

a personal account of being a lady punk by Rachel K.

I am a 25 year old woman. I am also a punk rocker, a vegan, a bisexual, a feminist and we are all greater than this sum of our parts, but some of the above are reasons for who I am and my life experience. Like last night at a party I met someone who found words limiting, especially words like "Vegan", etc, that is labels that we choose or are thrust upon us, because to some degree you are going to at some point limit yourself, because you'll think "Well I'm a Vegan, that means I can't do this", instead of just thinking, "I don't want to do that, because I don't want to do that". A valid philosophical point, but as I know words are only short hand, and my aim is to at least approximate communication with others, I guess I don't really have the option but to use words to "label" myself. I know for a fact that a lot of the experiences that shaped me as a person are directly related to the fact that I am female. I never chose that definition but its something that I will always have to live with, and that means living with other people's negative and positive interpretations and assumptions of what that being female means.

Anto asked me to write for this here zine on account of him knowing about a zine I help put together (Fast Connection) and that I co-run an underground D.I.Y. record label (Slampt) and I'm in a band (Red Monkey) and I'm kind of outspoken about the ladies being involved in culture. So he wanted me to write about the whole thing of women in music, etc, cos he felt that no one was saying anything about it in Loserdom. I always find that the best way to talk about issues is from personal experience, so I'm going to outline some of the how and why of my involvement in music, and some reasons I think some women are not actively involved in the creation of music.

As far as my history as a girl-into-music goes it's pretty straight forward.

I was lucky. My mum raised me with loads of feminist ideals. I knew from an early age that there was no reason for me (Being female) to not do anything I wanted to do. It would be up to me to work hard at making my dreams reality, but I had the support of my family behind me (mostly). But I was lucky. Although I was as shit scared of the world as almost anyone, I had a firm belief in my own worth as a person. Not greater than anyone else, but equal to.



finding an outlet for their burgeoning sexuality in a way that has been seen as socially acceptable since the days of the Beatles (i.e. consumerising their sexuality into harmless spending rather than acting on their impulses and causing mayhem). But of course with my background, of my mum playing me Maddy Prior songs and explaining how women were oppressed by men, it was going to be unlikely that I would be a good unquestioning consumer of pop idols. But still there was something about music that made alot of immediate sense to me. It could articulate feelings, generate complete utopic visions of new worlds, question the whole fabric of society. Music can seem to do anything. Music is a safe place and a very dangerous place to be.

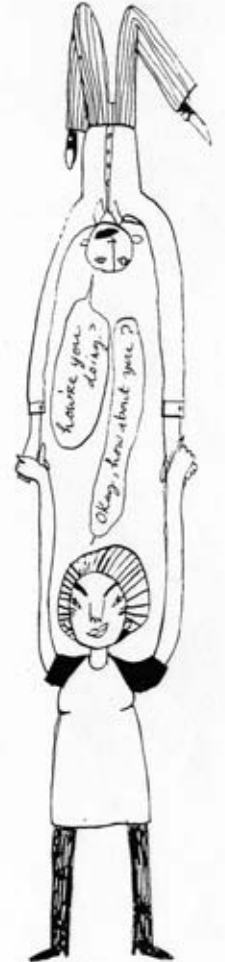
So I got into the Housemartins. Socialism and pop and spotty 'deep' boys, nice combination for a girl raised on socially aware culture. Then it was a short step to my immersion in indie pop, which in the mid eighties actually was "independent" of finance from major labels. The bands I was into, The Pastels, Talulah Gosh, The Smiths played pop tunes which were accessible enough to my teenage ears, but also fucked around with gender identity. These were my heroes, introspective, androgynous, and geeky. I could relate to that.

Then I was really into fanzines, cos the music press was so anti-everything I thought had an ounce of soul.

A lot of the zines I was reading discussed gender or socioeconomic politics, particularly "Are You Scared To Get Happy?" and the Sarah label's zines. So I myself thought of this as an indigenous part of what I understood to be Independent music. And when I started doing zines of my own, spurred on with vague notions of "well if no-one else is going to write about bands and talk about life in a way I can relate to, I'M going to do it". And all the people who said my zine was shit, or that I was naive just spurred me harder. All my insecurities got directed into building a facade (and later, a reality) of self belief.



So then I get to University, and I'm still doing zines. And the music I'm into is like The Breeders or P.J. Harvey or My Bloody Valentine, which is cool, I like it, but there's something missing from it. Yeah, alot of it is made by women, which is an unconscious choice of mine, but it's not as political as I want it to be. Things are not visionary enough. Okay, so this is what we are,



what we experience as women in a patriarchy, where are we going to go now? What can we do to make shit change?

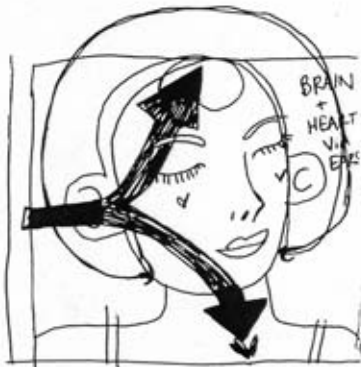
So I'm lucky and I discover this band Beat Happening, a primitive pop band, from Olympia USA. They're on this label K and I reckon that that might be a good place for me to start looking for something new. And inadvertently I discover Riot girl through Bikini Kill/ Bratmobile/ Heavens to Betsy etc. During this time I'd been learning to play the bass guitar. Cos the music made by these bands was totally like "This music is great, its primitive, it means alot to me, it sounds like it's going to be easy to play and I want something like that happening RIGHT HERE, NOW!". Then Huggy Bear happened in the UK. This band was so much what I'd been looking for. A riot, for girls. Political, but totally alive. Influenced by sassy soul music, but totally punk. And they discussed gender politics and socio-economics! So that was it, that was the reassurance that I'd needed, without even knowing it.

I started taking myself seriously. And the band I was in at the time (Pussycat Thrash), which perhaps by many standards "couldn't really play" but had heaps of attitude, alot to say and it's own style (is that punk?) started getting better and better and more and more full of self belief. What better incentive to learn to play other than being in a band that you believe in? People would say we were shit, but they were all really boring musos, or sound men, or boy's who'd been playing guitar for years, and wouldn't know about punk or soul if it hit them in the face, cos they thought "good" music was quantified by how many notes you could play. Duh.

Right now I'm in a band (Red Monkey) that's probably quite "technically good", but not show offy. We're dedicated to doing things independently. We're interested in politics, but try to relate this to real life. We think we've got soul and we think we're punk. We're happy, and I'm a woman in a band, but can't speak for all women in bands ever. This is my personal experience.

Other male musicians talk to the guys in the band about who they admired musically, I get told I'm glamorous by these same men, which is dull and misses the point utterly (I'm not interested in "glamour" anyway). I get to meet some really cool ladies though and discuss feminist culture etc, with them.

But so something can be deduced from this train of events. I would say from experience and observation that generally girls and women, because of their implicit socialisation, see themselves as consumers (i.e. passive) in society. In my case it took two things to overcome this, the fact that my mum was good enough to explain to me about what feminism really meant (women having the potential to be equal, but different to men in society if they want to be) from a very early age, so I believed in what I myself was doing and didn't put my pride into being only proud of what my brother, father, boyfriend etc. was doing. The other thing that was instrumental in me becoming an active musician was seeing and hearing other female musicians. Riot Girl in particular had a big effect on me



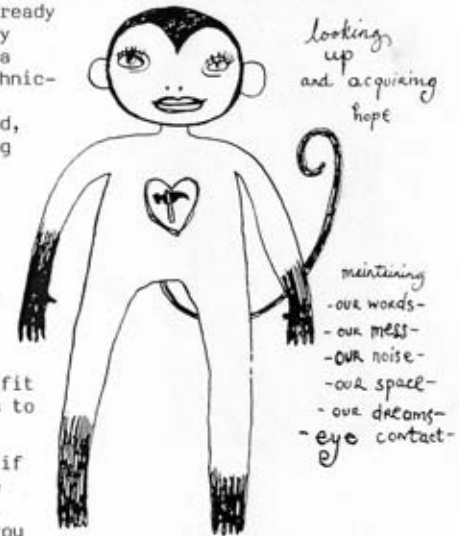
a potential musician from quite an early age. HE is much more likely than a girl to get a electric guitar when he's a teenager, because the girl who sees the band sees no musicians that are female up on stage to identify with. (Also quite often parents will try to dissuade girls from doing something as "unrespectable" as being in a band, it's just for some unlogical reason less desirable for girls to do that.) If the girl is bright and reasonably secure in herself it may take her a few years before she has become conscious enough of this equasion to actually consider becoming a musician. In the time it takes her to become aware of her conditioning, her male peers have already learnt how to play the guitar to a fairly technical level. So she's starting from a point where she sees herself as less technically good as other musicians, which is a point where it's easy to get discouraged, especially if other musicians are telling her how great some piece of music is because of its technicality, and not how much it means to them emotionally, or politically.

No women on stage acts as an implicit NO to would be female musicians, because everyone is struggling for some kind of identity (especially teenagers), and what does that mean to your gender identity, and the fact that you want to fit into society, if you're a girl who wants to be also make music?

Okay so that's some of the reasons that if you're female you're not so likely to be in a band. If you're male and think that there could be more women in bands, do you understand it a bit better now? This is not going to be the case for all women of course, (just as not all men are bastards) but it generally holds true.

But I think the trick is, now we've realised what's been going on, is to move forwards. Or in any fucking direction we want to. Like another reason that Riot Girl was so useful to me was that it was about a support network for girls interested in creating music. If you have other girls around you saying "Yeah it's going to be difficult, but we can do it" then that creates a safe environment for you to fuck up your barchords, cos we all need time and space to learn how to do stuff.

because it made making effective music look easy. If you are a female and are surrounded by (male) musicians who tend to harp on about how great x band is because of how technically perfect the guitar playing is you are going to feel like playing the guitar is a difficult thing to do, and more than likely be put off. There's so many points that come out of this simple equasion. The fact that when growing up, if a teenage boy likes popular music, he can easily identify with those playing it, because they are male, and thus see himself as





When you start learning anything it can be a slow process to getting really good at it. But starting to learn how to do it is the hardest part. If you really don't want to do it, don't. You're not invalid as a human being if you can't play guitar. But if you're really into music, and can get your hands on an instrument, you have the potential to be an amazing musician. I sometimes think, well this is obvious, maybe it's too patronising to say it, but then I think of how easily I was disheartened from taking myself seriously as a musician, and I had everything on my side. And even though I had male musician friends around me who were nice enough and encouraging, it didn't mean nearly so much as the implicit or overt encouragement I got from the women I knew. Because other females trying to create music knew exactly what stupid shit I had to deal with at each gig, in the guitar shop, when I felt really moved by some piece of music and some particularly dumb male would try to invalidate that by saying, "but it's so technically simple, it's not worth as much as THIS...".



And anyway, sometimes obvious stuff needs to be said to get some action happening. Cos we need more women up there on stage telling us it's okay to actually DO things, rather than consume things. We all need to see all the varieties and possibilities of what women can be. We need to not just see the limitations placed on us, by society, by our parents, by men, by ourselves. Every stage is ours for the taking (or sharing). We have no right to moan unless we at least try to do something about the situation.

If you would like to write to me or get my fanzine or find out more about Slampt or the bands I've been involved in, you can either wait till I'm over in Ireland touring with Red Monkey

(All drawings by Rachel, taken from various Slampt stuff.)



*The Kabin Boy
in Charles Bar,
22nd June '97.*