

I lived in Portugal under a dictatorship that lasted until the 25th of April 1974. Although that was all I'd ever known, I felt stifled like a lot of people there. The political, social and moral codes were limiting. I decided to come to London with a small suitcase and see what would happen. London was an exciting place for the arts as it was so affordable. It was easy to live there with very little money and a lot of belief. Low rents, clothes from charity shops, cheap transport.

In 1976 I began studying Fine Art at Hornsey School of Art and immediately I felt a sense of freedom, just by being in an art school where I could explore so many different ways of using my imagination. I found that I was able to use any process or medium to create something interesting and that those explorations had no boundaries. I felt like a child in a playground for the first time.

I met Gina Birch on my course and two boys who told me about punk. Gina and I started going to early punk gigs and we saw the Sex Pistols and there were about 20 people in the audience! They were irreverent and seemed unafraid and I thought they were so inspirational – like nothing I'd ever seen. Their songs were questioning the monarchy and the establishment. We hadn't been able to do that freely in Portugal before 1974. I saw all the other early punk bands including Patti Smith and later The Slits. They opened my mind even further. They made me feel that women had such an important role to play in this punk revolution, and their voices were a crucial inspiration for me, and future generations.

Music in my experience had been almost only records, cassettes and radio. Now I could see the musicians at a short distance and in the crowd. I felt it was almost a way of life. People were expressing their creative, political and social ideas through music, photography, fanzines, badges, graphic design and the way they dressed. It was so amazing to feel part of all that. These things weren't meant to be pretty. There was an edge to it all, a desire to show what was wrong in society, to criticise and challenge and to fight against pretence. At this time organisations like Women's Liberation, Gay Liberation, Rock against Racism, Reclaim the Night all expressed the desire and need for resistance and change. All these things made me feel alive and encouraged me in my own desire to do something that was challenging in the visual arts and in music when eventually Gina and I decided to form The Raincoats in 1977.

Another very important thing that happened to me was to find the record shop and label Rough Trade. I used to go there frequently as it was really close to where I lived

and it was a very exciting place to be, where bands and friendships were formed. I ended up working there for a while.

When we formed The Raincoats we used to rehearse in my living room. It surprises me now that no one ever complained about the noise. We played our first gig at the Tabernacle, Notting Hill, and, although we were hugely nervous, all we wanted to do was to write more songs and perform them. It was a terrifying experience but it felt so good to have actually done it! I still love the intensity of playing live. By 1979 we had an all female band and it included one of my favourite musicians, Palmolive, who had been playing drums with The Slits. I couldn't believe our luck when she accepted to join us in our adventures. Vicky Aspinall joined on violin and the mixture of the four of us created what characterized the sound of The Raincoats. And Shirley O'Loughlin joined us, first as the liaison between the band and Rough Trade, and later as a collaborator.

In April 1979 Rough Trade released our first record, the E.P. 'Fairytale in the supermarket'. The day I received a phone call saying that the record had arrived, I felt so full of emotion. It was one of the happiest days of my life. London felt like a place where anything could happen, where I could try what I wanted to try. I felt such a sense of achievement by being part of a creative force that made a record! Working together creatively as a group of female artists gave me an enormous sense of strength because I was part of something that I felt was very specific in its voice and in the way we chose to express our ideas.

Ana da Silva, The Raincoats