heavens to betsy / *baby's gone* bio (Kill Rock Stars)

More than three decades after they founded heavens to betsy, Corin Tucker and Tracy Sawyer still have something important to say.

Just as riot grrrl punk rock and feminism pushed for inclusivity, bodily autonomy, and gender equality in the early-to-mid '90s, there is arguably an even greater need for the scene to rematerialize in an age where women's voting rights and healthcare access are under siege, as is the safety of any marginalized community. Now, the longtime friends and musicians have answered the call by reuniting as heavens to betsy, the DIY punk project they famously founded back in the riot grrrl halcyon days, among like-minded Olympia artists in Bikini Kill, Team Dresch, and Bratmobile.

In celebration of their reunion, Corin (Sleater-Kinney) and Tracy (The Husbands, The Flying Tigers, The Lies) are set to release their first project since 1994: *baby's gone*, a 16-track mission statement comprising a never-before-heard demo tape originally recorded by Bratmobile's Molly Neuman (who also provides liner notes for the forthcoming release), plus the 1993 *These Monsters Are Real* and the 1994 *Direction* 7" recordings.

"When you're young and full of that outrage that comes with being 19, 20 years old, it's like you're ready to take on the world," Corin says of listening back to the earliest days of heavens to betsy, which she and Tracy co-founded in 1990. "The songs really hold that kind of power. I just felt proud of us for putting ourselves out there like that. We weren't the best musicians in the world, but we just did it. We were young women with something to say, and that was how we were able to say it."

"I wasn't sure if I would ever revisit heavens to betsy, and then when we started talking more about it, and feeling how relevant the subjects are today, almost even more so than they were back then… it just seemed like just the perfect opportunity to be doing this," Tracy adds. "Just to know each other again as adults and as mothers, it's really cool. Once we started playing again, it was like muscle memory."

The title *baby's gone*, adopted from the ruminative, distortion-heavy title track, acts as a mission statement for heavens to betsy, applicable in each of its incarnations, regardless of era. Lyrics across the project illustrate such passion and defiance at the injustice that pervades every corner of our society. The title track looks closer to home, portraying a place where shame overrides pleasure and daughters grow isolated by secrets they wouldn't dare reveal. *I grew up in your house/ I grew up with your rules/ I know sex is what I shouldn't do/ I know what I can't tell you… Your baby girl's gone away/ Your baby grew up today/ I did what you told me to do/ Now I'm dead... Goodbye.*

"We were really concerned about the volatility of reproductive rights, even though in our lifetime it was legal to have an abortion," Corin says. "We knew that our parents' generation fought extremely hard to get that, and we knew that that was such a target for the right wingers in our country. It was under threat when we were 20 years old. That song's imagery is about the feeling that your own body is not within your control. I also like the double entendre – we wrote these songs when we were kids, and now we're coming back to it as women that are older. It's sad to me how incredibly relevant all these issues still are."

Corin and Tracy grew up in Eugene, Oregon, where they met in middle school and bonded over a mutual love of music. The dream of starting their own band began to feel more attainable after the duo took a post-grad train trip to Athens, Georgia, where they witnessed the town's burgeoning indie-rock scene, led by local legends R.E.M., who set an example for balancing commercial success with retaining one's personal values.

Once Corin assumed her place at Evergreen, she felt even more inspired by the young women making art, advocating for their rights, expressing "impolite" feelings of rage and desire, and carving out space for new faces in the traditionally male-dominated punk scene. Area bands like Bratmobile and Bikini Kill were starting a national movement, and Corin wanted in. So she called up Tracy, who was one school year behind her, and the pair officially became heavens to betsy.

The first time Corin and Tracy played live, at KAOS DJ Michelle Noel's request, it was at the International Pop Underground convention's Girl Night. "I don't think we had any material written," Corin remembers. "But I was like, 'Yeah, we'll do that' with all the confidence in the world. Then we wrote two songs and played them at that convention, and it was a really big deal, because all of our musical heroes were in the audience that night: Fugazi, Bikini Hill, Bratmobile, Calamity Jane. We were terrified, but they were so supportive. All of them told us how much they loved the band that first night. It was like a Cinderella story."

heavens to betsy would go on to release three 7" recordings (in 1992, a split with Batmobile, followed by *These Monsters Are Real*, and *Direction*) and one, now-classic full-length album; *Calculated* came out in 1994 via Kill Rock Stars. Their songs, led by Corin's singular howl, covered then-unheard of subjects, like the pervasiveness of rape culture, discussions of intersectional politics, female friendships, queerness, and body shaming – themes that continue to fuel debate in the average American life.

It's actually a modern miracle the band's 35-year-old cassette demos, which comprise the first eight tracks of *baby's gone*, were ever found, let alone digitized. Corin was sure she'd lost the master reel. "Rob Jones from Kill Rock Stars was like, 'We can take the original cassette tape and we can rip and master from that," Corin says. "One of those cassette tapes is still floating around from 35 years ago, which is wild."

Looking back at their college-age relationship with Molly Neuman, who recorded their first demo tape, Corin says, "Molly's such a leader, and she's… such an intellectual. She grasped right away that it was important for young women to have these tools to express themselves… She was so confident and so unafraid to just be like, 'Yeah, why don't I just record that for you? I'll just check out the Tascam from the AV library at Evergreen and do it.'"

Molly perfectly captured Corin and Tracy's excitement at finding a community of female artists and business owners on the thrumming declaration "ain't never goin' back." After growing up in Eugene, a more traditionally male-dominated arts environment, it felt good to land in Olympia, where they witnessed women performing in bands, booking shows, and running record labels. "It was so exciting to get to a place that had that kind of ethos," Corin says. "That song is like, 'I'm in a better place. The mentality of a place that valued women's participation, that was what was so exciting to me, and not wanting to go back to being in a place that felt like it didn't have that."

Just as heavens to betsy was an outlet for Corin and Tracy to express the issues on their mind as young women in the ‘90s, it was also a place for them to process trauma while giving other women a safe space to unpack theirs. The thrashing, rageful “my secret” gave Corin a place to talk about the things society would have preferred her to keep inside. “I really needed to find other people to talk to about being sexually assaulted when I was young,” she says. “The feeling that I wasn't supposed to talk about it was eating away at me. By letting out all of those feelings, it was like opening this like jar of emotions, and letting go of giving a fuck.”

Finally, the uneasily ruminative “direction” considers the necessary act of setting boundaries in a romantic relationship, especially once it’s over. “It's really about growing up a little bit and realizing that it’s critical to take care of yourself in a relationship, and I wasn't really doing that,” Corin says. “That song is about giving yourself space to leave a relationship and put yourself first.”

As Tracy and Corin prepare to release their first project as heavens to betsy since 1994, they are also in the process of ideating new live shows, which will no doubt give fans who were with them from the start, plus a new generation of riot grrrls, the chance to form much-needed communities and push back against threatening, regressive forces.

“We wrote these songs when we were 20 years old, but they were about the struggle to feel in control of your own body and to feel your own power in the world, and how difficult that is as a teenage girl,” Corin says. “It’s a really intense time, because you have all of that interest and power, but you're also very vulnerable. There weren’t avenues to talk about that, and I really needed to talk about it before I went on with the rest of my life… It's intense to come back to that as an older adult and wonder how it's going to impact people now.”