

Rebel Girls: Riot Grrrls and Punk Feminism

Tristan Burfield

Introduction

The last words published by Huggy Bear on their final recorded epitaph 'Weaponry listens to love' simply read: "An inauthentic appetite is served by an inauthentic diet". Perhaps the inauthentic diet and appetite Nicci refers to is the masculine tradition of rock since the 60's (which the general public to this day still unquestionably crave).

Adorno talked of popular music acting as a social cement, he studied it in terms of its effect on the listener, and claimed that the musical content of this genre was standardised and therefore lacking in meaning. In this essay I will be challenging these claims and explore how meaning in popular music is mediated by social practice and thus informs gendered identity¹.

In this essay I shall give an overview of the history of Riot Grrrl and consider the genres relevance today.

Women in Punk Rock

Riot Grrrl aimed to challenge the male dominance of Rock and Roll. Rock and Roll has always been traditionally considered a masculinist genre due to its reliance on loud volume levels, phallic low slung guitars and macho sexual posturing (ala Presley). Conservative fans and practitioners have historically believed that in order to play rock music certain physical and mental characteristics are required such as aggression, power, and physical strength. Due to the power of gender stereotyping these traits of aggression, power and physical strength have often been falsely associated with hegemonic mainstream masculinity.²

It could be argued that women played a somewhat marginalised role in the progression of popular music until the punk rock era of the late 70s. During this period many women leapt to the stage despite lack of formal training. Bands and artists such as The Slits, The Raincoats, The Go-Go's, Debbie Harry, Polystyrene [X-Ray Spex], Chrissie Hinde, Sioux Sioux, Exena Cervenka, Laurie Anderson, Grace Jones, Lydia Lunch stripped away the often

subservient postures associated with women in the music industry and adopted confrontational performance techniques, controversial images that made men shudder.³ Traditional emphasis of attractiveness or glamour was challenged rejected and playfully undermined. A new generation of female punks like Polystyrene and Laura Logic broke all the existing rules of feminine appearance in ways that were striking (skirts too short, slits too high ect.).⁴ Ugliness was celebrated and in contrast to the beauty advice in the magazines. Punks deliberately ugly-fied themselves by applying make-up in garish ways and by dying their hair shocking colours. The whole praxis of natural beauty was re-contextualised so that woman performers could also be fat, tall and even middle aged.⁵

Candy Ballantyne from Jane Goes Shopping explains:

“Punk was a great equaliser I was struck by the fact that girls didn’t think they had to live up to any kind of standard woman image. You could be any shape or size and you’d be quite acceptable”.⁶

Punk transcended fashion and gave women a new voice and sonic identity, sounds that “that had been previously regarded as unfeminine and therefore unmusical” such as “strident, grating, screeching, squawking”⁷ were being used to challenge, transgress, shock and provoke. The genre provided an easy accessible musical framework, which allowed girls to get up on stage and simply play. Zine writers like Kookie monster typified the optimism of the era:

“who cares if the boring muso's whinge that we haven’t learnt to play our instruments properly ...anyone can write and play for long as there’s attitude anger there” [Kookie monsters free peach thingy fanzine]⁸

If the punk scene of the late 70’s was a quiet victory for women musicians, the post punk scene of the late 90’s [Riot Grrrl] was a very loud one.

Post-punk influences

Another important influence on Riot Grrrl was a new of post punk personified in bands such as Mecca Normal and The Raincoats.

Mecca Normal were one of the first feminist bands to be comprised of both men and women fighting for a common cause. Mecca

Normal are widely acknowledged and recognised by musicologists and punks as “the original Riot Grrrls”. Mecca Normal formed in 1986 consisting of only 2 members Jean and David. The band were committed to “creating recording and promoting musical, visual and written work dealing with poverty housing capitalism women’s rights and relationships between men and women from an anarchist and feminist perspective”.⁹

Girl Germs: Riot Grrrl spreads

The scenes two main centres were in the US and UK. Famous US bands included Bikini Kill, Sleater Kinney and Bratmobile. In the UK famous bands included Huggy Bear, Mambo Taxi, Voodoo Queens.

Many bands used child-like imagery to dissect the jealousy and intense loyalty of pre-adolescent female friendship and bonding. The music explored the power of early years femininity before adult women reached maturity and were forced to conform to the status quo, compete for male attention, accept masculine shortcomings and compromise their true female identities. The Riot Grrrl dress code: the baby doll dresses and hair clips mimicked this sexual ethos, as did the childish lyrics and unaffected musicianship. The song ‘Double dare you’ by Bikini Kill is a call to action, mixing a feminist savvy with the competitive language of the school ground:

“I Double dare you...I triple dare you, Dipple fucking dare you Girl fuckin' friend”. The song is taunting woman into action asking:

“Are you going to do what he man tells you?...Don't go speaking out of yr. turn, gotta listen to what the man says”

The song also acts as a voice of encouragement:

“You're a big girl now you've got no reason to fight
You've got to know what they are so you can stand up for your rights
Rights! Rights! Rights!
You have them you know”

The scene was built up through grassroots zine support. At it's apex in 1993, Karen (a brit-zine writer) identified 47 new grrrl bands which formed that year¹⁰. She reports:

“Regardless of the rock industries smug dismissal of their music as un-compelling and unprofessional bands like Bikini Kill, Bratmobile and their cohorts Heavens to Betsy and Siren have sparked a new generational interest in feminism –and have reopened the discussion on women in music and the industry”¹¹

Many of these Zines were the antithesis of the mainstream media and openly critiqued its values through exploiting the situationist techniques of Jamie Reed [i.e. taking texts from mass culture and endowing them with new and subversive meanings]. One notable example in ‘ablaze’ included a collage of photographs of smiling woman from ‘Girls Annual’ which were juxtaposed against racy lingerie advertisements and soft pornography. Words and phrases such as ‘bitch’, ‘anorexic/ absolute beauty’ and the ‘psychology of rape’ were used to subvert the intention of the squeaky clean imagery.

Other zines often featured articles on date rape, abortion rights, walking home at night, personal experience, angry discussions of sexism, broken relationships and disclosures of sexual abuse to a small group of likeminded people.¹²

Girl frenzy #1 states “Girls we all need to learn the incredible value and joy to be found in girlfriends. It’s not just a silly slumber party full of make-up and hair and boyfriend talk. Girl talk is cool but that’s not all it has to be about. It can also be about feelings about being a girl”¹³

Kay and Josie state in ‘go go grrrl riot grrrl’ that the movement is “not just about music it’s a girl positive energy. Don’t feel that you have to be in a band to do something constructive with your time”¹⁴

US Scene: Bikini Kill, Bratmobile

Bratmobile

Bikini Kill and Bratmobile are widely acknowledged to be the two key galvanisers of the US scene. Bratmobile’s coining of the term ‘riot grrrl’ was inspired by the roles that girls at a young age play in society. Bratmobile claim that girls in society are “defined by their immaturity they are depoliticised” in a sense the word grrrl in riot

grrrl “is a reclamation of the word girl [as apposed to the PC term women], and a representation of it as a wholly positive term”¹⁵ They say, “she [a grrrl] can do anything she wants. She [you] are a powerful person to the degree that you can hold the powers that enable you to be free of a lot of things – sexism, phatism, racism and homophobia¹⁶ . Kay co-author of ‘intimate wipe’ explains the term Riot Grrrl “not a girl because of the easy cook rice and the late bedtimes, not a woman because of the pre-pubescent dresses the messy bedrooms and the toys”¹⁷ . Alison Wolfe of Bratmobile claims the “riot” in Riot Grrrl was inspired by the “mount pleasant riots in Washington DC”, it was “a call to action to induce “a state of rebellion”¹⁸

Bratmobiles ‘Girl Germs’ was a key song in the movement. The title ‘girl germs’ was highly symbolic communicating not only female toxicity to men but also a message of self-protection, playing with the idea that females have the ability to repel unwanted sexual advances. ‘Girl germs’ also became germinal in the sense that a girl can grow into a liberated independent young women. The song reflects the growth of the Riot Grrrl scene from an initial idea to a fully-fledged youth culture in its own right.¹⁹ The refrain celebrates female independence and challenges macho male patriarchy:

“Girl germs x2, can’t hide their everywhere”

“Girls on the walk in this town
So pulling my pony tail you persist You put down my goofy game
But you’re just goofy just the same “

Verse two plays with polar opposites, simplistically juxtaposing girl strength with masculine weakness:

“Getting down on my parent bed
Going nowhere and looking glum
When you button up the courage to look round my way You always
get scared and run away
Because looking my way means confrontation
Boyish fears of girl intimidation
Yr. too fuzzy and yr. on my fun show
Either wet yr. bed or cool at my house”.

Bikini Kill

Bikini Kill were key Riot Grrrl agitators who declared “revolution girl style now”. Hanna envisaged music as a force for social change: “I am a fucking idiot. I still think we can change the world”²⁰ Hanna sees her Riot Grrrl philosophy as taking up a dialogue with wider punk narratives:

“Bikini Kill’s show is not just “a vague fuck society gesture but a focused critique of the punk scene itself”²¹

Below is a flyer given out at one of their early shows:

“Bikini Kill is more than just a band or a zine or an idea, it’s part of the revolution. The revolution is about going to the playground with your best girlfriends. You are hanging upside down on the bars and all the blood is rushing to your head it’s a euphoric feeling, the boys can see our underwear and we don’t care! We must make sure that lots of girls are also in the revolution and we want to find them. Sure our revolution has a lot to do with making ourselves important enough to start a revolution, but we also don’t care about this...because what makes us feel good without hurting others IS good. This society isn’t my society cuz this society hates woman and I don’t. This society doesn’t want us girls to feel happy or powerful in any way...We are not special, anyone can do it. ENCOURAGEMENT IN THE FACE OF INSECURITY is a slogan the revolution”²²

Kathleen below explains the motivations underlying Riot Grrrl:

“BECAUSE we must take over the means of production in order to create our own meanings. Because viewing our work as being connected to our girlfriends-politics- real lives is essential if we are going to figure out how we are doing impacts reflects perpetrates or disrupts the status quo.

BECAUSE we recognise fantasies of instant macho gun revolution as impractical lies meant to keep us simply dreaming instead of becoming our dreams AND THUS seek to create revolution in our own lives every single day by envisioning and creating alternatives to the bullshit Christian capitalist ways of doing things

BECAUSE we want and need to encourage and be encouraged in the face of all our own insecurities, in the face of beer gut rock that

tells us we can't play our instruments, in the face of authorities who say our bands/zines are the worse in the US and

BECAUSE we don't wanna assimilate to someone else's [boy] standards of what is or isn't. Because we are unwilling to falter under claims that we are reactionary "reverse sexists" AND NOT THE TRUE PUNK ROCK CRUSADERS THAT WE KNOW we really are

BECAUSE we know that life is much more than physical survival and patently aware that the punk rock "you can do anything" idea is crucial to coming angry grrrl rock revolution which seeks to save the psychic and cultural lives of girls and woman everywhere, according to their own terms, not ours.

BECAUSE we are interested in creating non hierarchal ways of being AND making music, friends and scenes based on communication and understanding, instead of competition and good/bad categorisations

BECAUSE doing/reading/seeing/hearing/ cool things that validate and challenge us can help us gain the strength and sense of community that we need in order to figure out how bullshit like racism, able body-ism, age-ism, species-ism, classicism, thin-ism, sexism, anti-Semitism and hetero-sexism figures in our own lives.

BECAUSE we are fostering and supporting girl scenes and girl artists of all kinds as integral to this process

BECAUSE we hate capitalism in all its forms and see our main goal as sharing information and staying alive, instead of making profits of being cool according to national standards

BECAUSE we are angry at a society that tells us girl=dumb girl=bad girl=weak

BECAUSE we are unwilling to let our real and valid anger be diffused and or turned against us via the internalisation of sexism as witnessed in girl/girl jealous-ism and self-defeating girl type behaviours

BECAUSE I believe with my whole heart mind body that girls constitute a revolutionary soul force that can and will change the world for real”²³

Kathleen is perhaps the most outspoken feminist of the Riot Grrrl scene, she cites author Kathy Acker and performance artist Karen Finley as her main influences.²⁴

In a fanzine article entitled ‘Jigsaw youth’ Kathleen discusses the importance of resistance against male patriarchy:

“Resistance is everywhere it always has been and always will be...Being told you are worthless piece of shit and not believing it is a form of resistance. On a girl calling another girl to warn her about a guy who date raped her, is another. And while she may look like a big haired make up girl who goes out with jocks she is a soldier along with every other girl, and even though she may not be fighting in the same loud way that some of us can [and do] it is the fact that she is resisting that connects us, put a piece together”²⁵

UK Scene: Huggy Bear, Voodoo Queens

Huggy Bear hailed from England, a half male and half female band who blended eloquent rhetoric with positive actions²⁶. Songs such as ‘shaved pussy poetry’ and ‘her jazz’ called for ‘girl boy revolution’ through the medium of discordant guitars, howling vocals, passionate manifestos and bad poetry. Huggy Bear declared “revolution our time now” and used Sex Pistols inspired situationism to convey their anti-sexist agenda. The band famously caused controversy by asking Terry Christian on live television in 1993 whether he thought, “All women were shit”?

Voodoo Queens were the masters of irony and used music to explore kitsch and naïve feminine themes. Their pre-occupations included “chocolate, dreamy Keanu Reeves and telling crap blokes to get stuffed”²⁷.

‘Keanu canoodle’ by the Voodoo Queens places men (rather than women) in the position of sex object. A great example of how Riot Grrrls use irony and self condescension to reverse gender stereotypes and music industry sexism!

“Keanu reaves you make my heart breathe you make me sigh
I real come when you comb your hair u look so square
I really think it’s time to go just u and me
And the desert moon and your subtle breeze it blows incessantly

Keanu Kenadle Kanooie Kannodle How do you say your name?
It doesn’t matter anyway
Cos you look good in a wetsuit And that’s where I wanna be

He was in Bill and Ted
I love it when he shakes his big hair Shake it

He’s the most bodacious boy you ever sore
When will he be more than just a picture on my fridge door?

Oooh he’s cool”

Riot Grrrl and Male Hardcore

Many Riot Grrrls used Punk music to challenge the misogyny of Male Hardcore. Among male Punk and Hardcore performers there is a long tradition of Punk rebellion being acted out at the expense of women. The male Hardcore band Fear once wrote, “I just wanna fuck some slut/ piss on your warm embrace/ I just wanna come in your face/ I don’t care if you’re dead”. In this lyric we witness male desire articulated in terms of a desire to hurt or to degrade women (this is a trait that has been inherent throughout the history of punk).

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An anon brit-zine Writer recalls:

“When I was seriously listening to Hardcore, back whenever, there were no girl bands at least none I could remember hearing on the radio. I remember thinking that girls couldn’t do Hardcore, back whenever, because it wouldn’t sound good girls can’t shout right or something idiotic like that. I’m so glad all these girlcore bands are proving me so wrong. Groups like Lunachicks and Bikini Kill really push the bare essential to the limits and there anger is palpable, it blows away my memories of the most extreme 80s hard-core boy bands. Listening to these bands And others ...makes me feel like I can stomp every yucky thing I hate right into the tread of my boots like I can shout right after all”²⁹

Kathleen Hanna's opposition to the sexism of male Hardcore can be seen in her furious reply to a request from Mike Watt [of the male Hardcore band "the minutemen"] to play on one of his records

"Hello Mr Watt

This is Kathleen Hanna returning your phone call: Bout 345 on Monday and it's about that fucking record that you asked me to do something for, And I guess I'm responding to that now cuz I have a few minutes...But uh, I'm just not so sure I wanna be included in your little white rock boy fucking hall of shame here, you know? I'm just like "Do I wanna be sandwiched in between some of these guys that

are just doing the whole like, big-white-baby-with-an-ego-problem thing? I mean [sigh] get over it!

It's so boring. It's like a lot of these guys should just fucking quit music and become lifeguards at like wild waves or shit. And I mean, I guess what I'm saying is? "I'm just too cool to be on your fucking record. The music coming out by guys right now in the sort of like rock world or alternative rock world or used to be punk world or whatever. It's like the whole I'm a straight middle class male rock star guy but I'm so fucking oppressed. I'm a loser baby why don't you kill me [sigh] Yawn

Like big fucking yawn. So yeah I guess what I am saying is NO NO NO. NO not interested NO

I don't want to be on your fucking record. No But um Mr Watt Dude Babe sir. Uh you need to get me my fuckin' Anne soundtrack back like soon cuz you've had it forever and I know I haven't fucking listened to it yet. Just like gimme a call and tell me when that's going to happen. And ummm I'll talk to you then .Bye"³⁰

The phallic undertones of well-known bands (such as Sex Pistols, Revolting Cocks, Dickies) reveals the common mindset of the era. Many Riot Grrrls bands have taken similar stances by naming their bands after parts of the female anatomy (i.e. Hole, Burning Bush, Thrush Queen, Meenie Puss, Snatch, Pop Smear, Ovarian Trolley, Faster Pussycat Kill! Kill! Kill!). Some Riot Grrrl bands used sexual

imagery to critique and mock overt masculinity (i.e. "Pork Thrust, Spit boy, Weenie Roast, Blood Sausage)"³¹

Unfortunately sexism is as an important part of male bonding and punk has only helped reinforce this mentality. Male punk bands in the late 70s often wrote aggressive and insulting lyrics many of which were directed at women .As Laing recalls:

"The lifting of the taboo on the unsayable in rock discourse ended in a way of saying something quite old: a celebration of male sexuality as an essentially aggressive and phallogocentric. Undeniably the lyrics of some punk bands such as the Stranglers were as misogynistic as those of the Rolling Stones. Yet at the same time punk allowed anger and frustration as new topics for woman's experience. Subject from the downright unsexy or taboo i.e. housework, motherhood, menstruation, contraception, rape, anorexia, female masturbation, cunnilingus, faking orgasm and the female body etc. Band names such as Bleeding Women, Ova, Annarexic, Body Functions and PMT revealed this mentality...the performance of male artists generally showed an uncritical adherence to standard styles which emphasised macho postures"³².

Riot Grrrl and female solidarity

Riot Grrrl was a call for female solidarity. 'No Sleep' by Huggy Bear literally encourages women to chase men out of town. The song angrily challenges the unquestioned sexual norms of heterosexuality. The use of tribal drums and mantra like refrains has a tribal Amazon like resonance:

"No sleep till the locations found

No sleep till that man is out of town

No sleep till I can't hear the sound of your voice

Your voice telling me there is no choice telling me there is no choice

No sleep till that man is found

No sleep till that man is out of town

No sleep till I can't hear the sound of your voice Telling me there is no choice

There is a choice"

In Riot Grrrl the often over-romanticised traditional heterosexual relationship is challenged. The song 'Jack' by 7 Year Bitch uses the anonymous figure of Jack to represent the perils of an abusive heterosexual relationship. Jack represents an undesired controlling force over women. He wants to keep you feminine and "keep your fingernails clean". This nightmare man is possessive, the boy who gets "jealous when you go out on a date".

Female solidarity was achieved through interrogating traditional masculinity. 'Bragging party' by The Amps deconstructs the bravado of a beer laden keg party. Revealing the pitiful vulnerabilities that 'real men' hide behind:

"Songs of longing other missing
Hide in some self-pitying boy
Bragging party just beginning
All the tales mythic men, mythic men

Here are tales, tales, tales, tales
So fill the air with memorised breasts
memorised breasts

Ooh ahh ohhh

From the valley of the mythic
Kids don't do drugs just fuck there mothers
Here in business school"

'You smell lonely' by 7 Year Bitch also challenges traditional hegemonic masculinity:

"You smell lonely
So you wanna go to bed with me
Why don't you climb in my head with me?
Knew what I was thinking
Your dick it would be shrinking x2 ...
Honey are you lonely
Baby you smell lonely to me

The tone is one of disgust:

"What goes on in the mind of a man like you
To make you say the things you do"

'My Guitar Baby' by the Voodoo Queens alternatively exposes gentler themes. The song is a lullaby to a cherished guitar. The singer finds solace in music. Favouring a

maternal relationship with a guitar over a heterosexual relationship with a boy:

“I hold you into my arms and I pray
My guitar baby will always stay
I hold you into the night and I see my guitar baby is back with me

Who needs boys when you’ve got guitars? My guitar baby makes much more noise

I hold you into my arms and I pray
My guitar baby will always stay”

Riot Grrrl and Queercore

Riot Grrrl was heavily influenced by the Queercore scene. Queercore was a pro-gay Hardcore punk movement spearheaded by bands such as Pansy Division and Tribe 8.

Gill explains how Queercore redefined gay culture:

“Queercore is about an attitude more than anything else .It says nothing new – pansy division admit their music is a hybrid of post-punk styles, ranging from the Ramones to Billy Bragg what’s important here though, is that before there hadn’t been any queer bands influenced by the Ramones and Billy Bragg. Queercore could be dismissed as derivative, but the importance is in its message, which is empowering young fans and musicians who feel ignored and alienated by what queer culture can offer them.”³³

A concept central to Queercore and Riot Grrrl was the notion of girl love i.e. gay love between girls. Huggy Bear once said, “punk rock is a queer scene, punk is a queer core, a call to the multi-trajectorized sex”³⁴

Lorna is a song by 7 Year Bitch which openly declares ‘girl love’:
“She made love she didn’t get laid x2

Well she was hot A hot girl, hot night Yeh, she was hot All right

Lyin' fucked up on the floor
She put her head into the pain x2
Then she pulled back the bloody remains

Well she was hot A hot girl hot night

Yeah she as hot Well all right”

Rebel girl is also a tale of lesbian obsession [“Rebel girl, rebel girl, you are the queen of my world, I think I wanna take you home, I wanna try on your clothes, uh”]. It celebrates female independence and empowerment, whilst also revelling in riot grrrls outsidersness in the face of mainstream society [i.e. “That girl thinks she’s the queen of the neighbourhood/ She’s got the hottest tank in town /That girl she holds her head up so high/ I think I wanna be her best friend yeah... They say she’s a dyke but I know she is my best friend yeh”]

Riot Grrrl and live performance

Riot Grrrl performers saw performance as a medium to convey their feminist principles through social action.

In 1991 Bratmobile organised the international underground pop festival in collaboration with K records. At this festival female musicians performed, grrrl zines were distributed and female audience members collectively countered instances of sexism³⁵. The band explain:

“Girls night will always be precious to us because, believe it or not, it was the first time we saw women stand on a stage as though they truly belonged there. The first time we had ever heard the voice of a sister proudly singing the rage so shamefully locked in my own heart. Until girl’s night, we never knew that punk rock was anything but a phallic extension of the white middle class males frustrations”³⁶

Artists and bands encouraged participation through disseminating information at gigs. Mambo Taxi famously gave away free chords sheets of their songs at performances (so girls could play along with the records). They even produced and disseminated a free 9-page booklet on how to put up a successful gig.³⁷ These actions directly emulated the grass roots philosophy of post punk bands such as ‘The Raincoats’ who distributed ‘Rock against Sexism’ pamphlets at their shows.

Bikini kill and Huggy Bear at there shows offered hand-outs requesting girls and woman stand near the front of the stage rather than toward the back. Nicci from Huggy Bear explains:

“The basic precepts of the tour, that women should be encouraged to take front of stage, and that violent moshing and the groping of girls by boys was unwanted were reacted to hysterically straight away”³⁸

This was an issue that needed correcting as in the past girls were often crowded out of the pit due to their smaller size weight which puts them at a disadvantage. Before the mosh pit was traditionally associated with adolescent boy’s slam dancing and pogoing a space traditionally reserved for male bonding. Girls for fear of being injured or groped girls would often stand at the back for reasons of safety while boys had all the fun.³⁹

Many male music fans were incensed by the riot grrrls. One male Hardcore fan R.S wrote the following insults in reply to a female review of a bikini kill gig:

“As a direct result of her femaleness Kim Neely cannot possibly comprehend what moshing [skanking slamming] is all about. Moshing is not a feminine activity but a chance for a man to reach into himself grab all of the anger and hatred that has built up and bash everybody around over the head with it. Woman have their own ways of dealing with stress”⁴⁰

Huggy bear also stated the importance of the front of the stage that claimed in there handout that the “front of stage excluded woman due to violence of slam dancing or potential for harrasment”⁴¹.

They continue:

“I really want to look at female faces while I perform I want her to know that she is included in this show that what we are doing is for her to criticize / laugh at / be inspired by / hate whatever ”⁴²

These provocation often meant that shows were regularly stopped and house lights brought up when male audience members refused to move to the back or vocalised their irritation, as a result banter between band and audience became a regular part of show.⁴³ What Huggy Bear proposed was that gigs should be viewed in a gendered way and the venue was “a place for debate rather than passive viewing requesting people change their viewing

habits”⁵¹.”They totally ignored the customs usually employed in maintaining distance between performer and audience”⁴⁴.

Nicci below describes one of the confrontations at a previous gig:

“There was a couple of guys on the stairs that were being real jerks. The reason I was saying ‘come up closer’ was because I noticed that they started pushing into people and stuff. So I was like “oh, we’ll have the ladies step up a few steps and they can do their little thing right there and leave us alone” and then I could like get some energy...There was this one boy and it was a similar incident about three or four in. He started pushing very small girls who were at the front of the stage. Not just like dancing and being like rather too elbow like. He was being just like a brat and pushing them on the shoulders and barging into them and stuff. So we stopped the song and made him look stupid. Which is what we always try to do. We always try to make it silly, so it doesn’t get too ugly. Cause then everyone has a bad time. They think that we should play. We always get that. We are trying to save people from getting pushed around in the front and they’re going ‘just play some music, you know’ ‘quit the political thing!”⁴⁵

However sometimes the confrontation backfired on Huggy bear:

“In Wales, no one complied and a riot ended the gig. At another gig, Jo (the bass player) was hit”.⁴⁶

Whenever there was trouble [i.e. harassment] at a Huggy Bear gig initiators were always called upon, “casualties/victims rather than being ignored were often given a microphone to voice their anger”⁴⁷.

Tobi, the drummer of Bikini Kill was asked in January 1995:

“Q: Do you feel awkward because Kathleen is so confrontational?

A: Sometimes, because some of the guys get really violent and sometimes that can

be scary.”⁴⁸

For Bikini Kill playing live challenged notions of female display. Bikini kill wrote emotionally charged words such as ‘slut’ across their arms and midriff in marker pen which was designed to pre-

empt “any derogatory term which might be directed at them”⁴⁹ These slogans “publicly confronted the viewer with the very terms designed to prohibit female display and curtail sexual activity”⁵⁰ This mode of exhibition allowed for “particular responses to hecklers and played with codes of exhibition”⁵¹ These slogans could also be seen as a feminist statement against 70’s victim feminism, proclaiming a new self-conscious ironic approach to reconstructing gender roles. The ironically feminine dress codes [bunched hair slides patterned dresses] juxtaposed with words such as ‘Whore’ had clear semiotic intentions⁵². Through adorning their bodies with slogans such as ‘slut’ Riot Grrrl also highlighted the abuses of girls bodies by the media and thus turned gaze “into an aggressive act”⁵³.

As the guitarist from Jane Goes Shopping explains:

“The minute that you are female fronting a rock band, everybody looks at you sexually. Everybody takes a sexual perspective: do you fancy her or do you not?”⁵⁴.

This mentality associated with women and the stage has been present throughout the history of music, in the 1600s women performers/singers were often looked down upon by the public as it was considered if you were being payed to perform to the public that you were an undignified women, women performers were often associated with prostitution.

Below Kathleen contemplates the performative male gaze:

“Why yes, I feel like I'm being gawked at live. Part of the thing that is really weird for me is that I used to be an exotic dancer. Sometimes there’s not really that much of a difference between playing in a punk band and being a stripper (except that in a band I have my clothes on). A lot of men come to a gig with the same exact attitudes that have at a strip bar. They think, oh, it’s a girl band we’ll go and watch her bum and tits or something like that. They don’t think of us as performers, they just think of us like seals that jump through hoops, that have tits, like the guys tonight saying ‘take your clothes off.’”⁵⁵

In another interview Kathleen discusses the similarities between the gaze of pornography and the gaze of live performance:

“Sounds like really pornographic doesn't it? I mean there are a lot of similar elements, like object identification, commodification and money exchange”⁵⁶

Nicci recalls how threatened many of the men felt in the audience at their shows:

“In England probably the whole riot grrrl thing gained some attention to a lot of boys...it was obvious they just felt threatened and felt that they were going to be left out of the next big thing. In terms of currency of English music phenomena goes. So any show were a band of girls who were very vocal about being girls in a band, there would be boys who would try to act upon and be rude to them. And try to disrupt them and things. They don't like being humiliated anyway, it seems like any disruption at a show I saw, the antagonists were always quickly put to rights and just ended up looking stupid, so they didn't gain anything”⁵⁷

In ‘Girl Germs’ fanzine Bratmobile and 7 Year Bitch explain how their performances have played an important part in helping men re-think musical gender stereotypes:

“We are helping open [male audience members] minds...they say like ‘oh wow your women and you can play like’, and we say ‘No shit’...just think of all the boy bands we sit through”⁵⁸

Fugazi were an all-male Hardcore band that were ‘educated’ by the Riot Grrrl movement. During the 90's they incorporated Riot Grrrl style gender interventions into their live set, Ian MacKaye explains:

“A group of women became aware of a man who had harassed and date raped a number of woman in the area. In response they composed a short written account of the man's behaviour to which they added a short explanation on date rape and advice of what to do if you have experienced this crime. One woman on receiving this handout said she'd been raped. Fugazi's Ian MacKaye in the middle of playing a song about street harassment stopped to talk of the problems faced by victims of sexual aggression – the woman sang the close of song by invitation. This was one case where male Hardcore helped a rape survivor articulate distress against her attacker.”⁵⁹

Hanna notes that some men were less sincere in adopting Riot Grrrl values:

“Okay all of a sudden at our shows, all the guys were Spitboy shirts and you know they never even listen to the band, but they were there Spitboy or their rock for choice shirt, or like their feminist T-shirt to our gig...to show us that they’re like...do you know what I mean? They’re on their best behaviour around us and that’s really annoying cos I’d rather people were just real. That’s the kind of behaviour that’s really annoying”⁶⁰

Conclusion

By speaking and singing to the women in the audience – by prioritising them – feminist bands have challenged the dominance of men at gigs.⁶¹ If Riot Grrrl did achieve one thing it encouraged more girls to actively go to gigs, it also reintroduced the 70’s tradition of female only gigs where women have the first and last say.⁶²

Despite media blackouts and the potential for misrepresentation and misunderstanding Riot Grrrl has remained true to its original vision and cause. Many of the original bands have dissolved but the spirit of the movement remains un-compromised and pure.

The genre has inspired a whole new generation of women to fight for their rights and make revolutionary music. Exhibitions and publications such as ‘Her Noise’ and ‘The Gendering of Music Technology’ suggest that feminists are using Riot Grrrl aesthetics to critique Electronic Music. This genre is currently over-subscribed by men (and suffering from a lack of active female role models). In 2015 Riot Grrrl’s incendiary influence can be felt heavily in the music of The Gossip, Chicks on Speed, Peaches and Atari Teenage Riot (to name but a few).

Feminism has gone viral since I drafted this essay in 2002. Many of my references are dated and the debate has moved on. Blogging and social media has encouraged women to reveal injustices and publicly speak out against male oppression in ways that were unforeseen 13 years ago.

The bravery of musical activists like Pussy Riot has been a testament to the anarchistic spirit that women have shown against oppressive male patriarchy.

Bratmobile are optimistic about the legacy of the Riot Grrrl movement:

“I don’t think the Riot Grrrl tag has ever been a hindrance. It’s cool to know that there’s some sort of network or community- however vague or broken up at this point- of girls who are interested in what we’re doing. I’m interested in what they’re doing too! I still don’t know exactly what to think of Riot Grrrl maybe because it was never exactly one thing or agenda. The term itself seems a bit dated, but I will always support the idea of girls organising .I think if we ended up affecting even one girl positively, no matter how convoluted the message then that’s a good thing.”⁶³

Huggy Bear once claimed that ‘revolution fails’. Perhaps Huggy Bears Punk Prayers have finally be answered through the courageous actions of Pussy Riot- who have inspired a whole new generation of rebel girls to define new radical feminist utopias.

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