

## FILM REVIEW: *THE RUNAWAYS* (FLORIA SIGISMONDI, 2010)

By Penny Spirou

The first image the film's audience is confronted with is fresh menstrual blood hitting the pavement. It is clear that *The Runaways* (Floria Sigismondi, 2010), a film based on the story of the all-girl band of the same name, is riddled with themes of girls in transition and transgression. The story, which concentrates on band members Cherrie Currie and Joan Jett, hones in on themes of gender and sexuality. Gaining a sense of one's own identity is an immensely confusing time in a young woman's teenage life, especially when The Runaways are simultaneously thrust into the rock and roll music industry.

*The Runaways* is a musical biopic based on the all-girl rock band active during the late 1970s in Los Angeles, California. Co-founder Joan Jett, at sixteen years old, played rhythm guitar and did most of the songwriting for the band, including the famous song, "Cherry Bomb". Jett later went on to form the successful band, Joan Jett and the Blackhearts, as well as developing the independent record company, Blackheart Records.<sup>1</sup> Cherrie Currie, inspired by David Bowie's *Aladdin Sane*, is the blonde teenager who auditioned for lead singer of The Runaways at the age of fifteen.<sup>2</sup> She sang lead for the first three albums for *The Runaways* but, after returning from their sold-out shows in Japan, left the band to pursue a solo career.<sup>3</sup>

Joan Jett was very active in her relationship with *The Runaways*, serving as executive producer on the project. Currie did not have a direct association with the film project apart from that it is based on her autobiography *Neon Angel: A Memoir of a Runaway*. Basing a musical biopic on an autobiography/memoir has been commonplace, much like others released over the last decade. Hollywood film, *Walk the Line* is based on Johnny Cash's autobiography, *Cash: The Autobiography*; Australian film *Mao's Last Dancer* is based on Li

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.joanjett.com/>, accessed 11 September 2012.

<sup>2</sup><http://www.cherriecurrie.com/>, accessed 11 September 2012.

<sup>3</sup><http://therunaways.com/>, accessed 11 September 2012.

Cunxin's autobiography, *Mao's Last Dancer*; US film *I'm Not There* was based, in part, on Bob Dylan's autobiography (considered to be a disjointed stream of consciousness), *Chronicles: Volume One*. Although the film is slightly different in narrative structure and progression, as the film focuses on female protagonists, as well as inevitably missing out on some of the finer details of Currie's life, the film does latch on to one of Currie's idol: David Bowie. In her memoir, she professes her love for the musician:

I can't quite put into words what exactly David Bowie meant to me back then. Over the past few years, Bowie had filled all of those empty spaces inside of me, spaces that began to appear like wormy wood holes in old furniture, since the day my dad upped and left (2010, p.7).

In her memoir, Currie's dad left the family (including her mother, twin sister and younger brother) and moved to Texas when Currie was twelve years old. The rest of the family resided across the country, in California, which marked a very difficult time in her life. With no father-figure mentioned in Jett's life, there is an internal battle in *The Runaways* between masculinity/femininity and developing their own identity.

### **Gender: Girls in a Man's Man's Man's World**

In her analysis of the film, Janice Miller frames *The Runaways* through a post-feminist lens. That is, promoting the female right to sexual pleasure and fun as opposed to second wave feminists who perceived this open display of sexuality as dangerous and disadvantageous (Adriaens, 2009). Considering the intersection of biographical myth, music and gender politics, Miller looks at the themes of gender identity and fashion. What is most interesting in the film is exactly this: gender identity and politics (Miller, 2012). There is a constant acknowledgement throughout *The Runaways*, that these women are doing something in a "man's world" and need to toughen up, even becoming more masculine in order to achieve any level of success in the industry. This is reinforced in particular by the band manager, quirky Kim Fowley, portrayed by Michael Shannon in the film. There is even a point in rehearsals where Fowley stops them playing and announces, "Men don't want to see

women anywhere except in their kitchen or on their knees. Let alone on stage holding guitars”. He tells the girls that they are about to go through a “hecklers’ drill” and begins to throw bits of empty cans and even dog faeces at the band accompanied by a troupe of young boys as they are playing. The Runaway girls are able to fight through this and progress to the next scene where they play at a house party, suffering through the same torment by the onlookers. This marks the first test for the band, which they clearly overcome.

These gender norms and clichés run through *The Runaways*, as lines of dialogue suggest, “guys don’t like girls who are tough” and “girls don’t play the electric guitar”. This is reinforced further with selected music tracks including “It’s a Man’s Man’s Man’s World” which plays non-diegetically (that is, not within the world of the film) as Joan Jett practices guitar in a darkened room earlier in the film.<sup>4</sup> The key lyric “This is a man’s world; this is a man’s world. But it wouldn’t be nothing, nothing without a woman or a girl” screams a kind of empowerment, or longing for it, as Jett is alone, almost in a longing dream-state. The music track that sets up the gender issues in the film is “The Wild One” which is featured non-diegetically, as Currie cuts her hair and paints her face to look like David Bowie (as he is featured on the cover of his *Aladdin Sane* album, in the Ziggy Stardust persona), and in an unrelated scene, Jett buys a studded leather jacket via cash payment of coins and meets a girlfriend later on who she smokes with. Jett then plays “The Wild One” quietly on her guitar.<sup>5</sup> This well-selected song is another salute to the rebellious nature of these women, who are embracing that masculine/feminine ambiguity.

The man that led and managed the band was Kim Fowley. Although it is clear that Fowley is a man, and in any other context, would be the father-figure for the girls, he instead wears an excessive amount of make-up and sometimes a thick diamanté-encrusted choker. In a particular scene, Fowley is having sex with a woman while on the phone to Jett, almost

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<sup>4</sup> ‘It’s a Man’s Man’s Man’s World’ is written by James Brown and Betty Newsome, performed by MC5.

<sup>5</sup> ‘The Wild One’ is written by Michael Champman and Nicholas Chinn, performed by Suzi Quatro.

casually discussing their financial concerns. From this scene it is clear his character reflects gender ambiguity as opposed to homosexuality, which ends up being a form of experimentation with the band members early in their musical career.

### **Sexuality: explored yet restrained**

As well as gender, *The Runaways* draws attention to issues surrounding sexuality; more specifically androgyny, promiscuity and bisexuality. Cherry Currie and Joan Jetthave some sexual type of relationship that remains quite vague in the film, largely due to the fact that the actresses who play the roles, Dakota Fanning and Kristen Stewart respectively, have quite a following in Hollywood and a reputation to maintain.<sup>6</sup> According to Kramer:

Production decisions (casting, budget, and so on), the actress's choice of roles, her performance, film marketing (including advertising and publicity), critical responses and box-office results interact so as to select a particular performer to become the focus of intense public interest and substantial financial investments on the part of the industry (2004, p.91).

The choice for these stars to be featured in *The Runaways* together is something of a statement. Here they are showcasing diversity in their acting skillset and also presenting their acknowledgement of the difficulties young women face in the entertainment/creative industries. Nonetheless, the sequence where the stars become sexually involved is blurry and out-of-focus, with a loud music track playing in the foreground, "I Wanna Be Your Dog."<sup>7</sup> It ends quite abruptly, as the scene changes dramatically and the song does not fade out but just comes to a grinding halt. All we see is the subtle removal of clothes and kissing. It seems that the intention was there, but was not taken to the desired, transgressive level. As journalist Child concurs, "despite segues of lesbian love-making, masturbation, urination, drug-taking and bad language... the movie still manages to feel a little sanitised and under-

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<sup>6</sup> Dakota Fanning and Kristen Stewart starred in *The Twilight Saga: New Moon*, the first of a highly successful vampire romance film series, released the year before *The Runaways*.

<sup>7</sup> 'I Wanna Be Your Dog' is written by Iggy Pop, Ron Asheton, Scott Asheton and Dave Alexander, performed by The Stooges.

developed.”<sup>8</sup> Sexual experimentation is evoked again when Jett teaches the drummer, Sandy West, played by Stella Maeve, to masturbate in the shower, while thinking of someone that they find attractive. She settles on Farah Fawcett and Jett stays in the bathroom to listen to her. The camera is fixated on Jett’s facial expressions of excitement, but ends just as prematurely as the Currie encounter.

Public sexualisation of *The Runaways* takes a turn for the worse as Currie poses in her underwear for a photo shoot without conferring with her band mates. Jett and the others become infuriated with her as they are trying to be “taken seriously” and do not want to be known for their looks. They want to be known for their musical talent. As much as sexuality plays a role here, it is not subject to Laura Mulvey’s “male gaze.” Considering the lesbian experimentation, it can be considered a brief excursion into the “female gaze” in accordance with the aforementioned post-feminism frame. Sexualisation in *The Runaways* draws attention to male gaze in the music industry, even when the female artist attempts to fight against it. In Mulvey’s seminal study she asserts, “Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen” (1975). Although the first part of this statement is true to *The Runaways*, it does not apply to the film audience, who assumingly would be predominantly female.<sup>9</sup>

### **Breaking the glass ceiling?**

In terms of genre, *The Runaways* appears as an exception to the rule with musical biopics which have been released in the twenty-first century in the USA (particularly Hollywood). The film, which was a joint venture between Apparition and River Road

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<sup>8</sup><http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/filmblog/2010/sep/13/the-runaways-rock-chicks-biopic>, accessed 30 October 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Male journalist, Danny Leigh, frames *The Runaways* as a ‘chick flick’: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/filmblog/2010/sep/03/great-movies-chick-flicks>, accessed 30 October 2012.

Entertainment, is one of the very few Hollywood films to focus on female music star over the past decade or so.<sup>10</sup> That is not to say that there is no female presence in the contemporary Hollywood musical biopic, there always is, in the form of a partner (such as a wife or girlfriend) who does play a significant role in the life of the protagonist, but has not often held the focus in the film.<sup>11</sup> This may well be the reason why gender and sexuality issues are so prominent in *The Runaways*. It can be considered a way that Hollywood is trying to validate the film yet falls short in making a lasting contribution to biopics of female music artists. Significant contributions to the female musical biopic are left to other national cinemas including France with *La Vie En Rose*<sup>12</sup> and Australia with *The Sapphires*.<sup>13</sup>

– Penny Spirou, Macquarie University, Australia

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<sup>10</sup>Most female musical biopics over the past 12 years did not have a cinematic release and were instead, made into TV-movies. These include *Child Star: The Shirley Temple Story* (2001) and *Life with Judy Garland: Me and My Shadows* (2001).

<sup>11</sup>*El Cantante*, based on the life of Puerto Rican singer Hector Lavoe, features a strong role of the wife, Nilda Roman Perez (played by Jennifer Lopez); *Walk the Line* is not so much a story about Johnny Cash as it is a story of the love between Cash and June Carter; British film, *Control*, represents the short life of Ian Curtis, frontman of band Joy Division. The story was based on his wife's memoir, *Touching from a Distance*. Therefore the film narrative is largely told from Deborah Curtis' point of view.

<sup>12</sup>*La Vie En Rose* is based on the life of the French female singer, Edith Piaf.

<sup>13</sup>*The Sapphires* is based on the experiences of Australian Aboriginal all-girl singing group of the same name.

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