

## NOT MISSING A BEAT // SHE

Sarah Raine

Sat on the back row of my local cinema, it's the rave scene that really does it.

Flying neon bats long forgotten flap frenetically across the screen in time to the bass-driven House music, and I swear that I can smell that sickly-sweet candyfloss air of my teen clubbing nights. I am transported by the camera angles and the clever use of light, the beam of white across the faces of the dancers as the music (and their bodies) rises, the flashes of colours and darkness. And most of all *the bass*. For a moment, I am there.

That's exactly what this scene was meant to do.

Finally, the earliest edge of my musical era has become the topic of cult cinema, subcultural reflections, rave nostalgia. Directors and scriptwriters are telling a little bit of my story and I see in those choreographed moments and playlists, scripts and careful casting glimmers of familiar feelings and places and people and happenings. The switch of a driver on the side of a motorway, enjoying the evening too soon. The adrenaline of getting ready and getting there. Lyrics and beats archived away beneath layers of life, brought to the fore in an instant, as if never neglected. And I swear, if I just close my eyes I'll be back there, in the very fucking moment of now, teetering on the edge of ecstasy, the borders of oblivion, surrounded by people who I've only just met but I *know* will look out for me.

But it's not my story; not quite.

It misses out me. A woman, the protagonist of my own story, the lynchpin in *my* memories and the way that I remember this music and this time. It misses out key if mundane places, like the ladies' toilet; a place to sort ourselves out, cool down, to salvage makeup or hair. It misses out the concerted level of care that women (and queer folks) develop for each other, particularly in a risky environment, making sure that it stays a messy but 'good' night. *Have you had some water? Don't drink too much. Do you need to cool down? Are you having a good night?*

Like so many other retrospective films that recreate the emotions and moments of a music movement, we discover the world of *Beats* (dir. Welsh, 2018) through the eyes and friendship of two male teenage boys. And it's not that their experience doesn't invoke any of my own. We are not *that* different, after all. But once the nostalgia has peaked and ebbed away a question remains: where are all the women? I mean, I can *see* them. They are the girlfriends (potential or actual), the cousins and friends of our two ravers, and they are part of the surging crowd in the rave scene that

so grabbed me. But they are peripheral narratives. We are not supposed to care about them or ask questions about their lives or their futures. They are fleeting flashes of female ‘others’.

This evening at the cinema comes at the perfect time. Trying to consider *American Graffiti* (dir. Lucas, 1973) through a frame of gender has been tricky. Like many films that celebrate underground music and the euphoria of youth, *American Graffiti* follows a number of teenage boys through a rite of passage, a liminal night that bridges life in their hometown and high school with a range of future possibilities. And like *Quadrophenia* (dir. Roddam 1979), *Human Traffic* (dir. Kerrigan, 1999) and the 2018 newcomer *Beats*, these friends are bound together for one last time before the claws of adulthood, responsibility, jobs, and university finally pierce the idyllic bubble of their youthful and carefree adventures. We follow them through familiar patterns of brothers-in-arms: the ecstatic peaks and disconcerting troughs of their journey mirroring their friendship as it is tested; their clashes and eventual truce with the scary fuckers of their town; and the sharing of a formative experience before growing up and moving on.

Like Elaine Constantine’s *Northern Soul* (2014), the female characters in *American Graffiti* represent potential future paths for our (multifaceted if flawed) male heroes. Laurie, the safe bet of staying at home; Debbie, the possibility of becoming (finally) cool through adventure and rebellion; “the blonde”, the excitement of the unknown, adult life offered now school is out; and Carol, the final realisation of adult (even paternalistic) responsibility. These women tell us more about the nature of the male characters than they do about themselves, their choices, or their futures as they too “come of age”. And when the credits roll, only the fates of the brothers-in-arms are considered of interest to the audience. The women have played their roles as catalysts – as potential roads through and out of Modesto – and as such they cease to exist.

Beyond the source of my own frustration at the cinema, at home, or during a writing group screening, this pattern of gendered storytelling in popular music texts leads to bigger questions. It forces us to consider what we lose if we continually tell stories through male viewpoints and memories. What happens if we equate valued moments of music history with young men and their rites of passage from innocence to adulthood in all its messy technicolour.

The following short piece, entitled **SHE**, considers the silencing of women characters in *American Graffiti* through a reimagining and a rewriting of the film script focusing on the iconic “At the Hop” scene. It does not aim to answer the questions posed above, but rather to expose the fractured, partial, and hollow representation of women and the exclusionary narrative threads that are spun through the film and seemingly tied up at the end of this 112-minute film. And in reflecting on my own erasure – and the erasure of many other experiences beyond the dominant heteronormative male narrative – this reworking is itself unstable and flickering, the space for expression offered temporary and bounded, and the reader left with yet more questions about *she* that will (for now) remain unanswered.

SHE

HIGH SCHOOL GYM – “AT THE HOP”

The music is playing and everyone is dancing. The music is an instrumental piece and it fills the room. She stands and watches the dancers, taking up a space at the very edge of the large gym. She follows their movement with quick eyes, standing very still. She is not dancing herself and does not seem to be intending to. No one looks at her. They all carry on as is she is not there and she does not notice this.

THE GIRLS’ LAVATORY

She stands in front of a mirror. She brushes her hair, staring at herself in the mirror. She opens her mouth to speak. She stops. She opens her mouth to speak.

SHE

It’s really happening. Now. Tonight. It will really happen now, there’s nothing else for it. Yesterday I wasn’t sure, but now I am, and I know that it will all work out. Tomorrow.

SHE

It’ll be better than we thought it would. Better than we had planned it would be, when it happens – and it will! Better than yesterday, that’s for sure. I guess I can already feel something starting, something new happening right now. So, let’s do it!

SHE

And **nothing** can go wrong. Or change my mind, for tomorrow is certain, now more than ever.

She nods, turns, pushes the door open and walks through.

HIGH SCHOOL HALLWAY

Music floats from the gym down the empty hall. She walks along with her hands in her pockets. One last trip down the grey, locker-lined corridor. She slows and stops by locker 2127. She smiles a little, then flips the dial of the lock. Once to the right—back to the left – then to the right again. She hits the handle. It doesn’t open. Changed already. She shrugs. She opens her mouth to speak.

HIGH SCHOOL GYM

SHE

Well, it’s all happening tonight, all the things we had expected and hoped and planned for. All the decisions that have been made are happening **right now**. It’s exciting, all this moving forward – I’m ready to leave the past behind.

SHE

You are right. No looking back now, only forward. It is time.

Music is playing. And she moves. With the music and against it. In the music and out of it. She dances in the silence. In the in-between moments. In the drawing of breath and in the applause. She is guided by the music but not a slave to it. It is but one sound that structures the movement

of her body in this place. And in doing so, she seems to splinter from the happening. She flickers, coming into and out of focus. But she is there.

She opens her mouth to speak.

**Sarah Raine** is an SFI-IRC Fellow at University College Dublin, Ireland. She is the PI of a joint Science Foundation Ireland and Irish Research Council funded project entitled *Improvising Across Boundaries: Voicing the experience of women and gender minority improvising musicians* (2023-2027). Sarah is the author of *Authenticity and Belonging in the Northern Soul Scene* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020) and the co-editor of *Towards Gender Equality in the Music Industry* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), *The Northern Soul Scene* (Equinox Publishing, 2019), and the forthcoming book *Popular Music Ethnographies* (Intellect Books/Chicago University Press, expected 2025). Sarah is also a co-Managing Editor of *Riffs* and acts as a Book Series Editor for Equinox Publishing (Music Industry Studies / Icons of Pop Music) and an Editor for *Jazz Research Journal*.

