



There are more than fifty chapters of RAR in the U.K. Started in the summer of '76 as a reaction against racial slurs made by Eric Clapton during a performance, it has grown steadily in popular support. RAR sponsors punk and reggae bands in concerts and "Militant Tours" under an anti-fascist and anti-racist banner. On June 30, nineteen Bay Area bands played a fifteen hour benefit to help get RAR rolling in San Francisco. Mary Sweeting, aka Sweet Mary Malice the Black, is one of its main organizers.

How did Rock Against Racism come to San Francisco?

MARY: It all started with me and my brother listening to the first Tom Robinson album. There's all these listings of radical organizations on the back cover. I said hey, check this out - there's something called Rock Against Racism in England. Sounds really hip, why don't we start a chapter? I didn't really know what was entailed, and England wasn't too swift about sending me information. Finally, the Clash came to town. They're old friends of Moe Armstrong and I got to meet them and talk with them for awhile. They were all very enthusiastic about RAR in England. I asked them how you go about starting a chapter here and they said, "You just do it." But how? And they said, "Just do it!" It built very slowly. My birthday party in March was the first meeting. Some of the key people working in the organization now were there for the first.

Given that RAR emerged in the UK as an organized response to the social situation there, how do you see it translated in the U.S.?

MARY: In England it's a very grassroots movement. It came out of a basic need people had to pull together and fight the National Front, which was kicking anybody's ass who wasn't a right-on right-wing English person. And that meant all the minorities living in England, as well as the punk rockers who were highly visible in their weirdness and going against the grain of proper English society. It was a natural coalition of oppressed masses against growing fascist violence. Blacks and whites really had to come together and defend each other, and do it around their music. When you're living in ghettos of the world and you're very poor, music is one of the things you can do for yourself.

In England they're highly visibly political. Whereas in California, we can even get a non-profit status; the dynamic is completely different. Here people think that the question of racism was made head-on and solved in the sixties. In Britain, the memory of the 1976 race riots is still very fresh. Racism is supposed to be a dead issue here. That's complete bullshit. All the gains supposedly made by the civil rights movement were taken back little by little. Now they're trying to take back our music by suppressing it.

Why did the concept first excite you?

MARY: Since I'm a deejay by license and a workie at a radio station, I know first hand what it's like trying to get music out that's about working class or just disenfranchised people. The record industry is not set up to publicize music coming out of the communities, because it's not commercial. They know the poorer classes of people are not the ones who support the record industry. It's your middle and upper middle class teenager who really puts the money in the companies' pockets by paying extravagant prices for commercial concerts and Peter Dinklage albums. Working class music isn't feasible to market, because the people who make it can't even afford to buy it after it's been through all the commercial changes and finally hits the market. It's just a matter of economics.

Julio Birchill wrote about Poly Styrene's involvement in RAR: "You don't have to be black or a girl to hate fascism, but it helps." Do you recognize yourself in that?

MARY: When you look in the mirror do you see yourself? Yeah, very much so. People try to tell me I'm copping an attitude because it's always conscious of the fact that I'm a poor and black and single mother in America, trying to eke out some kind of living with low-paying shit jobs. I'd like to be able to do more than just survive. They hire black people because they have to, but there's nothing that says they have to promote them to any

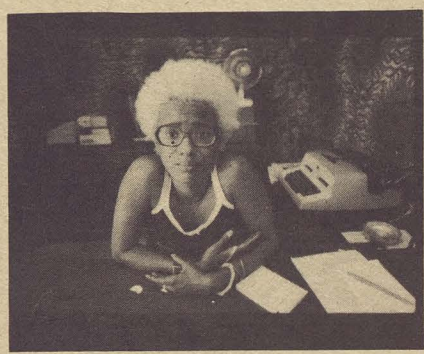


photo by Mia Culpa

theorizing to me; I feel it every day when I'm at work.

How do you see RAR making a dent on the music industry?

MARY: It's about building an alternative power base in music. Let's build our own music industry. We'd rather see a product that the people bring about than what the corporations produce; we've seen what they will give us to put on our turntables. It's almost a cliché that getting a contract and gaining musical popularity means never being able to do what you started out to do. Or being mechanized out of a studio job, like with disco.

Did you read Tom Ward's disco piece in the BARB? He says you could argue that a wholesale rejection of disco is racist, because the majority of black and Latino kids are discing down. It might be mechanical muzak but at least it's based on black polyrhythms, which "new wave" mostly is not. And Andrew Kopkind had an article in the VOICE where he argued that the disco strongholds are in the gay and black communities, and that disco has a black and female voice -- indicating that disco does speak directly to exploited people. How would you answer that?

MARY: Oh lord. I think Tom basically took the stance that disco is black music and it should be defended. But it's really not original black music. Its whole structure strikes me as more Euro-technic than anything else. It's music made by machines. You have to have 125 beats per minute. There's a whole calculated psychology behind it; it's a very controlling kind of music. It's geared to the masses only in that there's nothing else to be played. If you're into listening to the radio and dancing, if that's what you're being programmed to listen to, that's what you hear. Like they told us at broadcast school: you're not here to learn how to educate the public, you're here to learn how to program them. Disco is a form of brainwashing. If it's geared to the working poor, it's because it promises you that Saturday night fever after a whole week of taking shit. You're never gonna get anywhere, you're never gonna own a yacht or a house, you're lucky if you get your car paid off before it falls apart, but you can always go down to the disco and get anesthetized. You can always go down there and dream. You notice how disco songs are either about love or money or Saturday night? Look at the record jackets. Everybody's so slick and upwardly mobile. Black people decked to the teeth in jewels and furs and posing next to airplanes - that's the American dream. It's for the blacks who would love to be bourgeois; they can buy all these albums for a nominal price compared to what it would actually cost to live that life. If you can't have it, dream of it.

And rock n' roll is a rude awakening?

MARY: Back in Detroit I used to take the radio and go sit in the closet for hours and escape inside my head. Fill it up with Motown and the M3, until I was strong enough to go out and fight again. To some people, rock n' roll is the rhythm of their life. And that's why they're becoming so militant about it. Something like RAR is needed as a reminder that we wanna live. The emphasis isn't only on rock; it's just that RAR was born out of the whole rock medium. Rock is a conglomerate of black, country and pop music. Everyone who was affected by the adversity of the American dream and not being able to live up to it, therefore being ostracized from that society, has had input into rock. We're expanding into other circles to bring in reggae and salsa and blues because that's all part of it. All part of rock n' roll, the whole rhythm. I think people are able to put up with schlock like the disco crap and

mellow rock because the rhythm of their lives is no longer vibrant or alive. The apathy has to be broken through. People have to get up and move.

How successful was your first benefit on June 30th?

MARY: We grossed \$3,084. About 1500 people attended the concert. It went perfectly! \$1,500 of the proceeds will cover our expenses; we'll use the other half to produce the next concert, which won't be a 15-hour brouhaha like the first, but much more modest with maybe 4 or 5 bands - and put out the first full issue of our newspaper, I-Ital Kave Times.

What's it like to moonlight in a M.O.R. beautiful music station?

MARY: Moonlighting? Daylighting is more like it. I must admit that I skipped a few beats and just punked out there for a good while. I was on welfare and unemployed and doing an unpaid 2 AM to 7 AM show at a community radio station. Then I had to get practical again and decided to find employment in my field of "expertise." So I ended up at RAR at the same time I started organizing RAR. They hired me as their Citizen of the Day editor and beautiful music receptionist. I write radio copy and answer phones from 8:30 to 5.

What sort of comments do you get about your bleached blond hair and your leatherette minis?

MARY: When I walked in with blonde hair, one of the account executives said, "That's just what we need around here, another dumb blond." I guess I'm a good conversation piece. So far we're all tolerant of one another. When I worked at KJZZ as a radio trainee, I think my hair was turquoise and emerald green. I have a real schizoid existence. It's especially weird when people call the station and ask for Sweet Mary Malice the Black, please. I'd like to get off the phone and on the air again, but you gotta eat. I don't have expectations of going far in corporate radio, but I'm learning a thing or two about how it works. I've learned enough to know that I never want to see RAR co-opted by something like corporate music. It sucks.

Isn't rock revolt still largely a question of style?

MARY: Maybe it is now, but we're using it as a means of rediscovering our power. The whole white punk scene, the cholo scene, the badass black dual triple, every culture has a dominant vibe going through it right now and it's angry and it wants relief. You start screaming and screams turn into music. That's where our real power is.

What are RAR's immediate priorities?

MARY: We're working on developing more contacts into the communities, developing more minority involvement. They haven't been that responsive so far because they're put off by the whole punk persona. We want to do concerts in Hunters Point and East Oakland and the Mission. We'll be doing concerts once a month in different locations featuring different music. We want to have a platform where at least we can present people on the same stage, and expose the music of different communities to one another and break down the mistrust between groups. RAR is a unifying force more than anything else. When we have enough money and when whole bands are joining and want to contract with us to play concerts, we'll develop RAR contracts and start taking concerts on Militant Tours around the country. They've been doing it in England. And Ray, who's with the the Mission, we'll be doing RAR in New York. Yuppies and who started RAR in New York, just took a tour from NYC to Chicago and Detroit.