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PUNK ROCK: RAINCOATS, FROM BRITAIN

By John Rockwell

The Raincoats, a British punk-art-rock-feminist band that was one of the more curious but also most admired products of the late 1970's new-wave rock scene, gave its first New York concert in more than two years late Wednesday night at Danceteria - the beginning of a short East Coast Tour that ends up tonight at the kitchen, the avant-garde performance space.

The set had a curiously unformed quality, which seemed partly ideological but also partly accidental. Ideological, because this band came together during the apex of the British punk movement's emphasis on amateur creativity - the philosophy that we should all make music for one another. The front line of Ana Da Silva, a Portuguese-born guitarist and singer; Gina Birch, a singer and bass player, and Vicky Aspinall, a singer, violinist and pianist, sings with hoarse, untrained voices and, except for Miss Aspinall, betrays no particular skill at instrumental work.

On records, this odd folkishness makes a piquant contrast to the sparseness and ingenuity of the songs and arrangements, with straightforward rock leavened by a delicate, Orientalized eccentricity vaguely reminiscent of the Y Pants, the New York women's band that uses toy and miniature instruments.

In person, however, the Raincoats' same fragile charm is not always so evident. There were reasons for that Wednesday. The less important were a group of women hecklers and a feedback-ridden sound system. More complex was the presence of three male backup musicians, an all-purpose guitarist-bassist-cum-saxophone player, a drummer and percussionist.

Quite apart from the intrusion of men into this women's preserve, the newcomers' more overtly proficient but less individualized playing provided a foil against which the three women seemed needlessly naïve.

Still, the Raincoats write songs that are fascinating in their viewpoint and ingenious in their sound. And, at their best, the three women perform those songs with a haunting authenticity. Perhaps later in their visit they will be heard to better advantage, and perhaps later in their careers they will finally find the committed woman drummer they have always sought. John Rockwell