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Rebel Grrls in the Classroom:
Vocality, Empowerment and Feminist Politics at Rock and Roll Schools for Girls

Rock music can serve as a feminist activist tool. Combining music education with feminist and alternative approaches to pedagogy, I will examine how the growing phenomenon of rock and roll schools for girls provides girls and young women with musical skills that enable them to articulate empowered voices. I will also be drawing on interviews conducted with girls who participated in a rock and roll workshop that I facilitated in January, 2007, in Kitchener, Ontario, Canada. Rock and roll schools for girls developed out of the Riot Grrl movement of the early 1990s, and have appeared in cities across North America. Riot Grrls fused music and politics, seeking to provide more opportunities in rock music for women and other marginalized groups. Rock schools for girls, which often take the form of summer camps or after-school programs aim to teach young women rock music skills, including production, writing and performance, while creating environments in which collaboration and empowerment are encouraged. The approach to pedagogy that informs these programs stems from a perspective that views girl-focused education as necessary. Rather than encouraging essentialist divisions between the sexes, girl-focused education recognizes that girls and boys are socialized and socially constructed differently, and thus thrive in different learning environments. As I will discuss later, girl-focused education provides a safe space in which girls can express themselves. It is also important to acknowledge that the concept of girlhood should not be viewed as a fixed category. Each young woman's experience of girlhood will vary depending on factors including race, ethnicity, class, ability and sexual orientation, and although I do not have the time to address these complex issues here, they have nonetheless informed this work.

Women and girls have been limited in our ability to participate in the production of popular musics. While women have always participated to some extent in the production of rock and roll, women's contributions are often overlooked or are limited to specifically gendered roles. The girls participating in the rock workshop demonstrated awareness of the fact that women are not typically seen as rock musicians. Sierra, who was twelve, expressed surprise at learning about women rock musicians that she'd never heard of before, even though they were highly skilled musicians. She said that, "men didn't think they could do it (be rock musicians), so, it was kind of interesting that way, because a lot of the time the women were actually better than the men." The girls in the rock workshop also expressed awareness that male and female musicians typically make different kinds of music. Holly, who was nine, observed that "usually you get those screaming songs from boys. Or those really slow boring songs from guys, but you don't really get those fast, happy ones, not screaming, but just upbeat, you usually get that from girls." Looking back to trends in popular music in the 1990s, one can see how the mainstream media contributes to establishing specifically gendered roles for women in music. The Riot Grrls of the early 1990s represented a feminist reaction against sexism in the underground music scene, and was as much a social movement, based around community building and activism, as it was a musical movement. Riot Grrl music is characterized by highly political lyrics and musical technique that sounds loud, brash, and often amateurish and unskilled. While there are women musicians that continue to work within this aesthetic and through this political ideology, mainstream success typically eludes them. The female singer-songwriter boom of the 1990s has often been described as a kind of "quiet grrl" backlash against the riot grrl movement. Maria Raha states that:

when word got out that riot grrrls' affections could not be bought or co-opted easily and the record industry was stumped as to what to do with bands like the Lunachicks,

mainstream music seemed to trip over its own version of the ‘angry girl.’ And out trotted a string of attractive young women armed with guitars and a softer, cleaner feminist bent that tidied up riot grrrl’s grit . . . Riot grrrl’s self-made communities, networks, shows and lifestyles were viewed as ‘antisocial,’ while these more mainstream acts, existing within well-paved social and artistic avenues, were considered new and engaging.¹

Singer-songwriters can thus represent a safe manifestation of women’s voices – women’s voices as expressed through a musical vehicle that makes it appropriate for public consumption by reinscribing normative gender roles and power structures. What is absent is any sign of anger, dissent and real agency, as such expression would violate and subvert traditional notions of femininity. Women in popular music traditionally present traditional narratives of femininity: emotional, quiet, happy and upbeat. In their song *Entertain*, Sleater-Kinney bemoan the proliferation of traditional gender roles and the absence of resistance in mainstream music by women, asking, “Where’s the fuck you? Where’s the black and blue?”²

Given this history and context, teaching young women alternative modes of musical expression, that do not necessarily enforce traditional feminine roles, becomes a means of enabling gender transgression. According to Mavis Bayton, women have been discouraged from participating in rock and punk music because it is a genre that is not “feminine” and encourages masculine traits:

It is difficult to stay ‘feminine’ in a rock band precisely because ‘femininity’ is an artifice: it is assumed that women do not sweat, that their noses do not go red and shiny, and that their hair stays in place . . . The vast majority of bands are male and many actively exclude women. A major preoccupation of young men is establishing their ‘masculinity’. Thus, so-called masculine traits are exaggerated.³

¹ Maria Raha, *Cinderella’s Big Score: Women of the Punk and Indie Underground* (Emeryville: Seal Press, 2005): 224.

² Sleater-Kinney, *The Woods*, Subpop Records, SPCD 670, 2005.

³ Mavis Bayton, “Women and the Electric Guitar,” *Sexing the Groove*, ed. Sheila Whiteley (New York: Routledge, 1997): 40.

Women punk musicians are therefore participating in gender subversion by creating a space for themselves in a masculinized musical genre.

My goal at the rock workshop, however, was not to dictate to the girls how they should seek to subvert gender norms or to tell them what to do but to expose them to modes of expression frequently denied to women, allowing them access to a wide range of musical language through which they could express their own empowered voices, and subvert gender norms in their own, meaningful ways, without feeling inhibited or feeling as though there was a right or wrong way to express themselves. Music can give women an opportunity to sing and play and write songs, thereby expressing not only our physical voices, but also a metaphoric voice through which women are able to express ideas, and become active participants in discursive practices. In *The Laugh of the Medusa*, Helen Cixous explores how writing, specifically of a genre she calls *écriture féminine* can be used by women as a tool through which they can articulate their voices, and reappropriate their bodies. Cixous calls women to write, saying “Write! Writing is for you, you are for you; your body is yours, take it. I know why you haven’t written . . . Because writing is at once too high, too great for you, it’s reserved for the great – that is, for “great men”; and it’s “silly.”⁴ She argues that writing is a masculinist, phallogocentric tradition, and that women need to work with these masculinist tools, but also subvert them, reclaiming writing for themselves.⁵ Rock music occupies a similar position for women as does writing. Traditionally the domain of men, women have had to struggle to be taken seriously as rock musicians. Rock music can provide women with ample opportunity to articulate their voices and thus become empowered. Where Cixous says write, can we not also read “sing” or “play”? And while rock music has been traditionally viewed as an expression of

⁴ Helene Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” *Signs* 1 (1976): 876.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 879.

masculinity, the work of influential women in rock music demonstrates that it, too, can be reclaimed, subverted and used for purposes of empowering women. Riot Grrrls used underground punk music, a historically masculine domain, to deliver feminist messages. Earlier bands, including The Slits and The Raincoats, worked within the masculinist, British punk movement of the 1970s, to create music that communicates feminist messages lyrically, while also using innovative musical techniques to create music that some critics have said “shatter[s] traditional (read: masculine) subjectivity in rock music, using punk’s ideology of passionate amateurism to express feminine possibilities.”⁶ These bands eschewed conventional musical language in favor of their own musical subjectivity, but did so within a patriarchal genre.

One does not, however, need to be a rock star to reclaim rock music for feminist purposes. The girls in the rock workshop did so themselves. During the part of the afternoon where the girls were working on writing their own song, rather than use actual musical chords, the girls made up chords that they liked on their own, based not on any sort of music theory but on what they thought sounded good. Lily, who was twelve, had a lot to say about the process the girls went through when they wrote their song together. She said “I think I like the more creative part of writing songs . . . I think it’s fun to just like mess around with different words and different things that you can do.” By experimenting with sound in this way, the girls were using music to express their own, distinct musical ideas. Inventing their own chords demonstrated that they could move outside of the traditional musical tropes, articulating their own, unique musical voice.

As Cixous’ work on *écriture féminine* indicates, the expression of vocalicity works in tandem with the functions of the body in allowing women and girls to become empowered subjects. The human voice is a function of the human body. Women, however, have been

⁶ Caroline O’Meara, “The Raincoats: Breaking Down Punk Rock’s Masculinities,” Poular Music 22 (2003): 300.

encouraged to distance ourselves from our bodies and become disembodied due to discourses that associate women with the body while coding the body as negative. I spent a part of the workshop teaching some basic vocal technique, which involved talking to the girls about how the body produces sound and how it feels to sing. At the end of the lesson, we all took turns screaming like punk rock stars. The girls learned how to use their bodies to sing and scream in a way that was healthy and not damaging to their bodies, and thus learned about how their bodies can be important tools for communication. It is important that this lesson was learned in an environment where girls did not feel that their bodies were being threatened or watched. According to Michel Foucault, individuals and their bodies are controlled and disciplined through surveillance by a normalizing gaze that discourages deviance.⁷ He says that “the fact of being constantly seen . . . maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection.”⁸ Surveillance thus disciplines the body by creating power relationships in which the person being watched is constantly under the control of the watcher. Women are constantly subject to the masculine gaze. Given that women and girls are already associated with the body, surveying the body results in further subjugation and creates a situation in which actions are monitored. Girls thus may not feel comfortable behaving the way they would like to behave, out of fear that it will result in their bodies and their selves being judged, limiting their ability and willingness to express their voices may be oppressed. In the rock and roll workshop, it was thus essential to avoid situations in which girls would feel that their bodies were being judged. By keeping the workshop a girls-only space, the girls did not experience any of the anxieties they may have felt if boys had been there. Lily spoke about how she often feels uncomfortable around boys, and

⁷ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Random House, 1977): 184.

⁸ Ibid.

her comments address to the idea of being watched and surveyed: “When you’re younger you feel kind of, um, nervous around boys like you can’t be yourself, but when you’re just around the girls when you’re younger, you can kind of do stuff that you won’t necessarily do when you’re around boys (laughs).” Lily’s comments that boys make her nervous reveals the power dynamics that continue to be at play between boys and girls. Girl-only space avoids such power dynamics and allows the girls to learn without that anxiety. By empowering girls in a girls-only space, girls can thus become more self-confident and empowered and better equipped to learn and express themselves in conventional educational settings. In addition, as the workshop facilitator, I did not want the girls to feel as though I was surveying or passing judgment on them. By acting more as a mediator and a colleague than as an instructor, and by allowing the girls to direct their own learning, I managed to avoid a hierarchal situation in which the girls felt the need to defer to me by allowing the impetus for the activities in the workshops come from the girls themselves, which allowed the girls to have an active role in their own learning, contributing further to their ability to articulate empowered voices. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Friere offers a critique of traditional modes of education, saying that it is based on narration and repetition on the part of the teacher and memorization on the part of the student. This technique turns students “into ‘receptacles’ to be ‘filled’ by the teacher. The more completely she fills the receptacles, the better a teacher she is. The more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be filled, the better students they are.”⁹ Friere argues that this form of education robs students of agency because they are not allowed to play an active role in the educational process and their voices are silenced because they are not invited to take part in discourse. In reaction to traditional systems of education, Friere proposes a pedagogy that seeks

⁹ Paulo Friere, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (London: Continuum, 1970). [Available on World Wide Web], cited February 21, 2007. <<http://www.marxists.org/subject/education/freire/pedagogy/index.htm>>.

to liberate marginalized or oppressed peoples by engaging in dialogue and by seeing education as a mutual process in which both student and teacher play an active role, and have equal opportunity to speak, be heard and articulate a voice. Friere says that teachers must be prepared to learn from their students, resulting in a breakdown of hierarchical relationships and in dialogue. This was the type of environment that I strove to create in the Rock and Roll workshop.

At the end of the rock school workshop, the girls presented a concert for their family and friends. In the span of a day-long workshop, they learned basic guitar, drums, bass and vocal technique skills; talked about and learned about important women musicians; learned how to play two songs and wrote an original song as a band; and planned and staged a concert. The feedback I received from the girls and their families was very positive and it was great to see the girls, who had never played in a band before, get up and put on a confident, fun performance for their families and friends. Rock and roll schools for girls illustrate that music education can be an influential and important activist tool. Music is a medium that can be used to communicate marginalized voices, and by using alternative approaches to pedagogy, it can be used by feminist educators as a means for empowering young women and equipping them with the skills and confidence to express their voices.

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