

GRRRLS ONLY

By Lauren Spencer
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WHAT IS a girl? The question has been posed in classrooms, locker rooms and the offices of advertising agencies since history's preadolescence. Is she a soft and cuddly vision in a pink sweater? A lady in a dress and a come-hither smile? Maybe. But this is 1992, and under that dress, that sweater, she may well have the words "bitch" or "whore" scrawled in magic marker on her belly. If you get close enough for a peek, you may find out why. She's no girl. She's a grrrl -- a Riot Grrrl -- and if this new, rocking breed of feminist isn't about to overrun the planet, it is proliferating enough in Washington and other cities to upend one of the pop media's favorite themes: that feminism is the fast-depopulating province of the middle-aged.

Still, this is female solidarity '90s-style. Besides being drug free, sartorially flexible, and vegetarian-inclined, the grrrl movement comes with an aggressive, do-it-yourself punk ethic.

Here in Washington, the grrrls thing cranked up a few years back at the Sanctuary Club in Dupont Circle, the 9:30 Club and the now-closed d.c. space. "Dare you to do what you will/Dare you to cry right out loud," went a line from, "Double Dare Ya," by leading local grrrl band Bikini Kill, and before long hundreds of grrrls began taking that cry for independence quite seriously. At the Washington Peace Center, Dante's restaurant and informal grrrl conventions at Dupont Circle, young women in clunky shoes from Sidwell Friends, Wilson, Walt Whitman and Churchill gathered to talk as well as rock -- no boys allowed.

Anyone remembering punk's power and liberation can recognize the spirit of the Riot Grrrls: forget about music and create a generation gap, terrorize and insult your own useless generation, stay away from the mainstream at all costs. Based on those simple rules, create your own reality.

While the punk movement was high-testosterone, it also gave rise to women like Patti Smith and Exene Cervenka not afraid to shout, swear, scream or go unshaved. The Riot Grrrl style, though, also allows girls to add traditional styles of femininity to the new identity. Courtney Love of the band Hole adopts a kind of kindergarten-whore approach in her dress, all ribbons and lace with bleached blonde hair and smeared red lipstick. It's basically about looking how you want and not worrying what anybody -- read men -- thinks.

What is it about this movement that gets under the skin of affluent suburban teens? In an issue of the fan magazine 20-year-old D.C. Riot Grrrl Erika Reinstein puts out for other local grrrls, she spells it out pretty clearly:

"BECAUSE we girls want to create mediums that speak to US. We are tired of boy band after boy band, boy zine after boy zine, boy punk after boy punk after boy. BECAUSE I can't smile when my girlfriends are dying inside.

We are dying inside and we never even touch each other, we are supposed to hate each other . . . BECAUSE we are being divided by our labels and philosophies, and we need to accept and support each other as girls, acknowledging our different approaches to life and accepting all of them as valid. BECAUSE we need to acknowledge that our blood is being spilt, that right now a girl is being raped or battered and it might be me or you or your mom or the girl you sat next to on the bus last Tuesday, and she might be dead by the time you finish reading this . . . BECAUSE a safe place needs to be created for girls where we can open our eyes and reach out to each other without being threatened by this sexist society and our day-to-day {expletive}. BECAUSE every time we pick up a pen, or an instrument, or get anything done, we are creating the revolution. We are the revolution."

The first time I came upon the Riot Grrrl network was in Seattle in 1991, at an all-ages club called the OK Hotel. The scene was very young and very pure -- juice, natural soda and health food comprised the bar. The bands featured were Bikini Kill, Mecca Normal and Some Velvet Sidewalk. When I walked in, the members of Bikini Kill were in the first throes of musical mayhem. Drummer Tobi Vail, wearing only jeans and a bra, was supporting Kathleen Hanna's unearthly screams with a sloppy beat. While the lyrics were raw and disjointed, the emotion in the room was moving. Every girl knew every lyric to every song. They were taking off their clothes, rushing the stage and generally acting with a fearlessness that I had only seen in males in rock shows. The message delivered that night was about girls creating sounds, styles and sexualities for themselves instead of passively accepting the roles and ridicule so often assigned them.

Music like what I heard that night has driven the Riot Grrrl scene since the beginning -- first in small clubs and, by 1990, on punk labels like Olympia, Washington's K and D.C.'s Dischord, best known as the label for Fugazi, a band that never charges more than \$5 for a show and does no interviews in publications with alcohol or tobacco advertisements. Ian MacKaye, Fugazi's singer/lyricist, produced Bikini Kill's newest album.

From the music emerged a network of xeroxed fan magazines linking grrrls across the country (and in some cases the world). The grrrls write them, produce them and share them -- on their own, in keeping with the feminist ethic. In the zines, almost anything adolescent goes. Missives on divorce, lovelessness, boy trouble, abuse and other variations of suburban angst sit beside articles on where to buy cool guitars, how to make vegan burritos and holistic toothpaste, and the location of the next pro-choice rally. National teen magazine Sassy has become a major proponent of the grrrl movement, hosting showcases for grrrl bands at clubs in New York City and featuring interviews with some of the band members and spotlighting a fanzine in each month's issue.

The recurring theme of most grrrl lit may be disturbing to outsiders: the many-layered rage and shame privileged teenagers feel about sexual abuses they've suffered at the hands of men. The abuses they outline can be as subtle as remarks about their looks or clothes or as horrifying as charges of incest. In an interview published in Raygun magazine, Bikini Kill's Kathleen Hanna accused her father of abusing her when she was young, prompting hundreds of other girls to share their own grim memories.

But the movement isn't all talk therapy. It's about actively trying to change the power balance, too. Much grrrl anger focuses on male domination in the subcultures of music, which is why, when boys come to grrrls' rock shows, they are often told to stay away from the front of the stage. For once, the girls can be up there without being pushed and shoved. At a pro-choice show at the Sanctuary Theater in April 1991, the girls reclaimed the mosh pit -- the area at the front of the stage that's usually filled with slamming male bodies -- by joining hands and walking up to the front of the stage, where they protected each other and themselves and actually got to see the show.

With this kind of assertiveness you might think no boys would be allowed in this girl culture, yet there is a place for males here. One boy fanzine called Patriarchy Kills was circulated during 1992's D.C. Riot Grrrl convention, offering advice on how men can stop rape along with general insight into an evolved male's mind. And make no mistake: Most Riot Grrrls still find boys useful for the usual teenaged things.

It remains to be seen what will happen when the Riot Grrrls grow up and, inevitably, unravel themselves from the tight-knit local scene. "After a certain point, the group thing gets a bit much," says a 24-year-old former grrrl who now works as an editorial assistant. "It's not that I don't still believe the feminist line or anything, and of course I'm still a vegetarian, but after a while being in it that intensely starts to get to you. I sound like I'm getting old, don't I? But that's what it is. I feel too old to be a Riot Grrrl."

Yet, fortunately or no, at Sidwell and Churchill and other local schools, replacement Riot Grrrls are right now getting harassed, frustrated and deciding to do something about it. So don't be surprised if on your way to work some day, a nice suburban girl gets out her magic marker and shows you what's what. It's a grrrl thing. But maybe now you understand.

Lauren Spencer, former music editor at Spin magazine, is a producer for the Lifetime cable channel.

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