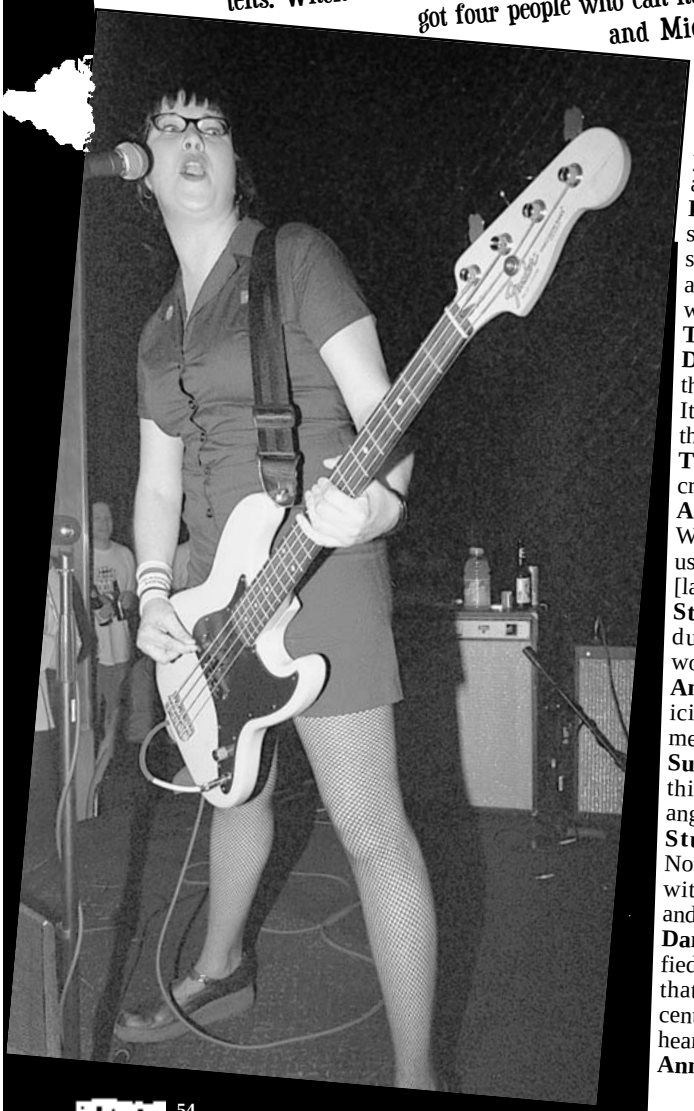
THE SOVIETTES

Annie: guitar ▶ **Susy:** bass ▶ **Sturgeon:** guitar ▶ **Danny:** drums

It doesn't sound like that big of a mountain to climb. Name one female-fronted band, beyond the Avengers, who consistently retained their sense of melody instead of just screaming when they got serious and political. After thinking about this for, now, several months, it became obvious why I took a liking to the Soviettes so quickly. They've got the fun and bounce of The Go-Go's, the teeth and smart marbles of *Reject All American* Bikini Kill, the hot-wired, charging punk of the Avengers, and song topics that go far beyond boyfriends and bubblegum. They prove that melody and backup vocals don't always have to equal a frontal lobotomy and that serious issues - from personal to public to political - can be confronted while the crowd is singing and dancing along with them. My recommendation to listening to their self-titled, debut album is to give it several listens. When the songs separate from one another, when the lyrics start seeping in, when you realize that you've got four people who can not only play, but are intelligent, have good hearts, strong friendships, and Midwestern ethics, that the album spins itself into a brighter and brighter gem. The Soviettes are definitely an addictive listen.

Interview and pictures by Todd Taylor



Todd: A lyrics question. How do you, "Grab a knife and turn it into art"?

Danny: That's "Blue Stars." The song itself is about battling depression through the Minnesota winter and doing so through creating artwork.

Todd: Why a knife, then?

Danny: Because the knife is something you can use to commit suicide. It's pretty harsh, but so is life. But that is sort of what you have to do.

Todd: For the band, what is one criticism that's hard to duck?

Annie: [in funny voice] Criticism? What is this word? Everybody loves us all the time. What do you mean? [laughter]

Sturgeon: The one that's hard to duck is that we're angry young women. Grrr!

Annie: They might mean it as a criticism, but I'm like, "What do you mean?"

Susy: If girls write or play something political, it's because we're angry.

Sturgeon: Because we're girls. Now, all of a sudden, we have issues with things because of our gender and not just because we're people.

Danny: It seems like we get classified easier because of that. Because that's what they hear. Ninety percent, or even more than that, they're hearing girls.

Annie: We would be nothing without Danny.

Sturgeon: Seriously.

Todd: Have people called you an all-girl band?

All: Yes.

Danny: All the time.

Todd: So, Danny, you're pre-op?

Sturgeon: One article, they had the photo of all four of us and they said, "This girl band trio." They couldn't even count us in the photo that they ran. There's four people in that picture. One of them is not a girl.

Danny: Not only do they have a drummer – shhh – it's a boy. It's a secret.

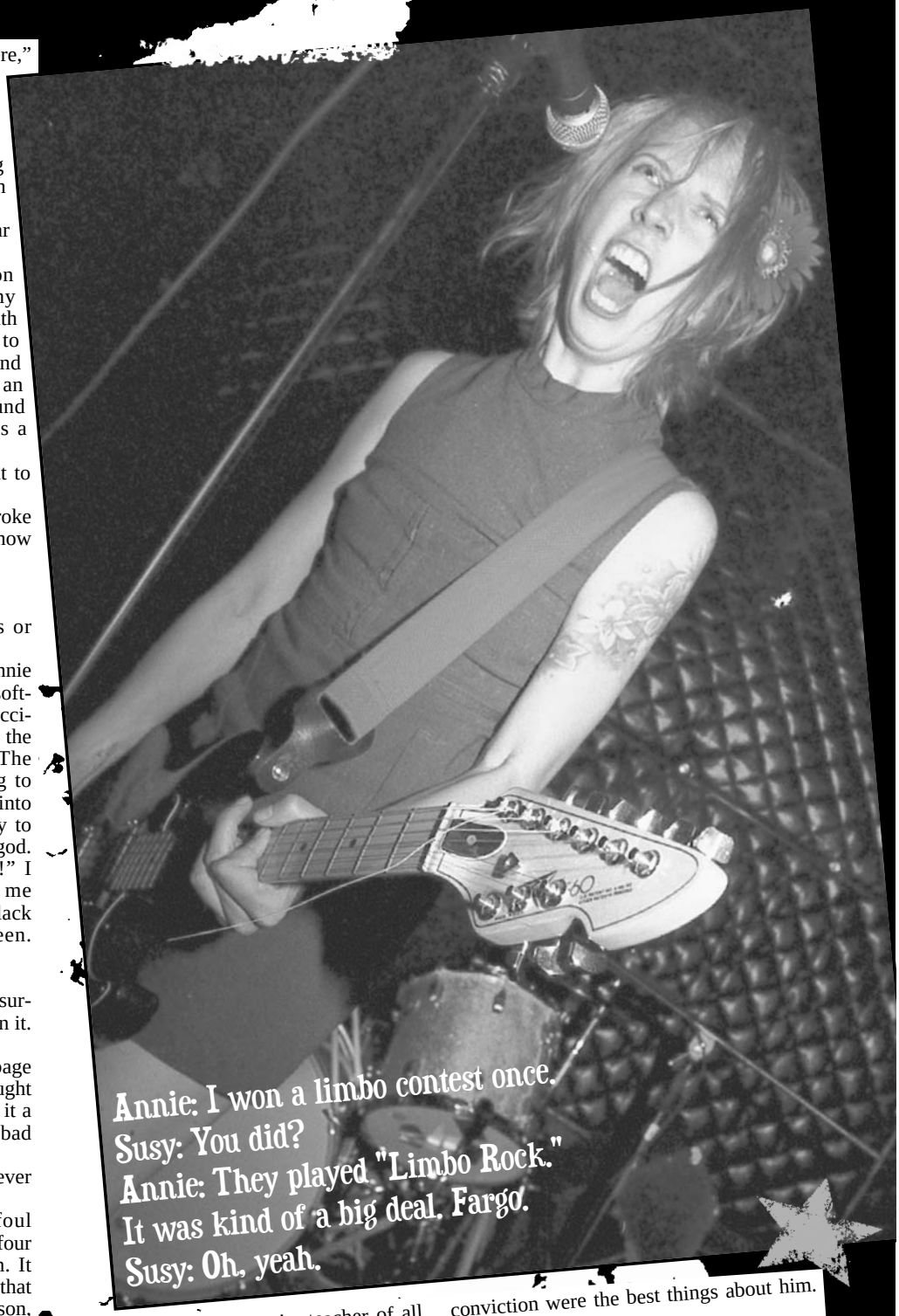
Todd: When I was talking to Susy yesterday, the question for the criticism is that after you recorded the album and could hear the songs on a regular basis, that everybody stepped up to the level on the album on a more consistent basis.

Sturgeon: Our other stuff isn't as good?

Todd: No. You realized how a song could be played – not only just the chords, but also the style behind it. When things become more effortless to play, they become more fun. You don't have to think and stare at your instrument all the time. You realize, "Oh, that's how it's supposed to sound," and everyone's in a groove.

Danny: Yeah, also because we all write songs, it's easy if one of us comes in with a song and say,

"Okay, I want you to do this thing here," because we know each other's styles.
Annie: We all have distinctly different styles. I really like that.
Todd: It gives it more depth.
Sturgeon: It's just more interesting than hearing the whole record written by one person or one voice.
Annie: Or one drum beat or one guitar riff.
Todd: That was my major trepidation when I first got your album. So many bands can put out a seven inch, and with four songs, it's not a stretch to listen to basically the same song four times and dig the shit out of it. But if you get an album and all twelve or so songs sound the same, I'm like, "I wish this was a seven inch. I'd listen to it more."
Danny: I really like not knowing what to expect from track to track.
Todd: What was the last thing you broke that, prior to breaking it, you didn't know you used it a lot?
Annie: My heart.
Susy: Oh, Annie.
Danny: Probably just some scissors or something.
Susy: I broke my hand last summer. Annie and I decided we were going to join a softball team and I told her that I'm super accident prone. They knew me by name in the emergency room when I was little. The first time I hit the ball – I'm running to first base – I totally tripped and slid into first. We sucked so bad. It was twenty to zero. I laid there for awhile. "Oh my god. My hand." Everyone was "Woooo!" I broke my hand and you guys made me play with a broken hand. It was all black and blue. Remember that? Then green. Then yellow.
Todd: Was it your dominant hand?
Susy: No. I also I didn't have health insurance so I couldn't afford to put a cast on it. It's still kind of weird.
Annie: My dog pulled me into a garbage can on my bike the other day and I thought I hurt my wrist. It's fine. I just bruised it a little. I called, "Sturgeon, something bad has happened."
Todd: What is the best trophy you've ever won?
Danny: I was the best free throw foul shooter at basketball camp. In front of four hundred kids, I put in nine out of ten. It was really great. The funny thing was that I'm not very good at that. For some reason, one day, and I took home a trophy. I don't know where that is now.
Susy: I won a Bruin Award when I was in soccer. We were the Fargo Bruins. It meant that I was a woman who had lots of spirit, a go-getter.
Sturgeon: What the hell's a bruin?
Susy: A bear.
Annie: I won a limbo contest once.
Susy: You did?
Annie: They played "Limbo Rock." It was kind of a big deal. Fargo.
Susy: Oh, yeah.



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Todd: Who is your favorite teacher of all time?
Annie: Sturgeon is my favorite teacher of all time. [laughter]
Susy: Ms. Bush. In the four, five combination class in Fargo, North Dakota. I found out years later that she's a lesbian. She's an old lady.
Danny: Mine is my American history teacher. His name is Rothman. I don't remember his first name. He was this old New York, Jewish guy. His accent and his conviction were the best things about him. Just a very smart guy.
Sturgeon: I had a lot of great teachers, but I had a lady called Ms. Bibblenix. I had a program at the U., one of those advanced math programs. She taught math. I had failed out of the program the year before, then tested back in. She was really cool. She had that crusty '80s winged hair. It was all black and shaggy. She'd wear black cowboy boots and super tight black jeans. She wasn't married. She was young. She

Sturgeon: Nah. I'm not afraid to show my underwear. Sometimes I wear underwear that's really bright so people can see it. You're going to see it anyway. You might as well make it fun. We're not too shy. We're not too full of tricks, either. Can't really do any of those.

was a really good teacher, and I was like, "I could do that job. I could be a math teacher." And now I am.

Annie: My favorite teacher wasn't my favorite teacher because he was such an extraordinary teacher. I went to an alternative high school for my junior/senior year and I had this teacher, Gary. He was my physics teacher. I don't know what his last name is. He was cool. I'm pretty sure he was just high all the time.

Todd: Suzy, what's so great about your dog, Tucker?

Susy: Tucker's old. When I met Lane (Lane is the drummer for Dillinger Four), he had Tucker. It was his ex-girlfriend's dog that they had saved. He's really ornery. He'd bite people. We have parties at our house. We put a sign on our door: "Do not touch the dog." People would still be like, "Oh, but dogs love me." And he'd bite 'em.

Danny: There's a picture of Tucker on the split LP (with The Valentines). Max didn't make it for photos one day, so we just took a picture of Tucker, and put "Max" below it.

Susy: Tucker's disagreeable. He's old and he can't hear. The other day, Lane said, "Do you think Tucker thinks, 'Why don't people talk to me anymore?'" [laughter]

Danny: And Lane doesn't know how old he was.

Susy: When I first started dating Lane, I was like, "So, how old is Tucker?" "Oh, ten." A couple months ago, we took him to the vet. "Seriously, how old do you think Tucker is?" "Oh, about ten." I was like, "Three years ago, you told me he was ten." Tucker's fourteen now. He's got all of these gross warts all over him.

Sturgeon: He used to come to our practice when we practiced in the basement at your house. He would sit in the middle of the bass drum.

Susy: He follows me everywhere. He's a special guy.

Todd: Danny, what do you do in a "sound arts" class?

Danny: Sound arts is anything from scoring film to just learning the basics. Even old school, like spicing tape and all that stuff to learning digital stuff – Digital Performer, ProTools – all that junk.

Todd: How does that bleed over to your drumming?

Danny: It doesn't too much, actually. Anything I learned in sound arts is way trumped by Jacques Wait who records us and produces us. He just knows everything. It doesn't, really, other than the kind of microphones that they're using to mic up the drums. I can tell him what overall sound I'm going for, I suppose.

Todd: Are there any tricks, on stage, that you won't do if you're wearing a skirt?

Annie: Tricks? I can't really do any.

Sturgeon: Nah. I'm not afraid to show my underwear. Sometimes I wear underwear that's really bright so people can see it. You're going to see it anyway. You might as well make it fun. We're not too shy. We're not too full of tricks, either. Can't really do any of those.

Susy: I guess if I fell down when I was drunk and my skirt happened to fly up.

Annie: That's kind of like a trick.

Todd: Do you know of any other female-vocal punk band who, when they talk about politics, they don't scream? I only came up with one. I thought about this for a long time.

Danny: What about The Avengers?

Todd: That's the one I got.

Susy: Give him a trophy!

Sturgeon: I was going to say X-Ray Spex, but she totally screams.

Todd: Trills.

Annie: Weird falsettos.

Sturgeon: Kathleen Hanna sounds exactly like Poly Styrene.

Todd: I didn't think it would be that rare. But it is. Kathleen Hanna does sing sometimes, but when she was in Bikini Kill, who I love, she screamed a lot. I don't want to lump you strictly into political pop punk – but a female-vocal band that covers serious issues – I think that's one thing that makes the Soviettes special in one big respect. When you get serious, you remain melodic.

Sturgeon: That's interesting.

Todd: Many punk-inclined ladies think that the combination to doing a political song is this: "I can't be sweet and poppy and serious at the same time." I believe it's a false premise.

Annie: We always said that we wanted to make songs that were catchy, songs that kids would want to listen to over and over that have something to say besides "I miss my boyfriend," or whatever.

Sturgeon: The other thing is that I don't think we ever thought about it in terms of, "If you have this subject matter, you have to have this style." Here's a song. Here's some lyrics. Here's how I'm going to sing. This is what I care to sing about at this point in my life. I don't think we ever thought about it, like you can't do it.

Susy: No.

Todd: What are your biggest fears, facing your first tour?

Susy: Being penniless. I have no money.

Annie: I'm not worried about that. I think people will be nice to us.

Sturgeon: The only serious fear I have is that the van breaks down or we crash it. I'm ready to go.

Danny: We're all ready to go.

Todd: What are you most looking forward to?

Annie: Playing in front of people we don't know. Seriously.

Danny: Meeting new people.

Sturgeon: Going to new places.

Annie: I've never been anywhere. I'm really excited to go.

Susy: You've been to Wyoming, Annie.

Annie: I've been to Wyoming. I've been a couple places on family trips. I finally went to New York and Chicago this past year.

Todd: What type of communism do the Soviettes model themselves after? Trotskyism? Stalinism? Joe Strummerism? Care Bearism?

Sturgeon: What's Care Bearism?

Todd: How you spell your band name, it's both hard and soft. You have something – communism and the Soviet Block – that many people picture as hard, concrete, and gray, but with the "ettes" at the end, makes it kind of cuddly.

Danny: I would say The Ronnettes. [laughter] With no explanation.

Sturgeon: I think that in the very beginning of communism, it was this whole idea that, "Hey, we're going to get together and we're all going to put a part into it and we're all going to do it for ourselves and we're all going to make this work." It's kind of what we do.

Todd: In the album, you approach gender politics from three distinct areas. One, in "Matt's Song," it's approached from a male point of view. In "Her Neon Heart," the gender is put on a city, and in "Undeliverable," you have a lady who is being shelved by her boyfriend or significant other. Care to explain?

Annie: "Matt's Song" is about a friend of ours who is a boy and it's such a touchy subject. When you get into the bedroom

and there's any sort of confusion, it can be a really bad thing. Rape is one of the biggest four-letter words that there is.

Danny: I would say that it is the biggest.

Annie: Absolutely. I would never discount anyone who felt that they were, but when other people get involved and you weren't really there, and so-and-so is saying this and so-and-so is saying that. We had a friend that was caught up in the middle of it and was, "I don't know what happened. I'm sorry. It was like this and it was fun and all of a sudden it wasn't." And the girl was like, "Oh, but I never said that." There are men who do get falsely accused of rape and it happens and that's what the song's about.

Todd: As a listener, I'm just happy that there's a depth of narrative in an album. It seems more balanced. Sometimes, when I listen to a record, I feel accused by the person screaming the lyrics at me. On occasion, I feel, "Hey, I'm a good person. Why are you screaming at me?"

Danny: That's preaching, sort of.

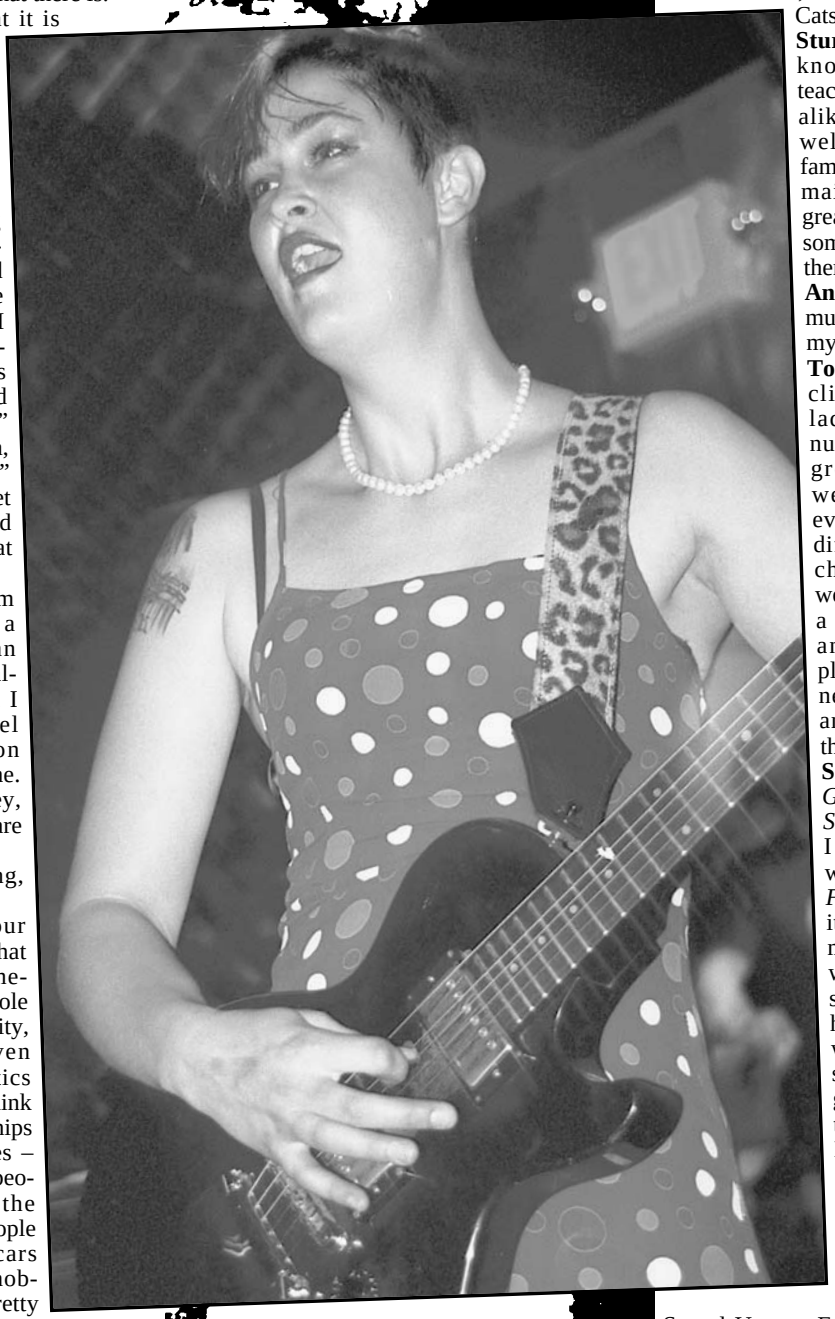
Sturgeon: In all of our songs, we write about what we know. That was something that affected our whole town, our whole community, for awhile. I don't even know what gender politics can mean, but I always think of cities as female, like ships and cars. I think of cities – well, what is it? It's the people and every city is the same. It is made of the people who have houses and cars and jobs and kids and hobbies. Where you go is pretty much all the same. I gave it a gender because I thought it would sound cooler. "Undeliverable" – I don't really know where that song came from.

Todd: Who has family members who are almost the opposite of you?

Susy: My sister's got an affluent husband who's an entrepreneur. He makes a lot of money. She's a stay at home mom. She has a boy and a girl.

Sturgeon: She's living the American dream.

Danny: Most of my family is opposite.



All: Absolutely.

Sturgeon: The ownership of different clubs around town means – because they're national – they get a lot of the bigger names. People who are going to come here, go to those clubs. Typically, those clubs tend to be quite expensive. First Avenue, the club that used to get all the big shows, was the place that everyone played at, period.

Actually, there's only one other person in my family who I can relate to and that's my older brother. Everyone else is strictly Americana. Get a good job, get married, have a house, all that stuff. Kids. Dogs. Cats. Food.

Sturgeon: Actually, I don't know. All my family are teachers, kind of. We're a lot alike. We get along really well. I have a really cool family. Big. Tight knit. High maintenance. But they're great. I've had such an awesome life and it's because of them.

Annie: My parents are both musicians and artists. So is my sister.

Todd: Where did the sound clip on the album of the lady saying, "We're the number one rock and roll group in the world and we're going to see that everything is going to be different. It's all gotta to change. The first thing we're going to do is build a radio station tomorrow and we're not going to play commercials, and no news, just rock and roll and the truth. One, two, three four!"

Susy: *Ladies and Gentlemen, the Fabulous Stains.* That was my idea. I saw that movie when I was fourteen on *Night Flight* and I'd never seen it again. It didn't change my life, but watching it when you're fourteen, it's so cool. My friend Brad had a copy of it, so I watched it again. That sound clip was originally going to be the start of the record.

Danny: I heard that song on the radio today. They didn't put the sample.

Sturgeon: Sometimes they do. A few years back, they played it on the big screen at the Sound Unseen Festival here. I had never seen it before and it's such an awesome, awesome movie. It's so bad and it's so great at the same time.

Todd: What's the worst bit of advice you've ever followed?

Danny: When I was eighteen, my dad told me to go to school and be a business major. And that's the end of that.

Annie: I tend not to follow advice. Or ask for it.

Todd: Is Clear Channel doing its best to fuck Minneapolis?

Sturgeon: One article, they had the photo of all four of us and they said, "This girl band trio." They couldn't even count us in the photo that they ran. There's four people in that picture. One of them is not a girl.

Susy: It's a great place to see shows.
Annie: It's historic to this city – if thirty years can be considered historic.
Sturgeon: I think a lot of what we've got today is because that place has been around and has been having cool shows and it's a place where local bands can go and play.
Annie: Or open up for bigger bands.
Susy: You look at any billboard in the city and it's owned by Clear Channel. All of them.
Danny: And ninety percent of the radio.
Annie: Every time, "You're listening to blah, blah, blah, Clear Channel Radio." Ack.
Sturgeon: The radio is so bad. Thank god for Radio K and NPR.
Danny: At work we listen to the eighties station. According to them, there were only twenty-five songs that were from the eighties. It's terrible.
Sturgeon: When the news for the war was on, it was, "This is a Clear Channel update. We're doing really well over there."
Danny: "This is exactly how things are going."
Sturgeon: I heard that Colin Powell's son was doing the news for it.
Todd: Well, Michael Powell, the head of the FCC, is Colin Powell's son, who, on June 2, 2003, said, "We're not going to keep anti-monopoly restrictions on national radio or national television because those are archaic laws that didn't fathom cable and satellite We should no longer restrict them." It doesn't make any sense because ABC, NBC, the big five, all made huge profits last year. And as much as people hate basic TV and radio, they're still free to watch and listen to. They're such a huge influence.
Sturgeon: All of them are CNN or Warner.
Danny: They're putting money before variety or new ideas.
Todd: Or dissenting voices.
Sturgeon: Or, god, even good songs. I think, in general, I think there's much more restricted information and filtered information and stomping down. Arise Bookstore, in this town.
Annie: This tiny little bookstore with vegan recipe books and the ARA (Anti-Racist Action) has meetings there sometimes.
Sturgeon: They got listed on the terrorist organization list early spring.
Susy: Oh my god.
Sturgeon: It's a bookstore, you know? For people who want to make an organic farm or if you want to know what happened in Central America.
Susy: People have different ideas.

Danny: Not only do they have a drummer - shhh - it's a boy. It's a secret.

Danny: People want to learn. Weird.
Sturgeon: Or know about political prisoners. It's so bad. I can't believe it.
Annie: They try to call it a free country. It's ridiculous. It scares me.
Sturgeon: If it gets worse, I really want to start thinking about Canada. There's federal grants for the arts.
Todd: Sturgeon, you were also in the band the Salteens. How does the direction of this band differ from that?
Sturgeon: Well, let me just say that I was in the Salteens for the last two years. Carrie and Emily really made the core of the band. I remember sitting in on their practices and it was really fun. I was all, "I'm going to buy a guitar and I'm going to learn how to play because I want to play in their band." It was a lot more – as hard as it is to believe because this band is so fun oriented – it was a lot looser and it was a lot more about basement parties, if that's possible.
Annie: They were less polished, but probably more fun to watch.
Sturgeon: It was so fun. Man, Carrie and Emily are just dynamos. You could see that a lot in American Monsters (another band that Carrie and Emily were in together). Together, they're so great. The combination of their vocals was complimentary to one another.
Annie: They've got great moves.
Sturgeon: She was like Little Richard. It was all beer and blood and arrrrggghhh! It was also very – again, I feel stupid in saying this in comparison to this band – it was fast and dirty. It was more punk.
Annie: If you can use that word anymore.
Danny: It was a lot faster.
Sturgeon: It was faster, but the mentality of it, there was never any thought to a future. I hate to say that because it was awesome.
Todd: When you first started playing your instrument, name some bands that you had in your brain at the time.
Susy: Go-Go's.
Sturgeon: Well, The Salteens. Emily taught me to play and I still can't play very much. Jawbreaker. The Misfits and the Dead Kennedys were what I was listening to when I learned. I don't really know if it had anything to do with it.
Danny: Mine were the Ramones, The Damned, and The Ventures. I learned how to play surf beats first. I just taught myself from there. I still play them.
Annie: Sonic Youth, The Dead Kennedys, and the Descendents.
Todd: If you could shape beer bottles into a different design, what would it be.
Susy: Grenade.
Annie: A bowling pin. As long as it has a big mouth.
Susy: Budweiser has the bowling pin bottles.
Annie: They do? How cute.
Sturgeon: Is it real beer?
Susy: Yeah.
Sturgeon: They would be insulated and have a ring on them so you could put them on your belt.
Danny: I think that they wouldn't have a new shape. They'd just be way bigger. Just a really big bottle.