HEAVY ANGEL: MIA ZAPATA

EXPLORING THE LIVING MEMORY OF A SEATTLE LEGEND

MARGARET O’NEIL GIROUARD
Women’s history department
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For Mia
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Cover photograph by Jackie Ransier.
INTRODUCTION

“I don’t need your social love
I already feel misread enough…”

Mia Zapata would probably find it ridiculous to be the subject of academic analysis. As a punk rock singer who loved the blues, Zapata was an old soul, an artist who loved to perform with her band The Gits, and spend time with her many friends. Yet she also cherished the solitude of hours spent alone in her room with her guitar, her easel and her journal. By all accounts she was a person who lived in the moment and walked to the beat of her own heart. Life interested her; people interested her; music interested her; art interested her. Theory did not, because for Mia Zapata, life was not meant to be analyzed. It was meant to be lived.

Sadly, Zapata’s life was intense but all too brief. She died at age twenty-seven, an infamous age in the history of music industry tragedy. Unlike Janis Joplin, another fiery singer with a bluesy howl who never reached twenty-eight (and to whom she is often compared) Zapata’s life ended when she was on the brink of potential national success, rather than in the thick of it. Joplin and her celebrated contemporaries Jimi Hendrix and Jim Morrison (also dead at twenty-seven) and Zapata’s own contemporary Kurt Cobain, (dead at the same age less than a year after her death) achieved legendary status in the popular imagination after

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their untimely demises, thanks to their already-established fame. Though The Gits were a popular working band at a time when “all the eyes of the world were on Seattle,”² Mia Zapata died before a larger audience could be exposed to the raw power of her vocals and the thundering music of The Gits. Despite this lack of widespread recognition, to those who did know her and to anyone who saw The Gits perform live, Mia Zapata was unforgettable.

Unlike famous rock stars felled by drug use and suicide, the extraordinary life of Mia Zapata was cut short in 1993 by an act of horrific violence that shocked Seattle and left those who loved her reeling for years to come. As the victim of a rape and murder that remained unsolved for nearly ten years, Zapata’s death was a well-documented news story, but her music has survived mainly in the hearts of fans old and new rather than in the annals of the pop culture explosion of Seattle in the early 1990s. In the years since her passing only one book has devoted a few scant pages to her musical legacy, despite the overwhelming evidence of her uncommon talent and unfulfilled potential.³

The band’s lack of exposure contributed to my own belated discovery of Mia Zapata. I first came across The Gits on July 9th, 2008, when an idle Google search of Kathleen Hanna revealed that she and fellow musician

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² *The Gits*, produced by Jessica Bender, directed by Kerri O’Kane, 81 minutes, Jab Films, 2008, DVD.
³ Maria Raha, *Cinderella’s Big Score: Women of the Punk and Indie Underground* (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2005), 162. See Chapter 19, “Look Through Me: Mia Zapata.” While Zapata’s murder has been briefly mentioned in a few books, Raha remains the only writer to focus on her life and career.
Allison Wolfe had co-emceed the New York premiere of *The Gits* documentary two days before, on the fifteenth anniversary of Zapata’s death. My initial dismay at missing a rare appearance of Hanna and Wolfe together quickly gave way to fascination as I read the story behind the film. I was shocked that I had never heard of this amazing singer, despite my deep interest in female musicians from the early 1990s. The lightning bolt struck: I had to write about Mia Zapata. I nervously discarded months of research on a different thesis topic, but after listening to my first few Gits songs, I knew I had no other choice. Like so many others before me, once I heard Mia sing, I was transfixed.

This thesis is divided into three chapters. Chapter One examines how Zapata’s murderer ripped her from the heart of two families: the one she was born into and the one she created with her band The Gits. I examine how Zapata was able to move freely between the two seemingly disparate spheres of her affluent Southern roots and the starving artist’s life in Seattle. Chapter Two examines Zapata as a performer and a lyricist and contrasts her to Riot Grrrl, a feminist punk rock movement that was close to Zapata geographically and perhaps in spirit, but could not have been further from her aesthetics or goals as an artist. Zapata is an example of how women in music are often unfairly classified or criticized due to assumptions based on their appearance or perceived motivations behind their art. Chapter Three examines the art and activism that occurred as a result of her death and inspired conflicting representations of her as a
musician and as a martyr. By examining Zapata’s life, I hope to draw some attention to the band and to a singer who could have captivated the world the same way she often silenced a room with her haunting voice.

In writing this thesis I find myself in the unique position of starting a historical conversation rather than joining one. The lack of secondary literature on The Gits means that I relied almost entirely on primary sources, mainly newspaper and magazine articles published after Zapata’s death, as well as court documents. These primary media sources, while useful, are also problematic not only for often incorrect categorizations of Mia Zapata, but because every single one of them was written after her murder. So far her life has only been examined through the lens of the violence that claimed it. A recent documentary film dispels this association somewhat by focusing on Zapata as a performer, a daughter, a sister and a friend rather than as a victim, but while The Gits adds a fresh dimension to Zapata’s memory, the end to the story remains the same. Therefore my most illuminating sources have been the interviews and other communications with the surviving Gits and other people who knew and loved Mia as she was in life.4

Mia Zapata might have found this thesis silly, but I hope she would be gratified to know that although the tragic details of her murder first

4 Quotations taken from the interviews I conducted with Zapata’s friends are reproduced as close to verbatim as possible, edited occasionally for space but mainly to eliminate the pauses, stammers and similar infelicities of every day speech. I have also taken pains to maintain the contextual integrity of every excerpt of conversation.
attracted my attention, this thesis was written not because of interest in her death but because of my enthrallment with her vibrant life and art.
CHAPTER ONE

THE TWO WORLDS OF MIA ZAPATA

“...you stand up against
A world set to deceive
You need a special strength
I’ve got that second skin
I’ve got that chance to give...”

Mia Katherine Zapata rests in Cave Hill Cemetery in Louisville, Kentucky. Her grave is marked by a flat stone inscribed with her name, and the dates that define her brief life: August 25, 1965-July 7, 1993. Zapata touched many lives in her short time, and those who remember her often describe as her greatest qualities her non-judgmental nature and her ability to befriend many different kinds of people. The multiple roles she played in her life are evident in the words on her gravestone, which commemorates her as a “Cherished Daughter—Sister—Artist—Friend,” and of course, “Git.” Whether one category is more important than another is impossible to say, because Zapata was up to the task of fulfilling all of these roles. She moved with ease between the family into which she was born and the family she created with The Gits and other musician friends, first at Antioch College in Ohio and then in Seattle, Washington. Mia’s father Richard Zapata described his daughter’s ability to transcend the seemingly disparate spheres of her life: “Mia lived in two different worlds. She lived on two different sides of the street—the straight side on one, parochial

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schools, affluent family and tennis clubs. But when she crossed the street, material things didn’t mean anything to her.”

In the many articles written about Mia Zapata after her death, she is often portrayed as the epitome of unfulfilled promise. But what her friends and family seem to remember most when they talk about her to reporters and in The Gits film is not just how talented she was as a performer and writer, but how loving and caring she was and open to knowing people from all walks of life. This ability to connect with vastly different people was evident in the diverse crowd of over a thousand mourners, from punk rock musicians to nuns, who attended her memorial on Capitol Hill. Years later, during her killer’s trial, Judge Sharon Armstrong would comment that Zapata was “extraordinarily vibrant” and “obviously talented,” but also that she was “struck by how closely Zapata had connected to so many people.” A friend who wished to remain anonymous was quoted, “If all the people who knew her and loved her and wanted to be here had come, the courtroom would have spilled over.” Zapata’s sister Kristen wondered,

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“Who would have thought that this unique, nappy-haired little wild child would have touched the lives of so many strangers?”

From her childhood in the wealthy suburbs of Louisville to her years as a starving artist in Seattle, this great capacity for friendship allowed Zapata to move relatively easily between what many would view as two completely disparate lives. In one of the first articles written after Zapata’s death, Seattle Times writer Mary F. Pols maps out her dichotomous existence. “Holding on to Mia’s Magic—Singer’s Killing Leaves Grief in the Two Worlds She Lived In” was published on August 26, 1993, the day after what would have been Zapata’s twenty-eighth birthday. In it Pols explicitly describes Zapata’s life as split between two worlds: the one in which she grew up as the daughter of an affluent family, and a second world inhabited by the punk rock family she created with her musician friends at Antioch and in Seattle. Pols portrays Zapata’s family of origin as a unit made up of her mother, father, stepmother, older brother and sister, and Zapata as the black sheep who would come home from Seattle each time with a new wild hair color or in need of a trip to the store to buy “presentable” clothes for family events. However, Zapata remained close with her family, even if she was very different from them.

Zapata’s friends also remember her as the glue that held many people together. In the liner notes for Seafish Louisville, a posthumously released album of live and remixed Gits tracks, friend Peter Sheehy writes:

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Mia was the hub of several social circles; a magnetic personality who drew all sorts of people together who otherwise might never have met. To this day I still make eye contact on the street with people I’ve never spoken a word to, but whose knot-like dreadlocks had stung my eyes in the pit at Squid Row, the Off-Ramp, or the Weathered Wall so many years ago. We smile and nod in passing now, sharing a special, silent knowledge and an unbearably painful ignorance.12

Mia’s loss permanently shattered an intensely familial circle of friends made up of Seattle musicians.13 The remaining Gits were brothers who had lost a sister.14

Every year on Zapata’s birthday, flowers arrive at her grave that represent each of the worlds she left behind: The Seattle musician she almost married sends her favorite yellow roses with an unsigned card that reads, “You are always with me.” Zapata’s father sends one red rose and one yellow rose for each year since her death.15 (See Figure 1). Though Zapata may not have viewed the spheres of people in her life in such black and white terms, the dual-family dynamic that Pols establishes in her article provides a useful template for examining the trajectory of Zapata’s life and career.

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Figure 1. Mia Zapata’s grave.  

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“It was a grand mystery.”

In early July 1993 the Gits returned home from a successful West Coast tour. The band was gathering more momentum than ever, in talks with Tim Sommer from Atlantic Records about a potential record deal, and another tour was due to begin in a few weeks, with a return to Europe on the horizon. Zapata was excited by these prospects, but Gits drummer Steve Moriarty asserts that she was not happy to be back in Seattle during the brief break between tours. He recollects her saying, “I don’t wanna be back in Seattle. I have a really bad feeling here.” He believes that she had a sense that something terrible was going to happen: “She was a real intuitive person. Extremely intuitive.” Zapata’s feeling of foreboding would prove to be tragically correct.

Zapata spent the evening of July 6, 1993, in the Capitol Hill district at a favorite watering hole, the Comet Tavern, with friends including drummer Valerie Agnew and singer Selene Vigil, members of another local band, 7 Year Bitch. The band’s guitarist Stefanie Sargent had died of a heroin overdose almost exactly a year before and they spent the evening reminiscing about her and toasting her memory. Little did Agnew and Vigil know that they were about to lose another dear friend: when Zapata left the bar around midnight, they were seeing her alive for the last time. In

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Kerri O’Kane’s documentary *The Gits* (2008), Agnew describes saying goodbye to Zapata that night, recalling that she hugged everyone really deeply, and did a “Mia maneuver” by licking her face. In a newspaper article published three days after Zapata’s murder, Agnew remembers Zapata speaking about Sargent, and of the importance of being strong and carrying on with your own life, while cherishing the memories of what a lost friend was like before death. “So I have to keep that advice for her,” Agnew says.

After Zapata left the Comet Tavern she went to the nearby apartment of a friend, Tracy “T.V.” Kenley. Though Zapata’s best friend Maria Mabra had also seen her at the Comet that evening and remembered her being in an extremely happy mood over The Gits’ future prospects, by the time Zapata left Kenley’s apartment, she was upset over her recent break up with boyfriend Robert Jenkins, and left briefly to look for him. Unable to find him, she returned to Kenley’s apartment, who urged her to stay over. Zapata declined, telling Kenley that she planned on heading back to her own place, and left the apartment around 2 a.m.

Zapata never made it home that night. What exactly happened the next hour and a half of Mia Zapata’s life became the grand mystery that baffled investigators and tormented her friends and family for a decade.

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22 State of Washington v. Jesus Mezquia, Defense Memorandum In Support of Motion To Introduce Other Suspect Evidence Pursuant to ER 402, The Sixth Amendment And Article One, Section 22 Of The Washington State Constitution, February 24, 2004, 3-4.
Around 3:20 a.m. a prostitute named Charity Vials found Zapata’s body lying on the deserted street of 24th Avenue between Yesler and South Washington, about three miles away from the Comet. She was partially clothed and lying on her back, legs crossed and arms spread to either side, in a crucifix position. Vials ran to a nearby fire station and alerted paramedics that a body was lying in the street. Though the medics vigorously attempted to revive her, Mia Zapata was pronounced dead at the scene. She had been beaten, brutally raped and strangled with the cords of her Gits sweatshirt. The medical examiner believed that even if she had not been strangled, Zapata would have died from the internal injuries sustained in the beating.  

The news of Zapata’s death reached her friends after a long night of fear and uncertainty. Agnew recalls that Moriarty called her say that Mia was missing, and that he was afraid there was going to be a “repeat of Stefanie,” Agnew reports in The Gits. “Which made me think, drug-related, which didn’t make sense.” Agnew still had a sinking feeling that something was wrong. Her worst fears would be confirmed when she found out that Mia had been strangled, and she instinctively knew that Mia had also been raped. Like the surviving Gits, Agnew’s memories from that time are hazy: “We all went over to Matt’s house and everything’s a blur

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25 Valerie Agnew, telephone interview by author, April 12, 2009.
after that. I just remember it being important to everybody that we were all together as much as possible."\textsuperscript{26}

On the day of Zapata’s funeral a formal memorial was held in the morning and that night her friends held a remembrance at the Weathered Wall, a bar where The Gits had played many times. The ticket for admission was a single yellow rose. On the way to the remembrance, the Zapata family got a little lost trying to find the bar, and Richard Zapata drove aimlessly until he suddenly noticed people walking through the streets carrying yellow roses. He tells this story in The Gits film, and his voice breaks as he remembers realizing, “These are all fans and friends of Mia’s.” He was able to follow them to the Weathered Wall, where her mourners partied in her honor till dawn.\textsuperscript{27}

There were almost no clues and no leads in the case. The Gits were quickly dissatisfied with the police investigation and decided to take matters into their own hands. They started organizing benefit shows that included Seattle bands that were nationally famous as well as local musicians and friends of Zapata’s. They raised almost $50,000 to hire private investigator Leigh Hearon, who eventually regarded the case as a personal mission.\textsuperscript{28} However, despite an investigation that extended to episodes of the television programs America’s Most Wanted, Unsolved Mysteries, City Confidential and 48 Hours, the identity of Zapata’s killer remained elusive, even in 2002 as cameras rolled for The Gits.

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{28} The Gits, 2008.
documentary. In it, Steve Moriarty laments the fact that he and the rest of
the people who loved Mia might just never know what really happened to
her.29

O’Kane’s documentary would receive an unexpected ending thanks
to Seattle detectives’ reopening the investigation of Zapata’s murder as a
cold case file.30 A sample of saliva from a bite wound on her breast had
been preserved since 1993, a time when DNA testing for criminal
investigations was still in its nascent stages. To the amazement of the
Seattle police squad, a DNA match was made to a man living on the other
side of the country, in a small Florida fishing town.31

Although he had few convictions, Jesus Mezquia had been arrested
many times in the past for various crimes, including an assault on a
pregnant girlfriend.32 He is a Cuban immigrant who had arrived in
America in 1980, and it was quickly proven that he was living in Seattle in
July 1993. Arrested for burglary in Florida, Mezquia had been forced to
give a DNA sample, which finally led to a match with the DNA evidence
retrieved from Zapata’s body. On March 24, 2004 he was convicted of the
rape and murder of Mia Zapata and sentenced to thirty-six years in prison,
ten years more than the standard sentence, as a result of the excessive
cruelty of the crime. Judge Sharon Armstrong commented on her decision,

30 *48 Hours Mystery*, CBS News Transcripts, January 8, 2005. (Accessed
September 2, 2008, Lexis Nexis)
31 Ibid.
32 Janet Burkitt and Alex Tizon, “Zapata slaying suspect called ‘predatory,’” *The
“It is evident that Mia Zapata was an extraordinary person. It is obvious that she was very vibrant and that you loved her very much. It is almost eleven years after her death, but it’s as though for many of you she is still alive.”\(^{33}\)

The case would receive one more twist in January 2009, when Mezquia’s sentence went up for appeal after a new ruling decreed that only juries, not judges, could mete out extra prison time. On January 29, 2009, he was resentenced to the original thirty-six years.\(^ {34}\) Mezquia still claims that he never met Zapata and has never confessed to his crime.

“Everything changed. In a horrible, horrible second.”\(^{35}\)

Zapata’s murder was not the first major news story to shake up Seattle and garner the city national attention in the early 1990s. By the summer of 1993, Seattle had for several years been reeling on account of the instant fame thrust upon the Northwest after local bands Nirvana, Pearl Jam and Soundgarden exploded into the mainstream. The consequent media invasion and national obsession with the sounds and styles of Seattle created a tension in its music scene that claimed several casualties among local musicians, due mainly to drug use. The April 1994 suicide of Kurt Cobain, the poster child of Seattle grunge, arguably ended


\(^{34}\) Levi Pulkinnen, “Mia Zapata’s killer again gets 37 years: Man returns to court asking only that his original sentence be reimposed,” Seattle Post-Intelligencer, January 29, 2009.

the national era of heroin chic and flannel as fashion, but to many who remained in Seattle, the real death knell of the remaining insular music scene had sounded when Zapata was murdered nine months before. Bands broke up, and people who had been friends for years were looking at each other with suspicion in their eyes.\textsuperscript{36}

A 2004 article in \textit{The Seattle Times} pinpoints Zapata’s murder as the moment “the Seattle scene lost its sense of invincibility—and the momentum when the world is watching and anything is possible.”\textsuperscript{37} Friend and fellow Seattle musician Eric Greenwalt describes the more particular destruction Mia’s death wrought in their tight circle of friends: “We lost our innocence as it were. We had this little make believe world, this little make-believe bubble where we were just fucking happy....When Mia was killed that was just like the real world launching itself into our world and just ruining it.” He remembers the suspicion pervading what had been a family circle of musicians and friends: “When no one knew who did it for so fucking long...It was just really fucked up. And it went really fucked up really fast in a really bleak horrible way that I don’t think ever stopped. I mean, I know it never stopped.”\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{36} \textit{The Gits}, 2008.
\textsuperscript{37} Nicole Brodeur, “What might have been for Zapata,” \textit{The Seattle Times}, March 11, 2004.
\textsuperscript{38} Greenwalt, 2009. Like Mia’s other friends, the weeks after Zapata’s death were mostly a blur for Greenwalt. He remembers his best friend Ray Skilton’s reaction better than his own: Ray was stunned. He told Eric that he had just seen Mia the day before when he ran into her while walking down the street. She was “brutally hungover,” and when Ray told her he felt the same, Mia punched his arm, said, “Well, at least you’re alive, tough guy!” and walked away. That was the last time
Zapata’s family of friends never recovered from her loss, especially the band she left behind. “The purity of the scene, the innocence was lost that day,” said Gits bassist Matt Dresdner in 2001. “It wasn’t all fun and games anymore. One of my dearest, best friends, part of my family, part of a collective mission was just brutally stolen from us.”

Steve Moriarty echoed his sentiments in 2004: “Everything changed. We all had planned this life together, to make records and tour the world, to see places and meet people. All that was crushed.”

He elaborates in a 2008 interview:

We had our whole career planned out and our whole lives ahead of us. We’d just been hitting our musical stride, and we were about to write a brand new album. We had this creative renaissance after being a band for five years, and we were just getting the recognition that we deserved. I think that we would still be a band now and making music had Mia not been murdered.

“There’s so much more we could have done,” Dresdner agrees in The Gits. Gits guitarist Andy Kessler remembers that in her last months Zapata had been playing guitar more often, and tinkering away on the out-of-tune piano where she worked at Piecora’s Pizza on Capitol Hill. He had hopes that Zapata would be able to play some instruments on the next album, and

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39 McGann, 2001
42 The Gits, 2008/
perhaps on stage during future gigs. Instead, The Gits whirlwind was irrevocably stilled.

“Darling, these are the Gits!”

The band that would become Zapata’s second family formed at Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio, in 1986. Zapata wrote the lyrics and provided the blistering vocals for The Gits, supported by Steve Moriarty on drums, Matt Dresdner on bass, and Andy “Joe Spleen” Kessler on guitar. With a shaky beginning that included some mutual dislike between Dresdner and Kessler, Moriarty’s initial refusal to be their drummer, and Dresdner’s novice skills as a bassist, The Gits faced their first gig about a week after they began rehearsing. Despite this tenuous start, Dresdner, Kessler, Moriarty and Zapata swiftly found themselves on their way to becoming, as Eric Greenwalt put it, “Four of the best friends in the world [in a band] that raged.”

43 Andy Kessler, interview by author, Seattle, WA, March 14, 2009. Kessler particularly remembers liking a piece Zapata played for him that she called “The Pterodactyl Song.” Eric Greenwalt recalls seeing Zapata in the Piecera’s window playing the piano during every spare moment she could find. Moriarty also cherishes memories of Zapata playing: “She was kind of a strange bird in that sometimes she would sit down at the piano and play some amazing piano part, and you’d be like, ‘Where did that come from? I had no idea that you could play piano!’ And she goes, ‘I didn’t either!’ And she would play. It was kind of the same with guitar. It was like one minute she’d be playing and the next minute you’d give her a guitar and she’d be like, ‘What the hell is this? I don’t know what to do with it!’ She was kind of magical in that way I think.”
45 Raha, 166.
The band that became The Gits was the brainchild of Matt Dresdner. He met Mia Zapata for the first time as a freshman art student at Antioch. Zapata had already spent a year studying painting at the college, and from her studio on the top floor of the art building, she could see the first-year students at work and had noticed that Dresdner did not spend any time in the studio outside of his required class and homework time. He remembers their first meeting vividly: “One day sitting at the cafeteria, this sort of odd-looking but very charismatic chicken woman came up to me and said, in a very aggressive and accusatory tone, ‘You never paint!’ And I was like, ‘Who the fuck are you and what the hell are you talking about?’” He goes on, “And eventually she challenged me and dragged my ass down to the art building and set me up with her paints in her studio and made me paint. And we became really tight friends immediately.”

The artistic connection between Matt and Mia grew even stronger after he heard her belt out some old blues songs for the first time at a campus coffee shop performance about a month after she marched up to him in the cafeteria. Dresdner was blown away by the emotional honesty of her delivery. “I literally teared up,” he admits. “Her voice was so beautiful and her lyrics so heartfelt, and I had never had a reaction like that before....And literally at that moment I was like, ‘I want to be in a band with that person.’”

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49 Ibid.
Dresdner quickly put his plan into action. There was no love lost between him and Andy Kessler, but Antioch was a tiny campus with a small student body, and Dresdner knew that the “punk rocker from New York” (with the requisite shaved head and Doc Martens) could play guitar, though at the time he did not know how well.\textsuperscript{50} He asked Kessler if he wanted to start a band, and Kessler agreed, despite or perhaps because of the fact that he was not taking Dresdner’s plans too seriously. \textsuperscript{51} Dresdner next asked his friend and dorm neighbor Steve Moriarty to be their drummer, but Moriarty was already busy playing for another band, and in the meantime another friend named Bob Lee filled in.\textsuperscript{52}

Zapata was not present at the band’s first few practices. While she was on vacation with her family in Disneyland, a few hopeful male singers rehearsed with the group, but Dresdner knew that once Zapata returned, the other singers would be out of the picture. He was proved right as soon as she came back: “From the first second we all played together (still with Bob on drums) it was like magic. I mean, the chemistry was just phenomenal.” Despite Bob Lee’s skill, the other members of the fledgling group knew that they wanted Moriarty to keep their beat, and eventually convinced him to do double duty as a drummer. By the night of their first gig opening for Moriarty’s other band, Big Brown House, the four had yet to choose a name, but with a trademark sense of humor, they speedily chose

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{51} Kessler, 2009.
\textsuperscript{52} Dresdner, 2009.
Figure 2. Mia Zapata, Matt Dresdner. Antioch College.\textsuperscript{53}

\textsuperscript{53} Photograph courtesy of Ursula Dohn.
the temporary moniker White Picket Fence.\textsuperscript{54} Borrowing a line from a Monty Python skit, they soon renamed themselves The Snivelling Little Ratfaced Gits which was quickly shortened to The Gits.\textsuperscript{55}

On the small Antioch campus, The Gits swiftly gathered a following of fans. In the liner notes for \textit{Kings and Queens} (the album the band recorded at while still at the school) Peter Sheehy declares that even in its earliest stages, the band drew people together, and that “everyone on campus talked about Mia as if she was already a rock star. The Gits were practically the sole joy in life for most of their fans, a collection of lunatics and wannabe artists who battled daily with the rigors of academic life, substance abuse and the ubiquitous threat of venereal disease.”\textsuperscript{56} Sheehy reveals that The Gits were ubiquitous at Antioch as well: “In the Spring \textit[sic] of 1989 it was difficult to walk across the campus without hearing the Gits blaring out of someone’s dorm room window.”\textsuperscript{57}

The band also swiftly gained a reputation at Antioch for putting on great live shows. Valerie Agnew first met the band as a fellow Antioch student, and classmate Mia stood out to her even before Agnew became a fan of the band: “I just remember being in class with Mia and just thinking, ‘Who is this woman?’ She just commanded respect and interest

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{55} \textit{The Gits}, 2008. In the film Kessler reveals that he actually hated the band name for its lack of evocative quality, but he was overruled by Dresdner, Moriarty and Zapata.
\textsuperscript{56}Peter Sheehy, liner notes for \textit{Kings and Queens}, The Gits, Broken Rekids skip 44, 2003.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.
Figure 3. The Gits, Antioch College, 1987. From left: Andy Kessler, Matt Dresdner, Steve Moriarty, and Mia Zapata.\textsuperscript{58}

\textsuperscript{58} Photograph by Jan Julicher. http://www.myspace.com/thegitsrule
immediately.” In *The Gits* film Agnew emphasizes the power of their live performances, even in those early days: “The Gits shows at Antioch were kind of like, unparalleled probably to anything that I’ve seen in a certain sense.”

Their intense stage presence blossomed organically, the initial tensions in the band disappearing as soon as they started practicing. “Everything else just fell to the wayside,” Dresdner says. “And we were inseparable. We would just hang out and play music and drink together and just have fun every single day. Other than not doing any schoolwork, it was a really great time.”

Despite their popularity, by the spring of 1989, the members of The Gits were ready to leave Antioch. Dresdner and Moriarty graduated, but

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60. Ibid.
Figure 4. The Gits live at Antioch College.62

62 Photograph courtesy of Ursula Dohn.
Kessler and Zapata had long since grown disillusioned with the school and both left without completing their degrees. They made the album Kings and Queens to have a recording before they briefly went their separate ways, planning on reconvening in Seattle to devote their full energies to the band in a way that had been impossible at Antioch due to the school’s requirement that student spend periods of time off campus in professional or artistic pursuits. When The Gits chose to start their career as a band in Seattle, they had no idea that they were headed toward a city on the verge of becoming the musical hub of their generation. All they knew is that they wanted a fresh start in a city far from their roots. Zapata perhaps came the farthest in this journey.

Mia Zapata was born August 25, 1965 in Louisville, Kentucky, to an upper-middle class family, the youngest of three children. Donna and Richard Zapata earned substantial six-figure incomes as broadcasting executives, and Zapata grew up in the suburbs of Louisville, in the affluent neighborhood of Douglas Hills. Pols describes Douglas Hills as “comfortable”, with its “neat brick houses and trim green lawns.” However, Mia was never very much interested in money or status, and in

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embracing the musician’s life in Seattle she rejected the comfortable lifestyle of her parents.\textsuperscript{66}

Before Zapata became an up-and-coming singer, she was an imaginative child who early on displayed the creativity, charisma and spirit of rebellion that would make her an immensely powerful performer during her musical career. When Zapata was three years old, the family was living in Detroit, Michigan. Zapata began preschool at a Montessori school where she quickly gained a reputation as a “most imaginative child,” according to her teachers. Her natural curiosity led her to do things such as spit into the classroom fish tank to make the water ripple, delighting in watching the reaction of the fish. Donna Zapata described the young Mia: “Even as a child she was an original, always finding her own way.”\textsuperscript{67}

Another story Donna Zapata recalled fondly concerns a parent-teacher conference during Mia’s days in elementary school in which Mia’s teacher revealed a blank report card to Donna. Her daughter had not completed enough work to earn any grades, and the teacher admitted that the loveable Mia often climbed into her lap and the teacher would be charmed into completing the work for her. Later Mia’s parents would learn that she suffered from dyslexia.\textsuperscript{68} The learning disability could not check her natural creativity, and sister Kristen described Mia as constantly scribbling in her journal as a young girl, displaying a compulsive need to

\textsuperscript{66} Tizon, 1998.
\textsuperscript{67} Sunde and Jamieson, Jr., 1993.
\textsuperscript{68} Ibid.
write that would become life long. As a teenager, Mia enjoyed spending time by herself on camping trips, often retreating to the solitude of trees and streams to write in her journal or sketch.\textsuperscript{69} Steve Moriarty witnessed similar habits in the adult Mia: “And the way it worked was Mia would write pretty much twenty-four/seven in a journal. She would just scrawl no matter what state of mind she was in, she would just write all the time in a journal: poetry and stories and feelings and thoughts. And she would work on that stuff by herself.”\textsuperscript{70}

The only time Zapata’s dyslexia appears to have negatively affected her was when she became interested in applying to Antioch College. Her anxiety was so great that while on a tour for prospective students, she made it a point to speak with one of the school admissions directors to share her concerns. Donna Zapata recalled that the director “told her not to worry” because “people with learning disabilities tend to compensate in other ways. They become very creative.”\textsuperscript{71} The Antioch director would be proved right time and again over the years of Mia’s adult life, as the constant scribblings in her journals would become lyrics that helped elevate The Gits into something more than just another punk band.

Music’s place in her childhood probably contributed as well to the ease with which Zapata transitioned between her Seattle life and life with her family. She and her sister would often sing songs together before they went to sleep, and Mia’s natural ear made her quick to correct Kristen’s

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{70} Steve Moriarty, telephone interview by author, January 16, 2009.
\textsuperscript{71} Sunde and Jamieson, Jr., 1993.
attempts at harmony. Zapata would continue to sing to herself even after her sister had fallen asleep.\textsuperscript{72} Sometimes all three Zapata children would perform together: Mia on vocals, brother Eric on air guitar and Kristen providing the lighting with two flashlights.\textsuperscript{73} Though occasionally Eric would make fun of his younger sister’s musical inclinations, an embarrassed but undeterred Mia would simply lock herself in her bedroom to sing and practice guitar away from her brother’s teasing.\textsuperscript{74} Perhaps as a result, in her adult life Mia also displayed the need for privacy when strumming guitar and working on her songs, though by then the brothers outside her door were not there to tease but to admire. Steve Moriarty reminisces that it “was always a really wonderful time if you could be a fly on the wall and sneak up on her closed bedroom door and listen to her playing.”\textsuperscript{75}

Despite childhood indications of Zapata’s interest in music, the depth of talent that she would later display as a performer would surprise her family. Eric Zapata tells a story in The Gits documentary about the night he began to realize the real magnitude of his sister’s vocal power and charisma. While visiting Idaho, Donna took Eric and Mia to a bar, not the kind of dive Mia frequented, but Eric remembers that Mia did not seem to care at all that her crazy dreadlocks and tattered vintage jacket looked out

\textsuperscript{72} Tracy Johnson, “Singer’s Killer Gets 37 Years; Mia Zapata’s Friends Fill Courtroom for Sentencing of Jesus Mezquia,” \textit{Seattle Post-Intelligencer}, May 1, 2004.
\textsuperscript{73} Pols, 1993.
\textsuperscript{75} Moriarty, 2009.
of place. An open mic night was in progress, and immediately Mia strode up to the man in charge and asked if she could borrow a guitar. She took the stage, performed some covers of old blues songs, and knocked the room dead. For the rest of the night, people kept sending shots over to the table and coming over to shake her hand. On screen, Eric’s pride in his sister’s talent remains undiminished twenty years later.

A childhood nickname followed Zapata into her life as a singer. As a kid her eccentric double-jointed walk earned her the nickname “chicken legs” from her family. Later Zapata’s friends nicknamed her a “chicken woman” because of her distinctive knock-kneed stance, one she would often unconsciously strike on stage. Friend Maria Mabra laughs deeply through this recollection during a scene in The Gits:

> Her natural performance was just so beautiful, I mean...there was an awkwardness about her because she would pull her knees together, and you know, she looked like a chicken! I mean, she did! And it was awesome because you’d be like, who is this lady who sings like a heavy angel? It was like, where is Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, let’s just like, power punch ’em and power pack them, you know, inside this chicken woman who’s got a lot of heart, you know? What’s going on here?

(See Figure 3).

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77 Several of Zapata’s friends have stories recounting Mia’s magnetism as a solo performer. Eric Greenwalt remembers a solo set she played at a benefit show, one of her rare attempts to play guitar in public: “Mia comes on after that, just sits down with an acoustic guitar and slays, just fucking slays.” Mia mostly played her favorite old blues songs, but Greenwalt said that the acoustic versions of some Gits songs she did were particularly cool. Valerie Agnew recalls the first time she heard Mia sing the blues: “I was just unglued, man! She was just amazing! She really was. And she didn’t have what people might call a sophisticated or refined ability that way. She was just a natural with it.”
Zapata even had a chicken tattooed on the back of her leg, and the nickname inspired the title of the album The Gits were working on at the time of her death, *Enter: The Conquering Chicken*.79

While Zapata may have been very different from the family into which she was born, her punk rock lifestyle did not detract from her ability to get along with her more traditional parents and siblings. The connection she still felt with her immediate family was certainly strong enough to be evident to the other Gits. Andy Kessler remembers how often Mia was in touch with her brother Eric, and she particularly enjoyed being able to visit him whenever The Gits were in California. Zapata also looked forward to her monthly visits with her dad.80 Even as an adult, Zapata would go on vacation with her mother and sister, and Donna Zapata attended some of The Gits’ shows. When she did, Zapata made sure to acknowledge her from the stage.81

A story about her sister Kristen’s wedding in 1991 epitomizes not only the differences between Zapata’s lifestyle and her family’s but also her willingness to transcend those differences. Zapata returned home to be the maid of honor in the wedding, and her hair posed a significant styling challenge to the hairdresser, who disguised her dreadlocks with curls and flowers. Zapata was also less than enthusiastic about wearing a traditional

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79 Ibid. This chicken tattoo also identified Zapata in the morgue after her death.
80 Kessler, 2009.
Figure 3. Mia Zapata. Los Angeles, 1993.\textsuperscript{82}

bridesmaid’s dress, but she did it for her sister’s sake. Kristen told the story to Pols, who wrote:

But what worried [Kristen] far more than how Zapata would like the dress was what to do about her matted blonde dreadlocks, anchored at the bottom by metal bolts. At the hair salon, Kristen overheard the hairdresser suggest to Zapata that maybe she should even out the color, which had ranged over the years from a natural blonde to a peculiar black and even purple. “She looked over at me, and I hear this little ‘Oh, sure,’ says Kristen. “I knew she was just like, ‘Oh, no.’” As Zapata sat in the chair awaiting the results of the dye job, the hairdresser came over to her sister. “She whispered, ‘Your sister’s hair is rusting!’” remembers Kristen. “And I told her, ‘Don’t worry, she’ll probably like that.’”

To Kristen’s surprise, Mia kept her bridesmaid’s dress after the wedding was over. “I expected that dress to end up hanging in my closet. I never thought she would want it. But she took the bouquet, carried it onto the plane. And the first thing, when I walked into her room in Seattle, after she had been killed, one of her friends took this dried-up bunch of flowers off the wall and gave it to me.”

This anecdote offers some insight into Zapata’s complicated but warm nature as well as the challenges she faced as the most eccentric member of her immediate family. However, it is worth noting that Pols uses descriptions of Zapata’s appearance to suggest her anomalous stature within her immediate family, since they were accepting of her artist’s lifestyle and she was willing to compromise her punk rock aesthetic for the sake of her loved ones. This willingness to cooperate most likely stemmed

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84 Ibid.
from the fact that Zapata did not wear dreadlocks or combat boots to express any kind of political ideology, and so wearing a bridesmaid’s dress for one day did not detract from any kind of statement she was trying to make to the world with her personal style.\textsuperscript{85} Despite numerous descriptions of her style as “androgynous” or “tomboyish,” by all accounts she was not attempting to project an image; she was simply being herself. While Zapata’s father and siblings have frequently spoken to the media over the years, her mother has spoken to reporters only a few times since her death. It seems too difficult for Donna Zapata to speak of the murder of her youngest child. Nor did she attend Jesus Mezquia’s trial. Eric Zapata believes his mother could not bear to relive the entire experience by hearing the graphic details of Mia’s death.\textsuperscript{86} Eric’s belief is corroborated by a 2004 article in which Donna revealed, “I don’t even want to know he exists.” She continued: “He will deal with God in his time. I would prefer to focus on Mia and the life she led.”\textsuperscript{87} Regarding the years with her daughter that were lost, Donna said in 2003: “We were all cheated that we didn’t get

\textsuperscript{85} Moriarty, 2009. Moriarty describes Zapata’s typical outfit: “Find some combat boots. Put those on. And then get some shorts or some black jeans and roll up the pant legs so that they’re sort of rolled up like English style, or some Doc Martens. And then get a T-shirt with a bunch of holes in it and a really old worn out bra, and there you have it.” Zapata also frequently wore her Gits hoodie or a vintage World War II bomber jacket. Pictures of her from Antioch College reveal that at time she wore dresses on stage as well.

\textsuperscript{86} The Gits, 2008.

to know a 40-year-old Mia. She was totally interesting and funny. A person with no pretense.”

Though the articles featuring Donna Zapata are few, those that exist are revealing. Mia’s love of writing stands out in her mother’s memory, as well as the moment when her daughter told her that she wanted to make a living as a musician. Rather than discouraging Mia, Donna told her that she should go for it, so that she would not have any regrets about not trying to pursue her dreams.

Donna learned of Mia’s death when she received a phone call from the Seattle morgue at 3 a.m. Since then she has never been able to sleep through the night, and she cannot bear to watch shows such as Unsolved Mysteries, or anything that features a new band such as Mia was a part of. Though she prefers to focus on Mia’s life, she still appreciates how her daughter’s spirit has lived on, particularly through her music: Donna once spotted a section reserved for the Gits’ music in a Kentucky record store and proudly noted, “They couldn’t keep the band’s music in stock.”

Mia’s father Richard Zapata has spoken the most to the media and is the member of Zapata’s family featured most in The Gits documentary. He often speaks about how the shy girl he knew was so different from the fiery punk rock singer most people knew Mia to be. Yet he acknowledges that both sides of her were entirely genuine: “What I know of my daughter: She

88 Jamieson, Jr., 2003.
89 Jamieson, Jr., 2003.
90 Ibid.
91 Ibid.
was very quiet, reserved, ultra shy, the last person who would call
attention to herself. And yet put a microphone in her hand, march her up
on a stage, and she was just magnetic.”

After Richard and Donna Zapata divorced when Mia was a child,
Richard moved to the Northwest. After period of estrangement when she
was in high school, Mia and her father began to rebuild their relationship
when Mia moved into his home in Yakima, Washington for about seven
months after leaving Antioch College, and they continued to see each
other regularly after Mia moved to Seattle. Richard cherished these times
with his daughter. “We really bonded,” he said.

One of these days together particularly stands out in his mind: After
the first Gits album became available at Tower Records, Richard dragged a
self-conscious Mia into the store to look at the album. She only agreed to go
in with him after he promised not to make a big deal out of it. Mia could not
handle Richard’s enthusiasm for long and quickly stomped out of the store,
claiming that he had embarrassed her when he excitedly pointed out the
record in a section for local musicians. He insisted she should be proud of
herself for being a singer. She replied, “You don’t think of it that way,
Dad.” Despite his obvious pride in her talent and accomplishments, in
The Gits film he reveals that he never really thought of her as a rock star.

To him, she was just, “My daughter, Mia Zapata. Twenty-seven years old

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94 Leung, 2005.
95 The Gits, 2008.
96 Ibid.
and double-jointed.” Like her friends, Richard saw his daughter’s open and kind nature as one of her defining characteristics. “Mia was the best of our family. She had a complete and total social conscience. She cared about people. She would see people on the street, homeless, and tell us that it wasn’t their fault,” he said.

Mia turned to her father for advice when Atlantic Records expressed interest in The Gits. They had recently met with executives who were interested in the possibility of signing the band, but she was unsure that they could trust a major label. Mia told her father that, at the meeting, each member of the band was asked what they really wanted out of their careers and lives, and Mia replied that all she really wanted was a cabin in the woods, a truck, a sheepdog, and time to write and make music. The executives told her that they could give that to her right then, but Mia remained skeptical. (After looking at the expensive menu, she even asked them with typical blunt honesty if they were sure they could afford to take the whole band out to lunch).

Richard insisted that she deserved

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97 The Gits, 2008. In my interview with Andy Kessler, he revealed that Zapata rarely even told people that she sang with a band: “She just kind of kept it to herself because she figured if we were meant to become known people would end up knowing anyway, so she didn’t want to make it a topic of conversation.” Zapata did not even approach Sub Pop owner Jonathan Poneman about the band though he was a regular customer at the Frontier Room, where she waitressed.
100 The Gits, 2008.
her success and that she should embrace the new opportunities being
offered to her.102

The last outing for Mia and her father occurred on the day before her
murder. Mia spent the morning at home, writing letters and talking on the
telephone.103 Richard drove to Seattle as usual and took Mia out for Thai
food for lunch. Afterwards they browsed through Tower Records and went
to the Seattle Art Museum.104 Mia had recently cut off her trademark
dreadlocks, and he later remembered how cute she looked with her new
spiky hair, but particularly how thrilled she was about the coming months
for The Gits. 105 “As far as she was concerned, this was really their year,”
he said. “They were really going to hit it.”106 She remained too modest to let
her dad make a big deal out of it. 107 Still, in the 1995 episode of America’s
Most Wanted that features Mia’s murder, Richard declares, “I don't think I
can ever remember my daughter looking so satisfied, so content, so at ease
with herself.”108

Mia and Richard said goodbye that afternoon, unaware that it was
the last time they would ever see each other. Later he would comment on
the significance of that moment: “You don’t realize what forever is. You
drive your daughter to school, tell your wife, ‘Have a good day, I’ll see you

  102 Leung, 2005.
  103 State of Washington v. Jesus Mezquia, State’s Trial Memorandum
  106 Tracy Johnson, “Zapata murder trial begins: DNA holds key to long-unsolved
  108 America’s Most Wanted, “The Gits on AMW,” YouTube.com,
      http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lYBfJ1cMpOI (originally aired July 1995)
later.’ You assume you’ll be together at the end of the day. But then something happens, and forever is forever. It doesn’t matter what I do, how I do it, how I pray, how I wish. Nothing on earth is going to bring Mia back.”

Like his ex-wife, Richard Zapata learned about his daughter’s death when he received a phone call from the Seattle morgue in the early hours of July 8, 1993. “There’s no easy way to say this,” said the voice on the phone. “But we believe we have your deceased daughter here.” After hanging up in a daze, Richard quickly called back, not sure that what was happening was real. It was the beginning of years of nightmares and uncertainty, the worst possible outcome for a man who had long worried about the company Mia kept and her wild lifestyle.

Of all Mia’s family members, Richard has been the most vocal about the difficulty of coping with Mia’s murder. He found it nearly impossible to live with not knowing what Mia’s last moments were like, and who was responsible for ending her life. After moving to Seattle in 1996, he obsessively tried to retrace his daughter’s last footsteps, making the journey, “as many times as I have hair on my head.” One thought returned to him over and over: “Somebody must have seen something.”

Richard mapped out every scenario he could imagine: “There are a hundred ways of getting to where her body was found. Sometimes I’ll take

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109 Ibid.
111 Tizon, 1998.
112 Ibid.
what I think was the route she took. Other times I’ll try a different route to see if it fits into the scheme of things. I want to understand. It’s a pilgrimage for me, I guess. I don’t know. Maybe I think by doing this I’ll figure out what happened.”

He continued to visit the spot where her body was found for over three years, watching as the chalk outline that had marked her body slowly faded away. In *The Gits* film, the relief on Richard’s face is impossible to miss as he discusses Mezquia’s conviction, declaring himself “completely satisfied” with the outcome of the trial.

Even in death, Mia Zapata built bridges between the two families she left behind. Shortly after her murder, Gits guitarist Andy Kessler went back to his native New York City and had dinner with Donna Zapata, who was living there at this time. Over the meal, Donna asked Kessler what Mia was really like. “She couldn’t spell worth a [damn],” Kessler replied. “But she could rock brilliantly.”

Richard Zapata also became part of the surviving Gits’ efforts to find Mia’s killer, most notably joining them in being interviewed for the true crime shows that featured the case.

Pols describes The Gits as the main force in the second family Zapata built for herself in college, an argument corroborated by many statements from the members of The Gits and Zapata’s other friends. Like her biological family, her friends also describe Zapata as someone seemingly full of contradictions: a shy, gentle person who would become a vibrant performer as soon as she got on stage.

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113 Ibid.
114 Ibid.
115 Sunde and Jamieson, Jr., 1993.
Pols writes, “The family of friends and the real family present a startling set of contrasts,” and describes Zapata’s biological family as “smart, polished, sophisticated.” She again uses appearance as the main measure of difference between Zapata’s two families: “Their daughter’s friends are sophisticated in a less traditional sense. For the most part, they are musicians, with inventive hairstyles, tattered clothing, tattoos and some body piercing. They stomp around wearing clunky Doc Martens boots. Most parents might be afraid of them, but the Zapatas are not. Their deep belief in their daughter’s integrity has given them a fresh perspective.”116 Perhaps what the Zapatas learned from their daughter is something Pols does not quite seem to grasp: appearances can be deceiving.

*Seattle family:* “All I got left in the end are my friends!”117

The Gits left Antioch as a group, but arrived in Seattle one by one. In the interim, Zapata keenly felt the absence of her boys in the band. In a letter to her friend Paul she confessed, “I ain’t got no friends yet, but I’m keeping my time busy. I’ve been reading and finally writing words with music. I hate the gaps I set between creative times...That’s something man, I tend to feel I’m living someone else’s life.” Despite the solace she found in this new burst of inspiration, she looked forward to reuniting with the other Gits: “I really miss playing music with all its amps and mikes, but

all in due time, eh?” Zapata would not lack friends or the thrill of performance for long. After The Gits reassembled in Seattle, not much time passed before they became a beloved live band and Zapata the heart of an extremely tight-knit circle of musicians.

Fifteen years after the death of his friend Mia, Eric Greenwalt still cannot say enough about her talent, but also the talent and skill of all four Gits together: “They were a fucking tight, tight band. They were a mechanism.” But he also cannot over-emphasize the closeness at the root of the band. “They were all amazing musicians, [but] that was secondary to them all being really tight friends,” he insists. Valerie Agnew concurs: “I mean, talk about a group of brothers who just adored and loved her so much....the love between them was so palpable.”

People particularly noticed the personal and artistic connection between Kessler and Zapata. As the two main songwriters in the band, Kessler describes her as his musical soulmate. “It’s rare to find someone like that in this world,” he says in The Gits. In the letter to Paul, Mia plainly feels Andy’s absence, writing, “I’m painting a lot more. There’s one with Andy in it. I miss him a lot, he helps me acknowledge my strengths [sic] (mentally) though I’m listening to myself pretty well, surprising.”

Greenwalt declares, “The relationship that Andy and Mia had was unbelievable. I mean, you saw it every moment they were around each

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120 Agnew, 2009.
other: over drinks, when they were playing....It was really incredible to be around that.”

Greenwalt and Agnew speak from personal knowledge, but the closeness of Mia, the band and their friends was apparent to an outside perspective as well. Even less positive reviews of *The Gits* documentary make the observation: “This rather crude, amateurish documentary is not so much about her murder, however, as it is about the Gits as a substitute family for her and a close-knit circle of like-minded musicians and friends, all living in a run-down old house at 19th and Denny.” Zapata was an essential member of the household known as “The Rathouse.”

Zapata lived in The Rathouse with Moriarty, Kessler, Agnew and other friends. The roommates hosted many house parties and shows, and the basement was a practice space that The Gits used and that they lent out to other bands, particularly their friends in 7 Year Bitch. A 2005 review of an early cut of *The Gits* documentary describes 7 Year Bitch as part of the same “family” of musicians, but then claims that tensions arose

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123 Patrick MacDonald, “The Gits’ explores punk family and tragic fate of Seattle rocker,” *Seattle Times*, May 26, 2005. The phrase “substitute” family might seem appropriate to the reviewer, who was probably not aware of the close relationship that Zapata maintained with her immediate family.
Figure 5. The Gits, Los Angeles, 1993.\textsuperscript{126}

\textsuperscript{126} Photographer unknown. http://www.myspace.com/snivelinglittleratfacedgits
Figure 6. Andy Kessler, Mia Zapata. St. Patrick’s Day, 1992.¹²⁷

between the two bands when 7 Year Bitch got a record deal and became more well known than The Gits.\textsuperscript{128} This review seems an odd perspective in light of the fact that several times during the film The Gits speak with humor and grace about their friends’ rise to popularity, and the members of 7 Year Bitch make very clear how inspiring and encouraging the members of The Gits (especially Zapata) were to them.

*The Gits* documentary particularly portrays how close the band members were to one another through good times and bad. “It was a real tight-knit family,’ Moriarty says. That intimacy played an important role when Zapata’s love of partying began to affect The Gits in the spring of 1993. Moriarty, Dresdner and Kessler considered breaking up the band in order to force Zapata to deal with her drinking, which had become excessive.\textsuperscript{129} One night before a rehearsal, Zapata’s bandmates sat in a car with her and gave her an ultimatum: cut back on the alcohol or the band would have to go on hiatus. Matt Dresdner insists that they never would have gone through with asking Mia to leave the band, but they were concerned enough about her well-being to forgo the opportunities on the table until she was in better shape. With Atlantic knocking on the band’s door and summer tours approaching, Zapata agreed and kept her word throughout the tour.\textsuperscript{130}

\textsuperscript{128} Patrick MacDonald, “‘The Gits’ Explores Punk Family And Tragic Fate Of Seattle Rocker,” *Seattle Times*, May 26, 2005.
\textsuperscript{130} Dresdner, 2009.
Alcohol had always been a part of The Gits experience. The band loved to get drunk, play music and have a great time together. In Seattle, The Gits and their friends spent countless nights at the Comet Tavern, knowing that if someone’s band was not playing a show, the gang would most likely be piled twenty deep into a booth at the Comet, buying each other beers all night until last call, when they would sometimes run out with pitchers of beer under their jackets to be finished in the nearby Kentucky Fried Chicken parking lot.\textsuperscript{131} In “Drinking Song,” Zapata’s lyrics celebrate these wild nights, with a nod to her tendency to overdo it:

\begin{verbatim}
I tend to drink too much sometimes
I fall a little drunk on my face
I get up I brush up I head to the bar
For another round with all of my friends

Here’s to ‘em To all of my friends
Here’s to ‘em To all of my friends yeah
Here’s to ‘em To all of my friends
Here’s to the bastards, the best of my friends

Step up to the bar we tip the bartender first
Keep ‘em filled to the rim
There might be a bit of a brawl that breaks out
But we always leave when we should

So with this pint I toast to you to all of my friends
Keep healthy and good I clench it tight and
I raise it high May the spirits runneth over
And drinks never be denied

I know work is the worst part of the day
But when you get out the fun will pay
So now drink with me to no end
’Cause here we are with the best of our friends
It’s all I got left in the end are my friends \textsuperscript{132}
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{131} Greenwalt, 2009.
Agnew believes that this tribute to her friends sums up Mia “in a fucking nutshell. If I had ten words or less to try to describe Mia’s spirit and her ideas about music, that would be it. [‘Here’s to all my friends!’] That song pretty much covers it and encapsulates it.”

Despite their love of strong drink and good times, The Gits had a general rule that they would not drink before a gig, only once they were onstage. The physical demands of playing a show, along with the accompanying adrenaline rush meant that they rarely got very intoxicated during their sets, which normally lasted about forty minutes. When Zapata began to stay out all night partying before recording sessions and break the rule against drinking before a show, it affected the quality of her voice, but it was mainly out of concern for the health that the other Gits felt the need to confront her. In general, Zapata’s magnetic stage presence—so unlike her normally quiet, introverted self—was the product of artistic rather than alcoholic abandon. She controlled her drinking for the sake of her music and her fellow Gits, just as she had earlier agreed when her father, a recovering alcoholic, asked that she not drink while under his roof.

Zapata’s readiness to satisfy the needs of her family reflected her highly developed intuition and sensitivity. Echoing Richard Zapata’s comments about his daughter’s social conscience, Steve Moriarty spoke at length about how genuine Zapata was and how she valued people for

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133 Agnew, 2009.
themselves, not judging them on the basis of political ideals or any notion of “cool”:

I think that she saw people as whole beings and she had a real hard
time classifying or labeling people or putting them into boxes that
were ideologies. She used to tease me about being political and being
interested in political things. I think she saw the surfaceness of it. I
think she valued the results and I think she valued the people in
general for their energy, but I think she was more interested in the
person and the psyche rather than a group, the grouping or the
movement. She was totally disinterested in the music scene. When
she had friends that were musicians, that was way more important
to her than what band they were in or what they were doing and she
was totally oblivious to any sort of idea of hipness or coolness. That
was just beyond her. She was just a total geek! She couldn’t fit in and
it was like...she just really loved being in The Gits and having us as
her friends, you know? But I think a lot of times people that are real
interested in political sort of ideals really come across from sort of a
narrow-minded perspective, liking looking at things in a real black
and white way, and she just didn’t come across that way. She didn’t
think that that was important.\textsuperscript{135}

Moriarty recalls in \textit{The Gits} documentary that many people considered her
their best friend, and she probably was the best friend that many people
had.\textsuperscript{136} Andy Kessler asserts that art and friendship were of more vital
importance to Zapata’s life, rather than political ideologies.\textsuperscript{137}

When The Gits left Antioch College destined for Seattle, their new
home was not yet the musical and cultural mecca of the early 1990s, just
still an “arty, rainy town with low rents and some promising bands.”\textsuperscript{138}
Though at the time of Zapata’s death the band still had not achieved the
same commercial success that other Seattle bands (including some of their

\textsuperscript{135} Morarity, 2009.
\textsuperscript{137} Andy Kessler, e-mail message to author, January 13, 2009.
friends) had begun to find, The Gits had developed an intense local following. They became a staple of the Seattle music scene, just as they had taken Antioch’s campus by storm. As a female singer in a bluesy punk band in a music scene dominated by male “grunge” bands, Zapata arguably once again found herself an odd duck in the family she created for herself.
Figure 7. The Gits in California, 1992.\textsuperscript{139}

\textsuperscript{139} Photograph courtesy of the collection of Michael Galen Nichols.
CHAPTER TWO

ART AND ANDROGNY

“That year [1991], the music we loved had blown up nationwide. It was a little ridiculous how formerly underground guitar rock was crashing through the boundaries. More guitar bands than ever were making noise, and more of them than ever were worth hearing... punk rock was now music that even figure-skater girls could listen to. The door was open. Our turn had arrived. Here we are now. Entertain us.”

Rock critic Rob Sheffield’s memoir Love Is A Mix Tape (2007) is a love letter to his late wife, but also to the music that has shaped his life. He

writes particularly of the music of the 1990s, which he views as a golden age, a cultural explosion of youth that thrust onto the national stage music previously beloved only in the underground scene of local bars and fanzines. Doug Pray’s documentary film *Hype!* (1996) reveals that this sudden fame more often chagrined rather than delighted the musicians involved and their original fans. Seattle became the focal point of national attention after bands such as Nirvana, Pearl Jam and Soundgarden became wildly successful, sparking a national and international craze not only for the music known as “grunge,” but also for the fashion and attitudes attributed to the scene. The media scramble to capitalize on “indie culture” quickly spread to Seattle’s neighboring music scenes in Portland, Oregon and Olympia, Washington, where a swiftly growing network of young feminists were starting bands and demanding revolution under the moniker “Riot Grrrl.” Mia Zapata and The Gits were eyewitnesses to this craze, watching many of their fellow musicians attract previously unanticipated (and largely unsought) attention while they remained on the fringes of success through the height of the Seattle explosion. As a band their sound, singer and aesthetic distinguished them from the flannel-clad boy rock dominating the airwaves, and from the nearby punk rock grrrls who were determined that the boys would not have the only say in the indie music revolution.

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141 *Hype!,* produced by Steve Helvey, directed by Doug Pray, 84 minutes, Republic Pictures, 1996, DVD.
The Hype! of the Seattle music scene in the early 1990s

In 1989, The Gits knew that Seattle was a music-friendly town, but more important, it was a fresh start for each individual and for the band collectively. None of them headed to the Northwest with any idea that the small rainy town they had chosen as a destination would soon be withstanding the gaze of the entire music world. The young Rob Sheffield saw the Seattle phenomenon as a much-needed breaking of musical barriers, writing, “Bands that would have been too weird, too feminist, too rough for the mainstream a year earlier suddenly were the mainstream, making their noise in public. Our subcultural secrets were out there, in the world, where they belonged.” The denizens of Seattle took less kindly to the cultural intrusion, particularly the bands that suddenly found greatness (or at least fame) thrust upon them by a drooling music industry determined to capitalize on the next Nirvana or Pearl Jam.

Media desperate to define the phenomenon affixed various labels to Northwest bands and music culture. The term “Grunge” became the umbrella term for music that featured heavy guitars and drumming along with dark or angst-ridden lyrics. While “grunge” originally evoked the “dirty and murky guitar sound” of Northwest bands, the definition quickly expanded to include the fashion associated with the music, including torn jeans and T-shirts, thermal underwear and, of course, flannel shirts. The sounds and styles of Seattle had their roots in the punk rock born in

142 The Gits, produced by Jessica Bender, directed by Kerri O’Kane, 81 minutes, Jab Films, 2008, DVD.
143 Sheffield, 9.
England in the late 1970s. Grunge shared the “punk” principles of mistrust in corporate culture, a distaste for popular trends and a commitment to being oneself and accepting others at face value. 144 Although the outside world became obsessed with “grunge culture,” Seattle rock musicians and their local fans knew that, while punk had organic roots, grunge was largely a media creation that had little to do with real life. “That whole grunge thing, Seattle blowing up, that was an alien thing. That was something that came in. That wasn’t something that went out,” Eric Greenwalt avows.145

Doug Pray’s Hype! captures the disillusionment of Seattle musicians through many interviews and footage of the bands that embodied the grunge phenomenon. In the film, musicians discuss how the media swooped in like vultures and created completely distorted portrayals of “grunge” culture, distortions sometimes exacerbated by the frustrated musicians themselves, who would often lie to the media or make up false stories about Seattle and the tenets of grunge culture. Megan Jasper, a twenty-five-year-old sales representative at Seattle’s Sub Pop Records even agreed to define the “Lexicon of Grunge” for an interview and then laughed privately when the supposed definitions of grunge slang words that she had made up off of the top of her head made it to the pages of the

In a December 1996 review of Pray’s film, critic Karla Peterson describes the opening shot of loggers hacking down a lush forest as an “apt (if obvious) metaphor for a music scene that started out as a labor of love and mutated into the flannel-swathed monster that spawned musical imitators (Bush), fashion atrocities (designer long johns) and Vanity Fair’s infamous ‘grunge wear’ photo spread.” Peterson characterizes Seattle before the grunge hype began as a quiet town where people started bands out of boredom and created their own record labels out of necessity, not a place where aspiring rock stars dreamed of worldwide fame. Yet, however unintentional, the results were real: Seattle became a town full of hard-working, talented bands who were “indie” when the word stood truly for “independent” of major labels and not an entire rock subculture replete with slang, fashion and marketing. The small Seattle label Sub Pop in particular suddenly went from an independent local business to cultural avatar, wielding power not appreciated by all Seattle bands, including The Gits.

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146 *Hype!*, 1996. Jasper’s joke was printed in the *New York Times*, in a November 15, 1992 article by Rick Marin titled “Grunge: A Success Story.” It seems hard to believe that some of the phrases she invented were taken seriously, but perhaps a generation of reporters who came of age in 1960s and 1970s (decades that provided their own wealth of groovy teen speak and slang) had a willing suspension of disbelief that led them to accept that hard core punks would use phrases such as “swingin’ on the flippety-flop” to say “hanging out” and call their ripped jeans “wack slacks.”

147 Karla Peterson, “‘Hype!’ cuts away to grunge’s rich roots,” *San Diego Union-Tribune*, December 5, 1996.

148 Ibid.

Doug Pray and Steve Helvey arrived in Seattle to begin filming *Hype!* in 1992, when the hype itself was still very real, not yet fading as it would be by the time of the film’s release in 1996. Many of the musicians they wished to interview were already wary of the media spotlight burning into every corner of Seattle’s music scene, and at first the filmmakers found it difficult to convince musicians to talk to them.\(^{150}\) The musicians in the film discuss the Seattle explosion with varying degrees of derision and bemusement but also some nostalgia for the era that has gone by and for the friends that were lost during that time, to drugs, violence, and the pressures of fame and notoriety. Arguably the best part of the documentary is the footage of many locally popular Seattle bands filmed exclusively for the project, including a set by The Gits. It is the only official film recording of one of their live shows. Pray and Helvey were encouraged to film the Gits by Valerie Agnew, after 7 Year Bitch was asked to be a part of the documentary. She asked them immediately, “Have you talked to The Gits yet? If you haven’t, get on it!”\(^{151}\)

Nobody can know what kind of impact The Gits would have made on the national music scene. Zapata was murdered before the Atlantic Records deal could go through, and before the band could embark on the year of touring it had planned to begin in July 1993. Zapata’s murder is irrevocably associated with the band, no matter what its musical accomplishments, and the media’s conflation of Seattle grunge and the


\(^{151}\) *The Gits*, 2008.
nearby Riot Grrrl scene means that Mia Zapata’s legacy as a fierce female singer in Northwest music has become a murky sea to navigate.

*The Gits’ role in the Seattle music scene*

Once The Gits reassembled in Seattle, the band quickly got back underway. Though they struggled to get their first booking, after an initial show around Halloween in the autumn of 1989, the Gits rapidly gained a local following. Musically, however, they never felt as though they quite fit in with the Seattle scene, even before the grunge phenomenon exposed the city to national attention. Yet they found themselves rubbing elbows early on with Nirvana, the band that would be the face of Seattle music (and, arguably, of a generation). Matt Dresdner recalled in a 2001 interview that Sub Pop’s owner Jonathan Poneman “booked us to play our second show at the Hub Ballroom with Nirvana and Tad. That was scary. It was a huge show, but we never really felt like we fit in with the rest of the music that was becoming so popular around here—and that became pretty clear when we weren’t asked to do any more big shows.” Despite the lack of major gigs, Dresdner is adamant that The Gits’ outsider status did not bother them: “There were a lot of things about The Gits that didn’t fit in with the burgeoning movement of music here in Seattle, the grunge scene. But we never had any intention of fitting in or being part of a scene. We were just

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doing our music for ourselves. It’s what we did. It’s what we loved to do, and if we fit, great! If not, fuck it!”\textsuperscript{153}

The Gits witnessed the media craze as it began, but rather than capitalize on the hype as it neared a boiling point, they intentionally left town for a while.\textsuperscript{154} After Agnew introduced them to a musician from Holland, the woman offered to set up tour dates for the band, to which they agreed, not really believing the offer would come to fruition. When a postcard arrived months later inviting them abroad, the band decided the time was ripe to do some travelling and get away from the pressures of the Seattle scene.\textsuperscript{155} Or, as drummer Steve Moriarty put it more succinctly in \textit{The Gits}: “We said, ‘Fuck it. Let’s go to Europe.’”\textsuperscript{156}

The Gits tore through their European tour, gaining international fans who initially were excited to see a real rock band from the famous Seattle, but who quickly fell under the spell of Mia Zapata’s searing voice and the band’s intense sound. Moriarty notes in \textit{The Gits} that a singer from another band immediately learned the lyrics to Gits songs and would sing along joyously at their gigs.\textsuperscript{157} After returning to Seattle, the band was still a local favorite, but not being pressured to become the Next Big Thing, unlike many of its friends and fellow musicians. Ted Fry offers the

\textsuperscript{153} Dresdner, 2009. The Gits were never motivated by dreams of commercial success or fame. As Mia sings in “Slaughter of Bruce” on \textit{Frenching the Bully}: “Some fool came up to me/ And said, ‘You’d make a star with that band,’/I said, ‘It’s not why we’re doing this/Why can’t you fucking get it?’

\textsuperscript{154} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{155} Kessler, 2009.

\textsuperscript{156} Steve Moriarty, \textit{The Gits}, 2008.

\textsuperscript{157} \textit{The Gits}, 2008.
following explanation in a 2008 review of the documentary: “The Gits were playing speedy, torn T-shirt punk when other Seattle rockers were hunkering down in flannel and experimenting in fuzz. Zapata and guitarist Andy Kessler wrote songs that were mostly fast and furious, with Moriarty and bassist Dresdner providing blistering backbeats. Though they were a product of their time and place, the Gits were largely misunderstood when the eyes of the world were on Seattle and grunge.”

The Gits maintain that they were not really a part of the grunge scene. Dresdner describes The Gits’ music as “different from other things going on at the time.” Ted Fry agrees: “When the steamroller of the early ’90s Seattle scene was in full rev, the Gits made the same rounds as other bands that were exploring variations on a sonic theme. It may sound disingenuous when Kessler says it, but the film gives evidence that the Gits were not part of grunge. What separated the Gits was a purer, faster ethos that may have made them a harder sell than the guitar-fuzzed longhairs that became record-label darlings.”

Steve Moriarty believes that The Gits were prototypical of a style that would become popular in the mid-1990s, but not at the time of the grunge phenomenon: “The Seattle thing was more of a heavy metal garage rock revival, and we were more of an English-style pop-punk band,” he says of The Gits’ sound. “That style later became huge with bands like

158 Ted Fry, “Mia Zapata, the Gits, get their due in fan’s documentary,” Seattle Times, July 1, 2008.
159 Ibid.
Green Day and Offspring, but back then it was really small compared to the Sub Pop scene. Sub Pop was a rather exclusive little clique because they were one of the few labels that had money.”161 He described the male-centricity of the label to music writer Maria Raha in Cinderella’s Big Score: “Most of the Sub Pop bands were really male-oriented. They were sort of boy bands that always had a male lead singer, and Sub Pop had very, very few female-led bands, and very few bands that recalled punk music.”162

When asked if the band experienced any difficulties from having a female lead singer, Moriarty believes it might have affected Sub Pop’s interest in The Gits because of common assumptions about what it meant to have a frontwoman: “I feel like that’s why Sub Pop (the record label in Seattle that was signing all these contemporary bands of ours) why they wouldn’t really give us a listen was because we weren’t cock rock enough....We were more introspective and also, we were kind of standoffish, and we were pretty punk rock and, you know, we would not always be on our best behavior when we were out in public.”163 Dresdner recalls the occasional annoyance of being booked on the same bill with other bands with female singers, “as if that was something that would make an evening cohesive.” But he does believe that “the fact that Mia was a woman did help us stand out in a certain respect, but I also just think

161 Ibid.
162 Raha, xvii.
163 Moriarty, 2009.
that [it was] her talent, [and the fact that] The Gits was a pretty good band also made us stand out.”

Although The Gits initially attracted less industry interest than some of their contemporaries, nobody denies the power of their music, particularly their live performances. Also, nobody denies that the Gits owed much of their power to Mia Zapata’s ferocity as a lead singer.

Zapata’s friend Selene Vigil, lead singer of 7 Year Bitch, describes her in The Gits: “The intensity that was within her was something like both punk rock and blues because it had that depth.” In a review of the film for National Public Radio (NPR), Sarah Bardeen writes:

Primarily we fall in love with Mia Zapata, a singer who sounds like a punk rock Janis Joplin—both in her soulful voice and her ardent personality, which mixed brashness, kindness and vulnerability in equal parts. Zapata never became a bona fide star, but she had star quality, the ability to command attention without ever seeming to seek it. Above all, we fall for the music. Compared to many of their contemporaries, the Gits were instrumentally brilliant, playing fast, tight, classic punk rock that took a radical left turn when Zapata added her voice to the mix.

Praise for Zapata’s talent and charisma is the common factor in every review of the film. As music journalist Gene Stout writes, “The band’s formidable talent comes through in such gritty, powerful songs as ‘Guilt Within Your Head,’ ‘Another Shot of Whiskey,’ ‘Wingo Lamo’ and ‘Second

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164 Dresdner, 2009.
Skin.’ If you never saw The Gits perform live, the film offers a glimpse into a world that is now Seattle legend.”167

Though the Gits did not receive as much industry attention as some of their contemporaries, they were not ignored for long. In 1993, Tim Sommer was an executive for Atlantic Records, a label in talks with The Gits about a potential record deal shortly before Zapata’s murder. He states in the documentary that he had decided to make them a “firm offer” and maintains that the band was doing something incomparably original: “Mia was doing something that was unique in 1993, and it’s unique today. This raw, pitch-brilliant blues singer singing as this charismatic front to this whirlwind of a punk rock band. I’m so lucky to have seen it.”168 Fry corroborates this opinion: “Seeing Zapata belt it out with such ferocious, bluesy power makes clear why the Gits’ legacy hasn’t lessened, unlike the

diminishing authority of many bands that made a big noise during the same era.” To put it succinctly once again, Agnew summed up the band and particularly Zapata’s talent: “I mean, you’d have to be a fucking zombie to not be affected.”

Mia Zapata’s tremendous talent as a singer and performer is usually the first topic of discussion regarding her role in The Gits, but her talents as a lyricist insured that she had something real to say with her voice. Zapata’s lyrics often came straight from her journals, while Andy Kessler wrote the vast majority of the music, arranged with Dresdner and Moriarty during rehearsals. Zapata often would not attend the music-writing portions of band practice until the other Gits had something solid

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169 Photograph by Robert MacDonald, http://www.myspace.com/vivamiazapata
170 Fry, 2008.
for her to hear. She would listen to them play, and often tape the music, sometimes working out the lyrics with them right then, and other times taking the music with her to her room and later presenting them with a finished song. According to Steve Moriarty, often something that would start out as a piece of music written for fun or as a joke would be elevated to something much greater thanks to Zapata’s lyrics.\textsuperscript{172}

There are many songs with lyrics penned by Zapata that contain what can be read as feminist content and message. The song “Spear and Magic Helmet” is an accusation of rape, but unlike many Riot Grrrl songs about rape and abuse, it was not written as a general political statement. Zapata wrote it with a specific Seattle musician in mind who she had been told raped a friend of hers. Though Andy Kessler now expresses doubt that the incident actually occurred,\textsuperscript{173} Zapata believed it to be true at the time and “Spear and Magic Helmet” still denounces the alleged rapist’s actions:

\begin{verbatim}
You jumped her from behind
Two against one
He said you been a bad girl
Then he slapped you right across the face

What could be going through your mind?
It does no one good
I suggest you buy a cage 'cause I'm full of rage

Then you raped her
You left her in the alleyway
I know I'll have to see you
And now I think of you as mine\textsuperscript{174}
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{172} Moriarty interview, 2009.
\textsuperscript{173} Kessler, 2009.
Moriarty says that this song is a great example of Zapata’s natural social conscience rather than an attempt to be political, and that her conscience explains her lyrics’ wide appeal:

She was more of an advocate for the oppressed than she was a champion. I think she [wanted more] to relate to people on a personal level in her lyrics than on a political level. You could say the personal is political, and I think that’s why people like you think, “Wow, she must have had a political ideology to have written lyrics like that.” But more it was just being really attuned to people’s feelings and thoughts and emotions that made her lyrics sound universal...I mean, I think each tune had sort of a different political bent. “Beauty of the Rose” is about what it’s like to be addicted, and it was about a friend of hers who was addicted to drugs, you know. And [addiction was used] sort of as a subject in the song, but the whole song’s not about that. It’s just a metaphor. So I think she would use people’s experiences as metaphors for greater truths.”

Riot Grrrl Allison Wolfe, the lead singer of Bratmobile, saw The Gits play many times and remains a huge fan. “Spear and Magic Helmet” is her favorite Gits song, and she came to love it even more after Moriarty told her the story behind its creation. “That was such a righteous thing to do,” she says. “And a bold thing to do.” When Wolfe heard the news of Zapata’s murder, the first thought to cross her mind was to wonder if the alleged rapist was the culprit, out for revenge against Zapata.176

Some of Zapata’s lyrics about violence against women seem to eerily foreshadow her tragic death, and none more than those in the song “Sign of the Crab,” which was written just a few weeks before she died:

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175 Moriarty, 2009.
Never ceases to amaze me  
The things you try to pull  
Anything to get me in and then get me killed  
Go ahead and slice me up  
Spread me all across this town  
Because you know you’re the one who won’t be found

“It’s pretty gruesomely accurate,’ Steve Moriarty told a reporter, though he argues that in this instance Zapata was writing about a generalized problem rather than issuing a specific call to action: “But I think it was mostly focused on the culture of slasher films and how violent Seattle was at the time. Seattle was just coming out of a recession. We’d hear gunshots at night. And Mia had friends who had been raped. I think [the song] was more a reflection of what could happen as opposed to what was going to happen.” Matt Dresdner says in The Gits that he prefers to let Zapata’s songs speak for themselves and to not ascribe special meaning to them because of her tragic death.

The surviving Gits maintain that despite the media circus that surrounded Riot Grrrl, Zapata took little interest in the scene. Steve Moriarty states, “Her idols were old blues singers and Patti Smith. She blasted ‘Horses’ and ‘Radio Ethiopia’ daily at our house. She had very little awareness of newer groups like Bikini Kill, Bratmobile or Sleater-Kinney.” Guitarist Andy Kessler fervently believes that not only was

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178 Stout, 2008.
179 Steve Moriarty, e-mail message to author, September 22, 2008. Allison Wolfe speaks at length about the separation between the Seattle and Olympia music scenes, which may have contributed to Zapata’s lack of interest. The Seattle scene
Zapata not really aware of Riot Grrrl, she would have hated being labeled in any way as part of some kind of “scene.” She simply wanted to be a great artist:

Also, to put it gently, Mia would have absolutely hated being associated with the riot grrl movement in any way. Of course, she fully enjoyed seeing or hearing other great female rock and roll performers (and male, too). Really she was just an artist (though probably very raw, primitive or unrefined) who loved strong drink and hanging out with friends. She had so much potential, and could have developed into a groundbreaking rock musician, writer, painter, etc. but of course never got to.\footnote{Moriarty, 2008.}

Steve Moriarty agrees: “[Mia] did not consider herself part of the Riot Girl [sic] thing. She was very much enlightened as a feminist but did not relate to the fashionista and cutesy side that was the small town Olympia indie music scene. She was also a little older and a real punk rock outsider. She drank too much to be a considered much of a girl and lived in cities like Detroit, New York and Seattle. The community she found was in her band and with close personal and artistic relationships, not so much didactic political affiliations.”\footnote{Moriarty, 2008.}

If Mia Zapata was “enlightened as a feminist,” to quote Moriarty, her bandmates insist that it was not because of a belief in political ideologies or labels that made her so. Andy Kessler writes:

\[
\text{...please understand right off the bat and with respect to the rock scene and gender stuff, issues of feminist theory, etc. weren’t issues for Mia. She was not especially interested in those things or in any}
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\footnote{Andy Kessler, e-mail message to author, January 13, 2008.}

was considered tougher and more hard living than Olympia’s. Zapata did gain more awareness of Riot Grrrl bands: The Gits shared a bill with Bratmobile less than two weeks before her death.
form of ideology. Mia was not a “tomboy”; she was not trying to prove anything to anyone (except that our band was good); and she was actually an extremely funny, gentle person, although she could be difficult, make poor decisions, and be a bit boisterous at times. She was neither intimidated by the male-orientation of the scene (which wasn’t that male-oriented, at least it didn’t end that way) nor did she feel the need to make any statement about it. That sort of thing was just circumstantial for her, no big deal.182

It is easy to draw comparisons between Zapata and her idol Patti Smith, a groundbreaking punk artist known for her deeply poetic lyrics and androgynous appearance, but beyond these similarities exists a shared commitment to art purely for art’s sake that transcends gender. Smith could be speaking for Zapata as well as herself in this 2008 statement: “I never thought about gender. I never felt oppressed because of my gender. When I’m writing a poem or drawing, I’m not female, I’m an artist. I’m more concerned with the work people do than their gender.”183

Riot Grrrl: “We want revolution girl style now!”184

Mia Zapata’s lyrics often reflect what could be described as a feminist agenda, but her writing and her image as a performer were free of political tactics. Zapata was a female musician almost completely disassociated from the Riot Grrrl scene, yet she often gets lumped into this category by journalists who even fifteen years later assume that any

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charismatic female musician from this era (particularly from the Northwest) must automatically be part of Riot Grrrl, and for that matter, must have a deliberate feminist agenda.\textsuperscript{185} This miscategorization is so entrenched that even the back of The Gits DVD box describes Zapata as “the very embodiment of riot grrrl intensity, talent and humanity.”\textsuperscript{186} An examination of Zapata’s work as a lyricist and performers shows that her style and artistic process sharply delineates her art from the political ideology that motivated Riot Grrrl.

While Seattle was facing the media blitz surrounding the grunge phenomenon, further south in Olympia, Washington and Portland, Oregon, a girl revolution was starting. Like the Seattle musicians who found themselves in the middle of a media-created grunge hurricane in the early 1990s, Riot Grrrl started out as a punk do-it-yourself (DIY) movement that quickly got taken over and misrepresented by the media, much to the dismay of many of its founding members. As a result, any Northwest female musician or band primarily made up of women would automatically be labeled part of “Riot Grrrl”, even if they did not label themselves that way.\textsuperscript{187} As Riot Grrrl zines and, more significantly, Riot Grrrl bands became popular, the theory that any girl could be an artist, writer,

\textsuperscript{185}Raha, 162.
\textsuperscript{186} The Gits, 2008.
\textsuperscript{187} In my interview with Valerie Agnew, she spoke at length about 7 Year Bitch being miscategorized as such, even being called “The Godmothers of the Riot Grrrl Movement” on a poster during a European tour. Despite admiration for the Riot Grrrl movement, 7 Year Bitch firmly rejected this label on artistic principle: “We always felt uncomfortable being associated with it, not because we had disdain for it or were against it any way, but because it felt like plagiarism.”
musician or anything else she wished to be quickly captured the imaginations of young women and the movement “spread like wildfire.”  

While Riot Grrrl sparked a media frenzy akin to the one Seattle faced, no Riot Grrrl band achieved the same kind of commercial success as bands such as Nirvana or Pearl Jam. Several did become quite popular, most notably Bikini Kill and Bratmobile. The overwhelming media attention and consequent distortions of fact would eventually deal the divisive blow to a movement that started out as a collective. Tired of being misrepresented and misquoted, the most prominent Riot Grrrl bands called for a media blackout and refused to talk to the press at all.

Riot Grrrl tactics spread through a network of zines and bands that wrote songs with lyrics that were extremely blunt and confrontational, tackling issues such as rape, abuse, body issues, misogyny, and the need for girls to be free to express themselves without fear. Musicians such as Bikini Kill singer Kathleen Hanna would often perform with words such as “Slut” or “Whore” scrawled across their bodies, both to preempt criticism and also reclaim derogatory terms as their own. (See Figure 2). Girls were encouraged to pick up instruments, write songs, and form bands even if they did not yet know how to play, and following in a punk tradition, many girl bands basically learned to play on stage. Aside from scrawling slurs on their bodies, Riot Grrrl performers often dressed in intentionally over-

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189 *Don’t Need You: The Herstory of Riot Grrrl*, produced and directed by Kerri Koch, Urban Cowgirl Productions, 2006, DVD.
feminized styles, mocking the feminine traditions of culture and society.\textsuperscript{190}

As discussed in Chapter 1, Zapata’s style has often been described as androgynous or tomboyish, but according to Steve Moriarty, there was never a conscious political message in the clothes she chose to wear or the hairstyles she adopted. She never attempted to fit into any kind of “scene”:

I think she was just clueless [about the grunge and Riot Grrrl scenes]. She knew punk, because she knew the bands and she’d seen movies about it, and was into the style more. I think she related to the idea of the movement. The punk movement was really a lot more irreverent and a lot more apolitical in some ways, allowing for politics but at the same time, irreverent about politics....So I think she related more to that sort of free spirit, like “anything goes” inclusivity, and Riot Grrrl was definitely not about inclusivity. It was more about fighting patriarchy and it was young women mostly, and it was definitely fashion-involved and a small artistic movement of music and writing mostly....but I think if there was any sort of politics involved I would say that it was more of a free-spirited anarchistic movement that she would say that she probably related to more.\textsuperscript{191}

Moriarty hesitated to place even this ostensible label on Mia, laughing as he imitated her deep, raspy voice: “I mean, she would probably be like, ‘No, what are you talking about—I’m an anarchist?!’”\textsuperscript{192}

Zapata would not have labeled herself a feminist either, Andy Kessler says: “I doubt she would ever have needed to identify herself as such. We often become attracted to certain ideas, movements, and to placing labels on ourselves because we feel there’s something in or about

\textsuperscript{190} Don’t Need You, 2006.
\textsuperscript{191} Moriarty, 2009.
\textsuperscript{192} Ibid.
Figure 9. Bikini Kill’s Kathleen Hanna, 1992.  

them we need. We hope they will give us something we lack or help us.” He continues:

Mia seems to have had an intuitive sense that the basic human desire to be left alone and not be brutalized or murdered by vicious scum assumes an ethical-ontological precedence over ideologies. She was her own woman—not into being defined by groups, or what others wanted her to be, etc.194

Valerie Agnew agrees that Zapata’s feminism was not based in theory, but in practice:

She didn’t carry any flags or signs any manifestoes or do any of that. It was just wasn’t her style. It wasn’t that she was judgmental about other people doing or participating in it, she just really was much more...she just dove in, man! She would just live it more. She was not an armchair politician activist type of person in terms of theory and all of that. The way she lived and the way she treated people and the way she moved through the world was very much what people would aspire to anyway. She was really authentic. I think that she was the original feminist badass! Totally inspiring and totally amazing because she did not belittle it in a way by trying to be that, you know what I mean? She just sort of was like, “Of course I can do that!” Or, “Of course we can do that!” Or, “What the fuck!” But [she] also understood and got that there was a lot of shit that [women] had to take....It wasn’t like she wasn’t aware of that stuff; she just didn’t stoop to its level, really.195

Agnew’s opinion echoes Moriarty’s comments in Raha’s Cinderella’s Big Score, in which he calls Zapata “a living example of what social justice movements are about.” He continues, “I think that she lived true to a higher standard of political understanding than most people that are overtly [active] politically. She just didn’t deal with all the bullshit and

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194 Andy Kessler, e-mail message to author, January 15, 2009.
rhetoric.” Again, Kessler agrees: “I hate using the word ‘anti-intellectual’ because she was really, really bright, but she wasn’t into a lot of theory about [art, politics] or anything. She was just sort of, ‘Here I am, take it or leave it.’”

This emotional honesty resonated in Zapata’s performances, which often moved people to tears. Zapata’s emotional intensity on stage resonated so deeply because she felt every word she sang, and she was not afraid to show it. This honesty extended to Zapata’s physicality and appearance as a performer as well, as Allison Wolfe confirms: “What I always really appreciated about Mia and The Gits is that they just kind of came as they were. They were just like, what you see is what you get. She didn’t doll up, she didn’t dress up, she didn’t look coy, she didn’t pose. She was just really real.” Wolfe believes the inability not to care about appearance affects too many female performers: “I think most women on stage are not willing to let it all hang out and to go crazy and to dare to look ugly or to dare to look wild and crazy and really go all out and not care if their veins are popping out.” She continues:

I don’t think most women totally let loose on stage, they’re always a little bit like, “Oh, I’m being looked at, and I should look a little cute or sexy or hot,” or whatever. That was never anything to do with Mia’s stage persona or anything she was doing...I really felt like she was so genuine all the time on stage. Or, I didn’t feel it, you knew it. (See Figure 3).

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196 Raha, 168.
Steve Moriarty describes Zapata's intensely honest stage presence, as well as The Gits' appeal to an eccentric crowd:

> We really developed a hardcore following of misfits and dykes and radicals and homeless people and alcoholics. We really didn’t have any pretense about being different from the crowd, especially Mia. It was like, “I’m singing in this band, but I’m just expressing myself like you are right now. I’m singing the blues, and I’m singing for you, but I’m singing with you.” We didn’t do stage shows. The idea was to just go up and pour your guts out. It was for people, it was about communication and expressing an emotion, and Mia did that better than anybody....That was who she was; it was like, “All I can do is be completely open and honest [with] you, and I know it’s gonna hurt me, but that’s the way I am,” and that’s how she sang. She just sort of poured it out, and that’s the way we played. 199

As a female performer in a music scene dominated by male bands, Zapata was at times under the kind of scrutiny of the male gaze that Riot Grrrls resisted so vehemently at shows, often asking the girls to come up to the front of the stage, or at times, barring men from their performances, or offering discounts to boys who wore dresses to shows.200 In her groundbreaking work *Gender Trouble* (1990), gender theorist Judith Butler proposes that the power structure of heterosexual desire can be disrupted when the female “Other” returns the male “gaze” and that this inversion of power also serves as a theoretical framework for disrupting socially constructed gender binaries.201 The theory of a disrupted power structure between one who looks and one who is looked at applies to Zapata as a performer. She was frequently the object of a literal gaze and yet retained agency by flouting traditional norms of gender expression.

199 Raha, 167.
200 *Don’t Need You*, 2006.
through her dress and demeanor, even if her friends believe she did not make a conscious choice to do so.

In *The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion and Rock ‘n Roll* (1995) authors Simon Reynolds and Joy Press devote several chapters to the examination of the female “tomboy” performer in rock music. They describe rock music as a space for exploring sexual identity, through affirmation, exploration and escapism, citing Suzanne Moore’s phrase “gender tourism” to describe this activity. They claim that performers such as Patti Smith presented as androgynous out of necessity. According to them, in her emulation of male rockers’ appearance and attitude, Smith freed herself of the expectations that limited female performers in pop music because it “seemed to be the only way to get what [she] wanted.” They do not seem to consider the fact that Smith might define herself by her art and not her gender. They go on further to say that women in punk rock must similarly act tough or “hard” to be accepted in a hardcore scene—an assertion that negates the possibility that some women rockers actually are hard.

There also seems to be no middle ground for female performers: They can either be “Tomboy rockers [who] mimic the toughness of the

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203 Reynolds and Press, 240.
204 Reynolds and Press, 246.
Figure 10. Mia Zapata.

Photograph by Lucy Hanna. http://www.myspace.com/lu_lucy_hanna
macho rebel” or “soul-baring singers [who] try to transform vulnerability into a kind of strength.” Presumably, female performers must choose between conventional masculinity or conventional femininity; there is no other road to credibility. Reynolds and Press seem to find it impossible to imagine that a tough “tomboy rocker” in the mold of Patti Smith or Chrissie Hynde could break the binary by displaying the emotional honesty and vulnerability of a singer like Janis Joplin. They should have gone to a Gits show.

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206 Reynolds and Press, 276.
Figure 11. Mia Zapata onstage at RKCNDY, Seattle, 1992.\footnote{Photograph by Harley Soltes, Seattle Times, \url{http://seattletimes.nwsource.com/html/movies/2008032613_gits04.html}}
“I just remember feeling like, holy shit. Like the world caved in. The fucking walls came tumbling down, you know. It was hard,” says Valerie Agnew in *The Gits* documentary, remembering the day she heard the news of Mia Zapata’s death. In the aftermath of the murder, as her friends struggled to make sense of their terrible loss, they discovered that it was impossible to stand by and do nothing while the police tried in vain to find any clues that would lead to the identity of the killer. The most immediate responses were benefit concerts staged by the remaining Gits to raise money for a private investigation into the murder, and the formation of a self-defense organization called Home Alive. Zapata’s violent death is forever associated with The Gits’ musical legacy, but the surviving members are sure that she would not want to be remembered as a martyred figure or as a symbol of violence against women.

None of Zapata’s friends could believe that she disappeared from their lives so suddenly and so violently. In *The Gits*, Selene Vigil recalls the emotional aftermath of Zapata’s untimely death:

> You think things are bad and then they get so much worse. And you have to handle it, you have to deal with it, and you have to persevere and you have to carry on and you have to hold each other up and keep each other up but it was so hard—it was really like a devastating thing, her death—there was no

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rhyme or reason to it. It was so—definitely she was there and then she was gone. She was missing in action. It was just like she was taken out, like so violently.  

Valerie Agnew describes the frustration of having no idea of who killed Zapata or why:

Every body was just blown away and stunned, grasping at anything and trying to figure it out, and it was a mystery. It was a grand mystery. And I think that the main thing for me at that time was that she was gone and that she was dead and that she had suffered. That she had suffered and that was the hit I kept getting. What did she go through? What were her last moments like? What the fuck happened?

The initial shock and grief felt by Zapata’s friends was quickly joined by suspicion and fear, because the police and everyone else assumed that she knew her killer. In The Gits, Vigil and Agnew recall that many of their male friends spoke about how hard it was to have to go to the police station for questioning and to submit semen samples. Agnew says, “It was horrible, man. Really fucking horrible to sit next to the person that you’ve been drinking with for however many years, that Mia used to drink with, and to even have the question in your mind. It sucked worse for them I’m sure, but it was awful for everybody.” No one truly knew what to think; there were even rumors of a serial killer targeting female musicians. Night after night after Zapata’s death, Steve Moriarty drove around the area where her body was found in hoping he would find the killer, armed with a knife and baseball bat in case he saw anyone attacking another

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212 Agnew, 2009.
213 McGann, 2001
woman.\textsuperscript{214} "I don't know what I was thinking that I would do," he said. "But I felt like I was so angry that nothing would stop me if I found someone trying to do that to someone. I thought I would literally see someone abducting women on the street."\textsuperscript{215}

Zapata’s friends were also outraged that the police initially wanted to keep it a secret that she had been raped. All of the early newspaper articles about the murder fail to mention it.\textsuperscript{216} The police feared that discussion of the rape would interfere with their investigation.\textsuperscript{217} Friend and performance artist Gretta Harley reacted furiously to the police’s attempts to keep the rape a secret: “The police were telling us, don’t tell anyone that Mia was raped, and we were like, ‘fuck that!’”\textsuperscript{218} Looking back on it now, Valerie Agnew realizes that the police were trying to maintain the integrity of the investigation,\textsuperscript{219} but at the time she was similarly frustrated: “I just remember sitting at the Comet a few times and saying to Selene, man, I know this information and I’m not able to tell these other women. They’re doing semen samples on guys we’ve known for years and at the same time telling us not to talk about this. I was like, this is

\textsuperscript{216} Bizarrely, this omission occurs in Maria Raha’s chapter on The Gits in \textit{Cinderella’s Big Score}. The book was published in 2003, long after the rape was made public knowledge.  
\textsuperscript{217} McGann, 2001.  
\textsuperscript{218} Gretta Harley, \textit{The Gits}, 2008.  
\textsuperscript{219} Agnew, 2009.
absolutely fucking ridiculous. I’m not keeping my fucking mouth shut about this!”

The police were absolutely baffled by the case. After about two weeks into the investigation, frustrated by the lack of information, the remaining Gits decided to hire a private investigator and began organizing benefit concerts to raise money. Many Seattle bands got involved, including Nirvana. Courtney Love and then Kurt Cobain called Steve Moriarty personally to give their condolences and to offer to help with the fundraising.

Love and Cobain were not the only music celebrities who got involved with the investigation. People who did not even know Zapata were shocked and intensely affected by her death, and turned that shock into activism. Joan Jett was around Seattle at the time of the murder. She was working in the studio with Kathleen Hanna, and together they wrote and recorded “Go Home,” a song about a stalker following a woman home. The video, which depicts Jett playing a woman being attacked on the subway, is dedicated to Zapata and presents the information about her murder.

Andy Kessler was initially disturbed by the video: “I, for one, was not exactly pleased with the video. I felt protective at first. I thought, ‘Who are these rock stars capitalizing on our tragedy, that my best friend was raped and murdered and left in the street?’ I thought maybe [they were] latching

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221 Moriarty, 2009.
on to a saleable issue. We wanted to approach [Jett] and say, ‘Look, if you really care, help us out and play a benefit show and give money to the investigation.’”

In 1995 Steve Moriarty contacted Joan Jett and asked her to participate in a benefit show, to which she agreed. It was decided that she would sing with the band, the first person to fill in for Zapata since her death. The group decided to call themselves Evil Stig (Gits Live backwards) for the performances. The benefit shows led the band to record Jett's performance with them as a benefit album, also called Evil Stig. The band was initially unsure about having another singer step into Zapata's role, and Jett was sensitive to their reluctance and sadness. The collaboration proved fruitful, however. Jett said, “I never felt uncomfortable singing her songs. When I listen to the Gits and hear Mia sing, I feel a real anger. It’s like it’s transferred. I feel real energized when I do them. The lyrics are so right on and so powerful that I’m just like the instrument transferring the message.”

Jett also knew that as a woman in music, she, too, was not immune to potential attackers: “People say to me, ‘Why are you doing this? You didn’t even know her.’ But someone murdered a woman who I can relate to. She was someone in a band just like me. When I play live, I

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223 Lorraine Ali, “‘Evil’ to Benefit the Search for Killer of Gits Singer; Pop Beat: Mia Zapata’s former bandmates continue to raise money to help fund the investigation, this time with the help of Joan Jett,” Los Angeles Times, September 16, 1995.
sometimes get this feeling, like you never know—that person could be waiting in the audience for me next.’”

Home Alive

Seething with rage and frustration, Valerie Agnew began hosting meetings at her house so people could voice their feelings about the fear that had seeped into their community, and to discuss how to make themselves feel more safe and prevent further violence. Home Alive co-founder Cristien Storm remembers that about twenty or thirty people came to the first meeting, but as a plan to form a self-defense organization took shape, the meetings eventually wended down to the nine women who became the founders of Home Alive. In a 1998 interview, Storm recalled the shock of realizing that everyone was vulnerable to the kind of violence that claimed her friend Mia: “We had sat around in (bar) rooms saying, ‘We’re tough women! We’re street smart!’ Suddenly it went to, ‘We’re...very...scared.’ We realized that we didn’t have a place to talk about these things, didn’t have a place to acknowledge that fear or what to do

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about it.” Agnew said, “We had so much energy, we had to focus it, to put it somewhere.”

The founders of Home Alive started by reaching out to people who could teach self-defense. They were determined that the organization would be able to help anyone in need, and would work to teach all people regardless of sex, race, sexual orientation or ability how to protect themselves from violence. As the mission statement reads:

Home Alive is a Seattle based anti-violence non-profit organization that offers affordable self-defense classes and provides public education and awareness. We believe violence prevention is a community responsibility as well as an individual issue. Our work in self-defense encourages everyone to recognize their entitlement to the basic human right to live free from violence and hate. Our goal is to build a cultural and social movement that puts violence in a context of political, economic and social oppression, and frames safety as a human right.

Co-founder Jessica Lawless, a friend of Zapata’s from college, knew that she could not sit by and do nothing. “It was important to me to respond in some way,” she said in a 1996 *Rolling Stone* article. “I was pissed off, I was scared and I was hurt. This was something to do. We had no idea it would turn into this.” Agnew wondered if Zapata could have survived the attack that ended her life if she had known some self defense techniques: “Just after Mia died, my band went on tour, a tour she would have been on. So I had the sadness of missing her, plus this absolutely incredible anger. It was far too much for me to swallow. We were all like Mia, we thought that we

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were streetwise. But if it happened to her, it could happen to us. If Mia had known how to really throw a punch, would she be alive? Could she have survived?\textsuperscript{231}

Echoing Richard Zapata’s statement that you never know which goodbye to your loved ones might be the last, Lawless said that there was a serious realization that, “We just weren’t taking care of each other. We would let our friends stumble out of bars. We assumed we’d always see people again.”\textsuperscript{232} Said Cristien Storm, “We are all very tough people and as a group of women, we are all really strong, outspoken, and hard-hitting, very opinionated women. And that perception of, ‘We’re not victims at all in any way and this can’t happen to women that aren’t victims,’ and I think that shattered that myth for us, [and showed] that it happens to all types of women.”\textsuperscript{233} Home Alive began by offering sliding-scale classes so that anybody who wanted to learn self-defense could afford to do it, but also took their message to the streets and bars, teaching bartenders and bouncers how to be aware of situations in which a woman might need assistance. Many walls outside of clubs were spray-painted with the mantra of Home Alive: “How are you getting home tonight?”\textsuperscript{234}

The Home Alive founders began raising money through a series of benefit concerts and fundraisers. Aside from the concerts, the organizers

\textsuperscript{232} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{233} All Things Considered, NPR, April 17, 1996.
\textsuperscript{234} Inga Muscio, “Strike Back,” \textit{Ms.}, February/March 2001, 37.
of Home Alive put together a benefit CD called *The Art of Self-Defense*, which included performances by many Seattle musicians including The Gits, 7 Year Bitch, and many other friends of Zapata’s, as well as Nirvana and other famous bands. In the liner notes to the CD, the Home Alive mission statement declares its commitment to art as a teaching tool, as well as multiple forms of verbal and physical self-defense:

> Home Alive is a collective of performance and visual artists (and other freaks) hell bent on fighting all forms of violence including rape, domestic abuse, gay/lesbian bashing, racism and all forms of oppression. We support people choosing any form of self-defense that is necessary to survive in any given situation. Examples of self-defense are verbal boundary setting, walking friends to cars or houses, locking doors, planning escape routes, de-escalation techniques, using pepper spray, physical striking techniques, fighting, yelling, martial arts, knives, guns, other weapons—ANYTHING that keeps us alive.**235**

A review of the CD in 1996 describes the emotional response provoked “when one hears the vibrant, raspy Zapata regaling the audience during her live cut. It’s a sobering fact that this young woman, so alive on this track, was silenced in the most brutal of ways. It’s impossible to ignore that it’s Zapata’s spirit hanging over this entire project.”**236**

After Home Alive became a non-profit, it began holding annual awareness weeks, and organized several conferences to discuss the definitions of self-defense in a broader context. Storm says, “The conferences were really looking at linking up self-defense and the idea of self defense through community.” She elaborates:

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There was this idea of, “How can we take care of ourselves and each other in a way that really addresses the complexities of oppression?” And how can we be doing this in a way that doesn’t perpetuate or replicate racism, homophobia, transphobia, sexism, just all systems of oppression, but actually can interrupt it, challenge it, and create and uphold visions of liberation and create environments where violence is less likely to happen.²³⁷

Home Alive thrived in Seattle for fifteen years after Zapata’s murder, but had to close down its facilities in January 2009 because of financial problems.²³⁸ Those involved remain absolutely committed to sustain the classes and the work in the community, hoping that the question will not be if Home Alive will continue, but how.²³⁹

Though many people view Home Alive as a positive result of something horrible, some people who knew Mia Zapata might prefer that the organization remain closed. In fact, Valerie Agnew is certain that there are people who knew Mia well that would prefer it if Home Alive did not exist at all, a tension that first occurred during the earliest days of the organization when it was an immediate response to Zapata’s death.²⁴⁰

Regarding the community response, Dresdner told a reporter in 2003, “She was sainted, and that was very peculiar. She became this icon for feminism and all kinds of things that she had very little to do with in her actual life.”²⁴¹ Andy Kessler is certain that Zapata, a very private person,

²³⁷ Storm, 2009.
²³⁹ Storm, 2009.
²⁴⁰ Agnew, 2009.
would not want her memory to be so closely associated with her violent, sexualized death:

[Mia] had no social or political agenda and no real interest in that stuff. Also, after her death, she quickly acquired a symbolic status as a feminist icon, martyr, and poster child for rape and violence toward women in the eyes of many folks—which had nothing to do with who she was as an actual person. In fact Mia would be mortified that she has been remembered and portrayed in such a way.\textsuperscript{242}

Agnew herself felt protective of Mia’s memory, but felt that the threat of violence in the community was tantamount to a call to arms that made Home Alive necessary.\textsuperscript{243}

Valerie Agnew responded to her friend’s death through art as well as activism. The next album released by 7 Year Bitch was \textit{Viva Zapata!} The cover features Scott Musgrove’s painting of Zapata wearing bandoliers and standing in an eerie landscape, with a bush of yellow roses in the foreground. (See Figure 1). On the back cover is one of Zapata’s own paintings, of her distant relative Emiliano Zapata, hero of the Mexican Revolution. The album includes a powerful song about Zapata’s death, “M.I.A.” The song is often mistakenly interpreted as an ode to Zapata, but in fact Selene Vigil’s lyrics articulate her rage at the missing killer:

\begin{verbatim}
Matter of fact
No fact
No matter
Who do you suspect?
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{242} Andrew Kessler, e-mail message to author, January 13, 2009.
\textsuperscript{243} Agnew, 2009.
Figure 12. The cover of 7 Year Bitch’s *Viva Zapata!* (1993)²⁴⁴

Who is not afraid to die?
Who would tell such a lie?
Who runs away
Who do we fear?

Somebody just like you gonna rape and strangle you?
Would you mutilate yourself?
And who would be so shocked by the brutal murder of a killer?

Will there be hundreds mourning for you?
Will they talk of the talent and inspiration you gave?
No
Who besides your mother will stand in sorrow at your grave?

....No fact
No matter
Society did this to you?
Does society have justice for you?
Well if not
I do246

The inside of the CD sleeve for Viva Zapata! includes a photo collage of 7 Year Bitch and their friends, with a portrait of Mia as the centerpiece. Underneath the photo a tribute reads, “An influence and inspiration to us all.”246 (See Figure 2).

At one point Mia’s father Richard turned to art to help him cope with his daughter’s loss. Five years after her death, Richard was suffering from nightmares and frequently broke down in tears during the day. He found himself becoming uncharacteristically hostile, and began drinking again after years of sobriety. He enrolled in a group therapy class specifically for

Figure 13. Mia Zapata, circa 1990-1991.\textsuperscript{247}

\textsuperscript{247} Photograph by Jackie Ransier. 7 Year Bitch, \textit{Viva Zapata!}, Way Past Your Bedtime Music, 1993.
bereavement caused by homicide. An eventual assignment was to face the unimaginable by creating an image of the lost loved one at the moment of death. Richard painted a portrait of a pale woman cloaked in black, set against a “burning sky.” The black silhouette of a naked tree stood on her left. He explained the painting when it was unveiled to the group: “This is her, cloaked. I wanted her to be covered. The tree is the tree of death. Her face is white, death white.” Though the assignment was incredibly difficult, Richard reflected on the experience: “What [it] did for me in a sense was strip bare whatever was blocking me from seeing what happened to her in the light of day.” Richard found solace in painting just as his daughter had. “I see her at peace,” he said.248

Feminist writer Inga Muscio lived in Seattle at the time of Zapata’s death, and claims that the crime profoundly affected her, although they did not know each other. She includes Zapata’s story in her book *Cunt: A Declaration of Independence* (2002): “I never knew her, never went and saw her band. Never listened to her music, not even after she died. But Seattle’s a small city, and we shared a number of friends. She was generally associated with things like outspokenness, creativity, powerful expression, talent and loving inspiration. She was strong.”249 Muscio echoes the outrage of Zapata’s friends at the attempt to keep the rape a secret: “I knew no woman who was not profoundly grief-stricken by her

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death. This was the feeling *before* rape was associated with Mia Zapata’s death. \(^{250}\)

_Cunt_ contains the most writing about Zapata aside from Maria Raha’s _Cinderella’s Big Score_, but Muscio focuses only on Zapata’s death, not her life. She portrays Zapata as a martyred figured, albeit a symbolic one:

A definition for “martyr” according to my trusty 1965 Random House Dictionary is: “One who is put to death or endures great suffering on behalf of any belief, principle, or cause.” The greatest purposes martyrs serve are teaching, inspiring and giving strength to those who live on after their death. In contrast to the killing of Dr. King or Malcolm X, there is little to support the idea that Mia Zapata was raped and murdered because of her personal (that is, political) actions as a woman. Nevertheless, her unspeakably tragic death is symbolic in that very mien. Ms. Zapata was a pillar of strength—a living, thriving, raging testimony of the power of unleashed artistic expression. That she was killed in a horrible way psychologically tortured an entire community of women. Mia Zapata’s life and death moshed into a collective unconsciousness. Being a part of a community that was grieving the brutal murder of one of its priestesses had a massive impact on my life.\(^{251}\)

Excerpts from the poem “Stupid” in an unpublished chapbook by writer Sou Macmillan also suggest that Zapata’s memory has been reduced to a kind of martyrdom:

Mia Zapata is dead
the girl who sang for the Gits left practice drunk and pissed off
and ended up raped and killed in the middle of a Seattle street.

Oh, Mia...
how could you not have known?
why didn’t anybody tell you
that girls who front punx bands

\(^{250}\) Muscio, 148.  
\(^{251}\) Muscio, 149.
have the life expectancy of a fruit fly?
    if it’s not the drugs then it’s
at the hands of some pretty bastard
    wants to show you the underbelly of punx rox

....but punx isn’t about being smart
    you knew that, Mia
punx is about being stupid and having enough blind
faith to
know you’ll get home

...but, Mia
I wish we were allowed to be smart
    ’cos X would still be on the charts
    ’cos Joan Jett would still be all over Tiger Beat
    ’cos I would never have let that boy hit me
        the second time
    ’cos you would still be alive to agree with me

Mia Zapata is dead
and the sick part is
half the kids who listen to the Gits
wouldn’t have it any other way

    ’cos she’s a lot easier to get along with now

stupid, isn’t it?252

All of the surviving Gits vehemently reject Zapata’s portrayal as martyr,
instead stressing what mattered most to her in life. To quote Steve
Moriarty, “Mia was an artist through and through and struggled with life
itself to create amazing art.”253

The Gits’ desire that Zapata not merely be remembered for her
tragic end manifested itself during the making of The Gits documentary.
When director Kerri O’Kane and producer Jessica Bender approached
them with the project, The Gits insisted that the film’s focus be on the band

252 Sou MacMillan, no & other city noises, released May 21, 1997, Brown
University Library.
253 Steve Moriarty, e-mail message to author, September 22, 2008.
and Mia’s life and music, not her death. In a recent interview, Steve Moriarty discusses the process of making the film: “They would finish a version, and they would send it to myself and the two other guys. Andy and I actually reviewed the films, we’d write critiques, and then they’d make adjustments. We pretty much came up with the two criteria for the film that we were pretty consistent about: There has to be as much live footage as they can get away with, and it had to be funny.”

He continues:

The band was always funny. It wasn’t this angst-filled goth band or something. We had a great fucking time. And everything had become so serious, so morose, and melancholy because of how the band ended. But what we wanted to do was remember the music and the band for what it was in the moment. In the moment, it was a blast.

Andy Kessler emphasizes the funny side to Zapata’s intense, artistic nature, saying “Mia was in some ways, if you can imagine, almost a combination of Janis Joplin and Curly from the Three Stooges [and] maybe Charles Bukowski, like all three of them in one, a little bit. She was kind of like that. She got up to some wacky hijinks.”

_The Gits_ documentary successfully reveals the goofy humor of Zapata and the band, though the memories are too numerous for all of them to be captured in the film. Steve Moriarty tells one particularly funny story that characterizes the band’s spirit of misadventure, an anecdote that was supposed to be portrayed as an animated sequence, but did not make it into _The Gits_: while in Switzerland during the European tour,

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254 Drea, 2008.
255 Ibid.
Moriarty and Zapata decided to take the van and drive around in search of authentic Swiss cheese. Instead they went to see a local castle and then went to a diner, “kind of like a Swiss Denny’s,” as Moriarty calls it. They enjoyed several cocktails before realizing that their travels had left them with pockets full of currency from several countries, but no Swiss money. They decided to leave what they had on the table and to make a run for it. Moriarty left to pull up the van outside, instructing Zapata to wait at the table until the last minute, and then to dash for the door. As he tells it, they nearly did not make it:

[Mia] ran out and got in the van, but these huge women, like these giant Swiss ladies with pigtails and butcher knives came running after her and grabbed her and I was driving and moving in the van and they were grabbing and pulling at her, like [trying] to pull her out of the passenger seat and I’m like, “Just go! Kick her! Don’t give up! Don’t give up! Just kick ‘em off!” And so she kicked them off and pulled the door shut and they were yelling and screaming at us and calling the police and we had to drive away and it was really scary but we laughed and laughed and laughed and it was really funny....[We were] broke and just really willing to take a lot of risks. We just had a really good time.257

Like Moriarty, Kessler believes that this humor and adventure were an essential part of The Gits experience, and that up until the end, the band seemed to have a charmed existence: “[On] the level of friendship and stuff

257 Moriarty interview, 2009. Those risks included Zapata convincing friends to let her drive their cars while conveniently forgetting to mention that she did not in fact have a license. In The Gits, a friend laughs over the memory of Mia getting lost while driving home, but Kessler remembers a more disturbing incident in which Mia almost flipped a car over: “I mean, we were screaming! Like me and these other grown men who were not the most squeamish of people, we were like, AHH! Help!’ She was like, ‘Hahaha, I don’t know why this stuff happens!’ Because you don’t know how to drive and they’re letting you drive! She did crazy shit sometimes.”
it was kind of a blast the entire ride, the entire length of it from beginning to end...we would just meet people and have adventures and fun times and have friends.”

Figure 14. The Gits, circa 1991. From left: Moriarty, Dresdner, Kessler, Zapata.258

Mia Zapata’s musical legacy can never be entirely severed from the fact of her violent death, but The Gits documentary will perhaps bring the story of the Gits and their music to a new generation of fans. L.A. Times critic Ann Powers believes that an audience is out there waiting to discover the band: “Often times in the history of popular music, women artists take a while for really their influence to be felt, and I think it’s a ripe time for The Gits’ influence to be felt and Mia’s influence, because a new generation of artists like the Yeah Yeah Yeahs and the Distillers are taking from Mia without even knowing they’re taking from Mia.”259 Home Alive strives to prevent other women from suffering the same fate that befell Zapata, and

The Gits may help ensure that her musical legacy receives the attention that it deserves.
Figure 15. The Gits, circa 1990-1991.260

CONCLUSION

Mia Zapata was not someone who was easily classifiable in life. She was shy and gentle. She could also be raucous and wild; tough yet vulnerable. She was not very interested in the “scenes” around her yet she was open to listening to all kinds of music and appreciating all kinds of art. She did not label herself a feminist or an activist, yet she was concerned with social justice for all people. She was intensely private, yet in public she passionately sang the lyrics she created out of her deepest thoughts.

In death, her legacy is even more complicated. The media attempts to attach easy labels to her: Riot Grrrl. Grunge girl. Victim. Martyr. Saint. Though she did not attain the legendary status of a Joplin or a Cobain in death, the Mia Zapata that looms large in the media-created vision of her is a construction that focuses on her death and ignores the deep complexities and contradictions of her life. In the simplest terms, the purpose of this thesis was to show that Mia Zapata’s life is more than her death. She was a living, breathing, multi-faceted person who deserves to be viewed as such.

Though I have debunked some false perceptions of Mia Zapata, this thesis does not claim to be a definitive portrait. In Chapter One, I examine Zapata’s life by dividing it into two separate spheres, but what really emerges from this analysis is that those two worlds were in fact not so distinct. Zapata was able to bridge the gaps between those she loved best not because she was a saint but because she was so very human. Chapter Two corrects the miscategorization of Zapata as a Riot Grrrl and prove that
Zapata transcended gender binaries in her life both on and off the stage. This argument relies heavily on testimony from those who knew her best, and the argument succeeds by proving that a real human life as well as an artistic career is not so easily bifurcated. Chapter Three examines the various responses to the violence that claimed Zapata’s life, but also the residual tensions created by those responses that affect how Zapata is remembered.

As someone who never knew Mia Zapata in life, I fell under the spell of her memory. I am thankful that I have had the chance to explore her life in depth, and now see her as more than a great singer or a symbol of a fate all women fear: Mia was a little girl from the South who saw Elvis Presley live. She was a fiery young woman who once unwittingly sassed David Bowie in a parking lot. She was talented. She was sometimes troubled. But above all, she was real: Mia was a daughter, a sister, an artist, a friend. And a Git.

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Figure 16. Mia Zapata, Albuquerque, NM, circa 1992. Photograph courtesy of the collection of Michael Galen Nichols.
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58. O’Kane, Kerri and Jessica Bender. The Gits, 81 minutes, Jab Films, 2008, DVD.


60. Peterson, Karla. “‘Hype!’ cuts away to grunge’s rich roots,” San Diego Union-Tribune, December 5, 1996.


69. Pray, Doug. *Hype!,* 84 minutes, Republic Pictures, 1996, DVD.
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