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Rebel Girls: Feminist Punk for a New Generation

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**REBEL GIRLS: FEMINIST PUNK FOR A
NEW GENERATION**

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

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INTRODUCTION

In my first year at Scripps College, I wrote a paper about the Riot Grrrl movement of the 1990s. This was a loose collection of musicians, writers, and fans who fused punk culture with Third Wave¹ feminist activism. Since then, as I have been continuing to think about Riot Grrrl, I have repeatedly encountered discourses about the movement that I find problematic, because they idolize Riot Grrrl in a way that ignores the contributions of other artists. In scholarly literature, blogs, magazines, and even casual personal interactions, I see Riot Grrrl discussed as *the* definitive moment in feminist music, rather than one moment out of many. In the feminist magazine *Herizons*, a writer went so far as to say that the third wave feminist movement started with Riot Grrrl, and that they uniquely embody the values of modern feminism (Rundle). A natural extension of this argument is that if Riot Grrrl was the epitome of feminist music making, and if Riot Grrrl as a movement died out, then no other feminist music can be as important. This lionization of feminist punk in the 1990s sometimes means that other contributions are overlooked.

In an online Bitch Magazine article, Kelsey Wallace asks, “Where have all the Riot Grrrls gone?.....What I really want to know is, which pop stars are representing feminist values? Are there any popular singers out there who are actually keeping it real in the name of the f-word and still enjoying successful music careers?” She proposes Beyonce as a feminist pop star, but recognizes that many people will disagree. In the article’s comments, a few people suggest Amanda Palmer as a strong example of a

¹ Contemporary mainstream feminism: generally concerned with sex-positivity, intersectionality, LGBTQ issues, and acceptance of diverse expressions of womanhood.

musician keeping feminism alive and well in her music. The comment thread reads: “It’s not quite the same category...but when you ask the question about what awesome feminist acts I’ve been rocking out to lately I have to mention Amanda F’n Palmer.” Two more commenters enthusiastically agree with her before some disagreement is expressed. One poster says that Amanda Palmer is not a feminist, because she creates a masculine persona in order to be perceived as having authority, yet also over-embraces femininity. A response to this post then asserts that by reclaiming femininity, Amanda Palmer is in fact demanding respect for women (Wallace). These claims raise questions about the performance of gender, and the political implications of such performances. This issue is relevant to any discussion of Riot Grrrl, and will be included in Chapter 3. Likewise, Chapter 4 will discuss these issues as they apply to Amanda Palmer.

Gender performativity is just one issue that will be discussed in this paper. Questions about what it means to be a feminist musician, the significance of early punk, the contributions and legacy of Riot Grrrl, and the relevance of Amanda Palmer’s work will all be addressed in the following chapters. I will ground my research in the theory and scholarship surrounding the Riot Grrrl movement and punk in general, but I will not end the discussion where Riot Grrrl ended. Amanda Palmer exemplifies the current state of feminist music making. Even if she is not consciously continuing the work of Riot Grrrl, there are clear parallels between her methods and theirs. Both use classic punk tactics: a DIY² approach to the creation and dissemination of music, which avoids potential corruption by the corporate music industry; direct interaction with fans, for the purpose of building a community united by music and activism; lyrics that directly

² Do-It-Yourself. A value system that advocates learning how to produce and distribute music yourself, without the help of a record label.

address problems the musicians see in society; and a style and aesthetic that goes against gender norms, or societal norms about “respectable” appearances. While the original punk movement was itself an activist culture, it had sexist undertones, and largely excluded women. Riot Grrrl continued in the tradition of punk, but brought women into the fold, and directly addressed sexism in the music industry and in society as a whole. They found ways of making rock more accessible to young women, by creating unthreatening environments in which they could experiment with instruments and music making. Riot Grrrl lyrics were also feminist, addressing the myriad issues facing young women. Amanda Palmer is also concerned with feminist issues like body image, sexuality, and rape culture, remaining well within the activist tradition of punk music while still working against implicit sexism in punk and rock. Feminism and activism in music did not begin and end with Riot Grrrl: it built off of the existing punk culture, and its values and goals continue today, with punk musicians like Amanda Palmer.

The first chapter of this paper will briefly outline the history of the mainstream feminist movement, and define “feminism” as these musicians would think of it. Chapter 2 provides a history of punk music, while also explaining how punk has traditionally excluded women. Chapter 3 discusses the Riot Grrrl movement, and how those bands challenged the sexism in punk music. Chapter 4 then profiles Amanda Palmer, and explains how she continues in the tradition of feminist punk. While different points in the history of punk are placed in different chapters, they should not be thought of as separate. Early punk, Riot Grrrl, and Amanda Palmer are all musically and ideologically related, and should be thought of as building upon one another, rather than as distinct musical entities.

CHAPTER 1

MAKING WAVES: A BRIEF REVIEW OF FEMINISM

The Riot Grrrl bands of the 1990s, and Amanda Palmer today, enacted feminism³ through their artistic expression. Before beginning analysis of these artists as feminists, it is necessary to first establish a theoretical and historical framework for the discussion. This chapter explores the history of the women's movement, defining "Third Wave" feminism as it is used in this paper. This will lay the groundwork for analysis of Riot Grrrl and Amanda Palmer as activist musicians.

The Three Waves of Feminism

Many feminist activists and academics have described the history of feminism in terms of three "waves" (Baumgardner and Richards 20, Mann and Huffman 56). This approach can be problematic, because it focuses on the history of middle-class, white feminism, ignoring the movements and contributions of other groups (Mann and Huffman 57, Springer 1059). According to Kimberly Springer, when we limit ourselves to a "Three Waves" discourse, we "effectively disregard the race-based movements before them that served as precursors, or windows of political opportunity, for gender activism" (1061). For example, the white women associated with First Wave feminism learned their activist strategies from black women who were involved in the anti-slavery movement (Springer 1061). Conventional "wave" discourses ignore the contributions of these and other politically active women who were essential to the feminist movement. However, despite these problems, a wave approach will be useful for the purposes of this

³ The movement for gender equality. This chapter will continue to define the term as it is used in this paper, and as it is used by the musicians I analyze.

paper. The artists I discuss come from a tradition of white, middle-class feminism, and the wave approach is their reference point. Despite the problems with this discourse, it is the most appropriate one for this particular paper.

The First Wave is generally considered to have started in 1848, with the Seneca Falls Convention. This was a meeting of primarily radical Quaker women, many of whom were active abolitionists, and provided the official start for the early feminist movement (“Seneca Falls Convention”). The First Wave continued into the 1920s, and was primarily concerned with concrete legislative issues, with less of a focus on changing the way people thought about women. These activists were interested in gaining more rights, without addressing the underlying systems that lead to oppression. However, they did have significant successes. Property acts beginning in the 1830s, but gaining traction in the 1850s, began to secure a woman’s right to property: anything she owned coming into a marriage would continue to legally belong to her, rather than immediately passing to her husband (“Married Women’s Property Acts”). A nurse named Margaret Sanger opened America’s first birth control clinic in 1916, and formed the American Birth Control League, which would later become known as Planned Parenthood (“Margaret Sanger”). In 1920, the passage of the 19th amendment guaranteed the right to vote for American women, and after this huge victory the early women’s movement began to lose momentum (“Nineteenth Amendment”).

The First Wave can be criticized for some missteps: its focus on temperance led to Prohibition, early birth control activists sometimes advocated eugenics, and the advocacy for “twilight birth” led to unsafe labor and delivery practices (“The Sanger-Hitler Equation”, “Parturition”). However, their accomplishments should not be discounted.

The role of women changed dramatically during these decades: the ability to own property and sign contracts allowed women to be more secure in their marriages, knowing they held legal rights independently of their husbands. They were able to attend universities and join professional organizations, and of course they were now able to vote, and thus able to shape future legal decisions.

The Second Wave began in the 1960s, and rallied around clear changes in law and culture. Unlike the First Wave, which was primarily focused on reversing legal inequality, this movement had broader goals, concerned with changing the culture rather than simply gaining more legal rights. These feminists tried to change society at many levels, by tackling everything from the politics of housework, to equal pay and sexual harassment in the workplace (Baumgardner and Richards 69). The failed Equal Rights Amendment may be the most famous of their legal battles, but there were numerous legislative successes (“Equal Rights Amendment”). The Equal Pay Act was passed in 1963, and while it did not successfully fix the gender gap, it at least aimed to correct it (United States Equal Opportunity Employment Commission). *Griswold v. Connecticut* eliminated the bans on birth control, NARAL was founded in 1969, and in 1973 *Roe v. Wade* ruled it unconstitutional to ban abortion (“*Griswold v. State of Connecticut*”, “NARAL Pro-Choice America”, “*Roe v. Wade*”). After two decades of successes, the Second Wave finally began to disintegrate in the early 1980s.

While the Second Wave began decades after the First, “the third wave rose from within the second wave, as opposed to after it” (Mann and Huffman 58). Feminists who were unhappy with elements of the Second Wave began to branch off and form new, smaller movements, eventually leading to what we call the Third Wave. This wave

represents the current feminist movement, and unlike the previous two waves it, in some ways, lacks a clear focus. The goals of this movement tend to be more nebulous than those of the previous two waves. Even the definition of feminism is unclear; people now feel free to add prefixes to the word “feminist.” Modified terms such as eco-feminist, Girlie feminist, and queer feminist allow the individual to make feminism fit their life, values, choices, and beliefs more accurately. These modifiers allow feminism and activism to be accessible to a wider range of people, but create added difficulty when attempting to identify the nature or goals of the movement (Baumgardner and Richards 50).

In spite of this difficulty, there are certain themes that appear repeatedly. Some of the most important of these themes are intersectionality, sex-positivity, and a movement away from the idea of an “essentialist woman” (Mann and Huffman 59). Third Wave feminism focuses on the differences between women, rather than attempting to posit a universal female identity or experience. While the Second Wave is sometimes criticized for ignoring issues of race and class, Third Wave feminists examine where those concerns overlap with women’s issues. In fact, women of color, who were critical of the way white, middle-class women dominated Second Wave discourse, were the first to refer to a new, third wave of feminism (Mann and Huffman 59). Additionally, queer theory is an important part of the movement, leading to a focus on the rights of LGBTQ people (Baumgardner and Richards 56, Mann and Huffman 72). Finally, Third Wave feminism “means improving women’s access to health care and health education, taking away the risks, shame, and stigma that often come with sexual freedom,” and making personal issues into political ones (Baumgardner and Richards 30).

The issue of making the personal political is a fraught one. The Second Wave was focused on this issue, but has been criticized for being too restrictive and judgmental of women's personal choices (Mann and Huffman 69). According to Mann and Huffman, "The second wave's notion that the personal is political was a double-edged sword that highlighted not only how personal issues were political, but also how personal lifestyle choices should not undermine feminist politics" (70). Third Wave feminists, in their attempt to loosen restrictions and allow for a wide range of female experiences and choices, have also opened themselves up to criticism by earlier feminists (Mann and Huffman 70). While I tend to agree with the Third Wave approach, that women should be free to live their lives how they choose without pressure to adhere to a strict definition of a "feminist" lifestyle, I also recognize that this is a significant step away from radicalism, and more towards liberalism. In other words, there may be less of a focus on getting to the root of the problem, addressing deep-seated power structures, and creating profound social change. Instead, the emphasis is on individuality and personal choice, which can unintentionally reinforce existing power structures. This is a fine line to walk.

Changes in Feminism

Third Wave feminists are sometimes criticized by the old guard for not being "feminist enough". It is true these younger activists may not consciously associate themselves with the movement, but that does not mean they are not political.

Baumgardner and Richards address this in *Manifesta*:

Third Wave women have been seen as nonfeminist when they are actually living feminist lives. Some of this confusion is due to the fact that most young women don't get together to talk about 'Feminism' with a capital F. We don't use terms

like ‘the politics of housework’ or ‘the gender gap’ as much as we simply describe our lives and our expectations. 48.

Without a clear movement to rally around, young feminist women may appear apathetic in the eyes of older feminists, but this may be partially due to the historic difference in the way politics are dealt with in everyday life. When Second Wave feminism was at its peak, politics were an important part of the public consciousness. With the war in Vietnam, the Kennedy assassinations, and civil rights occupying the general populace’s minds, it was a logical extension that feminists would be equally concerned with furthering women’s rights and raising awareness. However, everyday culture today is less overtly political, and political life is in greater competition with other cultural stimuli (Mann and Huffman 82). As a result, many women may not feel comfortable framing their beliefs in the context of a movement, and instead enact feminism in more subtle, individual ways (Baumgardner and Richards 130).

Given these cultural changes, it is understandable why Third Wave feminists may be more focused on their own lives, and less on a movement. However, this does present problems. As Baumgardner and Richards say, “This fuzzy sense of where we’ve been plays out when something like *Bust* or Bikini Kill or the phrase ‘girl power’ turns masses of females on to feminism - and then peters out after that first rush. Having no sense of how we got here condemns women to reinvent the wheel and often blocks us from creating a political strategy” (152). The idea of being a radical or an activist is sometimes more appealing than the reality of doing serious political work. This is a pattern that we see with Riot Grrrl and other feminist artistic movements. Women who want to make

change and be engaged do not always know how, partially because they do not have a clearly defined movement to rally around.

Even women who have a background in academics, and actively identify with feminism, may have difficulty translating feminist theory into practice. As women's studies has become more widely accepted in academia, it has become more professional and less oriented towards activism (Mann and Huffman 86). In her essay "Challenging the 'Academic/Real World' Divide," Catherine Orr discusses the ways in which traditional women's studies curricula tend to leave out activism as a skill to be studied and learned. She says it is important to provide "students with classroom structures designed to help them reflect on activism, not just as the application of the theory learned in the classroom, but as a practice that engenders power and makes use of particular understandings of difference" (52). If theorists were more comfortable with activism, and activists more willing to situate their practices in the larger context of theory and history, then perhaps more young feminists would be willing to identify themselves as such, thus allowing for greater and more lasting progress in the movement.

Girl Culture

Possibly because the Third Wave is more loosely organized, it ends up being more focused on individual expression than the Second Wave was. While Second Wave feminists fought for, among other things, the right for grown women to be called and treated as women rather than girls, Third Wavers are reclaiming the term "girl", along with other derogatory terms such as "bitch," "cunt," and "slut." According to Baumgardner and Richards, "Now that we can choose and use the word ourselves and not have it forced on use, 'girl' is increasingly rehabilitated as a term of relaxed familiarity,

comfy confidence, the female analogue to ‘guy’ - and not a way of belittling adult women” (52). Reclaiming the word “girl,” and everything that comes with the idea of girlhood, is also a reaction against the perceived values of Second Wave feminism.

According to Baumgardner and Richards:

Girlies are girls in their twenties or thirties who are reacting to an antifeminine, antijoy emphasis that they perceive as the legacy of Second Wave seriousness. Girlies have reclaimed girl culture, which is made up of such formerly disparaged girl things as knitting, the color pink, nail polish, and fun. They also claim their right to a cultural space once deemed the province of men; for example, rock ‘n’ roll...porn, and judgment-free pleasure and sex (80).

While some feminists might criticize this interest in fashion and beauty, which are sometimes perceived as tools of women’s oppression, Girlie feminists are using these activities in empowering ways (Mann and Huffman 73). *The Beauty Department*—a website which is not consciously feminist, but reflects Third Wave values—talks about cosmetics as a skill or artform, done for pleasure rather than to attract men. They offer tutorials for how to reproduce needlepoint patterns on your nails, or style your hair around a homemade fascinator (“Nailed It!”, “A Chignon for a Fascinator”). None of this would interest or appeal to men, and that’s the point. This is not done to attract a mate or to compete with other women; it’s just another way for women to express themselves. There is nothing inherently oppressive about makeup and clothes, especially if the goal is to show off one’s creativity and artistry rather than to make oneself attractive and desirable to men (Baumgardner and Richards 131).

This reclamation of girl culture and all the fun, frivolous activities that come with it is also a way of making feminism more appealing. Many women are turned off by the stereotype that feminists hate men and makeup and fun, and Girlie culture demonstrates that one can be a feminist without always being serious. However, Girlie feminism is not a movement unto itself. Instead, it is a way of finding common ground between radical feminists and women who do not want to give up the enjoyable aspects of traditional femininity.

While increasing the acceptability of traditionally feminine activities may make feminism more accessible, there is always the danger that this consumption of fashion and beauty, despite its good intentions, supports male-dominated industry and capitalism. While Baumgardner and Richards are more specifically speaking to “girl power” products, they make a good point that also applies here: “With Girlie, there is danger that Spice Girls Pencil Set Syndrome will settle in: girls buy products created by male-owned companies that capture the slogan of feminism, without the power” (161). This concern is related to the larger issue of Third Wave feminists not always being connected to the politics and theoretical framework of the movement. Girlie is valuable as a positive spin on feminism. However, it runs the risk of reinforcing patriarchy if Girlie feminists are not fully conscious of the politics inherent in consumption. This is one more issue where young feminists may benefit from a deeper connection with the history and theory of the women’s movement.

The Arts as Activism

Political application of artistic and musical expression is no easy task. Although musicians do not necessarily have a direct effect on policy or mainstream cultural

changes, the arts often lead to more subtle changes in individual behavior and thought, which are crucial in transforming larger social discourse (Hanna 135). In her essay “The Media and the Movement: A User’s Guide,” Gloria Steinem discusses the importance of using the media as a tool for activism. She says, “If we don’t learn to use the media, mainstream and alternate, global and local - and by ‘use’ I mean monitor, infiltrate, replace, protest, teach with, create our own, whatever the situation demands - we will not only be invisible in the present, but absent from history’s first draft” (103). Riot Grrrl very consciously used popular music in a subversive way, promoting their own brand of feminism in contrast to the majority of pop music, which tends to uphold hegemonic ideals. This was partially facilitated by working outside of the major record labels, thereby avoiding the conservative values and patriarchal spin that are often imposed by such large corporations in mainstream media (Steinem 111). Another important factor is that they were producing music, releasing recordings of their own voices. Trying to express a viewpoint through written media can expose a person to editing and misinterpretation, but expressing oneself by speaking—or singing—directly to the intended audience makes editing and censoring more difficult (Steinem 114).

Independent from any specific message being promoted through music, the very act of creating art outside of the hegemonic norm is an act of protest. In *Geographies of Learning*, Jill Dolan says “Theater can be a mobile unit in a journey across new geographies, a place that doesn’t center the discourse in white male hegemony, but a space that can be filled and moved, by and to the margins, perpetually decentered as it explores various identity configurations of production and reception” (84). While she is talking about theater, I argue that these concepts apply to the arts in general. Making

feminist music within an industry and genre that tend to reinforce patriarchal norms is a step towards decentering pop culture, and by extension American culture in general. Rather than working within hegemonic norms, activist musicians take political action by creating their own space in the media.

Women in Music

In the canon familiar to most consumers of Western music, women tend to have limited representation. While women are occasionally featured in prominent positions, such as in sacred songs for the virgin Mary, or female operatic roles, these do not often represent a wide range of possible expressions of womanhood. In modern popular music, there tend to be certain prescribed roles for women (such as the acoustic singer-songwriter or pop star), while the majority of roles are assumed to be for men (Leonard 91). A woman can play the bass, or support the band as a fan or groupie, but the lead singer or guitarist in a rock band will generally be male. There have also been institutional barriers to women working in music, such as preventing them from getting adequate training, and cultural ones having to do with propriety and ideas about appropriate behavior for women (McClary 18). McClary theorizes that this is a result of music being perceived as feminine:

The charge that musicians or devotees of music are ‘effeminate’ goes back as far as recorded documentation about music, and music’s association with the body (in dance or for sensuous pleasure) and with subjectivity has led to its being relegated in many historical periods to what was understood as a ‘feminine’ realm. Male musicians have retaliated in a number of ways: by defining music as the most ideal (that is, the least physical) of the arts; by insisting emphatically on its

‘rational’ dimension; by laying claim to such presumably masculine virtues as objectivity, universality, and transcendence; by prohibiting actual female participation altogether” (17).

If men are worried about music being perceived as feminine, one way of asserting its masculinity is by making it as threatening and inhospitable to women as possible. In a historical context, this has sometimes taken the form of laws against women performing in public, but one might also see the more subtle method of microaggressions from male musicians to women in music, or shaming of female performers. These more covert practices have certainly been prevalent in the past, but are also present within modern, popular music.

This paper will primarily be concerned with rock music of the 1990’s and 2000’s, and the masculinization of that music genre will be analyzed more thoroughly in future chapters. For the purposes of this introduction, however, it is sufficient to establish that rock music has long been culturally associated with white heterosexual masculinity, to the exclusion of female performers (Leonard 96). For this reason, any time women make a space for themselves in rock music, unabashedly performing the way they want, without apologizing to or making accommodations for the dominant male norm, they are doing something political.

Conclusion

When discussing musicians as feminist activists, it is easy to run into trouble. Activism does not have to mean people out on the street in protest marches, or directly working for policy changes in government. As Baumgardner and Richards say, “Activism, like feminism, can be something organic to our lives, a natural reflex in the

face of injustice and inequality” (282). A musician can be an activist without using that label herself. If she refuses to be objectified onstage, and writes lyrics that are empowering to herself and other women, she is doing activism. One does not necessarily need to identify as an activist in order to do political work. This kind of activism is difficult to identify, though, and does not always lead to a concrete, satisfying result. While somebody protesting for policy change can show that she was successful when a new bill is passed or a law is changed, a musician cannot point to tangible progress as easily. This makes it more difficult to definitively say whether Riot Grrrl or other forms of musical activism have been successful, and makes us reconsider the meaning of “success” in this context. In the end, it is important to remember that while one can attempt to define “Third Wave Feminism,” there is a plurality of possible ways to enact feminism and make political gestures.

CHAPTER 2

PUNK ROCK AND MASCULINITY

The Riot Grrrl bands and Amanda Palmer all fall under the larger umbrella of punk⁴. Riot Grrrl very consciously rebelled against the misogyny within punk culture, and Amanda Palmer also subverts some of the dominant masculinity in the genre. However, this begs the question: what is punk, and how is male dominance expressed through and by it? A contemporary feminist analysis of punk requires an examination of how it implicitly reinforces sexist power structures, and that will be discussed in this chapter. At the same time, punk has traditionally been progressive in many ways and that will also be a part of the analysis here.

What is Punk Rock?

Punk began in England in the 1970s, during a recession that left many British citizens disenchanted with their political and economic system. Most punk rockers were young working class men, who strongly felt the perceived failures of capitalism (Bindas 70). In America, punk had its heyday in the 1980s, a particularly conservative era in American history. Although there were some differences--for example, American punk culture was more concentrated in the middle classes than in the working class--the social conditions leading to punk were largely the same on both sides of the Atlantic (Bindas 83). Political and economic conservatism, combined with a culture that valued accumulation of wealth and status, led many young people to feel excluded and morally at odds with the dominant culture.

⁴ A countercultural rock movement that started in the late 1970s in England, and challenged the political conservatism of the time.

In both England and the United States, punk culture was primarily organized around small, local “scenes” (Mattson 72, Wagner and Stephan 44). In addition to music, punk also involved independent record labels and shows, handmade fan publications called zines (short for fanzines), and other modes of production separate from the large record companies. It also represented a wide range of values and cultural practices, ranging from a hardcore culture that favored slamdancing and drug use, to straightedge punks, who advocated vegetarianism, abstention from alcohol, drugs, and promiscuous sex, and safer concert environments. This variety of practices was largely due to its focus on small community structures, rather than an overarching prescriptive culture. Despite the immense variation within punk, popular media tended to present only one image of it, focusing on the nihilism that tended to appear in punk culture (Mattson 70). While nihilism was certainly a part of punk culture, it was not the defining feature. Punk was a multifaceted ideology, with some very idealistic elements, particularly the Do It Yourself ethic.

Do It Yourself

One of the main goals of punk was to get away from the corporate domination of music. Punk musicians were focused on producing their own media, away from the capitalistic music industry that was dominated by a handful of large record companies. Part of this was due to a desire to maintain shock value. They believed that if music was marketed through mainstream means, it would steadily become more socially acceptable, and lose its power (Bindas 81). However, there were other motivations as well. They wanted to make music more personal, more sincere, and less money-driven, thereby attempting to change the focus of media production in America (Mattson 72). This value

system is usually referred to as Do It Yourself (DIY), reflecting the desire to make music independently, rather than going through a record label (Wagner and Stephan 44). They believed that rather than relying on paid professionals, musicians should learn how to handle every aspect of music production, from recording to distribution and advertising. This could be done independently, with each band or individual musician handling their own affairs, or collectively, by having musicians share their skills with each other.

The DIY ethic was not some kind of hipster pretension. It stemmed from a serious desire to change the locus of control in the music industry, and resulted in very real experimentation in independent production (Mattson 74). It was not an easy endeavor, either. Independent production is difficult: putting on a show without the backing of a record company involves significant liability and expenses, touring without a manager to deal with the logistics can be overwhelming, and the issue of record distribution is huge. However, bands found ways to cope with these difficulties. The cassette tape was a major boon to the punk movement, as it allowed for easy duplication of recordings (Mattson 75). Zines—-independent publications created simply by photo-copying and stapling pages—also served as a cheap, easy, and accessible way of transmitting information (Mattson 76).

One did not have to be a musician to participate in the DIY culture. Because punk music production was so far removed from corporations, anyone could be involved in it. People were always needed to promote shows, spread the word about new bands, and help distribute zines. Also, simply by consuming this media, rather than media produced by a corporation, a person could be contributing to the movement (Mattson 77). It is easy to see how this might contribute to the popularity of the movement. Being a punk fan was

not a passive identity - anyone who participated in punk could feel like they were actively contributing. At the same time that this mentality contributed to the sense of belonging that a person might have in the punk culture, it was also useful for political purposes.

What starts with purchasing an independently-produced cassette tape might lead to more general questions about the role of capitalism in culture (Mattson 77). This aspect was what made punk a potentially very radical musical culture. A person might originally only care about the music, but then the music might change the way this listener thought about the world, leading them to possibly seek and act towards larger social change.

Punk Politics

In addition to the implicit political meanings of producing music independently, some bands also held explicitly political positions. British punk bands often took strong stances against capitalism and imperialism, with The Clash as the loudest and most articulate voice for social change (Bindas 84). American bands tended to be less radical and more locally oriented in their politics, and many fell into politics unintentionally. For example, independent shows were frequently shut down, leading some Seattle punks to form an organization called the Youth Defense Campaign (YDC), which called for the city council to provide public spaces for all-ages concerts (Mattson 77).

The protest style of punk matched its general focus on nontraditional expression. As a result, punks were less likely to use the 1960s methods of protest marches, letter-writing campaigns, or sit-ins, and more likely to see the value in bringing political engagement into everyday life (Mattson 82, Bindas 78). They placed value in a local production and communal sharing of culture, as a means for political change. However, although they provided an alternative means of cultural production, they were not able to

change the dominant corporate system. In order to bring about a larger cultural change, they would have had to involve themselves in policy, which is not something they were interested in, or capable of (Mattson 92).

Punk Style

While politics were a significant part of punk, they are not what is most frequently associated with the culture. When most people hear the word “punk,” the first thing they think of is probably the aesthetics associated with the word, rather than the political ideologies. They might picture someone with a mohawk, multiple piercings, and ripped black clothes held together by safety pins (Bindas 76). On the cover of *Clash on Broadway*, we see the members of the band wearing black from head to toe, with studded belts, cigarettes in hand (Bindas 71). Sid Vicious, of the Sex Pistols, would wear heavy black combat boots and a leather jacket with no shirt (Young 2). These stylistic choices were part of the general backlash against 1960s rock and its associated style, which was co-opted by corporate fashion retailers. Punks strove to make their style repulsive to mainstream society, thus avoiding easy appropriation. Sid Vicious described himself as a “sexless monster,” which is not an image that would be appealing to the mainstream (Young 2). The safety pin was a perfect symbol for this movement, especially when it was used for body piercing. This was simultaneously off-putting to outsiders, and also implied a level of commitment that one cannot find in an article of clothing or other fashion item that does not require permanent body modification (Bindas 77).

While these stylistic elements are certainly a part of punk, they are by no means the most important aspect. Style was a useful way of demonstrating group allegiance and subculture identity without having to say anything, but was not the primary cultural

aspect of punk. In fact, many punks were aware of the contradictions between anti-corporate politics and a fixation on clothes, which were most likely produced by large companies (Mattson 86). However, as punk became increasingly villainized by the media, and the subculture increasingly drew in on itself rather than focusing on political engagement, style became more important (Mattson 87). This was seen most dramatically in America, where the “New Wave” punk look was popular and mainstream by the 1980s, although style also became increasingly important with British punks (Bindas 83).

The withdrawal from politics was partially a result of a disconnect between the movement and the historical and theoretical aspects of protest. Unlike earlier American subcultures, punks were not necessarily intellectually engaged with the theory behind the issues they were interested in (Mattson 88). Previous subcultures tended to be dominated by intellectuals who were heavily engaged with politics, so subculture and radicalism would often be tied up with one another. Mattson says “Max Eastman and the small magazine, *The Masses*, were typical of this counterculture: experimental in lifestyle but deeply intellectual” (88). However, the 1950s (and the introduction of rock music) started to change things, such that rebellion became associated with loud music and aesthetics, and less with history and theory. There was now a split between intellectual radicalism (which retreated into academia), and countercultural rebellion, which became the domain of art, music, and style (Mattson 89). Punk reflected this shift.

Rock and Masculinity

In many ways, punk was progressive. It was anti-capitalist, anti-conformist, and it sought to give a voice to young people who felt voiceless. However, it had the same shortcomings as other genres of rock music, particularly in the area of gender. Rock tends

to be perceived as a masculine genre, produced and consumed primarily by men (Cohen 17). When you ask someone to imagine the role of women in rock, they are likely to think of groupies and backup musicians before they think of a female lead guitarist. However, the issue of what roles men and women play in the culture is not the only gendered aspect. Rock itself is often perceived as masculine, separate from the people who produce it. This image is continually reinforced by the discourse around rock, and by the way both men and women engage with it (Cohen 34). When someone performs the role of a rock musician or rock fan, they are generally performing a masculine image. Every time this happens, it strengthens the connection between rock and masculinity, making it more likely that future people will enact the same masculine role, creating a positive feedback loop.

The fact that rock music is primarily produced by men does not explain why it is perceived as masculine (Leonard 24). Other fields that are dominated by one gender rather than another are not always considered to be inherently gendered. For example, there are more female than male teachers, but teaching is not thought of as an inherently female profession. Ultimately, the perception of rock as masculine comes from the consumers, not necessarily the producers. “While a male performer may display a certain type of masculinity or sexual identity, the person listening to his records or attending his concert is active in making sense of that performance and may create a personal understanding of it that is at odds with the musician’s original intention” (Leonard 26). Even when a woman performs rock music, I may read her performance as masculine, simply because she is operating within a tradition that is interpreted as masculine.

Female Essentialism

This pattern tends to build on itself. Rock is perceived as masculine, so every new performer is evaluated in terms of how they fit into the existing tradition (Leonard 29). In contrast, women are often treated as exceptions. They tend to be discussed as “women in rock” rather than just rock performers who happen to be women. This kind of discourse works to continually “otherize” women who choose to perform within this musical tradition (Leonard 32). By treating women in rock as a fad to be reported on, this discourse also works to erase the work and influence of women who have been continually contributing to rock music (Leonard 34). Leonard addresses this issue with an excerpt from her correspondence with Kim Deal, singer and guitarist with The Pixies: “Since the Pixies started I’ve been doing interviews since about 1986...This is the question I hate: ‘What about the resurgence of women in rock now?’ I get asked that about every six months, or not even every six months, about every three months I get asked about the resurgence of women in rock” (35). Rather than being questioned about her work, and her contributions to the genre, she is being asked to represent women as if they were a fad or a trend that may disappear at any moment.

If women in rock are perceived as a passing trend, this creates problems for the women who do have lasting appeal, and are accepted into the canon. One way of dealing with this is to treat successful women as if they were merely imitations of men. When they are being incorporated into a tradition that is heavily male-dominated, then their female identity gets partially erased. This was at work whenever Janis Joplin was described as “one of the boys,” but was not a phenomenon limited to her (Leonard 37).

When women are not being presented as “one of the boys,” they may be hyper-feminized. One example of this is when women’s use of punk aesthetics is interpreted as an expression of female rage (Leonard 97). When a man sings in an aggressive, rasping tone, he is just acting within the punk tradition. When a woman sings in that manner, though, she is perceived as doing something specifically female. Her use of those techniques becomes notable in a way that is not the case with men. Leonard addresses this issue:

The equation of screamed rock vocals by female rock artists with ‘female rage’ is a problematic interpretation as it veers into essentialism. Such an interpretation ignores the performance conventions that female vocalists tap into and presents their delivery as something essentially female and personal. The performers are not understood within the rock tradition where harsh screamed vocals by male performers are normative. Rather, the vocal delivery of women rock performers is understood in these instances as something separate from this tradition and as essentially female. 97.

Another way that female performers are treated as “other” is eerily reminiscent of the Romantic era, when audiences began to infer emotional meaning from music. When a man expresses anger, defiance, or rebellion in his song lyrics, he is merely writing within the lyrical tradition of punk. However, when a woman writes similar lyrics, it is often interpreted as her particular testimony, rather than a use of established musical conventions (Leonard 97).

Sexualization of Women

This subtle exclusion is just one way in which women are kept from fully participating in rock music. Another method is the overt sexualization of female performers. For women in punk and other rock genres, sexuality may become a central issue, and one of tremendous interest to their fans and to music journalists. Female performers risk sexual harassment while on stage, but also encounter it from reporters and interviewers (Bayton 46). Kathleen Hanna has commented on how frequently interviewers ask her sex life, and about her previous work as a stripper (Leonard 107). This is problematic for multiple reasons. For one thing, it detracts from the music. If an interviewer chooses to focus on personal issues, she is essentially saying that the music is of lesser importance. Secondly, it is sexually aggressive to the musician herself. By constantly asking about her sexuality, she is made acutely aware of the male gaze, and the scrutiny about her body and her choices. This kind of sexual aggression works to intimidate women once they are already established in the rock scene, but there are also ways of excluding women before they fully enter the music world.

No Girls Allowed

Women are prevented from participating in rock at many levels, starting during childhood or adolescence, when girls have significantly less access to instruments and education about how to play rock music. Parents may give their young daughter a violin or flute, or sign her up for piano lessons, but it is unlikely that they would present her with an electric guitar and find her a group to jam with (Bayton 39). On a practical level, girls may have less time, money, and freedom necessary for learning music than boys do (Bayton 40). Out of concern for her safety, parents may not want their young daughter to

get an after school job or engage in activities far from home, especially if these would require her to take public transportation or walk alone. This makes it significantly more difficult to become active in the rock scene as a young person.

There are also issues related to how boys and girls are forming their gender identities. In the early teenage years, when most rock performers start to get involved, girls are being inundated with messages about how to be 'feminine.' The rock performers that they are most likely to see are men, and they see women in other, more typically feminine positions. Thus most girls do not think of being a lead guitarist in a rock band as something they could feasibly do, and if they were to do it, it would involve breaking with accepted standards of femininity (Bayton 39). Boys, on the other hand, see male rock musicians at the same time that they are being taught how to be masculine, so rock becomes a way of affirming their male identity, rather than conflicting with it (Bayton 40).

If a girl does decide she wants to play rock music, she has to deal with the fact that rock is frequently learned in the context of boys' friend groups (Bayton 40). Since this is a time of life in which boys and girls tend to have separate social groups, boys may be hesitant to let a girl into their band or other form of music group. However, this does not disappear after adolescence. Men maintain this exclusivity well into adulthood, making male social interactions a crucial element of rock culture. Cohen describes how "the conversation within the scene's male networks, for example, is frequently 'insider-ish', involving nicknames, in-jokes and jargon that discourage women newcomers from joining in, and it is often sexist" (22). This is a more overt form of sexism, and may make women feel uncomfortable or even unsafe within rock culture; however, it could stem

from a variety of male motivations. Some men may crave homosocial interactions within their music culture, as a way of escaping the perceived pressure of interacting with women (Cohen 21). However, for others this behavior may be linked with a desire for status, which may indirectly lead to increased sexual success with women. Whatever the motivation, this is at least a partially conscious move to exclude and subordinate women.

Out On a Technicality

Women also tend to be excluded from rock as a result of the focus on technical knowledge. Rock performance requires a familiarity with technology, especially for electric guitar players or other instrumentalists reliant on amplification. Starting in childhood, men are socialized to be more comfortable with technology, while girls learn to associate femininity with a lack of knowledge about electronics and technology (Bayton 42). This may lead to adult women lacking the necessary knowledge and skills to be successful in the technical aspect of rock, and also creates an identity issue for women who want to be “feminine,” and yet also want to demonstrate competence in rock music.

There is also a conscious exclusion of women through technical language, in addition to this socialization issue. Men may choose to use jargon-heavy language, to intensify the feeling of exclusion for women (Bayton 42). This contributes to a circular problem, wherein technical knowledge comes to be increasingly associated with masculinity, so girls are less likely to be educated in that area, and then they grow up lacking the knowledge, thus confirming the associations.

Connoisseurship

Connoisseurship is another value within rock, particularly Indie rock genres, that signifies as masculine. Proving that you have the most extensive knowledge of non-

mainstream music is a way of proving your expertise and gaining credibility within the culture. One expression of this comes through record collecting, which is frequently linked with masculinity, partly due to its association with the also male-dominated geek culture (Straw 4, Leonard 47). Record collecting and other “geeky” forms of music connoisseurship serve dual purposes: “Record collections are seen as both public displays of power/knowledge and private refuges from the sexual or social world” (Straw 4). Connoisseurship is linked with a supposedly masculine desire to collect and create knowledge, but, like other geeky pursuits, may be perceived as an escape from the real world. In other words, it can both affirm masculinity, and provide a refuge for men who do not feel that they live up to society’s expectations for them (Cohen 21). Either way, it is perceived as distinctly male. In punk and Indie rock, genres that value insider knowledge and appreciation of obscure music, this is one of the subtle ways in which masculinity is enacted.

Punk Aesthetics as Masculine

The aesthetic preferences in punk also serve to exclude women. The singing style tends to involve deeper voices, and a “harsh, abrasive timbre” (Leonard 96). One rarely hears a lyric soprano in punk. This vocal preference contributes to the perception of punk music as masculine. Physical appearances also perpetuate the association of rock with masculinity. The electric guitar, which is arguably the instrument most emblematic of rock music, is decidedly phallic in appearance. Rock guitarists tend to hold the instrument in front of their pelvic area, not because it is easy to play that way (it’s not), but because “it just looks right” (Bayton 43). This can only contribute to the apparent masculinity of rock performance, and make it harder for women to feel comfortable in

that genre, and particularly in the role of guitarist. In both physical and aural aesthetics, a sense of power and aggression is preferred in rock music, especially sexual power (Bayton 43). These traits have very strong cultural associations with masculinity, meaning that any woman who adopts them risks having part of her female identity erased or questioned.

Physical and Institutional Exclusion

In addition to all these social and ideological factors that exclude women, there are also very practical ones. One way in which women are prevented from gaining insider status is through the physical conditions of performance venues. In her ethnography of the rock scene in Liverpool, Sara Cohen describes how many concerts take place in “narrow back streets around and behind the main city centre thoroughfares. These are areas that many, particularly women, might feel uncomfortable venturing into at night” (20). These venues are not specifically chosen to exclude women, but their apparent lack of safety may be part of the rock culture. Rock, and particularly punk rock, are music cultures associated with risk and rebelliousness, so slightly shady performance venues are part of the image. Exclusion of women is a side effect of this.

In addition to all these rock-specific reasons why women might be prevented from becoming successful, they also face the same issues they would find in any profession. Women are more likely than men to have to make choices between family life and professional life, and may find conflicts between the role of a rockstar and that of a mother or partner (Bayton 48). Like in other fields, men may be more likely to expect their partners to support them through their careers, while women are pressured to sacrifice their careers in order to be supporters.

Conclusion

Punk rock is progressive in many ways. Its emphasis on taking artistic control away from corporations is a consciously anti-capitalist protest. However, its exclusion of women reinforces sexist power structures. This is a problem in many musical cultures and in almost all genres of rock, but it is particularly interesting in punk, due to its otherwise progressive nature. The next two chapters will discuss how some women have rebelled against the misogyny in punk, and created new ways of performing gender through music.

CHAPTER 3

GRRRLS: FEMINIST PUNK IN THE 1990S

The previous chapter described how rock music, including punk, has implicitly excluded women. However, punk also had a long history of activism and rebellion. Riot Grrrl, a loosely constructed movement that included musicians, zine writers, and fans, built on the activist tradition of punk, while simultaneously challenging its misogyny. It created a space for girls and women within punk, and paved the way for contemporary feminist punk rockers, such as Amanda Palmer.

History and Criticism

Riot Grrrl originated in Olympia, Washington, and Washington, DC, around 1991. Olympia was where things first started to happen, and this is related to some of its unique characteristics as a city. First, it is home to Evergreen College, a progressive university where some of the members of Bikini Kill first got involved with punk music and activism. Second, the punk scene itself was unique. While nearby Seattle had an active music culture, most of it was concentrated around the numerous bars and 21+ clubs (Downes 15). This made it very difficult for younger people to get involved. Places like Washington, DC, on the other hand, had the opposite problem. Its punk culture promoted the straightedge lifestyle, advocating abstinence from drinking, drug use, and casual sex. This sometimes resulted in a “no girls allowed” mentality. DC’s musical aesthetics also were less inclusive: unlike other punk scenes, they valued virtuosity in performance, which, as discussed in the previous chapter, can in some ways exclude

women (Downes 16). Olympia was free from these characteristics, allowing for a more inclusive, all-ages, girl-friendly scene (Downes 15).

Tobi Vail, who was attending college in Olympia, first published her zine *Jigsaw*, in 1988. Kathleen Hanna and Kathi Wilcox, also students at Evergreen, contacted her when they read her zine, and the three decided to work together (Downes 19). Kathleen had previously been in the bands Amy Carter and Viva Knievel, both of which were politically motivated. She became interested in the politics of race and gender while she was working at a women's art gallery, and volunteering at a domestic violence shelter. Her original participation in bands had been motivated by her desire to have feminist and anti-racist music to perform at benefit concerts. However, she also became more vocal about and driven by her personal experience with rape, abuse, and abortion. She reached out to Tobi and Kathi, as well as Billy Karren, to start a band, Bikini Kill (Downes 23).

While Bikini Kill was forming in Olympia, Allison Wolfe and Molly Neuman were becoming close friends in Eugene, at the University of Oregon. They began writing a zine together, and fantasized about starting a band. They would frequently break into song while at parties, and brag about their band, even though it did not exist yet (Downes 23). When they were visiting Olympia, Allison's hometown, somebody finally called their bluff and asked them to play a gig. They rapidly threw together a few songs, named their new group Bratmobile, and ended up performing alongside Bikini Kill in February of 1991 (Downes 24).

For their spring break in 1991, they decided to visit Washington, DC, where Molly was from and where they knew there was an active punk scene. While there, they formed connections with local feminists in the scene. Although the DC punk culture was

less inclusive than in Olympia, a progressive punk organization called Positive Force DC had formed in the mid-80s and was more in line with Molly and Allison's beliefs (Downes 17). That summer, Bikini Kill joined them in DC, and they held the first Riot Grrrl meetings, supported by Positive Force (Downes 26). When they returned to Olympia, the movement was officially launched at the International Pop Underground Convention, held at the end of August. The first night focused on female-centered punk bands, including Bikini Kill and Bratmobile, and jumpstarted the Riot Grrrl community in Washington state (Leonard 115, Downes 29).

The movement gained traction among women who were frustrated with the misogyny in punk and rock culture. In addition to creating a new space for women within punk, they found ways to address specific issues. For example, as discussed in the previous chapter, the "insider" culture in punk, particularly when it came to technical skills, was one of the ways that women were excluded. Riot Grrrl challenged this. One tactic was to organize events where girls and women could learn about instruments and musical technology without feeling threatened, intimidated, or embarrassed by their lack of knowledge (Leonard 54). This kind of approach, with its intention of making rock and punk more accessible to and safer for women, was common throughout the movement. However, Riot Grrrl did not only exist in reference and in opposition to punk culture.

While many of these women were active and vocal feminists before becoming part of the music scene, others were less familiar with the theory and history of feminism, and may not have even referred to themselves as feminists. Those who were well-informed about the movement tended to prefer the newer Third Wave theorists over the

“traditional” Second Wave authors, and wanted some new and different kind of feminism, that would represent their ideals and their lives (Leonard 123, Downes 26).

Ironically, despite their criticisms of Second Wave feminism and desire to promote a more inclusive, modern feminism, Riot Grrrl tended to prioritize and consist primarily of white, middle class girls and women (Leonard 148, Downes 32). This is a frequent problem among mainstream feminist movements, and not one unique to Riot Grrrl. While attempting to find a voice for all women, it is too easy to forget the differences between women, and enforce a dominant group’s experience on women as a whole (Leonard 148). A contemporary Riot Grrrl blogger writes: “Kathleen Hanna is incredibly cissexist and racist. I encourage you to be mindful of the music and things you consume. Enjoy riot grrrl but realize how awful a lot of people in the original movement were” (shpanya). Interestingly, she still aligns herself with the Riot Grrrl ideology, despite having problems with the original movement. She does not give specific reasons to back up her claim, but she is presumably alluding to an implicit sense of exclusion towards trans-people and people of color within Riot Grrrl. This was one of the most criticized problems with Second Wave feminism, and Riot Grrrl was not immune to it either. Riot Grrrl’s homogeneity may also be partially explained by the fact that it drew from the existing punk culture, which was predominantly white and middle class.

Because most Riot Grrrls were also part of the Indie rock and punk scene, the movement grew out of and in parallel to the existing scenes. They used the same methods and had many of the same ideals as earlier punks, such as a focus on DIY production, use of zines to communicate ideas, and musical style that emphasized expression over virtuosity. Rather than trying to create an entirely new rock movement, Riot Grrrl wanted

to change the discourse within the existing punk culture (Leonard 123). Like the punk movement that it grew out of, Riot Grrrl emphasized community and networking, but was never a fully unified movement. Anyone could identify as a Riot Grrrl, so while there are generalizations that can be made, it is important to remember that this is an essentially polymorphous group (Leonard 145). Much like punk culture as a whole, we can make certain generalizations about the values and aesthetics, but there will always be an exception to the rule.

The name Riot Grrrl draws on girl culture, and reclamation of the word “girl” and everything that comes with it, but adds a growl to it, signifying that these are girls who fight back, and have something to say (Leonard 117). While the growl symbolizes a bit of aggression, this was not an inherently aggressive subculture. Many youth cultures are treated as delinquent--this is certainly the case with hardcore and punk--and Riot Grrrl was no exception. However, media representations that focused only on the rebellion, ignoring the substance of the protest, were missing the point. Lumping Riot Grrrl’s rebellion in with the masculine anger and aggression of punk culture erases the way that culture was masculinized, and ignores the fact that Riot Grrrl was using that anger to challenge the male domination of punk (Kearney 212). Riot Grrrl was a thoughtful movement, and any aggression or rebellion was in the interest of making a political point and promoting their message, not just anger for the sake of anger (Leonard 124). When they did shock and make people uncomfortable, it was because they were challenging conventional gender norms, not because they were rioting or causing mayhem (Leonard 125).

This false focus on delinquency and anger was not the only misrepresentation that Riot Grrrl encountered. Mainstream media frequently presented images of Riot Grrrl that women within the movement disagreed with. For one thing, reporters often glossed over Riot Grrrl's connections with Queercore, a queer hardcore punk movement, and LGBT issues in general. They also presented highly sexualized portrayals of the women, sensationalizing the events that took place at concerts (Downes 30). In contrast to the feeling within Riot Grrrl that this was a non-hierarchical community, reporters tried to position Kathleen Hanna as the leader of the movement. They also interpreted her rage as pathological, rather than a justified anger in the face of injustice and inequality. Reporters would focus on her previous life experiences of rape, abuse, and sex work (she briefly worked as a stripper), to delegitimize her political position (Downes 31).

In response to this, Riot Grrrl declared a media blackout in either 1992 or 1993, depending on the source (Kearney 209, Downes 31). The downside of this was that popular media now viewed the movement as even more separatist and radical, and were writing reports with even less input from women within the movement. However, people within Riot Grrrl viewed this as a necessary side effect of what would otherwise be a positive move. By refusing to speak to the media, they made it so that girls and women who wanted to learn about the movement would have to read zines, go to concerts, and seek out existing Riot Grrrls. This would allow them to see a more authentic version of the culture, and it would also let them find the aspects of Riot Grrrl that were relevant to their lives (Downes 31). Rather than reading one article that tried to present a certain image of the whole movement, girls would be able to construct their own version of Riot Grrrl, based on real life experiences with the movement. What they would find varied,

but some of the most important elements were a subversive aesthetic, a tight-knit community that valued equality and communication through easily accessible means such as zines, a music culture that directly tried to empower women through feminist lyrics, and a general focus on girl power.

Girl Power

The phrase “girl power,” one of the rallying cries of Riot Grrrl, exemplified their desire to celebrate the power and strength of young women (Leonard 156). However, the phrase was sanitized, depoliticized, and co-opted by the Spice Girls, who used it so widely that most people now associate it with them, not the Riot Grrrl bands (Leonard 157, Downes 41). This is unfortunate, but not necessarily surprising. To the Riot Grrrls, girl power meant resisting patriarchy on all fronts, fighting personal acts of sexism, calling attention to sexual abuse and other forms of violence against women, and celebrating the diversity in female sexuality, all while making powerful music. The Spice Girls did not have such a clear set of goals and values behind their use of the phrase, making it a slightly more empty statement. While this does not necessarily eliminate all potential for empowerment, it does make the phrase less valuable, because girls are being told to embrace their power but aren’t taught how to do so. However, this does make it more marketable. The empty form of girl power is less radical, and thus less frightening to the hegemonic powers, so it is much more useful as a slogan to be sold. “GIRL POWER!” written in sparkly pink letters on a child’s shirt looks better in a store window than a girl power zine, complete with a lengthy article about abortion rights. Thus it should not be surprising that the Spice Girls’ version of the phrase gained much more widespread attention than the Riot Grrrls’ one, which was a little harder to digest.

Subversion, Contradiction, and the “Kinderwhore” Aesthetic

The Riot Grrrl aesthetic may have been viewed by outsiders as excessively sexual, but women in the movement fought hard against being treated as objects. Many of the performers in Riot Grrrl would take an active role in pre-empting viewers' attempts to sexualize them. The women in Bikini Kill would scrawl words like “SLUT” on their skin before going onstage, before anyone in the audience got the chance to yell the word at them as an insult (Leonard 121). By claiming a derogatory term for themselves, they changed the meaning of it, and took the power away from people who wanted to use it against them.

At the same time that they took these unconventional approaches to their sexuality and bodies, the Riot Grrrls also adopted traditionally feminine dress. It was not uncommon to see these women wearing floral baby-doll dresses, pigtails, and playful hair barrettes (Leonard 121). They rarely chose to adopt a sophisticated, adult style of dress, and instead chose a more youthful look. This fit in with their general emphasis on girl culture, and the desire to reclaim the fun, lighthearted elements of girlhood and youth culture. Combined with their overt sexuality and display of their bodies, this came to be called the Kinderwhore aesthetic, referring to the combination of childish style with adult sexuality.

While there was a general aesthetic and fashion style that Riot Grrrls preferred, there was never any specific symbol or clothing item that represented them. To a certain extent, this prevented appropriation. While one could simply wear a “Destroy” t-shirt to symbolize allegiance with the punk movement, wearing pigtails and a Laura Ashley dress with combat boots merely made one look like part of a general 90's grunge/Indie fashion

trend, not specifically like a Riot Grrrl (Leonard 129). This meant that to show allegiance to Riot Grrrl, one had to actually talk about it, play the music publicly, or share zines.

This prevented superficial symbols of affiliation with the bands, making it more difficult for the fashion industry to commodify the movement. While the “girl power” slogan may have been adopted by the fashion and music industries, the movement as a whole remained relatively safe from co-optation (Leonard 156). This is largely because there were so few artifacts associated with the movement, and the ones that were, such as zines, could not be easily sold for profit (Kearney 209).

If there was one style element that was universally used by women in the Riot Grrrl community, it was the consciously ironic use of feminine fashion. The individual clothing items that made up the “Kinderwhore” look were not the most important elements. Instead, it was the self-parodying attitude that the wearer adopted. By donning these excessively girlish and feminine clothing items while acting in a decidedly unfeminine (at least according to traditional definitions of femininity) manner, they subverted conventional ideas of what it meant to look like and be a woman. This is a strategy common in Third Wave feminism, which embraces performance theory and postmodernism. By using contradictions, such as girlish, feminine dress combined with behavior that would traditionally be considered unfeminine, women can highlight the performative aspects of gender (Mann and Huffman 71). This forces viewers to confront the possibility that a variety of behaviors and styles can be feminine—because they are seeing one woman enact all these supposedly contradictory traits—and that these distinctions are enforced by society, rather than innate to humanity. Ultimately, this should lead to acceptance of a more diverse concept of womanhood.

However, some may argue that it is not always ideal to automatically label any woman as “subversive” who does not display femininity in traditional ways. According to Leonard, this “naturalises the relationship between biological sex and feminine gender,” taking for granted that any biologically female person should naturally want to cultivate a “feminine” appearance, and that any deviation from that is a consciously subversive act (93). It is of course possible that women who choose to have a different aesthetic are not trying to make any political point with it, but I do think that in the case of these musicians, it is a conscious, political act.

There is another argument against the idea of subversion, however, that I find more convincing. Because the unconventional twist on feminine appearance is part of a certain musical culture, it becomes less subversive, and instead is just a way of signifying allegiance to Indie rock or punk (Leonard 93). After all, the Riot Grrrls were not the first rock musicians to take this approach to style. Siouxsie Sioux, a 1970s punk performer, challenged ideas of femininity by contrasting a militaristic, masculine style with stereotypically feminine clothing items, like fishnet stockings. She wore makeup, but applied it so heavily and dramatically that it did not function like conventional women’s makeup, serving as a mask rather than a tool to make her more attractive. Madonna also used this type of sartorial strategy, wearing dramatically feminine or sexy clothing in an ironic way (Leonard 91).

It could be argued that both of these women, in addition to the Riot Grrrls, were subverting ideas about femininity, but there is an equally valid argument to be made that they are merely adhering to a different set of aesthetic norms that exist in their musical culture. However, this argument is more convincing when it is talking about people

involved in the corporate music industry. In that case, there is an incentive in using stylistic elements that clearly reference a certain genre, because consumers can easily identify a musician as being part of their preferred genre, making them more likely to buy that CD or go to that concert (Leonard 104). It also allows for easier commodification of certain clothing styles, which can be advertised as related to a specific performer or genre. None of this is relevant to Riot Grrrl or other more independent artists, because they do not have a record company seeking to commodify everything they do.

Whether or not a given act is subversive ultimately comes down to intent (Leonard 95). If a performer dresses herself in the Kinderwhore aesthetic simply to fit in with a certain performance convention, then the act is not necessarily subversive. However, it is likely that the previously mentioned musicians are all consciously using appearance to challenge conventional notions of femininity. Since all public appearances involve the performance of a constructed image (Leonard 89), it seems most likely that for musicians who are independent (and thus have more control over their image), and are so acutely aware of gender issues, their performance and perceived subversion of gender roles must be intentional.

Community Building and Interaction with Fans

While it can be argued whether or not there was intentionality behind the Riot Grrrl aesthetic, community-building was clearly a conscious, intentional part of the movement. Many of the elements that are representative of this movement, such as the publication of zines and direct interaction between musicians and fans, were meant to serve that goal. Because community was so important, Riot Grrrl musicians stressed the fact that you did not have to be in a band to be part of the movement (Leonard 139). This

is part of the reason why zines and other publications became so widespread and important.

Zines, which were the main way of distributing information within the Riot Grrrl network, are one of the most famous aspects of that movement and time period. Although zines were significant in the earlier punk movement, they were even more widespread and important to Riot Grrrl. Because it was a movement made up primarily of young women and girls, with limited resources, zines offered a cheap, easily accessible way of publishing and spreading information. Especially for younger girls, who could not easily attend concerts, this was a way to feel connected with the movement when it would otherwise be inaccessible (Leonard 143). They also provided an opportunity to create alternative media for young women, which focused on topics other than corporate fashion, entertainment, and beauty (Leonard 138). Zines were generally photocopied pages, folded and stapled, distributed by hand or mail, and they were not intended to generate profit (Leonard 138). Instead, the motivation for making them was the ability to publish one's own writing, drawings, and ideas, as simply and affordably as possible.

As the internet became increasingly accessible and widespread, zines moved onto the web. E-zines still retained many of the same elements as the paper ones, though. For example, many publishers chose fonts that mimicked handwriting, and chose layouts similar to those used in the paper formats (Leonard 145). One fundamental difference between e-zines and paper zines, though, has to do with accessibility and networking. E-zines were automatically available to anyone who could access the internet, and often had links to other zines and Riot Grrrl sites. This enhanced the sense of community, and created an online network so that like-minded girls and women could easily find one

another (Leonard 146). In many ways, e-zines fulfill the ideals of zines even more effectively.

While zines were one approach to building community outside of the concert setting, Riot Grrrl bands were also interested in fostering solidarity and promoting their values in the context of a performance. One strategy for this was demonstrated on the 1993 Huggy Bear / Bikini Kill joint tour. Prior to the concerts, they handed out fliers requesting that women stand at the front of the concert venue, while men gather in the back. The intention of this was to create a safe environment for women, so that they could thoroughly enjoy the performance without worrying about men invading their personal space or making unwanted advances. When men disregarded this policy, all the lights would be turned on, and the band members would stop the performance and publicly chastise the men. This promptly became a regular part of Riot Grrrl performances (Leonard 119).

In addition to making the safety of women a priority, this strategy also served to change the relationship between audience and performer. When the musicians stopped performing to reprimand men who were not following the rules, they narrowed the distance between them and the viewers (Leonard 120). Their original request, and their action in enforcing the rules, elicited a response from the audience that they chose to acknowledge and engage. It resulted in direct communication between musician and audience, often ending in banter and conversation at the expense of the uncooperative men. This sense of camaraderie and joint enterprise was not the norm in non-punk concert environments, so it reinforced the feeling of community and equality in the Riot Grrrl scene.

While the “girls to the front” tactic was unique to Riot Grrrl, the direct involvement with fans was not. Many punk acts involve conversation and banter with the audience, and Riot Grrrl may just have been tapping into an established performance convention. For example, Courtney Love would frequently stop concerts to speak directly to her fans. In one performance she berated audience members for wearing Pearl Jam t-shirts, saying they were betraying the memory of Kurt Cobain, her late husband and lead singer of Nirvana (Leonard 101). This kind of performer-to-fan interaction is not unusual. However, Riot Grrrl was unique in their desire to use this interaction to promote their political agenda, and to make the audience challenge their own ideas and behaviors. The “girls to the front” strategy was one way of accomplishing this, but they might also stop songs to discuss rape culture, or talk to people in the audience about their experiences of sexism.

The Music

In addition to all these ways feminism was enacted in the Riot Grrrl movement, the music itself was deeply political. I will primarily analyze the lyrics here, but the musical technique is also relevant. As discussed in the previous chapter, virtuosity and an emphasis on technical skill can exclude women from music. Riot Grrrl bands did not emphasize either of these.

Instead, they embraced their lack of technical knowledge. The Bikini Kill song “Double Dare Ya” begins with feedback from one of the speakers, followed by Kathleen Hanna asking, “Is that supposed to be doing that?” (KristiannaLynn). Whether this was something that happened during recording and they decided not to edit it out, or they fabricated it entirely, it still achieves the same goal: rather than treating lack of

experience and knowledge in the rock industry as something to be hidden, they embraced it.

In addition to being welcoming towards musicians who did not understand the technology necessary for performance or recording, Riot Grrrl bands also made the music itself as accessible as possible. The compositions were generally very simple, and did not require virtuosic levels of performance ability. Anyone who wanted to could learn to play these songs. It is important to remember that calling this music simple should not be interpreted as a denigration. Simplicity was valued here, and the music served its purpose perfectly.

While the performance practice and composition style of these bands reflected their value system, the lyrics directly expressed their political views. "Alien She," by Bikini Kill, addresses some of the contradictions and identity questions that were common throughout Riot Grrrl and feminist girl culture in general (SuEcideSally). The lyrics, transcribed from a recording, are:

She is me
 I am her
 She is me
 I am her
 Siamese twins connected at the cunt
 Heart brain heart brain heart brain lung gut
 I want to kill her
 But it might kill me
 "feminist"
 "dyke" "whore"
 I'm so pretty
 Alien
 She wants me, she wants me to go to the mall
 She wants me
 To put the pretty, the pretty pretty pretty lipstick on
 She wants me to be like her
 She wants me to be like her
 I want to kill her

But I'm afraid it might kill me
 "feminist"
 "dyke" "whore"
 Pretty, pretty
 Alien
 And all I really want to know
 Who was me and who is she
 I guess I'll never know

Essentially, Kathleen Hanna is speaking to the inner conflict between the girl who wants to have fun, wear pretty clothes, and go shopping, and the feminist who thinks she should disdain all of that. When she says, “I want to kill her / But it might kill me,” or “Who was me and who is she / I guess I’ll never know,” she is attesting to the fact that these are both essential parts of her. Even if she might resent the part of her that wants to enjoy stereotypically feminine activities that feminists have traditionally viewed as demeaning, she still has those desires. At the same time that she mocks these interests (by singing about them in a sneering tone), this girly aspect of her personality also derides the radical feminist within Hanna, calling her a “feminist, dyke, whore.” Although in this song Hanna is playing up the conflict between these two personalities, Riot Grrrl and Girlie feminism in general embraced these contradictions.

Other songs directly addressed specific political issues that women face. In “Shut Your Face,” Bratmobile sings about how frequently issues of violence against women are ignored. With the following lyrics, they object to men who might have the attitude that these are not serious issues, and that reporting on them is just sensationalistic fear-mongering: “You know it’s just a piece of ass / When girls are dying / It’s all hype and selling news / When boys are lying” (GoreFreak08). When they sing “Us girls have a right to know / Us girls have a right to care / When women die anywhere,” they speak to

the fact that this is a global issue, and that people should be conscious of what is happening around the world (GoreFreak08).

However, Bratmobile does not only sing about issues that are so clearly political. They also have songs about issues girls deal with in their everyday lives. In the song “Cool Schmool,” Allison Wolfe sings about the frustration of having to adhere to dominant ideas of what is cool. When she sings “I don’t want you to tell me what’s so cool / I don’t want to go back to junior highschool / I don’t want anyone to tell me how thin I am....Cool Schmool,” she expresses her wish to move beyond this appearance-oriented obsession with being cool, which she views as superficial and immature (laughingparadox). In the last verse, she voices her frustration with friends who can only talk about these issues that she views as annoying and trivial, to the point where they lose sight of themselves and what really matters: “See I don’t know why you’re always telling me / What’s so cool about what I’m wearing / When you can’t even tell me how you feel / And you can’t even be my friend for real” (laughingparadox). While these lyrics are not as obviously political as those in “Shut Your Face,” I would argue that they are still feminist. Writing a song that focuses exclusively on female friendships, without any mention of a boyfriend or romance, is unusual and significant. It takes something that would usually be viewed as a trivial girlhood problem, and turns it into something worthy of writing music about. This gives a level of respect to girls’ lives that you do not usually see, and does it without discussing the problems in relation to men.

Unlike Kathleen Hanna, whose vocal delivery might switch from angry, to silly, to mocking within a single song, Allison Wolfe maintains an apathetic tone throughout, regardless of what she is singing about. This is less in line with traditional punk

performance style, which could be interpreted as a political move, because it means she is not conforming to a masculine norm. It also has the added benefit of making the lyrics more understandable, which may be more effective in getting the point of the message across.

While Bikini Kill and Bratmobile tended to deliver their messages with a certain amount of humor, other bands were more overtly angry. Heavens to Betsy is one example of a band that did not always temper their rage. In “Terrorist,” Corin Tucker sings about a man who followed her on the street, making her feel unsafe, and then screams out what she would like to do to him as payback (soniczap):

You follow me on the fucking street
 You make me feel like a piece of meat
 You think I don't know what war means
 Now I'm the terrorist, see how it feels.
 I'm going to kill you
 I'm going to gouge out your eyes
 I'm going to kill you
 I'm not your prey I'll make you die.

This kind of sheer, unadulterated rage is certainly powerful, but is also less relatable than the messages found in other Riot Grrrl music. The screaming and other stylistic elements are well within the performance tradition of punk and hardcore music, but the violence described in the lyrics is not as common within Riot Grrrl. However, it could be argued that many mainstream songs implicitly advocate violence against women, and this song simply brings violence to the surface, and uses it as a retaliation against those other songs. While I do not think that Corin Tucker is actually suggesting we all go out and murder men who make women feel unsafe, I do think that the violence in this makes it a less useful song than some of the others in the movement. It may be cathartic, and that is certainly valuable, but it is less likely to lead to any kind of dialogue than a song like

“Shut Your Face.” However, this question of whether or not a given song is useful to the movement requires a more general analysis of what the goals were within Riot Grrrl, and what success would look like.

Results

The goals of Riot Grrrl were ambitious and idealistic, but the chances of them achieving any kind of measurable results were slim. However, the people involved in Riot Grrrl were at least partially aware of this. They knew their threat of widespread girl revolution was a largely empty one, but this was not necessarily a problem (Leonard 131). If you narrow the scope of their intended revolution, the results become more apparent. On one level, they wanted the end of patriarchy and absolute freedom for women and girls, in all areas of society. Obviously, this did not happen. However, if you consider their revolution only within the context of Indie and punk rock, then their legacy is more significant (Leonard 137). They created new media that were female-centered and empowering, carved out a place for women where they were not traditionally welcome, and made feminism visible and apparent. Their focus was more on empowering individual women, and not on affecting policy or creating social change outside of the rock scene (Leonard 150). None of this should be dismissed. Even if rock still remains male-dominated, they had a profound effect on individual women entering the music world (Leonard 151). They were powerful and effective in this one area and in this one way, and it would be a mistake to evaluate their success in a more general context. That can only detract from the very real, although localized and subtle, success that they did have.

Conclusion

Using tactics already present in punk, as well as creating new strategies for bringing feminist activism into punk music, Riot Grrrl opened up a space for women within a traditionally misogynistic musical culture. While the Riot Grrrl bands eventually broke up and the movement ended after a few years, feminist music did not end with it. These young women showed how feminism could become a part of youth culture, and set the stage for future feminist punk artists.

CHAPTER 4

RUNS IN THE FAMILY: AMANDA PALMER TAKING OVER WHERE THE GRRRLS LEFT OFF

Amanda Palmer, formerly the lead singer and pianist for The Dresden Dolls, and currently the lead singer of Amanda Palmer and the Grand Theft Orchestra, is an excellent example of contemporary feminist punk. Like the Riot Grrrls, and like numerous punk bands before them, she uses a DIY approach to music, direct interaction with fans, and politically engaged song lyrics to make activism part of her life and art. Unlike previous punk artists of the 1990s and early 2000s, Palmer has had to find ways of bringing social media and internet culture into her artistic and business model. This constant online availability has in some ways made her more open to criticism, as opposed to the Riot Grrrls, whose writings were more safely tucked away in paper zines. However, it also allows her to connect faster and with many more people in many more places. She is a model for how punk activism can adapt and move forward as internet culture changes the music industry, at the same time that she draws upon time-tested punk strategies.

Palmer's Aesthetic and the Performativity of Gender

Like the women of Riot Grrrl, Amanda Palmer uses contradictions between masculinity and femininity to highlight the performativity of gender. There are two particular images that she uses most frequently. The first of these was most often used while she was with the Dresden Dolls. This dramatic, theatrical aesthetic is visible in the “Girl Anachronism” video. Her face is painted white, with eyebrows drawn on in a

baroque scroll design, heavy eye makeup, red circles of blush, and dark red lips. Essentially, she looks like a doll. This is not makeup used to enhance her beauty. Instead, it is a mask, part of a costume and a stage persona. At the same time that she creates this dramatically feminine appearance, she is also playing and singing loud, aggressive punk music that would usually be associated with masculinity. She uses other stereotypically feminine looks throughout the “Girl Anachronism” video, such as a blonde housewife and an old-fashioned nurse, complete with white dress and hat (dresdendolls). However, the doll-like appearance is the one that gets repeated throughout many of her performances. Combining this feminine appearance with masculine behavior challenges binary ideas of gender—rigid ideas of masculine vs. feminine, with nothing in between—and what it means to be a woman.

Currently, Amanda Palmer continues to use some elements of her previous stage appearance (she has kept the drawn-on eyebrows), but now tends to use a more masculine appearance in her videos. In “Do It With a Rockstar,” her muscular, sweaty physique is emphasized, along with her unshaven underarms and short hair. Her makeup is smeared and sloppy. She wears only a lace bra and a black corset on the upper half of her body, but has gold leggings harkening back to a glam rock aesthetic and combat boots, a more masculine clothing item, on her lower body. While the execution is different, the result is the same: she is challenging binary gender roles. In this video she is essentially in drag, and like drag queens, she uses her physical appearance to point out the performativity of gender. Keith McNeal, writing about drag queens, says:

The talented female impersonator creates a spectacle for the audience in one of two ways: (a) tacking between the illusion of authentic womanhood and

strategically disrupting this illusion with references to one's underlying 'male' identity, or, more frequently (b) creating the feminine illusion and leaving it to the audience to alternate forgetting and remembering what they are watching. This is the aspect that gender theorists point to as the epitome of drag's exposing gender as performative. 358.

While McNeal is talking about men impersonating women, the same analysis could be used to discuss Palmer's performance in the "Do It With a Rockstar" video. She looks masculine and performs the part of a stereotypical male rock star (she takes part in a crazy party after the show and goes home with a pretty female groupie), but the viewer goes back and forth between perceiving her as masculine, and then remembering that she is actually a woman. The result is that people are forced to question the essentiality of gender (McNeal 358).

Part of what leads me to believe this gender performativity is a conscious decision on Palmer's part comes from the fact that she uses drag queens in the video. The scene opens with a group of drag queens discussing the show and their opinions on Palmer. The inclusion of these performers in the music video only adds to the effect, and also implies that Palmer was consciously using the performative strategies of drag queens in this particular performance.

Palmer's Musical Activism

Like the musicians of Riot Grrrl, and like countless punk artists before them, Amanda Palmer does not emphasize virtuosity or compositional complexity in her songs. Palmer acknowledges that she has always struggled with reading music, and with classical performance techniques. In a blog post she recounts how her mother would

bribe her to take piano lessons, but instead of playing from the sheet music, she would simply watch the teacher play and then copy her (“how to play tchaikovsky”). She still composes and performs without the use of written notation, and when she chose to release the piano sheet music from some of her songs, she had to have someone else notate it (Snell 62). She then wrote instructions in the margins, telling people where to improvise, because she felt that traditional music notation could not adequately express the nuances of her music (Snell 63).

As was discussed in relation to virtuosity and masculinity, this is a much more inclusive approach to music making. While there is nothing wrong with choosing to use traditional notation and performance techniques, they are not the most effective methods for all musicians. Palmer is open about the fact that she has never been able to learn classical music techniques, but she has no shame about it. This has not held her back in any way, and being so open about it could potentially be very helpful to young musicians. For any young person who loves and wants to create music, but struggles with theory or reading music notation, Palmer’s approach could be incredibly liberating and comforting.

While Palmer’s approach to writing and playing music is progressive, the content of her songs and videos is usually also political. It has already been noted how the “Do It With a Rockstar” video challenges the gender binary, but it addresses other issues as well. Mainly, the video works as a critique of the music industry and the role that rock performers are expected to play. Palmer is initially presented as godlike, looming above the audience with her back to them. The music enhances this image, with a driving bass line and powerful vocals. We briefly see her singing on stage, and then crowdsurfing in the audience, but the stage performance ends early in the video. We then see her joining

in a party for a moment, before she sits down at her laptop and tries to get some work done, with the party still raging around her. Palmer, who is openly bisexual, is then approached by a female groupie (played by alt. porn star Stoya Doll), who closes her laptop, dunks her phone in a cup of beer, and begins kissing her. They then go back to Palmer's hotel room, where shots alternate between heavily eroticized images of them together (accompanied by the lyrics "do it with a rockstar") and images of Palmer curled up in the fetal position, with the lyrics "wait, wait, wait, I'll be fine in a minute" sung in the background. In general, when the "wait, wait, wait" lyrics appear, the music changes with them. The instruments thin out, and Palmer's singing becomes less forceful, with less reverberation added. At the end of the song, when this lyrical motive returns, the instruments do not thin out. All the force remains, with increasing layers added, creating a dissonance that becomes more and more pronounced until the song abruptly ends. The effect is one of chaos and discomfort, and enhances the meaning of the lyrics. While this is happening musically, we see Palmer having an apparent breakdown. Her sexual partner appears entirely unconcerned, and in the final shot she puts her hand over Palmer's mouth as if to silence her (Amanda Palmer).

The content of this video harkens back to some of the issues discussed in relation to rock and masculinity. Rather than simply portraying the traditional image of a masculine rockstar pursuing groupies, engaging in a life of pure hedonism, we see a very human rock performer attempting to live up to the stereotype. Rather than pursuing groupies, Palmer is trying to get work done (showing that the life of a popular musician is not all fun and games) and is almost violently interrupted, with the groupie essentially forcing Palmer to recognize her. While they do go back to the hotel room and have sex,

Palmer is clearly disturbed. This is not a sex-negative portrayal of a woman ashamed and saddened by the act of having sex; instead it is an image of someone stressed and lost because a certain identity is being forced on her. The image of the sexually available rockstar was imposed on her, and this woman is sexually interested in her because of that image, and not because of any personal connection.

In addition to questioning norms within the music industry, Palmer also uses her music to address larger social issues. In her song “Oasis,” she sings about a girl who was date raped at a party and subsequently had an abortion, but doesn’t care because her favorite band, Oasis, sent her an autographed photo. The music video, coincidentally showing Palmer in very Riot Grrrl clothing and accessories, depicts all of this quite literally. Palmer, who was date raped when she was 20 and had an abortion as a teenager, says the point of all this is to talk about how young people going through terrible life experiences use denial as a coping mechanism (“on Abortion, Rape, Art and Humor”). However, many radio stations and TV stations did not see it this way. In her blog post, Palmer lists NME TV, Kerrang! TV, Scuzz TV, Q, MTV, and The Box as stations that would not broadcast the video. Supposedly this was because she was making light of both rape and abortion, by singing about such difficult subjects in an up-tempo, major key, distinctly peppy song. In the same post, she points out that if she had sung the exact same lyrics and had an equally literal video, but set to a “sadder” melody, people would likely have felt differently (“on Abortion, Rape, Art and Humor”). She does not comment on the arbitrariness of the connections we make between happy and major/fast, versus sad and minor/slow, but instead comments on the fact that people are policing how an individual woman processes her experiences. She writes:

countless girls have been raped or date-raped. are we allowed to talk about it, joke about it, turn it over from every side and try figure it [sic] our own confused reaction to it?

or is that just too icky, uncomfortable ... and shameful?

should we just cry about it demurely and hope that the proper reaction, the one that society deems appropriate, will make it go away? (“on Abortion, Rape, Art and Humor”).

In this uniquely angry blog post, Palmer makes no attempt to apologize or appease her critics. Instead, she rails at anyone attempting to police how a person chooses to deal with her trauma, while drawing attention to the myriad issues that young women face in this country. This and the previous examples are by no means the only instances of Palmer using her music or her fame to promote a political, feminist message, but they illustrate her style and her perspective well. Most of her political action stems from a desire for freedom of choice and action, to express gender, art, and emotion however each individual deems appropriate.

Couch-surfing, Crowd-surfing, and Crowd-sourcing

Amanda Palmer’s promotion of individualism and individual freedom, however, does not come at the expense of the community. She also places significant emphasis on the importance of mutual support and community-building, and her business method is the prime example of this. In her TED talk, Palmer discusses her method of getting payment for her music (TEDtalksDirector). Rather than demanding payment, she asks for it instead. This attitude stems from her days working as a living statue. She was dependent on people freely giving money to her, and when the viewer dropped money in

the hat, and she gave them a flower in exchange, there was a moment of connection in which she saw tremendous value. As the Dresden Dolls gained in popularity, she no longer needed to work as a living statue, and instead devoted herself entirely to music. Nonetheless, this experience as a busker shaped her practices once she became a full-time touring musician.

After every concert, she and her bandmate Brian Viglione would hug and chat with fans outside. When touring, she would frequently invite local musicians to play outside her concerts and then join her on stage, resulting in what she called a “rotating smorgasbord of weird, random circus guests” (TEDtalksDirector). Once Twitter was launched, it was even easier to build community while touring. Wherever she was, she could ask for some favor, and people in the area would always help her out. She could ask for practice space, and fans would provide a studio and a piano. Free, home-cooked food was always available. When she asked for a neti pot, a nurse in Melbourne brought her one from the hospital she worked at. She would even be provided with places to stay. During the majority of her touring, she couch-surfs. Fans let her stay in their homes, ranging from mansions to tiny punk apartments.

According to Amanda Palmer, she learned how to couch-surf from her extensive experience crowd-surfing. They both involve “falling into the audience,” and trusting that they will catch and support you (TEDtalksDirector). They both require trust, and they both result in a close connection. Michele Catalano, writing for *Forbes*, relates this back to Palmer’s earlier work as a living statue, saying “it’s all about making eye contact. It’s about creating a personal connection: that moment when you reach out to someone - and

they reach back” (1). This sense of mutual engagement, of give-and-take, is essential to understanding Palmer’s value system around the way she handles business.

Once the Dresden Dolls became famous enough, they signed with a record label, and theoretically they no longer needed to ask fans for everything; the record label would demand money from listeners, and then provide for the musicians. However, Palmer promptly realized that the label’s values did not match up with her own. When her first album was released, it initially sold 25,000 copies, which she viewed as a success, but which the label viewed as a huge failure. She was proud of her creation, but they were disappointed in the lack of profit (TEDtalksDirector).

At a concert soon after this all happened, she was doing her standard meet-and-greet after the show, when a man walked up and handed her a ten dollar bill. He said it was because he burned a copy of his friend’s CD and felt badly, and he wanted to pay her for the music. This was the first of many such events. Once she was finally able to leave her label, she decided to make this her business model. She would make her music available for free, but ask people to pay her if they so desired.

Some may be skeptical as to whether or not this model can really work. At least for Palmer, it does appear to be a feasible business strategy. Michele Catalano explains this, saying: “Palmer gives her fans more than music; she gives of herself, trusting her fans, making that connection with them, becoming a part of their lives. So when she says ‘I *ask* you to pay for my music’ they will not say no. They will give freely because they’ve had that eye contact, they’ve had that moment of the artist’s hand reaching out to them on a personal level” (1). On her website, Palmer has the following message in the “Free Music” section:

DEAR DOWNLOADER OF MUSIC,

this store is built on a 'pay what you want' philosophy for my digital music.

i firmly believe in music being as free as possible. unlocked. shared and spread.
i believe that in order for artists to survive and create, their audiences need to step
up and directly support them. honor system. no judgment. if you're broke - take it.
if you love it, come back and kick in later when you have the money.

if you're rich, think about who you might be karmically covering if you really
love this record.

**once you have it, SHARE SHARE SHARE! COPY COPY COPY! SPREAD
THE EVIL!!! we are the media.**

I also release all of my music and writing using the Creative Commons
"Attribution - NonCommercial-ShareAlike (CC BY-NC-SA)" license. If you
want to understand what this means, google Creative Commons.

LOVE, afp

Most of her Dresden Dolls music is not available in this format, presumably due to
copyright claims by her former record label. However, a collection of their live
recordings is available, in addition to all of her solo music, and the albums she has
released with her current band, The Grand Theft Orchestra ("Free Music / Mission
Statement").

The comment where she mentions her Creative Commons license, and explains
how to figure out what all the legalese means, has some similarities with Riot Grrrl. Both
are concerned with making technical jargon accessible to viewers, rather than treating it
as an exclusive form of knowledge meant only for music professionals. Aside from this
particular comment, the general emphasis on equality and community between musicians
and fans is very reminiscent of Riot Grrrl. But, while Riot Grrrl only had zines, Amanda

Palmer has tools like Twitter, Kickstarter, and online stores that allow her to forge connections with even more people, in real time.

However, not everybody appreciates her approach. There was one controversy in particular, which stemmed from her asking musicians to play with her band for free. While touring, she put out a request for horn and string players in each tour stop to learn some simple parts, and then join her on stage. While she ended up with plenty of people enthusiastically wanting to participate, she also received large amounts of criticism. Some said that she was exploiting the musicians, and that a successful performer like her should not be asking for free labor. One columnist in particular was especially scathing: In a *New Yorker* article, Joshua Clover described her as a hypocrite, who espouses progressive Brechtian and punk values, all while allegedly exploiting her fans (Clover 1). While Amanda Palmer points out that everyone who participated did so of their own free will, and was more than happy to provide their services—all while getting to attend the concert for free—Clover questions this. He says that “this is a time-honored dodge, which might be called ‘the Oompa-Loompa defense.’ It goes something like this: outsourcing labor to people who will work for less is fine because they are ‘happy’ to do it. Such practices and accompanying rationales have been continually refined—think the helpline that dials a tech in Bangalore” (Clover 2).

However, I disagree with this logic. There is a fundamental difference between an independent artist asking other artists to join her in a project if they so desire, and a major corporation choosing to find cheap labor by offering low-paying jobs to people who have no better options available. The latter is exploitative, but the former is just an example of people sharing and working together within a community. Catalano also disagrees with

Clover's analysis, saying: "If you *volunteer* to do that, if you have that personal connection with the artist and are willing to offer your service and even your home to them; then the reward of playing in front of an audience with a person you admire is enough. And who are we to tell these people they were ripped off, when *they* were the ones who accepted the offer?" (Catalano 2)

This was a communal artistic project; she was not asking people to play for free at *her* concert. Artists may have chosen to join her simply for the opportunity to play with someone they respect and admire. They may also have chosen to do this in order to gain visibility and make connections in the music scene. Either way, there was some benefit to everyone involved. She was not taking advantage of her collaborators. On her blog, Palmer discusses how she built her early career by playing for free, including paying for her own travel so that she could open for Nine Inch Nails. She says this is standard for rock musicians, and she looks back on it as a positive experience, not a negative ("an open letter in response to amy").

The problem with Clover's criticism is that it essentially stems from an inability to see Palmer's financial model without a corporate, capitalist spin. The way he describes her practices reflects this: "She circumvented the major-label ecology, and asked fans to become more or less direct investors, to take an ownership share in her work. Depending on the pledge, they would receive some items from the planned cornucopia: music recordings in various formats, a related art book, chances to party with the artist herself" (Clover 2). The way he describes this, as a way for fans to "invest" in her business, and receive rewards in exchange, is not how Palmer (or her fans) would likely describe it. As she says in her TED talk, she is *asking* people to pay however much they want (or

nothing at all), leaving it up to their own consciences, rather than making them participate in a preset exchange system. Her model is built around an idea of community; his is dependent on the idea that people are motivated only by material gains (Clover 3).

The Rebellyon

Palmer's handling of the business aspects of music reflects her prioritization of community, but close interaction with fans is important to the rest of her practice as well. She shares her thoughts and stories with fans, but they also reach out to support her (and each other) in return. In 2008, after filming the video for her song "Leeds United," Roadrunner executives told her that they would need to reshoot certain frames, because her belly looked too big, and was supposedly not flattering. Palmer addressed the incident in a blog post, merely expressing her frustration, and not trying to start a community action:

i'm not TRYING to look hungry. i'm trying to look HOT. there's a difference. the big irony here, like i said before, is that i am totally vain about shit like this. i will be the first to run screaming from photos where my fat little belly is rolling over my jeans and taking center stage. i've been mistaken for pregnant so many times. it's always funny. AND embarrassing. i was born with a fat little belly and i love wine. there's just no changing things, unless i want to live on salad. and i love salad, but not all the time. i also like pasta. even when the rest of my body is JACKED, RIPPED and SLAMMIN', my fat little belly happily stays in place. it's just so. i am used to it. and i have learned to Love the Belly. still, however proud i may be of it in it's [sic] natural state, it's still not something i go out of my way to flaunt. but this video....i mean, look at it. there's just NOTHING there that

anybody could really object to, even by MAINSTREAM standards. so i was really perplexed. and i told the label i wasn't changing anything. they backed down" (The Rebellyon. The Deal With Roadrunner Records).

In addition to standing her ground and telling Roadrunner that she would not cave to their body shaming, she also admitted to having the same kinds of insecurities that so many women in this society share. However, she did it in a way that recognized the absurdity of these high standards. She acknowledged the existence of her belly, that continues to persist despite being generally very fit, but did not treat it like a terrible thing that must be fixed. She has a belly, it makes her slightly insecure, but she just has to deal with it. This is a very healthy attitude that one rarely hears from someone as prominent as her. The more frequent message is that we either have to pretend we have no insecurities at all if we want to be "good" feminists, or that we need to treat our bodies as enemies; things to be controlled. The first is unrealistic, and the second is unhealthy. Palmer promotes neither. She goes on to tell how her fans have rallied around this cause by starting a "Rebellyon," posting photos of their bellies in an online forum.

Multiple websites picked up on this story, and were generally very supportive. A writer at *The F Word Blog* described the Rebellyon as a movement to promote positive body image for all people, but also as a "protest against the 'barbie dolling' of artists by record companies and the media" (Laura). Emine Saner at *The Guardian* pointed out that Roadrunner appeared to only have these standards for its female artists, as many of the male musicians were significantly less fit than Palmer, but had never been censured for it (Saner). Both viewed this as an important movement, and a way to tell the music industry

(or at least this one label) that people would not tolerate these unhealthy and anti-feminist practices.

While Palmer gets most of the credit from outside sources, she does not treat herself as the hero of this story. It would have been easy for Palmer to claim responsibility for the movement, but instead she gives the credit entirely to her fans, saying “this is why i fucking love you guys. i couldn’t have thought this up in a million years. righteous” (“The Rebellyon. The Deal With Roadrunner Records”). Her value system and prioritization of community means that she treats this as a community effort, something that her fans did together, to take a stand against something that they found offensive and wrong. She provides a space and a cause for people to protest, but does not take credit for their efforts.

The “Evelyn Evelyn” Controversy

At the same time that some of Palmer’s projects (or projects that she inspired) are almost universally praised and admired, other projects are more controversial. In 2010, she announced a new project on her blog: she and Jason Webley, a musician who had opened for the Dresden Dolls in the past, were teaming up with two conjoined twin musicians whom they had found online. The twins, originally named Eva and Lynn, preferred to both go by a composite name: Evelyn. They sang sad, slightly funny songs about their life experiences (which had been traumatic, involving sexual and physical abuse), and played accordion, guitar, drums, piano, and ukulele with the two arms that they shared. Palmer and Webley flew to their home in Washington state to help them record an album, and then convinced them to go on tour, despite the girls’ fear of flying and traveling (“The story behind ‘Evelyn Evelyn’”).

Of course, none of this actually happened. Evelyn Evelyn is a stage persona created by Palmer and Webley, with an extensive backstory that they invented as part of the performance art. While some fans responded positively to what they perceived as a creative, whimsical performance piece, others were deeply disturbed and offended. A blogger for the website *FWD (feminists with disabilities) for a way forward*, wrote about how disturbed she was by this performance piece. While she acknowledged that Palmer and Webley probably meant well, and did not intend to offend anyone, she also points out that “intentions don’t equal a free pass for an end result,” and says that this particular end result is ableist (Annaham). Her main problem with Evelyn Evelyn was twofold: it was using fictionalized disabled people as an inspirational story, a tale of people overcoming adversity that able-bodied people could look at for comfort, and it simultaneously presented them as freaks to be gawked at. Both of these issues have to do with objectification, treating Evelyn Evelyn as a thing to marvel at, rather than two adult, fully human women. The story that Palmer and Webley created also implies that disabled people are helpless: Evelyn and Evelyn were stuck in a terrible life in a tiny town, until their able-bodied heroes swooped in to save them (Annaham).

The writer was especially disappointed in Amanda Palmer, given that she has written songs sensitively and consciously about disabled people, and people with mental illness in the past (Annaham). The Dresden Dolls song “Ultima Esperanza” is about a woman, who happens to be a double amputee, looking for love on the internet (Ele Mepetres). While one could criticize it for promoting heteronormativity, because she is hoping to find a man who will improve her life, the main point is that this is a woman taking charge of her life, using the tools she has available to further her love life. It

presents a disabled woman just like any other woman, with very human needs and desires; it does not fetishize her, and it also does not present her as an object of pity.

In the song “Runs in the Family,” Palmer criticizes the way people with mental illness are pressured to justify their disorder in a medical context. There is a stigma against mental illness, and if people can medicalize their problems, that stigma is reduced. While there is undoubtedly a physiological aspect of mental illness, people should not feel the need to validate their experiences by pointing to a specific medical cause. Many people do not have a clear pathophysiology behind their disorder, but that should not diminish or invalidate their experience. While she sings about the political aspects of mental illness, she creates a visual and musical atmosphere that seems out of control and chaotic. The visuals change rapidly with abrupt, disconnected cuts while the music is repetitive, with an ostinato in the piano. The effect is one of chaos, as though we are being presented with a visual and aural glimpse into Palmer’s mind, where she cannot control her thoughts. This is not a representation of insanity that is meant to provoke pity or fear; instead it is an attempt to make viewers feel what Palmer (or Palmer’s character) is feeling.

Because Palmer has created sensitive portrayals of disabled people, and the issues that disabled people face, the Evelyn Evelyn episode is all the more shocking and disappointing. However, it should not negate the positive things she has done in the past. In the same way that it would be a mistake to write off the entire Riot Grrrl movement because they did not handle class and race issues well, it is a mistake to discount Amanda Palmer’s positive contributions because of this error. She was wrong, and she upset many people. But she is not perfect, and she should not be held to unfairly high standards.

Creating art requires taking risks, and sometimes that means making mistakes. It is wrong to expect any artist to produce politically perfect work every time, and when they do get it wrong they should be able to move on and try again without being demonized.

Amanda Palmer has undoubtedly been the subject of valid criticism and controversy. However, this may not be because she is more worthy of criticism than, say, the Riot Grrrls. Instead, I would argue that because she is so available on the internet, she is simply easier to criticize. Every thought, every business move, every intention behind every project is immediately available on Twitter or her website. Likewise, anyone who disapproves of her can instantly make their criticism available online, or engage with her directly on Twitter. This sets her up for difficulty, but is also part of what makes her such an effective artist and community-builder. She has devoted groups of fans because of her availability, her eagerness to communicate, and her willingness to discuss her mistakes with critics.

Conclusion

Palmer's use of social media and the internet sets her up for some controversy, because her artistic choices are immediately and easily visible to fans, and to critics. However, this is also what allows her to be so effective as an activist musician. Without her direct interaction with fans, it would be impossible to have such an effective grassroots business model, and projects like the Rebellyon would never happen. Her approach to the financial end of music production is one example of how the industry can adapt to changing conditions, but her social media presence is equally important. It allows her to be at the same level as her fans, rather than positioning herself as a celebrity figure that they should look up to. While she is the focal point of these communities, they

are not hierarchical. All of this is essential to her message and her activism, and is what makes her an ideal model for the future of feminist rock.

CONCLUSION

Punk is, and always has been, an activist tradition. Early punk arose out of a politically conservative culture (the Thatcher era in England, and the Reagan era in the United States), and was meant to be a musical rebellion against capitalism, imperialism, and other problems that these young people saw in society. The DIY ethic was essential to punk culture, and stemmed from a desire to take art away from large corporations and bring its production to the people, where it could be made without the corrupting influences of capitalism. In this way punk was quite progressive. However, it was by no means perfect. While punk gave agency to young working class people, a group that felt disenfranchised in their culture, it also reinforced the hegemonic domination of other groups. As discussed in Chapter 2, punk was primarily the domain of heterosexual white men. Women were, and still are, marginalized in punk and other musical cultures.

In the early 1990s, a group of young women in the punk scene decided to create their own musical movement, one that would bring feminism to this misogynistic music culture. They combined punk's DIY ethic with the sex-positive, queer-friendly, pro-girl ideals of Third Wave feminism. A reclamation of girl culture, which was discussed in Chapter 1, was essential to their artistic production. They wanted to make feminism fun and accessible, and they wanted to do it by playing hardcore punk music.

In addition to building on the DIY methods of traditional punk, they brought in new strategies that were promoted by Third Wave feminism. Performance theory was an important part of their methods: they would use contradictions in their appearance to highlight the performative nature of gender, for example. They sang songs about rape

culture and violence against women, but they also gave respect and attention to elements of girls' lives that would normally be considered trivial and unimportant. They invited younger girls into the Riot Grrrl world by encouraging them to write zines or form their own bands, even if they were too young to go to concerts by the famous groups. While their message of girl power was eventually co-opted by groups like the Spice Girls, feminist punk did not die with the Riot Grrrl movement.

By carving out a space for women in punk, bands like Bikini Kill and Bratmobile set the stage for future feminist groups, and added a new form of activism to the already political punk movement. Amanda Palmer is one of the women who has continued to work in the interest of pro-woman punk. While she may not call herself a feminist musician, her work is undeniably feminist. She has sung about rape and abortion, openly and proudly displays her queerness in music videos, and has a personal style that challenges gender norms. She also addresses other issues, not limiting herself to topics that would traditionally be thought of as "women's issues." She comments on the medicalization of mental illness, and her entire business model works against the corporate domination of the music industry.

Palmer is frequently the topic of controversy, and has unintentionally offended many people, but this should not necessarily count against the value of her work. Making political art is tricky, but worth the risk. Other forms of activism are important and necessary, but art has a unique power to get to the root of the problem by changing the way people think. This makes it inherently radical, and this is why it is always valuable to make music and art more accessible to more people. The artists profiled in this paper all sought to break down barriers to music-making, and give an artistic voice to marginalized

groups. Early punk gave a voice to young working-class men, Riot Grrrl brought women into the fold, and Amanda Palmer has a huge online community where she can communicate with her fans, promote their art, and invite people to be part of her artistic process.

While the artists I discuss in this paper all had different goals and used slightly different methods, they all fall under the umbrella of punk. Rather than representing distinct episodes in musical history, they should be thought of as moments on a continuum. Early punk bands were necessary, because they tried to take control out of the hands of record companies, and empowered individuals to produce their own music. Riot Grrrl was necessary, because they reminded punks not to forget about women. As we move forward, and as internet culture necessitates a sea change in the music industry, Amanda Palmer and others like her will also be necessary. Art needs to return to the people, and Palmer shows us exactly how to do that.

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