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Sitcom's sonic sisterhoods: pop and punk as playful challenge in Girls5Eva and We Are Lady Parts

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Sitcom's sonic sisterhoods: Pop and punk as playful challenge in *Girls5Eva* and *We Are Lady Parts*

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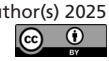
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Abstract

This article explores how music performance is presented as a space of freedom and collective creativity in two comedies centred on female musicians. The punk band of *We Are Lady Parts* and the pop girl group of *Girls5eva* are part of television's intermittent engagement with stories of musicians, and employ the elastic realities offered by the musical genre. Both comedies offer satirical jabs and sceptical gazes at social norms of womanhood. *We Are Lady Parts* positions its Muslim female punk band within a cultural legacy of riot grrrl and punk as do-it-yourself spaces of female fury and communities for challenging gendered social constructs. The programme offers a comic play with the gendered norms of British Muslim identity and the band's struggle to maintain their punk ideals. *Girls5eva* is part of a recent cultural reckoning with 1990s and 2000s white post-feminist pop culture, and follows the indignities experienced by a failed manufactured girl group who attempt to reunite in middle age. It presents a satirical reconsideration of their youth spent in an exploitative pop machine and renders the mundane everyday of mid-life womanhood through the comic absurd. Both programmes use music as an expressive device to explore those who sit outside of television's dominant comic model of 'imperfect' womanhood, the white middle-class messy millennial. In centring Muslim and mid-life women, respectively, *We Are Lady Parts* and *Girls5eva* offer performance and collective creativity as a space for their comic quartets to play with and push against social and cultural expectations of womanhood in a range of forms.

Keywords

Age, comedy, feminism, musical, Muslim, television

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Sitcoms *Girls5Eva* (Peacock, 2021–2022, Netflix, 2024) and *We Are Lady Parts* (Channel 4, 2021–) present collective music-making as a space to work through the complications of contemporary womanhood. Following a pop girl group reunited in mid-life and a female Muslim punk band, they centre the thrill of collaborative creativity and assert its ability to build affective connections. These musical comedies use song as comic commentary on the norms of femininity that shape the lives of mid-life and British Muslim women. Here, the 'pluralised sense of female identity' offered by television's ensemble storytelling presents pop and punk music as 'alternative lifestyles for women based upon meaningful social relationships with other women' (Ball, 2013: 246); as sonic sisterhoods.

Both programmes are more overtly sitcom in form and tone than the 30-minute prestige dramedies centring the 'precarious girls' (Wanzo, 2016) and 'horrible white people' (Nygaard and Lagerwey, 2020) familiar from recent academic studies of television's comic women. They use satire, parody and comic absurdity to explore their ensembles' ambivalent relationships with mid-life and British Muslim womanhood. The white middle-class messy millennial woman familiar from *Girls* (HBO, 2012–2017) and *Fleabag* (BBC3/1, 2016–2019) is a socially precarious individual in arrested development. She is detached or struggling with connection and is often in dysfunctional relationships. In contrast *Girls5Eva* and *We Are Lady Parts* centre female collectives bonded by their sonic cohesion, illustrating Lucy O'Brien's suggestion that girl bands 'operate like mini feminist collectives, with the emphasis on equality and the sense of a creative space that is separate from men' (2016:16). This article offers an alternative route for the study of women in comedy, outside of well-established frames of unruliness, precarity and discomfort (Woods, 2019). As distinctive blends of the sitcom and the backstage musical, it is productive to read these programmes through the musical's affective and structural dynamics and the conventions of the musician narrative. I explore how these programmes present the female collective as refuge against social and industrial struggle, their use of comic song as playful social commentary and critique and their sceptical, satirical gaze on the systems constraining their ensembles.

Created by Meredith Scardino, *Girls5Eva* follows a marginally successful turn-of-the-millennium pop girl group reunited in mid-life. It constructs a comically surreal vision of mid-life women pushing at the edges of a music industry that centres youth as the ideal expression of pop. Executive produced by Tina Fey and Robert Carlock, it continues their previous projects' comic commentary on the indignities of mostly white, middle-class contemporary womanhood in *30 Rock* (NBC, 2006–2013), *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (Netflix, 2015–2019) and *Great News* (NBC, 2017–2019). *Girls5Eva* shares its predecessors' joke density, accelerated pace, frequent cutaways and surreal elements. Created by Nida Manzoor, *We Are Lady Parts* locates itself within the racially and culturally diverse everyday life of East London. It draws its satirical comedy from the diasporic context of its all-female band of Muslim punks, shaped by local and universal Islamic discourses as well as Britain's hostile iteration of multiculturalism (Rahman, 2024: 200). British Muslim lives have been centred in sitcoms *Citizen Kahn* (BBC1, 2012–2016) and *Man Like Mobeen* (BBC Three, 2017–), but *We Are Lady Parts* is the first to centre British Muslim women.

Laura Minor (2023) rightly asserts the problems with conflating American and British programmes in studies of contemporary comic femininity, with issues of class and broadcasting context producing distinct differences (p. 155). *We Are Lady Parts* speaks with a national rather than transatlantic voice. Its East London setting aligns it with other regionally distinct British comedies from first-time female creators produced by public service broadcasters with a remit to foster diverse new comic voices, including *Chewing Gum* (Channel 4, 2015–2016), *Derry Girls* (Channel 4, 2018–2022) and *Alma's Not Normal* (BBC 2, 2020–2024). This could make the series an odd pairing with *Girls5Eva*, produced by NBCUniversal for its streaming platform Peacock (seasons 1 and 2) and Netflix (season 3), by a creator well-established in US television comedy. (*We Are Lady Parts* is produced by NBCUniversal subsidiary Working Title and airs on Peacock in the United States.) However, this article demonstrates the commonalities in these programmes' use of musical comedy storytelling, exploring how they depict women's 'musical cohesion, friendship and teamwork' as intertwined with 'sisterhood, solidarity, feminine agency, and sharing power' (O'Brien, 2016: 17). I begin by establishing their genre contexts in the musical and musician narrative, setting out some key formal and storytelling frames before moving to a detailed discussion of each programme. This highlights their play with the conventions of the backstage musical and musician narrative, their use of parody and satire to provide comic commentary on women's social and industrial norms, as well as the aesthetic and storytelling choices that affectively express the women's experience of music-making.

The television musical

Television has made intermittent attempts to integrate the musical into its serialised storytelling. But writing and staging musical numbers within the medium's fast-paced production schedule and budgetary limitations is a logistical challenge. Robynn Stilwell links the genre's struggle on American television to the musical's inherent spectacle, which 'seems to threaten the narrative integrity of serialised programming in a way it does not in a free-standing form' (Stilwell, 2019). US and UK television have seen sporadic interest in the musical form in both integrated and unintegrated formats, including a high school show choir in *Glee* (FOX, 2009–2015), the creation of a Broadway musical in *Smash* (NBC, 2012–2013) and a deconstruction of the romantic comedy in *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (CBS, 2015–2019). Stories of musicians and the music industry are a more common sub-genre of the television musical, stretching back to *The Monkees* (NBC, 1966–1968), *The Partridge Family* (ABC, 1970–1974) and *Rock Follies* (ITV, 1976). Music industry melodramas of family dynasties and industry towns include *Empire* (FOX, 2015–2020), *Nashville* (ABC, 2012–2016; CMT, 2017–2018) and *Champion* (BBC1, 2023), while comedy *The Flight of the Conchords* (HBO, 2007–2009) offered a quirkily surreal take on the music duo. Musician stories are familiar from the musical biopic (Marshall and Kongsgaard, 2012), with its narrative tropes of the rise and fall (and rise) arc, the conflict of personal and professional identity, musical reinvention and authenticity versus exploitation. These also shape films about fictional musicians, from the romantic melodramas of *Beyond the Lights* (Prince-Bythwood, 2014) and *A Star is Born* (Cooper, 2018), to the comic parody of *Josie and the Pussycats* (Elfont and Kaplan,

2001) and *Walk Hard* (Kasdan, 2007). A music industry setting naturalises musical numbers, with songs emerging from the professional contexts of songwriting, recording and performing on-stage. This musician narrative aligns with the backstage or show musical syntax (Altman, 1987) where narrative and number remain separate, or 'unintegrated'. However, songs performed in professional contexts are frequently shaped by narrative concerns and express characters' inner lives.

Nina Penner (2017) constructs a useful spectrum to chart variations in the musical genre's use of integration, ranging from realism to fantasy. This moves from numbers with 'a strict separation of performers and audience members, where the performance is intended primarily for aesthetic appreciation or entertainment' (12) to 'spontaneous performances that are intended primarily for communicative or expressive purposes, which often have no fictional audience aside from the performers' (13). Like *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend, Girls5Eva* and *We Are Lady Parts* use music numbers to reflect or comment on the narrative's feminist frustrations and interpersonal dynamics. However, *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* sits towards the fantasy end of Penner's spectrum, as it uses integrated story songs (albeit presented as figments of the protagonist's imagination), whereas in *Girls5Eva* and *We Are Lady Parts* song mostly functions as diegetic performance with thematic commentary. Here their clearest predecessor is *Rock Follies*, whose female rock group perform numbers in both naturalistic performance spaces and non-naturalistic 'fantasy' spaces, with their song lyrics commenting on the women's experience of 'social conventions, familial constraints and relationships' (Panos, 2014: 49). Most songs in *Girls5Eva* and *We Are Lady Parts* are naturalistically motivated by rehearsals, studios, music video and stage performances, although some numbers align with Pinner's fantasy level of integration. The formal playfulness of their comedy incorporates moments of fantasy and the surreal, which can accommodate the integrated numbers' disruption of realism. Here song soliloquies draw on recent television comedy trends of privileging 'individual characters' affective experiences through magical realism that frames what we see as perspectival' (Grey and Gershon, 2024:66). As I will show, *Girls5Eva* and *We Are Lady Parts* use perspectival magical realism to express characters' affective experience through moments of integrated song that escape the bounds of realist performance.

Both *Girls5Eva* and *We Are Lady Parts* combine episodic narratives with larger serialised arcs shaped by journeys of collective creativity and each quartet's relationship with the music industry, with each season building to a 'final show'. The backstage musical parallels an artistic narrative arc with an interpersonal arc, building towards a 'final show' which resolves each arc's conflicts. Jane Feuer (1993) notes that '[i]n a typical backstage musical, the success of the couple will be placed in a metaphorical relationship to the success of the show' (p. 80). Both sitcoms feature romantic plots, but centre the friendship bonds of each quartet, which are tested by creative and industrial trials but resolved through the final show. Having laid out key genre and formal frameworks, I now explore how these shape each programme's articulation of the preoccupations and challenges of their sonic sisterhoods. First, the pop world of *Girls5Eva*, which presents a comically surreal look at women grasping at their second chance at creative fulfilment. The programme playfully reckons with the burdens, dreams and invisibility of mid-life in a music genre fixated on youth.

Girls5Eva

Pop parody

Girls5Eva draws comedy from the clash of pop glamour with the mundane everyday life of women in mid-life. Personal and professional situations are frequently pushed into comic absurdity, blended with the emotional authenticity of the women's friendship bonds. The programme follows the four surviving members of Girls5Eva, a fictional, marginally successful girl group originally active from 1999 to 2003. When their song 'Famous5Eva' is sampled by a successful hip-hop artist (1.1), Dawn, Wickie, Gloria and Summer reunite in mid-life without original member Ashley – who died in a freak accident – and attempt to recapture their brief glimpse of fame. The women's ability to slip effortlessly back into their three-part harmonies after two decades apart asserts the connections woven by music; their sonic sisterhood. Here, I consider the programme's music industry satire, which renders the indignities of labouring at its margins through comic absurdity. Here, song can present playful pop parody or a working-through of the women's ambivalence over their positions in life and work. Despite the constant comic setbacks the group encounters, the programme asserts the value and affective thrill of performing together as a sonic sisterhood.

The programme's parodic pop is shaped by cultural memories of the 1990s and 2000s music industry, particularly the female artists manufactured for a teen fanbase. It speaks to an audience raised on the Spice Girls, Destiny's Child, Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera, along with their many imitators. Girls5Eva were assembled as young women by their manager Larry, depicted as a penny-pinching comic grotesque whose manipulations, exploitation and cheapness shaped their youthful career. This iteration of the group is depicted in faux archive footage as naïve yet confident, perpetually awkward in their performance of dance moves and sultry gazes, their ordinariness and low-budget scrappiness always peeking through. The programme constructs fast-paced comic beats from the absurd and at times surreal glimpses of Girls5Eva's pop past. Their heyday is presented as a comic punchline, conjured by the women's casual remembrances of their escapades and cutaways to snippets of faux archive footage in 4:3 video format. These music videos, interviews, entertainment news and behind-the-scenes reality draw comedy from the young Girls5Eva's naive excitement at their chance at fame, eagerly embracing the indignities involved in chasing pop stardom. The programme's comedy is shaped by the critical or 'reflective nostalgia' (Boym, 2001) that is part of a recent cultural reckoning with the casual cruelty and misogyny of 1990s and 2000s pop culture. It critiques the sexualisation standard to the period's treatment of young female celebrities, and the exploitative labour practices of the pop machine, by heightening them to comic absurdity.

If parody is 'a form of imitation, but imitation characterized by ironic inversion', *Girls5Eva* uses its 'repetition with critical distance' (Hutcheon, 1985: 6) to construct an absurdist rendering of the '00s pop machine's stylistic tendencies and treatment of young women. In 'Alf Musik' (1.3), the women argue about the messaging of Girls4Eva's early output, prompting a montage of their music videos that parodies the industry's

manufacture of 'empowered' post-feminist pop girls. Summer and Gloria sing 'Our eyes look so much bluer when we cry', daintily wiping away streams of tears in close-up. Dawn and Wiki dance in front of a couple in bed singing, 'If my man does cheat / We'll only get real mad at the other girl / It was her fault only', before pulling the partially clad woman onto the floor and high-fiving each other. All five, clad in high school graduation gowns over gold bikinis, play with their scrolls and shimmy, singing 'Jailbait, great at sex / But it's our first time'. Summer and Gloria testify in court clad in lingerie, pouting for the camera and rolling in front of the judge singing 'We may be incredible / But that doesn't mean we're credible / Sometimes girls lie, shh!'. The group's lyrics and performances comically heighten the industry's tendency to sexualise youthful femininity, with comedy drawn from the blatantness of these lyrics, making text what was (at times barely) subtextual in 1990s and 2000s pop.

The group's early songs create comic discomfort by presenting Girls5Eva as avatars for older male songwriters, producers and managers' ideals of young female sexuality. The girls sing of themselves as sexy virgins, gold diggers or young girlfriends who lack parental boundaries, are sexually available and never push back. Where turn-of-the-millennium cultural discourse and moral panics over pop girls focused on their impact on young female fans (Gill, 2012), *Girls5Eva* draws its comic edge from references to the young group's audience as creepy older men. They are awarded 'Least Daughter-like' at the 2000 'Dad's Choice Awards' (2.5) and describe their fans as 'old pervs begging for lipstick prints on their head' (2.8). The emotional authenticity of the group's new music is signalled by the women's delight at finally reaching fans who are their peers. Instead of a competitive femininity that centres male pleasure, their contemporary lyrics reflect on power and challenge as a collective.

A recurring source of comedy is Girls5eva's re-evaluation of their post-feminist past from a 'popular feminist' present. In 'Alf Musik', present-day Dawn and Gloria are horrified to realise the exploitative messaging of their early music and castigate their youthful complicity in patriarchal structures. Gloria catastrophises, 'Are we part of the problem? Did we cause Hilary to lose Pennsylvania?!'. The group argues whether to strategically accept the industry's long-standing gendered exploitation or seek empowering new music that reflects their mid-life sensibilities. The programme repeatedly pokes fun at the empty calls for empowerment common to popular feminism. Banet-Weiser (2018) conceives of popular feminism as a 2010s mainstream neoliberal iteration of feminism, which calls out institutionalised misogyny and preaches female empowerment yet ultimately operates safely within the capitalist status quo. *Girls5Eva*'s popular feminism is figured through Dawn's white liberal perspective, with her bandmates often challenging her passive feminist anguish over the messaging of their early songs. This functions as a self-critique, as liberal people-pleaser Dawn is often positioned as writer and audience surrogate through her ordinariness and emotional authenticity. The programme draws its humour from its fluid shifts between outsized comic absurdity and emotional realism, with its comedy of mid-life recognition frequently undercut by a push into the surreal or satirical excess. Its comedy targets the pleasures and frustrations of mid-life womanhood as well as the indignities of grasping for the attention of a disinterested industry.

Mid-life women at pop music margins

Girls5Eva's use of comic absurdity to explore the women's pop past and mid-life present distinguishes its comic voice from the 'messy millennial' dramedy's realist comedy of discomfort. It shares their use of comic abjection (Wanzo, 2016), but pushes this into the absurd to playfully shape the quartet's music industry struggles and ambivalent relationship with mid-life womanhood. The programme places the facile yet desirable glamour of the music industry in comic counterpoint with the stasis and struggle of the women's mid-life experience. Summer divorces her former boyband spouse and tries to find her identity outside of male influence; Dawn wearily balances managing her brother's restaurant with the mundane comforts of marriage and motherhood; Wickie maintains a glamorous diva persona at odds with her current low status and finds surprising love with a 'normie' school cook; unfulfilled in her dentist career, Gloria tries to reunite with her ex-wife and later attempts sexual promiscuity. The group breaks out of their routines to find fulfilment in the thrill of performing together and chasing fame. Despite their dreams of recapturing their youthful success, the mid-life Girls5Eva are not shown courting youth (although gentle fun is poked at Summer's pleasure in cosmetic enhancements). When performing live, their most committed audience members are women in their 30s and 40s, younger gay men and middle-American lesbians. They are never pitted against women in their fight for industry visibility; instead, their rivals at their new label are a boy band made from beautiful twenty-something TikTok fashion influencers. Girls5Eva's primary narrative challenge is the industry's disposable attitude towards women over 35.

The widespread pop culture disinterest greeting their attempted return reflects the marginal place of ageing women in pop music. As women in their early 40s, Girls5Eva are viewed as culturally 'old' in an industry that privileges youth. Dismissing their desire to reunite, ex-manager Larry stresses that 'for ladies 35 is check-out time' (1.1). Lynne Hibberd (2014) highlights that pop 'is the most youthful of music genres: conservative in style and form, produced on a massive scale, dominated by young pop stars and designed to appeal as widely as possible' (p. 124). In contrast, mid-life is perceived as 'steadying, mundane and settled . . . the antithesis of all that pop, for all its formulaic features, should be' (131). *Girls5Eva's* music industry satire plays with the supposed incompatibility of pop and mid-life womanhood. When the group persuades a hugely successful male Swedish pop maestro to write an authentic expression of their lives, he is ignorant of mid-life women's experiences. After spying on the group to learn about their lives, they are horrified at his song's portrait of sad and tired women who are invisible to society (1.3). Girls5Eva are perpetually haunted by the memory of their former youthful selves. However, this is a comic haunting by the faux archive's absurdity and satire, which is compounded by three of the adult actresses playing their younger selves. Their deceased groupmate, Ashley, only exists in her younger incarnation, while an age-appropriate actress plays the young red-headed Gloria. As Paula Pell is older than her cast mates, Gloria's larger mid-life body and long grey hair provide comic counterpoint to the spritely sportiness of her younger closeted self. Pell creates physical comedy from Gloria's attempts to recreate her youthful dynamism, with her kicks and death drops leading to a knee replacement.

Girls5Eva parodies the challenges and compromises of climbing the music industry ladder by pushing the well-worn tropes of musician narratives into moments of comic absurdity or rendering them playfully mundane. Each season charts the next stage of the women's scrappy attempts to regain a foothold in the music industry: writing their first song, recording an album, and then a grassroots tour. A central tension of the musician narrative is the pull between family or romantic commitments and music success. In *Girls5Eva*, the quartet's mid-life work and family responsibilities often provide comic counterpoints to their desires for creative freedom and pop success. These home-ties come to a head in season finales, where they challenge the women's pop bond. Season 1's finale (1.8) sees the group disbanded as each has succumbed to the lucrative job offers from a new manager, only to reunite and hijack a televised concert to perform their new single. In the season 2 finale (2.8), the women's personal commitments threaten Girls5Eva's chance at a supporting slot on a world tour. When they lose out on this spot, they decide to head out on their own. Each time, the women abandon the 'safe' option – financial security in season 1, family and romantic responsibilities in season 2 – for the precarity of attempting to advance the group's success. The final episode of each season features a concert performance where comic challenge is suspended for a moment and the women, glamorously styled in pop diva spangles, come together in a coherent, emotionally fulfilling performance. Pop performance is depicted as the space where the four come alive. In season 3's finale (3.6), they choose to go ahead with their elaborate show at the cavernous Radio City Music Hall despite there being no audience, performing together for the joy of it. Although comic deflation frequently undercuts the transcendence and togetherness of a successful performance, the women's pleasure at singing together aligns with Richard Dyer's reading of entertainment as utopia. It offers 'the image of "something better" to escape into, or something we want deeply that our day-to-day lives don't provide'. Notably, Dyer presents this utopianism as affective, 'contained in the feelings it embodies. It presents, head-on as it were, what utopia would feel like rather than how it would be organised' (Dyer, 2002: 22). The women repeatedly assert the feelings of joy and passion that performance and their reconnection have reawakened. The return to their girl group harmonies manifests an excitement and fulfilment in working together, absent in the stasis and isolation of the mid-life mundane. Comedy is wrought from the intertwining of this delight with frustration and challenge, with the women's new music often expressing the complications of striving for mid-life pop stardom.

Mid-life comic ambivalence in song

Where fragments of Girls5Eva's early songs appear as flashback punchlines, their contemporary tracks are given more narrative space. Some are strictly comic, like their attempt at a viral dance track, 'The Splingee' (1.7). Others express emotional authenticity, such as 'At the Beep' (2.5) a love song Gloria and Wickie write about missing Ashley, their deceased groupmate. The song uses a sample of Ashley's old voicemail message, responding to its request 'Leave a message if ya love me'. The track weaves samples of Ashley's voice together with her groupmates' as Girls5Eva share microphones in the recording booth. They lean heads on shoulders, share emotional glances and delighted

smiles as they sing of their love for Ashley, building to cathartic chorus harmonies. The belted pre-chorus' lyric confession of their past consumption of 'so much cocaine' provides comic counterpoint to the song's love theme.

The group's new music often blends emotional truth with comic ambivalence. Working without the objectifying male songwriters of their youth, the struggle and creative nourishment of songwriting is depicted through Dawn, who writes their new music in collaboration with the group. This references actress Sarah Barielles' real-life career as a singer-songwriter. Season 2 centres on the process of writing as the group races to record an album in 6 weeks. Where early Girls5Eva songs draw comedy from the girls' objectification, humour here comes from the women's ambivalent expressions of mid-life power and confidence. This includes throwaway comic fragments of 'B.P.E: Big Pussy Energy', their version of Cardi B and Megan thee Stallion's 'WAP' and an unnamed track with the lyrics 'Strong ladies with boundaries, better treat us well / Are we bitches or do we just respect ourselves / hard to tell' (2.6). Larger narrative space is given to songs with emotional resonance that function as comic set-pieces or climactic expressions of self.

The rise and fall common to musician narratives often creates conflict by compromising an artist's original 'authenticity' through success or the corruptions of the industry (Marshall and Kongsgaard, 2012). In *Girls5Eva*, the journey is from corrupt industry manipulation to authentic expression on their own terms. Freed from the control of ex-manager Larry, the women seek creative agency through songwriting. Season 1 charts their struggle to write their first song, and Dawn's initial attempt at songwriting results in a parody of confessional songwriting (1.4). Katherine Williams (2021) suggests that

> female singer-songwriters evoke strong feelings of authenticity and relatability from their audiences. By writing about their own experiences, and then performing these songs themselves in fairly unmediated formats . . . [they] represent a seemingly direct line of communication, from emotional narrator to emotional receiver. (p. 152)

After an all-night writing session, a dishevelled Dawn bursts into Summer's Bible study group with a large sheet of rumpled restaurant tablecloth scrawled with lyrics. She proudly performs her new song on a keyboard for her group mates and strangers, singing cautiously at first, then with increasing freedom. Her groupmates shift from excited finger snaps to concerned pauses and embarrassed glances around the room as the confessional song about her fears develops. Its repeated refrain of 'I'm afraid . . .' progresses from 'I might be a little bit stupid / To write this song' to 'I might thrive under Scientology' to 'I could accidentally text a picture of my vagina / To my dad'. As the confessions increase in comic abjection, Dawn releases her head back, eyes closed and belts with the freedom of the release, her authentic musical expression in comic counterpoint with her confessions. This song plays with musician narrative tropes of using personal experience to create 'authentic' expression through song (Marshall and Kongsgaard, 2012: 351). Dawn's songwriting journey ultimately finds success by embracing the challenges of mid-life womanhood, writing 'Four Stars' with Wickie. Described as 'An anthem about things that aren't perfect but are still great' (1.4), this song (written by Sarah Bareilles herself) reflects on the group's growth through struggle. It celebrates the reality of accepting what mid-life womanhood can comfortably manage, despite their ambitions.

Song soliloquy as working-through

Most of the programme's songs are presented as diegetic performance, but some move across the spectrum of integration (Penner, 2017). These song soliloquies comically express a character's worries or desires. Here, non-diegetic song has a meta-diegetic function, defined by Claudia Gorbman (1987) as music imagined by a character (p. 22). These musical moments use comedy's perspectival magical realism (Gray and Gershon, 2024: 66) to playfully shift into meta-diegetic song. The folk-tinged 'New York Lonely Boy' (1.3) confronts Dawn's ambivalence about having a second child and unfolds within her consciousness. Gloria describes Dawn's young son as 'a classic New York lonely boy', an only child born to older parents who prefers the company of adults to children. Later in the episode, Dawn and Wickie are excitedly sharing their dreams for the group's future when Dawn sees a little boy in a fedora high-fiving his doorman. Her 'Wait is that a . . .' cues an audio dissolve to a non-diegetic track, with a male folk guitar duo vocal responding '. . . New York lonely boy'. Diegetic sound disappears, and the two-shot of Dawn and Wickie moves into slow-motion to reflect the song's gentle Simon and Garfunkel tone. The image slides into the left corner of the frame, cutting out an oblivious chattering Wickie to focus on Dawn. Her reaction shots fade in and out in split screen with shots of boys her son's age that illustrate each lyric: dressed like little adults, playing with their doorman, drinking coffee or eating sushi. The song ends with an audio-dissolve back to diegetic sound as Dawn realises her fears over her son's loneliness and runs out of shot. Wickie is left alone, declaring, 'I will not adjust my pace for you!' as the scene's comic button, her imperious self-centred nature oblivious to Dawn's sonic revelation. Although Dawn doesn't sing the number, a non-diegetic song accompanied by a montage serves the same function as a diegetic number in an integrated musical (Feuer, 1993: 132), progressing narrative and catalysing a character's realisation.

Gloria's song soliloquy functions at a heightened comedic level that fits her blend of stoic and manic energies. 'Rekindling' (1.5) expresses her hope for a reconciliation with her ex-wife as the women spend the day together in the autumnal countryside. In montage, they hold hands, whittle wood and throw a frisbee in a parody of romantic gestures. Gloria is superimposed over the image, evoking early music video experiments with green screen, looking out of frame, yearningly she sings in a crisp, overly enunciated vocal. The song's 1970s singer-songwriter style employs excessively lush nature metaphors to express the desires she is struggling to contain in the narrative. Here, Gloria's attempt to play it cool romantically sees her emotions playfully breaking the boundaries of *Girls5Eva*'s backstage musical format, shifting into a non-space to communicate her romantic hopefulness. Dawn's reproductive fears are lightly satirised yet presented through folk markers of authenticity linked to Sarah Bareilles' naturalistic performance. Gloria's number brings a surreality that aligns with Paula Pell's more overtly comedic persona. Each song reaches across the spectrum of integration to playfully work through each woman's emotional complications.

Girls5Eva uses comic song to work through the personal and professional trials of mid-life womanhood, which it suggests can be eased through friendship and creative collaboration. Both the music industry and everyday life are rendered through a comic absurdity that playfully confronts the invisibility or instability of mid-life womanhood.

Girls5Eva produces comedy from culture's dismissive treatment of its mid-life pop quartet and the women's tenacious – or delusional – attempts to regain pop fame, ultimately finding fulfilment in the chase and their sonic sisterhood. Where Girls5Eva find a new voice in mid-life by creating pop that embraces ambivalence, the punk band Lady Parts use their music to challenge the contradictions and frustrations they experience as British Muslim women. Each programme uses music to work through the complexity of contemporary womanhood, weaving women's connections through the act of music-making.

We are Lady Parts

Punk challenge

We Are Lady Parts presents punk as an expressive device and worldview. Through their punk band Lady Parts, Saira, Ayesha, Bisma, Amina and their manager Momtaz confront limiting perceptions of British Muslim women, delivering subversive social critique in song. Punk shapes the band's music, friendships and bonds their fan community. The 'messy millennial' prestige dramedy frequently presents a gaze inward at white middle-class fragility (Nygaard and Lagerwey, 2020), but here punk directs an intersectional feminist rage outward at patriarchal control. The women of Lady Parts are '[c]aught between glocal and universalized Islamic discourses, and competing feminist traditions, and situated within a hostile, assimilationist British multiculture' (Rahman, 2024: 200). The programme's comic tensions are produced through the negotiation of their commitment to punk ideology, sisterhood, creative expression and their faith.

The band's iteration of punk positions them within a lineage of late 1970s British female punk and 1990s US riot grrrl, which presented transgressive responses to the constrained subjectivities of (mostly white) women in Western patriarchal culture. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, female punk musicians like Siouxsie Sioux, Poly Styrene and The Slits persisted in the hostile space that masculinist punk culture created for women. Julia Downes (2012) explains that these women 'frequently used punk culture to construct subversive critiques of middle-class heterosexual femininities and challenge sexism in British popular culture' (p. 206). 1990s riot grrrl was an explicitly feminist iteration of punk's 'minimalism, amateurism and rawness' (Gottlieb and Wald, 1994: 264) which blurred 'the boundaries between musical production and consumption' (263) through the communal female spaces of gigs and the circulation of hand-made zines. Lady Parts identify as punk rather than riot grrrl, but align themselves with bands linked to the movement, like La Tigre and Babes in Toyland. The band's music shares riot grrrl's use of 'rage, contempt, scorn, revulsion, satire, derision, mockery, irony, and other so-called negative emotional forms and rhetorical practices familiar to feminist and punk politic and art making' (Nguyen, 2012: 176). Yet, the intersectional feminist perspective of Lady Parts counters the centring of white middle-class experience in riot grrrl's consciousness raising (179). Through a blend of feminist anger and tongue-in-cheek provocation, the band's songs revel in their position as outsiders, resisting both conservative norms of Muslim femininity and assimilation into white British identity.

Lady Parts present a punk challenge to compartmentalised identity through satirical confrontation. Their song themes include postcolonial identity ('Fish and Chips'), British

cultural fears of Muslim identity (‘Voldemort under My Headscarf’), frustration with desire and relationships (‘Bashir with the Good Beard’), teen rebellion (‘Malala Made Me Do It’) and industry containment (‘Glass Ceiling Feeling’). *We Are Lady Parts* uses entertainment’s capacity to ‘present either complex or unpleasant feelings (e.g. involvement in personal or political events; jealousy, loss of love, defeat) in a way that makes them seem uncomplicated, direct and vivid, not “qualified” or “ambiguous” as day-to-day life makes them’ (Dyer, 2002: 25). The force and directness of punk expression creates sonic moments of pure challenge, while the programme’s narrative draws comedy from clashes of the band’s punk feminist ideals with the everyday challenges of romance, family life and motherhood as British Muslim women.

Negotiating punk identity

Like *Girls5Eva*, the narrative of *We Are Lady Parts* is shaped by twists on the conventional beats of the musician narrative. Season 1’s central arc is the assimilation of Amina, a folk-loving science graduate student, into the band and their musical development towards the climactic do-it-yourself (DIY) gig Momtaz organises in a scrap yard. Season 2 rejoins the band after a small venue national tour and tracks their next stages of success, signing a record deal and recording an album. Comic tensions are produced by Momtaz’s DIY attempts to grow the band, which puts their punk ideology in conflict with capitalist exploitation. The programme often aligns its point of view with Saira’s punk anticapitalism, just as *Girls5Eva* aligns with Dawn’s popular feminism, yet similarly offers comic critique of her politics. Where Dawn lacks agency and follow-through, Saira is a feminist anti-capitalist killjoy (Ahmed, 2010: 39), often producing comic frustration from her bandmates.

Musician narratives frequently set family life in tension with music success. In season 1, Amina must negotiate her expression of her faith, her anxiety and punk’s anti-establishment attitude. Punk identity requires standing out; a disregard for social convention. This is set against the conservative model of demure Muslim femininity modelled by Amina’s judgemental best friend, Noor. The programme produces comic shock and confrontation from lyrics expressing an ‘in-yer-face anti-establishment attitude to upend commonly held tropes about Muslim women’ (Rahman, 2024: 199). The band is introduced through a rehearsal performance of ‘Aint No One Gonna Honour Kill My Sister but Me’ (1.1), where casual threats of murder over stolen eyeliner and shoes common to sibling conflict are satirically linked with white Western perceptions of Muslim culture as a controlling, violent patriarchy. ‘You wanna kill her, mister? / She’s mine, motherfucker!’ The bass thrums and guitars screech as a fluid handheld camera pulls tight into Saira and Bisma’s forceful vocal delivery, captures Ayesha’s swirling curls as she thrashes her drums in medium shots and manager Momtaz exhaling vape smoke through her niqab. The band’s dynamism, and confrontational yet playful expression of their anger, is affectively expressed through the sonic wall of sound, rhythmic editing and kinetic camerawork. These aesthetic choices draw the viewer close, aligning them with the women’s expression of satiric fury, the punk shout constructing a cathartic connection.

The band’s sonic chemistry does not click until they recruit Amina as lead guitarist. Her anxious personality and vomit-inducing stage fright provide comic contrast with her

bandmates' directness and confident expressions of self. But she is assimilated into the intoxication of collective creativity. At a poetry night, she tries to push through crippling stage fright to communicate the pleasure Lady Parts brings, describing the shared affective power as 'Like Godzilla . . . after she's destroyed a city' (1.4). Sara Ahmed (2010) suggests happiness can be described 'as intentional in the phenomenological sense (directed towards objects), as well as being affective (contact with objects)' (p. 32). She positions the family as an object, with society 'orientated towards the family as being good. . .[which] promises happiness in return for loyalty' (38). In season 1, Amina searches for an 'appropriate' husband, viewing marriage as the object that will produce happiness through its expression of her faith. Yet, she comes to understand that the band is the object that produces happiness, affectively directed between the women and through contact with music creation.

Song as soliloquy and collective catharsis

Music performance serves as an expression of the band's collective frustrations and fury as intersectional feminists and British Muslims. Their songs are performed in rehearsal and on-stage, the naturalistic diegetic numbers of the backstage musical. However, like *Girls5Eva*, some numbers shift across the spectrum of integration and push at the boundaries of realism (Penner, 2017). The programme is an ensemble comedy, but it centres Amina's perspective through her position as narrator and the expression of her affective experience through her fantasies, moments of perspectival magical realism (Gray and Gershon, 2024: 66). These illustrate her overthinking, swirling anxieties and desires and include homages to *Brief Encounter* (Lean, 1945) and *A Clockwork Orange* (Kubrick, 1972). This play with perspective through fantasy naturalises the programme's occasional integrated numbers. When Amina directly addresses the camera with her acoustic guitar in the programme's first integrated number, it extends the intimate audience connection built from her narration (1.1). The number shares her romantic struggles through a reworking of Joan Baez's 'Girl of Constant Sorrow', with her wardrobe extending backwards to create a performance space complete with surreal sock-puppet backing singers.

This perspectival magical realism expands to other band members in season 2, including Bisma's use of a remote control to 'pause' family arguments, which later develops into an integrated number after she argues with her husband over her hesitant desire to remove her headscarf and display her braids (2.4). Although sympathetic, he fears social judgement, and Bisma struggles to express the tension she feels between the expression of her Muslim faith and Black identity. She 'pauses' her family in frustration and leaves the house, realising her braids are uncovered in public, but the pause has expanded to the people in her street. She breaks into a cover of Nina Simone's 'Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood' as the camera tracks backwards in a long take, centring her walking down the street. This number functions as the musical's supra-diegetic integrated song, whose diegetic vocal is accompanied by non-diegetic music (Altman, 1987: 62–67). The combination of song and aesthetic choices expresses Bisma's isolation, layering Nina Simone's assertive Black womanhood onto her struggle to resolve the parts of her intersectional identity. The programme's integrated numbers serve as soliloquies shared only

with the audience, with pre-existing songs used to signal a character's state of mind and provide an instant connection with the viewer.

While performance in *We Are Lady Part* is naturalistically motivated, aesthetic choices present rehearsals and gigs as musical spaces where 'characters break out of the normal world into a realm of performance and art, a world where stylisation and rhythm provide a sense of community and beauty absent from the real world' (Altman, 1987: 261). Saira's bedsit doubles as the band's practice space, with Momtaz their only audience. During band practices, the aesthetics heighten to music-video fluidity, presenting music-making as moments of cohesion and emotional transparency. The women declaim their lyrics, staring intensely off-camera at the imagined patriarchal or nationalist other the songs address, maintaining a naturalistic distinction from the direct address of an integrated musical number.

Amina's full integration into the band comes with their collective creation of 'Bashir with the Good Beard' in a band practice (1.2). Nina Penner (2017) notes that 'even [backstage] musicals rely on a degree of fantasy . . . [in] the tendency for shows to come together without rehearsals' (p. 13). The song's composition follows the musician narrative's trope of erasing the labour of songwriting to present improvised song as direct emotional expression. The song is catalysed by Amina receiving Ahsan's romantic rejection just as she arrives at practice. She surprises her bandmates by putting on an electric guitar rather than her usual acoustic one to work through her feelings. Previously bumbling and anxious, she is now relatively direct in her expression, her anger expressed through sparse angular strums on the unamplified guitar as she chastises herself for 'Losing my mind over every Bashir with a good beard that smiles at me'. The line inspires Saira, and the band rushes to plug in. Songwriting is presented as fluent collective creativity, with Saira and Amina trading off improvised lyrics expressing the latter's frustration that develop into a track critiquing the manipulative power games of heterosexual relationships and expectations of demure Muslim femininity. The camerawork becomes more fluid, moving smoothly across medium close-ups of each band member, capturing their improvised contributions as they come together in cohesive sonic sisterhood. Amina's awestruck voiceover delights in the 'punk anthem shorn from the fabric of my life', the band's collective creativity.

The song climaxes with a shift to the heightened non-naturalism linked to Amina's interiority, as she steps forward into a confident wailing solo and is suddenly lit by a stark spotlight. A wind with no diegetic source swirls around her, and a faint, non-diegetic concert audience roars. She has slipped into a music fantasy she'd never previously considered, the overindulgent rock star, then stumbles, embarrassed, as the band stops playing. Saira's shout of 'That was sick!' assimilates the shocked Amina fully into Lady Parts. 'Bashir with the Good Beard' functions as the spontaneous musical number arising from action, where emotion cannot be contained in words alone, progressing a character's emotional development. Where Amina's natural state is bumbling comic reserve, here punk moves her voice and body to release social frustration.

Negotiating Muslim punk challenge

The band walks an ideological tightrope, using humour to critique patriarchal control and British multiculturalism with a directness that produces scandal, yet fearing being

perceived as disrespecting their faith. In season 2, Saira suffers an identity crisis when she meets her Muslim punk hero Sister Squire, whose mainstream success was stifled by her commitment to political critique and refusal to conform to the industry model of sexualised femininity (2.5). She challenges Saira to use the band's platform to talk about 'real things' rather than 'funny Muslim songs', obliquely referencing the Israel/Palestine conflict as 'Muslims are being chucked out of their homes'. This catalyses an intra-band conflict over the limits of comic satire as political challenge, when Saira brings a new, more explicitly political song to her bandmates, and the women argue over its potential threat to their record deal. Left alone in the studio, writing to work through her feelings, the bounds of realism are broken to express Saira's frustration and sorrow over industry control. She finds herself unable to complete the line 'Don't mention the war' as a pixelated distortion over her mouth prevents her from singing 'war'. Shocked and shaken, she engages in an increasingly physical battle trying to break through this censorship barrier, climaxing with the invisible controlling force suspending her in the air, then throwing her against the recording studio, the camera pushing in as she screams in fury through the pixelated distortion. The challenge in expressing Palestinian solidarity as a British Muslim on both a major music label and Channel 4 itself is addressed self-reflexively through a starkly emotional use of the magical realism the programme usually reserves for the comic expression of Amina's interiority.

The band's conflicts over provoking sufficient political challenge, and their artistic compromises to label demands, are resolved through 'Glass Ceiling Feeling' (2.6). A slower-paced rock counterpoint to their dynamic punk 'funny Muslim songs', the track is delivered with a weary, solemn anger. The lyrics weave together references to their earlier fight with metaphors for the label's white, patriarchal manipulation and their overwhelm at the burden of representation. Their intersectional feminism is reasserted by the lyrics 'Stuck in the master's house/With the master's tools' referencing Black feminist Audre Lorde's (1984) much-quoted essay 'The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house' to express their entrapment in artistic compromise. Presented in music video form, the number intercuts the band members performing in white spotlights in the dark recording studio, lying together on the floor with direct gazes at an overhead camera and posed together in a mirrored glass box within the recording studio. This creates a non-space where song can present a direct confrontational expression of their complex narrative situation. While the track resolves their interpersonal conflict through communal creation, it cannot resolve their industrial struggles, and the record label secretly removes the track from the final version of the album. Lady Parts ultimately reassert punk's utopian community after their industry compromise by leaking the original mix of their album, spreading it online with the aid of their fans. The season finale's concluding montage presents the band playing alongside local younger musicians. Embracing their role as mentors, Lady Parts are incorporated into their grassroots musical community.

Conclusion

Girls5Eva and *We Are Lady Parts* present women's collective music creation as offering affective transcendence and emotional transparency, a space to negotiate the social

constraints of contemporary womanhood through a sonic sisterhood. Both programmes offer comic commentary on women pushing against culturally constructed norms of femininity, be that the youthful sexuality of pop, the invisible stasis of mid-life, the demure Muslim woman or the frictionless assimilation of multicultural Britain. I have tracked their play with tropes of the musician narrative to tell stories of women's collective music-making and their negotiation of an exploitative music industry. Both use the affective dynamics of the musical to express the thrill of performance and work through knotty emotions and ambivalent relationships with their identities. In these programmes, musical satire and parody negotiate the frustrations of mid-life and Muslim womanhood, with performance offering a space for shared understanding. In recording studios, practice spaces or on-stage, the women turn to each other after successful performances, directing their happiness inward to the group, strengthening their bonds. Music performance offers a utopian space of sonic sisterhood, where women find freedom in the struggle and embrace their status as outsiders together.

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