recent release, Once Upon a Time/The Singles, is the least rarest of creatures—the "greatest hits" compilation that is also a "best of" collection. (Greatest hits is arguable; none of these singles have ever been on the charts. Although they have all sold exceptionally well in Britain.) Collections of this sort serve two purposes: they are perfect introductions to a band's music, and they provide a means of assessing the band's progress and maturity. The Singles is organized chronologically, with the group's punk phase represented by side one and the art phase represented by side two. The singles also include some of the first and second pair of albums and the major personnel changes responsible for the punk-to-art transition. Despite the divisions, one trait remains constant—Siouxsie and the Banshees are not your run-of-the-mill punks.

"Hanging Gardens," one of the seminal punk singles, showed that the Banshees had more to offer than three-chord guitar barrages and "I'm so bored/You're a liar" lyrics. Guitarist John McKay drew from the punk idiom but tempered his playing, and drummer Kenny Morris added Oriental xylophone accents—hardly a hip instrument, the xylophone. Subsequent singles, however, from The Scream's "Mirage" to JoJo Hands' "Love in a Void," showed the band struggling too hard to maintain a harsh intensity, at the same time suffering from hastily produced material. However, the Banshees still sounded like no one else—except the early Banshees.

In 1979 McKay and Morris departed, and were replaced by guitarist John McGeog (from Magazine and Visage) and drummer Budgie (arguably the finest art/punk drummer). With the new lineup the Banshees recorded the pioneering Kaleidoscope and entered the realm of art-rock. The singles show the potential of a revitalized band—Siouxsie's famous banshee wail is more controlled, her vocals more assured yet retaining their early power. McGeog's effect on the music was drastic—keyboards were added to the sound palette, the arrangements became more experimental. Listen to "Christine"—the bass carries the chord sequence and McGeog adds accents on acoustic guitar.

Nothing from Kaleidoscope could prepare the listener for the trio of singles from the most recent album, Juju. This disc, which was included on almost every "year's best" list, is the work of a mature, innovative group. "Israel" (originally a bonus single included with the album) is Siouxsie's first overtly political statement: "Now hidden in disguise—cheap wrapping of lies keep your heart alive with a song from inside/Even though we're all alone." "Arabian Knights" is more meditative, with a plaintive voice and lovely treated guitar work. The tour de force remains "Spellbound," a piece that recaptures all the rage and intensity of the early Banshees. The song's texture, electric buildup creates a feeling of supernatural power that is reinforced by Siouxsie's hollow vocal and mysterious lyric.

Once Upon a Time/The Singles is highly recommended to those curious about the Banshees and to the long-time fan who might have missed some of the (now unavailable) landmark singles. Siouxsie and the Banshees managed to survive the collapse of the punk culture, maintaining their passionate convictions and innovative musical descriptions of the unnatural. They are now in the position to become musical innovators.

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