

RIOT GRRRL: THE HISTORY AND FUTURE OF ANGRY WOMEN

By: Madi Gubser

Riot Grrrl is a feminist movement that involves creating music, zines, and art related to issues women, non-binary, and transwomen face such as abuse, rape, eating disorders, sexuality, and sexism. It also strives to move women to the forefront of the punk scene, since female musicians often were ignored and not taken seriously. Unfair treatment was commonplace at punk shows, where women felt unsafe due to the violent moshing and sexual harassment from male attendees. Riot Grrrl isn't just a musical movement, though; it calls for women to be taken seriously in any field and calls out the way the world so frequently diminishes women. There's a good chance that you've heard of the song "Smells like Teen Spirit" by the band Nirvana, but the chance that you have heard the song "Rebel Girl" by Bikini Kill (BK) is extremely low, comparatively, even if you're familiar with 90's grunge or punk. Bikini Kill was a popular Riot Grrrl band from Olympia, Washington, the same place Kurt Cobain started out with his band. The lead singer of the band BK is Kathleen Hanna, a well known feminist figure who has also been in bands such as Le Tigre and The Julie Ruin. One night after Kurt and Kathleen

had been hanging out together, Kathleen wrote "KURT SMELLS LIKE TEEN SPIRIT" on his wall, making fun of the popular teen-gear deodorant at the time. Cobain later called her and asked if he could use the phrase as a song title and Hanna gave him the green light. Kurt had also been dating Tobi Vail, the drummer of Bikini Kill during that time. He was a huge supporter of the band and was inspired by the feminist punk scene (The Punk Singer, 2013). This is just one of the many classic examples of a male punk band succeeding, but their female counterparts whom they were inspired by, not getting their share of the spotlight. This was also seen in the 1970's, the "golden-age of punk," with the infamous poster boys known as The Sex Pistols being one of the most famous punk bands of that era. Again, woman fronted/all girl bands such as The Runaways, Patti Smith, The Pretenders, and The Slits, never got the same amount of attention as the male punk bands such as the Ramones, The Clash, and Black Flag.

Why was it that women in punk weren't given the same opportunities as male punk



Pair of four fists with "RIOT GRRRL" written on hands

bands? Well, simply put, they weren't taken seriously. Women were often unfairly and closely criticized in comparison to men, being told that they couldn't play their instruments as well as men – or worse, at all. There was a massive focus on their looks, which were frustratingly important in their success and even sometimes used against them, with statements such as "You're too pretty to be punk." Furthermore, girl bands were seen as just that, girl bands, that only girls should listen to. This warranted a grossly common response along the lines of: "Ugh! Girls make up the majority of this audience? This band must suck!" Women writing and singing lyrics about their experience was seen as "too feminine" and "too feminist", but a male's experience is somehow more universal and acceptable to hear about, over and over and over again.

Other factors alienated and pushed away women from the punk scene, such as the culture of punk and unsafe conditions at shows. The violence that occurred in the mosh pits of these shows left women who dared to step in with broken bones and bruises, or they were simply shoved to the side and called the “coat hangers” (referring to the fact that boys would throw their coats on women as they joined into the pit). Sexual harassment was also common at punk shows, wandering hands and even full-blown rape was prominent in the scene, causing women to never attend a punk show again. Riot Grrrl began in the early 90’s as a direct “fuck you” to traditional punk culture, calling girls to the front of shows

and demanding respect. Although it’s difficult to name exactly the people, places, and dates that got the movement started, its beginnings are often traced back to Washington DC. The “OG” Riot Grrrl bands are generally considered to be Bikini Kill, Bratmobile, and Heavens to Betsy. Even though there was a huge surge of girl bands in the 90’s, they seldom referred to themselves as a Riot Grrrl bands even if they claimed to be inspired by

the movement (Girls to the Front: the True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution, 2010). The hesitation to label themselves might be due to the fact that it was common to dislike feminine sounding bands/subjects in punk. Riot Grrrls, however, embraced all things feminine without fear or doubt. They wrote about their traumatic experiences, womanhood/girlhood, sexuality, hopes and dreams, lyrics, feminist art, and about anything and everything girl, in zines. Zines are self-made, self-published magazines about anything someone’s a fan of. Zines

first gained popularity in the 70’s punk scene to talk about bands and express one’s views on said band. In the 90’s this tradition carried on but with a feminist twist. The Riot Grrrls passed their zines out at shows (usually BK and Bratmobile) talking about anything from feminist theory to race and class issues within the scene “Subcultures and Sociology”). They also toyed with many revolutionary anthems and speeches. Phrases such as “Revolution Girl Style Now” and “riot don’t diet” surrounded by doodled hearts and swirls were sprinkled in between pages

In the world we live in today, finding people who’re interested in music, tv shows, comics, and pretty

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much anything else we’re interested in is extremely easy, thanks to the internet, but the grrrls didn’t have access to this level of exposure in the 90’s. Though they had tried making connections by making their own zines which were notoriously not well distributed, it was difficult to keep people in-the-know on feminist news, conventions, and meet-ups through such

measures. People at that time got their information on Riot Grrrl through magazines which more often than not consisted of sensationalized stories and bashing. Riot Grrrl was largely considered dead by the late 90’s and not spoken about by the media again until the early 2010’s. This may be correlated to the “20 year cycle of nostalgia” that was everywhere at this time, with popular 90’s fashion coming back into style as well. However, the articles that kept popping up about the movement weren’t negative; in fact, they were praising the movement and mentioning the

possible revival of it. A recent article by the LA Times reviewing Bikini Kill's reunion says that, "You can understand why the pioneers of riot grrrl — artist-activists committed to claiming space for women in music — chose the #MeToo moment to reunite." Some may just pass this off as the aforementioned cycle of nostalgia, but the actions taken by this generation's riot grrrls precede that. You can find numerous girl bands making feminist songs on Spotify, Bandcamp, and iTunes. Some riot grrrl bands that are helping revive the movement and possibly starting their own are The Regrettes, Cherry Glazerr, and The Coathangers.

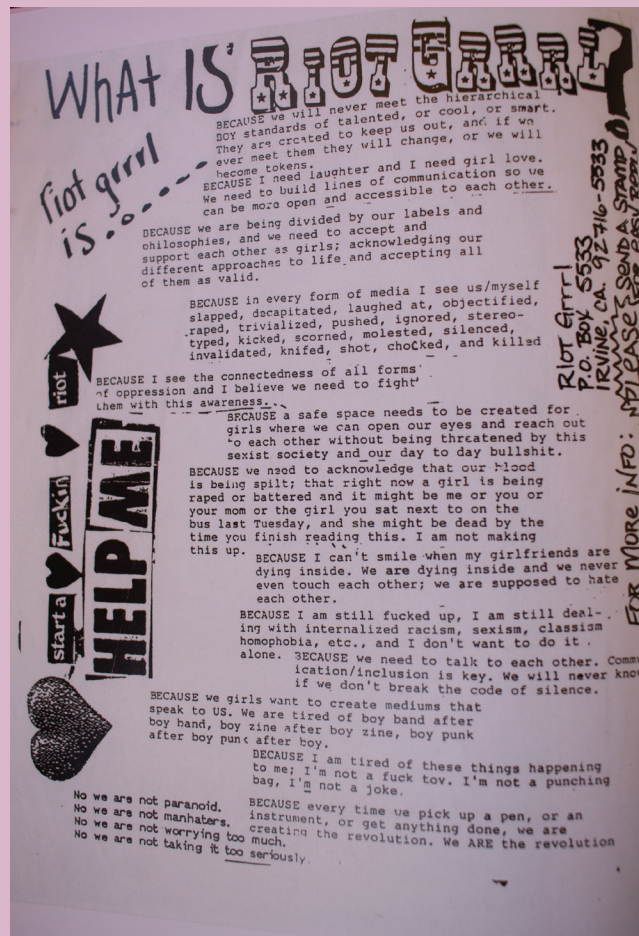
Not just music is being produced by Riot Grrrls, though; you can find many feminist DIY artists that sell their products on self-made websites or through Etsy. Their art is reminiscent of the 90's scene with punk patches, paintings, and buttons spreading girl power. One of the most popular Riot Grrrl bands has also returned! Bikini Kill has regrouped and played a show for the first time in 22 years on April 25th, 2019. I attended their show on April 26th in Los Angeles with my fellow riot grrrl friend, Cameron Semple. Even though Cameron has not been apart of the scene for long, she's immersed herself in it by listening to riot grrrl bands and joining as the other guitarist in the Mountain View based band

Feminoid. The RG inspired band Feminoid is a band I'm currently in as well. When asked if RG had inspired her in anyway, she replied, "I didn't get into a lot of riot grrrl bands until recently though it has influenced the way I dress and generally present myself. It's also made me more comfortable about how I express myself and helped me find other friends." This seems to be a common response among Riot Grrrls, including myself. Finding this movement and Bikini Kill at 12 changed my life in similar ways, it was the first time that I felt empowered to be

myself unapologetically. And when I asked Jehan Shemesh, the singer of Feminoid if RG had inspired them, they replied, "Yes! It inspires me every day. Every time I get out of bed I'm like, 'I get to be whatever the fuck I want to be and no one can stop me,' and that's honestly an awesome feeling I wish others could feel more often. It also inspires me to talk about my problems to others and express myself through my riot grrrl-inspired band." RG has a very powerful effect on the way girls and non-binary people perceive themselves. This makes sense considering its goals mainly involve empowering

and supporting women and nonbinary people. With older feminist bands like Bikini Kill, Sleater Kinney, and L7 reuniting, more than only riot grrrls are left wondering if the movement is reemerging. I asked Sara if she'd been curious about what all these regroupings meant for RG, to which she replied: "I think their regrouping is a sign that the issues and feelings that motivated RG are still very much with us today. The fact that tickets to Bikini Kill's shows could all sell out so quickly makes it clear that there's still a real hunger among people—teenagers, 20 somethings, and aging Gen Xers like myself (!)—for the feelings of feminist rage, bold disclosure, and communal celebration that we associate with Bikini Kill's music."

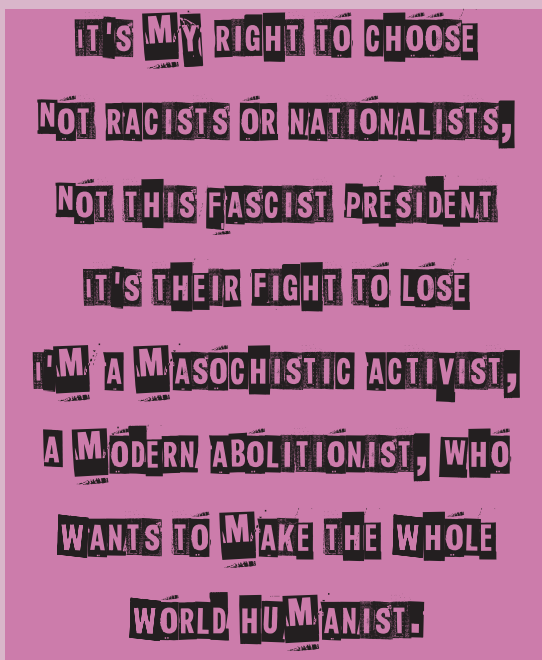
But has anything changed within the punk scene since the legendary feminist bands of the 90's? The answer is: A little bit, but not enough. When I asked Shemesh about whether or not women are represented enough in punk music today, they had this to say: I honestly don't think there is enough women representation in the punk scene—a lot of time women are seen as "not punk enough" or that they're just trying to get attention by labeling themselves as punk. A lot of what I've seen in the scene is that it's very male/masculine dominant and women punk musicians



Example of a feminist zine from "The Riot Grrrl Collection"

are scrutinized constantly about every single thing. There still seems to be the problem of women in punk being able to receive the same attention as male punk bands get. Semple also noticed this lack of representation: "It can be hard to find female punk bands and the ones that are out there aren't usually well known. All of the popular punk bands are made up of guys and generally the songs oversexualize women." In the late 2010's we are seeing feminist band after feminist band forming all across America, so even if it's not RG coming back, it may just be her angrier sister-movement forming. In the era of #MeToo and Trump's presidency it's no wonder grrrls are getting angry and wanting to speak up, Bad/Cop Bad/Cop is one example of a newer feminist punk band fighting against sexism in the 2010's, with their song "Womanarchist" proclaiming,

The members of Bad/Cop Bad/Cop are singing about a topic that feminist bands have also sung and protested since the 80's, reproductive rights. The



Trump administration is constantly trying to restrict Title X and establish a gag-rule preventing doctors from suggesting an abortion as an option for their patients. Just a year after Trump's inauguration The National Abortion Federation found that incidents of obstruction doubled, trespassing tripled, death threats/harm threats doubled and noted a continual "increase in targeted hate mail/harassing phones calls, clinic invasions, and had the first bombing attempt in many years [at abortion clinics]." It seems as if little has changed on the subject of reproductive rights, the song "Fallopian Rhapsody"

by the Lunachicks is just as culturally important as it was when the song was first released in 1996. With white nationalists, religious extremists, and the alt-right feeling more comfortable than ever to spread their hate, it's not just a difficult time to be a woman, but to be any minority group. In 2017, the Human Rights Campaign found that The FBI reported that anti-Black hate crimes increased by 16 percent, from 1,739 incidents in 2016 to 2,013 incidents in 2017. Hate crimes targeting Black people represented 28 percent of all reported hate crimes in 2017. Every other racial and ethnic group also saw increases in the number of reported hate crimes in 2017. Additionally, hate crimes motivated by anti-religious bias increased 23 percent, largely driven by a 37 percent increase in anti-Jewish hate crimes, which constituted the majority of religion motivated hate crimes. Hate crimes motivated by bias against people with disabilities increased by a disturbing 66 percent and hate crimes motivated by gender bias increased by 48 percent ("New FBI Statistics").

In conclusion, I believe not only Riot Grrrl but the RG inspired-movement currently fostering in the punk scene is necessary in today's world. RG is about helping everyone, but especially those less privileged. Now more than ever we need women and people of color joining the punk scene, writing protest songs and fighting back against any and all detractors who threaten our space in this world. To all grrrls and nonbinary people reading this, I encourage you to pick up a guitar, bass, drumsticks, and/or a microphone and start writing. What you have to say is important, the world benefits from hearing your perspective. In the words of Kathleen Hanna, "BECAUSE I believe with my wholeheartmindbody that girls constitute a revolutionary soul force that can, and will change the world for real." (Riot Grrrl Manifesto)



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Madi Gubser has been interested in Riot Grrrl since the age of 12, memorizing Bikini Kill's entire discography and dreaming about being in a grrrl band that takes over the world. She is also currently involved with the Mountain View based band Feminoid, playing guitar and writing lyrics. She attends Freestyle Academy as a Design student, practicing photography, website making, and is learning numerous Adobe Applications such as Photoshop, Illustrator, and InDesign. She has been researching Riot Grrrl for over 4 years, watching documentaries and collecting books on the subject.

