Feminist Punk Rockers and New Media Fan Communities:

How Patti Smith and Carrie Brownstein’s Music and Memoirs Kindle a Generation of Music Rebels

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Overall Research Questions:

The following questions summarize my research emphasis:

How do iconic women punk rockers use punk as a platform for gender identity formation and how do they shape a new generation of activist fans?

How have gendered experiences shaped the narratives of these two women rockers and their contemporaries?

What does it mean to be a fourth wave feminist, a fan, and a riot grrrl? How do we define ourselves through music?

How do platforms of new media contribute to the contemporary riot grrrl movement? Fandom as a cultural arena?
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By Rachel P. Levin

Introduction: Part Time Punk, Full Time Feminist / Ain’t I a Rebel Girl?

“That girl thinks she’s the queen of neighborhood. She’s got the hottest strike in town. That girl she holds her head up so high. I think I wanna be her best friend, yeah. Rebel girl, rebel girl. Rebel girl you are the queen of my world.”

- “Rebel Girl” by Bikini Kill

My relationship to rock and punk music is one of love, passion, and understanding. I truly love the song “Rebel Girl” by Bikini Kill. The punk band, with all women members, harsh guitar sounds, and powerful, thrashing lyrics, provides the perfect background music for a Sunday night bedroom dance session. I throw the pillows around my room, jumping loudly and singing the lyrics – very badly, probably. I only turn down the beat when I remember my neighbor’s recent noise complaint. It’s not my fault that my music is best listened to loudly, at the midnight hour when only the sounds of the whistling wind pulse through the window. Placing my noise cancelling headphones around my head, I switch the song to an equally impressive number by Sleater-Kinney, aptly named “Modern Girl.” The song, which features punk rocker and actor Carrie Brownstein, describes the experiences of a woman in the modern world. The character feels pressure to eat less, and reflects on the American atmosphere of consumerism, television, and advertising.

My mom and dad introduced me to classic rock and jazz music when I was in junior high school. When I heard my first song by the progressive rock band Jethro Tull, famous for the rock flutist Ian Anderson during the 1960s and 1970s, I knew that there was no turning back to my
days of buying Kidz Bop albums and Disney music. Anderson crooned about shady characters sitting on park benches doing questionable things (‘Aqualung’ by Jethro Tull) and the wonders of cooking in the kitchen with your true love (‘Wondr’ing Aloud’ by Jethro Tull). I soon bought many rock songs from the 1970s on iTunes, spending most of my birthday money and cash. I fell hard for the music and lyrics of The Doors, and admired the poetic lyrics of Jim Morrison. My peers did not listen to this classic rock, and could not relate to many of my obsessions with these legendary artistic figures. I decided that I did not care about sticking out, as these songs were too important to me, too influential to my development as a person.

My first favorite alternative band, Belle and Sebastian, is often described as melodic, pleasant, and even twee. This word, ‘twee,’ means both cute, dainty, and unthreatening. The band’s frontman, Stuart Murdoch, absolutely hates this term, and instead refers to the band’s genre as independent, or indie pop. Throughout high school, I grew to love many other indie pop bands, such as Scottish Camera Obscura, British Allo Darlin,’ Australian The Lucksmiths, and Swedish Acid House Kings. I knew that popular music, the music of popular radio stations, sold out arena shows, and music videos featuring infamous product placement, often did not appeal to me. As fourth year students at University of California, Davis, my boyfriend and I listen to music constantly in the car, at home, and at music venues, including our place of employment, Mondavi Center for the Performing Arts. Music fandom has always been act of love for me; the power of musical connection has not only connected me to my musically adventurous soul mate, but also my best friend and lifelong love. I feel very fortunate to be exposed to so many types of music, including the indie rock sounds of underground artists, punks, and folk singers.

In retrospect, I felt little connection to the messages of popular tunes during high school, and found myself searching for a different sound, one that defied the norms of pop – the hyper-auto
tuned voices, the generic sounds of computer generated backing vocals and extremely universal and usually vague experiences. I do not remember listening to the popular boy bands, Justin Bieber, or even Disney stars during middle and high school. Instead, I actually continued to define my identity as a popular music outsider, without realizing it. My best friend Molly and I decided to dress up as Joey and Johnny Ramone from The Ramones for Halloween during seventh grade. Let’s just say, well, we got some pretty confused looks from teachers, assistant principals, and curious students. When Molly went to math class, and proceeded to sit in her assigned seat, the teacher grew angry. Due to our long black wigs, black tee shirts, black jeans, punk makeup, and sunglasses, no one could really recognize us. There was a certain freedom in the culture of fan anonymity. Becoming part of the collective liberated us from our worries, our bullies, and our middle school environment. The math teacher demanded that this wig-adorned unknown punk vacate the seat of a petite female student. Laughing, Molly removed her wig, and her true identity was revealed. I think that this experience was the first time I felt at home with my own identity. I felt comfortable as Johnny Ramone, proud to represent the punk culture and in doing so, resist everything militaristic, capitalistic, and exclusionary about middle school. Maybe punk really is just about resisting, or maybe it is about allowing yourself to feel things, really experience life, in your own way. Maybe we were really just nostalgic about a different era. As Carrie Brownstein in her memoir *Hunger Makes Me A Modern Girl* explains, “There was a certain stillness about the past, a clarity, the way it had been somewhat defined and dissected, in the rearview mirror; it was there for the taking, for the mining. The old songs, the old movies, the black-and-white pictures created a visual and aural time machine” (Loc 179). In other words, by transporting ourselves to a different era, we could be “free” (179) and unbound by present day music, culture, and environment.
After pursuing a bachelor’s degree in American Studies, I realize that perhaps my dislike of pop music relates the patriarchal and hegemonic values of the music industry. Producers define sounds, instructing artists to tailor art to a certain acceptable form of expression. I see such censorship as quite stifling, and maybe even appealing, for music stars who are interested in the business rather than the art. Throughout junior high and high school, teachers and adults thought I was shy and passive, but I felt misunderstood. I had all these opinions, about love, art,
music, competition, and consumerism, and I began to see elements of my own personality in various indie pop artists. Murdoch’s introspection about the sadness of a fox lost in the snow (“Fox in the Snow” by Belle and Sebastian) was unlike anything I had ever heard on pop radio.

*Belle and Sebastian at Mondavi Center for the Performing Arts in Davis, California.*

I am proud to announce my identity as an indie pop fan, but recently discovered the music of riot grrrls, or punk rock revolutionaries. The harsher, louder sound of punk is not what I generally gravitate toward while listening to music. However, I realized the many possibilities of the Do It Yourself punk attitude and punk platform to express anger, frustrations, and contradictions through lyrical arrangements. Music fan identity, much like that of social identity, is ever changing and evolving. I often wonder what the riot grrrl message means to me, as well as to young girls and women across the United States. To really understand the riot grrrl message, and why I find this message relatable and powerful, I will further investigate both the
works of Patti Smith and Carrie Brownstein, two leaders of the fan based community activism surrounding gendered issues in the music industry. How do Smith and Brownstein inspire riot grrrls and fourth wave feminists? What does it mean to be a riot grrrl? What does it mean to be a fourth wave feminist blogger or musician? These questions have often inspired my own fandom, and obsession with the influence of great women in music. I plan on addressing these research questions through my perspective as a fan, and a rather obsessive fan at that. Fans maintain a powerful role in the riot grrrl feminist community, and often the lines between fan and artist are blurred. As I currently stare at the acoustic guitar that I brought with me to my apartment in Davis, I chuckle a little at my attempts to blur my own fan-artist identity. I want to emphasize that riot grrrl provides many young women and girls with the role models, the community, and the opportunity, to continue to pick up that guitar off of the ground, and strum along, despite challenges, anxieties, and stresses. Maybe one day, I will be able to rock out on that guitar. But for now I am perfectly content to write about the music, write about the experience of a riot grrrl fan. I am not an expert musician, or even really a very knowledgeable feminist, despite what I tell people sometimes. Instead, I am just trying to understand my musical identity, and hey, maybe I will help someone else think about their fandom in a different light. Maybe you will look up some of the artists I discuss of Spotify, and later buy their songs, but as music is really about personal connection, all I can ask you is to consider the eternal power and nature of music, and maybe dance in your room when nobody is looking. Just make sure to turn the music down past midnight, especially during final’s week. Through the autoethnographical method, I will describe my experience as a music fan, through memories, and hopefully somewhat humorous musings. I am one of those people who thinks that they can tell a pretty good joke sometimes, but more like subtle jokes that usually do not get bounty of laughter from an audience. Hopefully
everyone reading this will find some humor and joy in my autoethnography, as I constantly discover both elements in the music. I will also analyze the memoirs of Patti Smith and Carrie Brownstein, as well as complete a close reading of music and feminist articles, riot grrrl bloggers, and significant lyrics. In the second chapter, I will continue to discuss zine culture and fan venues of communication, including video, blogs, and social media. At the end of my autoethnography, I will include a listening guide to ten of my favorite riot grrrl songs, both danceable and poetic.

In the second chapter, I explore the work of fan communities, bloggers, and underground artists. The British singer Kate Nash, known for songs such as “Merry Happy” and “Foundations,” recently began a new online movement called Girl Gang. Nash, an artist familiar with both pop songs and riot grrrl punk history and melodies, released her first Girl Gang style album, Girl Talk, in 2013. Since then, Nash’s community of bloggers, artists, and fans have defined a punk girl power revolution based on equality, diversity of voices, and creativity. I will explore how such new media movements, fueled by Nash’s Girl Gang, Smith and Brownstein’s narratives, and the activism of transgender punk rockers, propel forms of accessible, intersectional feminism to the forefronts of critical race, gender, and music studies. Feminist punk rock erases the barrier between artist and performer, encouraging an anti-capitalist and anti-patriarchal, Do It Yourself cultural discourse.
Chapter 1: Smells Like Riot Grrrl Spirit (Yes, I am referencing Nirvana with this Title)

Defining the Punk Genre: Definitions and Explanations

What is it about punk? People generally look concerned or at least surprised when I tell them I am a huge fan of punk music. What do they assume about punk? Maybe that the music is loud, abrasive, angry. And generally, punk is fueled by anger, frustration, or raw emotion.

According to Larry Starr and Christopher Waterman’s *American Popular Music: From*
Minstrelsy to MP3, rock music became significantly more mainstream during the 1975, which left younger musicians feeling alienated and in search of a new sound and musical environment (423). Punk provided the space to escape the commercialism of late 1970’s rock, in which producers controlled the process, defining the sounds of artists as well as the political messages in many instances. The previous rock era of the 1960s and 1970s seemed to be a thing of the past, with artists more concerned with the opinions of labels and industry. The trajectory of auto tuned voices and derivative melodies became ever more apparent during the 1980s. I, too, enjoy many of these disco-inspired songs, but post-1980’s mainstream music never regained the authenticity of earlier decades. I say this decline in creativity is due in large part to the influence of the all-mighty dollar and the racial, sexual power hierarchy in the music industry, but we will discuss such ideas a little later in the analysis.

Some young kids did not see rock as the proper venue to express frustrations with the capitalistic values of the time period. Others were just looking to rebel against the older generations, rebel against the often “pampered, pretentious” ethos of later rock music, including arena rock and glam rock (Starr and Waterman, American Popular Music 423). Punk rock, forever influential but most prominent from 1975 to 1978, served as a rebellion against the consumerism and commercialism of popular rock, through a grass root platform.

The phrase Do It Yourself, or DIY, contributed to the genre, providing an ethos which encouraged so-called amateurs to pick up guitars, sing their hearts out, and ask their friends to join the band. Punks did not need professional instruction or radio ready melodies; instead, punk rockers emphasized the emotional power of the music. Scholars argue that in such a sense, punk was anti-musicianship, and indeed many punks thought musicianship was exclusionary and based on wealth, accessibility, and privilege. Third and fourth wave feminist punk rockers often
adopted the punk ethos to disrupt the mainstream systems of oppressions perpetrated throughout traditional rock and popular music. Starr and Waterman explain that “Punk was as much a cultural style - an attitude defined by a rebellion against authority and a deliberate rejection of middle-class values - as it was a musical genre” (Starr and Waterman, *American Popular Music* 423). Punk musicians and fans valued the “raw vigor and minimalism of this movement [and] went on to create distinctive regional music scenes in Los Angeles; Minneapolis; Seattle; Athens, Georgia; and elsewhere” (Starr and Waterman, 423). New wave music, with a slightly more reggae and electronic-synthesizer sound, grew as a contemporary style to punk, as a resistance to rock’s popular lyrics and guitar riffs. (Starr and Waterman, 423).

Many early and well-known punk bands, such as the Ramones, New York Dolls, Talking Heads, and The Cramps, are highlighted and discussed throughout music websites, reviews, textbooks, and fan culture. The lack of acknowledgment of the vast contributions of women in punk signals a key patriarchal influence in the music industry and culture. Throughout the memoirs of both Patti Smith and Carrie Brownstein, as well as the work of punk feminist bloggers, fans and musicians, the riot grrrl experience is finally receiving media attention and circulation. Without the efforts of women in punk, the music genre would not have evolved into a progressive, political, creative, and activist platform for many individuals to organize and speak up for civil liberties and human rights.

**Fourth Wave Intersectional Feminism: Meanings and Communities**

Throughout recent history, people of all identities have gathered to discuss ideas of equality, sexuality, desire, and creativity. Community organization leads to networking and powerful interpersonal connections. Small groups of individuals also provide support and a safe
platform to discuss issues and concerns. The feminist movement utilizes platforms of open communication and support in order to spread political messages and help women in need.

Fourth wave feminism began during the internet age, as a response to the popular notions that the work of feminism is completed. In a sense, some individuals suggest that society has reached the post-feminist state, in which women are treated equally in every sphere of daily life. Further, women born during the 1990s and 2000s have been told “that sexism and misogyny are over, and feminists should pack up their placards” (Kira Cochrane, The Guardian, “The Fourth Wave of Feminism”). However, at the same cultural moment, “women in the public eye were often either sidelined or sexualized, represented in exactly the same way as they had been in the 70s, albeit beneath a thin veil of irony” (Cochrane, The Guardian). The group, which I refer to as fourth wave intersectional feminists of the twenty-first century, utilize new media in order to combat popular stereotypes, as well as the invisibility of women’s voices. Through personal narratives and community discussion, new media feminists work to alter the discourse surrounding women’s bodies and identity. The online platform provides accessibility, as people around the world can talk to each other through chat formats.

For example, new media feminists utilize YouTube and the music video format in order to express concerns and represent agency. As discussed by Kristin J. Anderson in Modern Misogyny: Anti-Feminism in a Post-Feminist Era, “Even though women have made progress in terms of their numbers as pop stars and musicians, the roles they play in music videos are as sexual objects used by men [...] [Women] are pushed, grabbed, and slapped by men in videos. African American women are even more sexualized and abused than white women” (Anderson, Modern Misogyny, 77). Anderson links the objectification and hypersexualization of women of color with the pornography industry. Additionally, Anderson suggests that “Former pornographic
film directors can be found directing music videos and former porn stars can be found starring in them” (Anderson, *Modern Misogyny*, 77). Even though some feminists link pornography to freedom of sexual expression, the type of sexualized violence often depicted in music videos often overpowers the potential sexual agency of the singers and dancers. The fundamental patriarchal power play between producer and artist removes much of the agency of the women artists.

Through the Do It Yourself, grassroots efforts of riot grrrls and new media feminists, artists can take hold of their own agency and make their own decisions regarding fashion, dancing, singing, and style. The powers of choice and consent are absolutely essential in the process, as reclaiming agency allows women to find sexual and political empowerment. In my analysis, I will further discuss music videos which exemplify the punk rock, feminist ethos, including Kate Nash’s “She Rules” and “Free My Pussy.” Throughout her interviews about feminism and community organizing, Nash repeatedly honors the efforts of women in rock and roll, as well as early punk rock. She mentions the extreme significance of Patti Smith’s music, memoirs, and empowered attitude throughout the music scene.

Further, intersectionality suggests the importance of recognizing our multitude of identities, including but certainly not limited to the spheres of race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, ability, disability, and class. Intersectional feminists purpose that the many aspects of identity maintain interweaving histories, and develop according to societal discourse and discussion. For example, women of color in music videos are represented in socially constructed manners, according to the histories of both racism and sexism, and their complicated intersections. Therefore, intersectional feminists work to build a community of diverse voices and opinions, and encourage involvement. Whereas early first wave feminist movements often
perpetuated transphobic sentiments, prohibiting transgender women from feminist discussion, intersectional feminists realize that the voices of transgender individuals should be made visible and legitimized in order to fight for equality and representation. For instance, many bloggers are advocating for an inclusive riot grrrl environment, and criticize the previous trans invisibility of 1990’s riot grrrl (Trans Activist Takes On the World). The author of the WordPress blog, Trans Activist Takes On the World, considers whether or not the original riot grrrl movement maintained sentiments of transphobia, or feelings of ambivalence toward trans rights and people. Bikini Kill, led by well-known riot grrrl Kathleen Hanna, did not promote trans rights during the 1990s, and the band has been linked to “Mr Lady Records,” a label which sometimes encouraged transphobic messages (Trans Activist Takes On the World). The record label spoke of a “womyn-born-womyn” policy, promoting the transphobic idea that trans women are not “real” women, and are instead invading women’s spaces (Trans Activist Takes On the World). Kathleen Hanna recently spoke in support of trans people and trans groups, changing her ambivalent sentiments of the 1990s. Additionally, many riot grrrl spaces, such as Kate Nash’s Girl Gang, emphasize the inclusion of people of all identities and ethnic backgrounds. The accessibility of the Internet, blogs, and forums has allowed punk artists and DIY bloggers to change the scene of riot grrrl, and work toward an intersectional movement, based on equality, access, and freedom.

Patti Smith and Carrie Brownstein: Defining a New Sound and Message in the Punk World Through Melodies and Memoirs

Part 1: Patti and Being Punk to the Core

“I protested vehemently and announced that I was never going to become anything but myself, that I was of the clan of Peter Pan and we did not grow up” (Just Kids, Smith Loc 149).
Patti Smith begins her compelling memoir with these words of reflection, resistance, and childhood wonder.

Known to many as the true Godmother of Punk Music, Smith rebelled against expectations, defining a spiritual, independent identity throughout childhood and adolescence. Smith describes early instances of confusion and frustration regarding the gendered expectations of those assigned female at birth. As she puts on a shirt, at her mother’s request, and watches her mother perform “female tasks” (*Just Kids*, Smith Loc 149), involving makeup, red lipstick, and perfume, Smith feels a sense of treachery, betrayed by family values and the social hierarchy of femininity. Smith dreams not of these gendered tasks, items, and messages, but instead of magnificent journeys defined only by the possibilities of travelling, tasting, breathing, playing, and living fully. With or without conscious realization, Smith defied the assigned parameters of life, often marked by particular road maps, signs, directions, rules. Punk to the core, Smith oozes confidence, defining a unique sound and voice of powerful, creative expression.

Throughout the opening chapters of her memoir, Smith retells the events of her early adolescence, and her ultimate goal of becoming an artist. The path of the artist, however, is never clearly defined or expected or encouraged, as young Smith first attended school to become a teacher in New Jersey (Loc 296). Smith became pregnant during high school, facing unjust demonization from the school board and peers. Soon, Smith gave birth and the child was adopted by a family. She remembers being “incapable of tending to an infant” (Loc 226) and “[relieving] the boy of responsibility” (Loc 226). In retrospect, Smith describes that “He [the father of her child] was like a moth struggling within a cocoon and [she] couldn’t bring herself to disturb his unwieldy emergence into the world” (Loc 226).
Teenage mothers, including Patti Smith, face overwhelming stigma and shame based on the hierarchy of power and sex. As discussed by the theorist Foucault, sex and sexuality have been continually sensationalized and discussed at great institutional lengths throughout history. For instance, religious leaders, and state legislators ask individuals to provide information about sexual deviancy and possible sin. The discourse, or dominant, socially constructed meanings of language, around sex continually shame individuals in gendered, raced, and classed manner. In particular, Foucault analyzes why “sex [has been] associated with sin for such a long time […] What paths have brought us to the point where we are ‘at fault’ with respect to our own sex?” (*The History of Sexuality*, Foucault 9). Smith, from a very young age, faced gendered stigmatization, and was blamed for her pregnancy. The father of the child was not involved in the process, and Smith was left to fend for herself, in terms of both body and spirit.

Instead, demonstrating her courage and determination to the punk ethos of resilience despite oppression and repression, Smith describes her resolve to become an artist, and her true self. During her pregnancy, Smith remembers feeling such panic and depression, but then a “full possession of [herself]” (Loc 244). In a passage that I found particularly moving and inspiring, Smith continues, “I would do my duty and stay strong and healthy. I would never look back. I would be an artist. I would prove my worth, and with my new resolve I rose and approached the kitchen” (Loc 244). Smith saw freedom in art, as self expression allowed her to form her identity and tell a message of survival and perseverance to her family, friends, and fans. However, a creative career, one of music and song, is not an easy pursuit, and women in artistic fields are often stereotyped as either asexual or hypersexual. The position of extreme visibility and invisibility in the industry would not stop Smith from pursuing her dreams as an artist. Smith, as well as other women punk rockers, moved away from the traditional hierarchy between producer
and artist, and instead employed the Do It Yourself method to speak and perform directly to audience members.


**Part 2: Growing Up Punk and In Love**

Throughout Smith’s life, she keeps her faith and hope despite enormous struggles, including poverty, homelessness, and hunger. Her faith was rooted in Christianity, as well as her
desire to be an artist, and her determination to overcome her anxiety, depression, and loneliness. To me, the fact that Smith often describes the importance of religion in her life makes her even more of a punk rocker. Of course, people are often surprised that a punk would have faith or spirituality, as many believe that punk musicians and artists are often agnostic or atheist. Defying aesthetics of genre tradition allow punk rock women, along with riot grrrls, to defend intersectionality, at a personal and political level. After all, I find the most liberating aspect of the riot grrrl philosophy to be about the ability to make the choice, regardless of traditional associations and expectations. Additionally, the choice to be religious, or spiritual, does not exclude a person from also identifying as a rebel or riot grrrl. Similarly, the decision to be a sexually active woman should not exclude her from religious, conservative, or other traditionally heteronormative spheres. Smith’s agency proves the multitude of the intersectional, complex riot grrrl identity.

Patti Smith fell in love at a young age, emphasizing her choice to be in a loving relationship and partnership, while expressing her independent and determined identity at the same moment. One of my favorite narratives of the story occurs when Smith meets Robert Mapplethorpe, her true love, friend, and partner in Brooklyn. She is originally fascinated by how “he looked quite different in his white shirt and tie, like a Catholic Schoolboy” (Loc 459). At the time, Smith had just travelled to New York City, without money and with emotional and physical trauma from her difficult pregnancy. She emotionally recalls that “By the end of [her] first week [she] was very hungry and still had nowhere to go. [She] took to sleeping in the store. [She] would hide in the bathroom while the others left” (Loc 459). When Smith agrees to go on a date with a stranger, in hopes of eating a good meal, the man later pressures her into joining him in his apartment. Fearful of the man’s intentions, Smith notices the friendly face of Mapplethorpe
passing by. Smith had just met Mapplethorpe a few days before this important encounter, and felt an immediate connection to him. They soon became fast friends and supporters, united through the common passion for art and music. Mapplethorpe, who Patti affectionately called Robert, became an influential photographer, often shocking and surprising audiences with his depictions of nudity (“Patti Smith Remembers Life with Robert Mapplethorpe,” NPR). The pair grew together throughout their life in New York City, united by their love and dedication to art and a type of spiritual connection to their chosen media. Smith shares her idolization of Joan of Arc with Mapplethorpe, along with her promise to fulfill her creative self. Smith remembers how, “he responded that the drawing was symbolic to his own commitment to art, made on the same day. He gave it to [her] without hesitation and [she] understood that in this small space of time [they] had mutually surrendered [their] loneliness and replaced it with trust” (Loc 515).

I find their relationship very powerful, as Smith and Mapplethorpe connected through the mutual passion for art, and through complete love and respect, erased the system of power altogether. They created their own world, their own time and space, their own artistic platform. Indeed, identity formation positioned both Smith and Mapplethorpe as outsiders, which also molded them into independent thinkers, artists, and original punk rockers. Smith describes Mapplethorpe as “her knight” (Loc 515), as he rescued her from personal alienation and self-loathing, while she inspired his work and essentially saved his artistic soul.

_He wrote me a note to say we would create art together and we would make it, with or without the rest of the world (Patti Smith, Just Kids, Loc 686)._
Part 3: Defining the Punk Sound as a Woman Rocker: Cultural Meanings of “Gloria: In Excelsis Deo”

Often cited at her most famous and influential song, “Gloria: In Excelsis Deo” expresses many of Smith’s anxieties and ambivalences regarding her teenage years and early music career. Smith’s voice throughout the song is best described as haunting, creeping, reclaiming power and self identity. When I first heard Smith’s legendary song, “Gloria,” I was indeed intrigued by her sultry and poetic voice, and the intensity of the melodic arrangement. As a music fan, I listen to my favorite artists on a daily basis, humming along to the familiar sounds and words. I even listen to Irish folk music one minute and then the early years of The Ramones the next, and find myself not often surprised by what I am hearing. When I recently heard Patti Smith’s song “Gloria” for the first time, I felt an overwhelming connection to her persona and musical identity. Smith’s words seem to float off like a mystical enchantment of sorts, one that I cannot seem to get out of my head.

Notably, Smith begins the song with the crooning message: “Jesus died for somebody’s sins but not mine” (Smith, “Gloria”). Many of Smith’s lyrics discuss the Church, and references to the Bible. Smith addresses her spirituality in a non-conventional manner, questioning organized religion but also reflecting on the importance of worship to create art. When I listen to the first lyric of the song, I imagine the tendency of governmental leaders, police officers, and others in positions of power to blame the victim, to blame the survivor. Instead, Smith proclaims that Jesus did not die for her sins, but presumably the sins of the patriarchy, and people who try to condemn women for expressions of sexuality and desire. At the same time, Smith uses the line referencing Christ to state her liberation from any particular religious institution. She often
discusses her adamant faith in Christ and Christianity, but her lack of allegiance to a certain religious institution (Songfacts.com).

During her 1976 performance on Saturday Night Live, Smith performed “Gloria” in a profoundly subversive, independent performance. Smith dressed in a button down white shirt, a black tie, and black pants, reminiscent of her outfit for the album cover of *Horses*. Her signature midnight black hair covered much of her face, and she spoke directly into the microphone, staring at the audience. As she grasped the microphone, she sang the song about pursuing a romantic and sexual partner with determination and pride. Viewers were originally shocked at Smith’s cover of “Gloria,” which was originally written and performed by Van Morrison of The Doors (Songfacts.com). Smith proposes sexual liberation and fluidity through her crooning of the song, as she does not change the gender pronouns or Gloria’s name.

While listening to the song, I find myself feeling anxious, and yet inspired, by Smith’s careful singing and intense tone of voice. I think that her presentation and voice is indeed intentional, representing the uncertainty associated with women expressing sexual desires and needs. Smith sings, “The words are just rules and regulations to me,” resisting the dominant culture of heteronormativity. Her voice, defiant, defiant, and almost sarcastic, suggest that she does not mind being an outsider, in music, life, and her career, and instead that she embraces her unique identity. I believe that Smith chose to cover the song, because of the narrator’s astounding confidence and pride about their bodies, desires, and actions. Additionally, her singing style totally shocked the music industry. Never before had a woman artist sung with such imperfection, emphasizing strange crooning, and occasional screams. Later on in the song, Smith states that she will make Gloria her own, perhaps satirizing Van Morrison’s original objectification of a woman. Or perhaps, Smith just wanted to sing with confidence, and display
her rebellion against the masculinity of the industry. To me, this rendition of “Gloria” simply illustrates the badass work of a woman rocker, punk, and revolutionary.

**Modern Girl and Punk Rocker: Carrie Brownstein’s Fandom and Artistry**

Carrie Brownstein, known as half of the comedic duo of the television show, *Portlandia*, began her career in music, following the nontraditional path laid out by Smith and other women in rock. Brownstein, and Fred Arminsen, create iconic characters in the fictionally real place called Portlandia, reflecting on alternative - dare I say, hipster - culture and media. Brownstein, notable for her feminist bookstore-owning character Toni, has been a leader in the riot grrrl community for many years. She began her career as the guitarist, singer, and songwriter for the legendary feminist punk band Sleater-Kinney during the 1990s. The band defined a contemporary type of riot grrrl, rebellious, contradictory, and often ambivalent. Brownstein wrote lyrics about always being hungry, and feeling compelled not to eat, due to societal sexism and body size shaming. In the very same song, “Modern Girl,” Brownstein reflects on whether or not television and film can make her happy, or just more of a consuming force. Sleater-Kinney tackled the important questions, including what it actually means to be a “modern girl.” Is it the makeup you buy at the local boutique? Is it cheering for *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as she slays yet another demon? Is it eating a salad at lunch because you feel body shamed? Sleater-Kinney asked these questions sometimes through melodies, and other times through intense, punk, jangly screaming.
When I first listened to Sleater-Kinney, I identified with the band’s ambivalence regarding culture and subculture. The band did not shy away from politics, medicine, and religion. Instead, in one of my S-K favorites, “Call The Doctor,” Brownstein and the band call out sexist, patriarchal culture for shaming women and attempting to “sterilize” women. Whenever I hear the song, I think of the efforts to limit women’s access to birth control as well as reproductive health care centers. The lyrics include the statement, “I’m no monster, I’m just like you.” I find this empowered idea of standing up against reproductive injustice extremely powerful and important. The all-women punk rock band identifies the stereotypical stigma associated with women’s reproductive rights. Often, politicians, governmental leaders, and other authoritative figures, blame women for sexual desires, pregnancy, as well as sexual assaults and violence. The victim, who is also a survivor, becomes a “monster,” shamed and blamed and called horrendous names throughout media coverage. Indeed, many of the public figures are
merely protecting their own connections, interests, and corporate sponsors, despite the inhumane consequences. Power and privilege are hidden from the public eye, as all the harsh media attention falls on those women who are most vulnerable. I very much appreciate Sleater-Kinney’s efforts to highlight the inherent gendered and racial power hierarchy and system of shame. The seamless integration of messages of social awareness and feminist theory with everyday experiences of sexism and reproductive injustice inspired many riot grrrls across the United States. Additionally, Sleater-Kinney’s unique, harsh, punk sound was created, written, and performed by women.

In her recent memoir, *Hunger Makes Me a Modern Girl*, Brownstein gives fans a unique behind-the-scenes look into her life as a musician, actor, writer, and comedian. She also proudly identifies as a fan, and describes fan culture as a form of art itself. As she writes in the beginning of her narrative, “My favorite kind of musical experience is to feel afterward that your heart is filled up and transformed, like it is pumping a whole new kind of blood into your veins. This is what it is to be a fan: curious, open, desiring for connection, to feel like art has chosen you, claimed you as its witness” (Loc 89). As you can probably tell by this quote, Carrie Brownstein is actually my own personal spirit animal. As she describes it, this “desire for connection,” motivates me to research favorite artists, write my own lyrics, and proudly display my fan tee shirts and gear at any possible opportunity. It is like when you see someone wearing your favorite band’s tee shirt, and you are able to look at them with a certain level of connection of understanding. The bond between fans is that of commitment, dedication, and mutual obsession with artists, many of whom neither fan has ever met in person. But it doesn’t matter. All that matters is the ability to listen, to feel something while listening to the second chorus that makes everyone feel a bit more united. This type of musical connection makes us kinder, stronger, and
eternal. Brownstein’s words remind me of that feeling I get when my beloved, obscure riot grrrl or indie pop music plays at the local coffee shop, the grocery store, or the department store. I silently sing to myself, the music brings me a little slice of joy. Certainly, utilizing these buzzing bonds to spread fourth wave feminist ideas of intersectionality, diversity, women’s rights, and inclusivity becomes extremely potent and powerful.

According to Brownstein, the fan ideology of idolization, love, and music obsession, inspires many young people to embrace their creativity, contradictions, and personality. Attending concerts, listening to real, live music, further solidifies the bonds between fans, and in a destroying the patriarchy kind of way, erases the power hierarchy of the music industry. Live shows are the definition of DIY culture, as the artist communicates directly with the fans, feeding off of the screams, the energy, the electricity. The musicians are just people, just people leading others in songs. The communal space of the concert, often orchestrated by riot grrrl bands, encourages discourse in an open, safe space. Once again, the riot grrrls create subversive (safe) punk spaces, fighting against the sometimes rougher, violent spaces of traditional punk bands. As Brownstein explains, “[She] needed to be there - to see guitarists like Kim Warnick and Kurt Bloch of the Fastbacks or Doug Martsch of Treepeople play chords and leads, or Calvin Johnson and Heather Lewis from Beat Happening, in the wholly relatable threadbare T-shirts and jean shorts, enact a weird nerd sexiness, strangely minimal, maximally perverse” (Loc 155). Fan culture, and riot grrrl communities in particular, are very much about body empowerment and inhabiting your own body. The physical environment of the concert space incorporates bodies moving together in one united movement of melody, quite literally pulsing to the beat. Working together toward a common goal of liberation, visibility, and equality. Furthermore, Brownstein explains her own experience at shows, and how “[She] needed to press [herself] up against small
stages, risking crushed toes, bruised sides, and the unpredictable undulation of the pit, just so I
could get a glimpse of who I wanted to be” (Loc 155). The physicality of the concert experience
related to body and sexual liberation for Brownstein, who learned about gender fluidity, along
with feminist discourse, through her favorite music.

Throughout her memoir, Brownstein also analyzes the influence of legendary riot grrrl
bands, including Bikini Kill and Bratmobile, on her own musical career. She remembers the
lyrics of the Bikini Kill song “Feels Blind.” Brownstein includes the lyrics: “Look what you have
taught me. Your world has taught me nothing” and “As a woman I was taught to always be
hungry… We could eat just about anything. We might even eat your hate up like love” (Loc
665). Reflecting on the culture of stigma and shame regarding women’s bodies, these Bikini Kill
lyrics represents the confrontational and activist nature of riot grrrl. Riot grrrls take societal
hatred, stereotypes, and violence, and stand up against such injustices in a communal manner.
Feminist punk rockers then shift the conversation to women’s rights and progressive change
through artistic methods, including lyrics, blogs, posters, discussions, and melodies. Brownstein
identifies with the passage as a teenager, explaining that “Here was a narrative [she] could place
[herself] inside, that [she] could share with other people and explain how I felt, especially at a
time when [she] was a shy and fairly inarticulate teen” (Loc 665). Music provided Brownstein
with a “home” (Loc 665), or a place of comfort and empathy. She also acknowledges how Bikini
Kill and other early riot grrrl bands allowed for Sleater-Kinney to be “recognized as a band, not
just a female band” (Loc 683). Bikini Kill, Bratmobile, and Heavens to Betsy, along with many
riot grrrl bands, paved the way for feminist punk artists, fans, and fourth wave feminist
discourse.
Chapter One Concluding Thoughts and Chapter Two Preview: A Love Letter to My Music

So far, we’ve discussed a lot about women in alternative music, as well as the origins of riot grrrl music. Truthfully, I chose to talk about Patti Smith and Carrie Brownstein throughout Chapter One because they are some of my favorite artists. They inspired me to further look into this movement called riot grrrl, this movement about women picking up guitars and writing lyrics, without the commercialism, the pretense, the assumptions of pop music’s heteronormativity. Instead, they defined a new, subversive sound of punk music.

Smith and Brownstein are punk rockers, plain and simple. However, I find that their emphasis on gender injustices and feminist questions make the music about so much more. After listening to the songs of Patti Smith and Sleater-Kinney, I feel as if I have discovered a new aspect of myself, one that is socially aware and constantly observing and questioning. Just as Brownstein felt at home during those early Calvin Johnson and Heavens to Betsy concerts, I feel as home while listening to my favorite music, with my loved ones. I don’t feel small while listening. Instead, I feel as if I am a part of a giant, powerful, loving, DIY collective. And that brings me such fulfillment, that love, passion, and community pulsing through me throughout each and every day.
Chapter 2: 
Riot Grrrl Fandom, Free and Wild 
By Rachel Levin

Introduction: Who are the fans? What do we WANT?

Fans are often thought of as obsessive, nerdy, odd individuals who have too much time on their hands or frankly, not enough to do. Now, when I say that I proudly identify as a fan of riot grrrl music, I am not at all embarrassed by the stereotypical views of fandom. Instead, such social opinions seem to make fans even more endearing, special, and important to the artists, and American culture at large. What’s wrong with being a little eccentric, after all? It just seems to make life more fun.

The life of a fan of odd, eccentric, off-the-wall cultural things and events is not always a simple one. The road to accepting oneself, accepting your identity for all of its small flaws, large grievances, and unique stumblings is most difficult if you feel slightly cut off. Slightly removed from your peers, who seem to be into the popular things, and seem to enjoy it just fine. I remember when I used to try to play my favorite bands, many of whom featured women musicians and feminist political messages, during my high school yearbook class. I was the copy editor, and always thought that I should claim some of my power over the classroom music player. Usually the juniors would hog the sound system, blaring the latest Justin Bieber hit, or some country song about drinking beer, kissing ladies, and driving trucks. One day, I had enough of the popular tunes, the easy tunes, the acceptable songs for popular high schoolers. I was certainly not popular, but also not particularly sure of myself either. I took the advice of one of
my current favorite piano playing and songwriting heroes, Ben Folds. Ben tells his fans, over and over again, to “Do it anyway.”

And so, I did. I plugged in my iPhone, full of my favorite songs and melodies, many of which we have already discussed throughout this long, winded love letter to my favorite bands, feminism, and riot grrrl music. At this point, I had spent countless hundreds of dollars on these iTunes purchases (if only I had saved such money to say, buy a nice Hawaiian vacation or tickets to the next Golden State Warriors game), and I was so happy to play these songs for anyone. I was constantly making mix tapes, very High Fidelity of me, I know. Giving my mix tapes to friends and mentors and family, and later gifting these illustrations of my musical soul to my partner and true love. These songs were extremely meaningful to me, they meant everything during high school.

I think I only got to play one song, Kate Nash’s “Mariella,” before a younger student went up to the music player, unplugged my iPhone, and again plugged in her country music. My
heart was absolutely crushed. I knew that my songs were great, and I knew that they were still important. But the utter animosity and misunderstanding frustrated me. I thought about it for the rest of the day. How dare she? How dare she not even try to listen to my music? Extend me the same courtesies as I extended to the country playing cronies everyday in that class? Now these questions seem cruel to me, as she probably didn’t mean to hurt my feelings, but more likely didn’t really care too much. Of course, anyone who knows me knows that I probably would never actually say any of these things. It just hurt. How I longed for a community. A community that wouldn’t sneer and chuckle as I played obscure 1990’s punk stuff but instead cheer, gleam, and pat me on the back. I did not know where to find such a community in high school, maybe I was oblivious to the other punk fans in my school. Or maybe I should have turned to the internet, and discovered the rich resources and thriving community of girls interested in DIY aesthetic and punk philosophies. It was not until my sophomore year at UC Davis that I discovered the possibilities of fandom. The possibilities included not only being a dedicated fan, but also becoming a respected music writer, artist, or band member. After all, riot grrrl is all about picking up a beat up instrument you bought from a local garage sale, joining a group of some similar minded punk girls, and playing your hearts, without shame, fear, or gendered hierarchy.

In the following chapter, we will explore the coming of age story of the fan, the point in the process in which fan and artists identities merge, and consequently, become one. Many riot grrrl artists were originally just fans, like you and me, not accomplished musicians or producers. Many societal judgements and prejudices condemned this “wannabe-artists” to obscurity. Instead, these women saw themselves as powerful and unique, inspired by the narratives and music of artists including Patti Smith and Carrie Brownstein. The road would certainly not be easy, or pre-planned, but it would nonetheless represent some type of musical and creative faith.
Or at least for fans like myself, the journeys of brave women musicians would later mean everything once again.

Defining Terms (Yes, There’s a Bit More of That in This Chapter): Reclamation

I have often wondered about the powers of reclamation, and if people can really reclaim a word or term, previously used in a negative context, in a positive, new way. Did riot grrrls in this sense reclaim the word “punk?” Or merely add to the many, intersectional meanings of punk. After all, I never really thought “punk” was a bad word. Maybe it is not always used in a complementary fashion. When I was in high school, it really just sounded cool, or alternative. I do, however, think the name riot grrrl carries a different kind of political weight than say, girl punk. Riot grrrl musicians took out the possible vagueness of punk, and replaced it with the clear power of women and girls, rioting. Rioting the sexism, the tears, the fear. Rioting the fact that any woman, even a University of California, Davis fourth year student, often feels badly about her size at any given point in the day. Self conscious about her skin. Always locking the car door immediately after she gets in the car. That sick feeling when the pharmacist assistant sometimes gives her a dirty look when she’s picking up her birth control. That anger, that fear, through riot grrrl, is certainly used - or reclaimed - to illuminate and create a community of supporters, and people who live in the reality of their everyday experiences. I think reclamation is indeed the ultimate act of rebellion. The process includes telling the world, that frankly, you are who you are. You love who you love. You enjoy sex with your partner. You feel everything, and you are becoming everything you have ever wanted to be.
Wonder Woman expresses some riot grrrl thoughts.

https://www4.uwm.edu/c21/images/events/2014-15/riotgrrl200.jpg

When I think of reclamation, I often think of the non-traditional memoir *Cunt: A Declaration of Independence* by Inga Muscio. The popular tale of bravery and sexual reclamation is very popular amongst feminists. The narrator documents a very personal experience of sexuality, gender, and female anatomy. Throughout the work, the narrator reclaims the word “cunt” often used in derogatory reference regarding women’s sexuality and bodily anatomy. As the author writes in the memoir’s Introduction, “Cunt is a celebration, not only of cunts but of all life. Cunts are life, as are pricks, kneecaps, fingernails, the tails of tadpoles, redwood needles, and the dandy red soil we taste between foreteeth and tongue” (xix). Instead of viewing women’s sexuality as an inherently negative and perverse element of life, or as just a vessel for reproduction, the narrator identifies the power of owning one’s desires and valuing consent, and expressing one’s body in creative, original, and unique manners. Many women are never taught to think of their bodies as important, meaningful, and worthy of self-exploration. Instead, women and teenagers are told to hinder their desires, and forget about their sexualities, especially if they identify as queer or identify outside of the socially constructed norms. Further,
Cunt explores how community, friendship, love, and safety education, women and trans people can find peace despite societal sexism, rape culture, and victim and survivor blaming discourse. Derrick Jensen, who writes the Introduction, continues that “If we are to survive we must reclaim our planet from those corporations which - and people who - are destroying it. But even before this, we must reclaim our own bodies and our hearts from that same grasp. Cunt helps us do that, helps us find our way back to our cunts, pricks, elbows, kneecaps, and perhaps most important of all, our hearts” (xxii).

Additionally, I see both reclamation of sexual identity and desire, along with musical composition and fandom, as all very bodily oriented experiences. Feminists place extreme value on the bodily experiences of people who identify as women. To feel the blade of grass on your skin, the soft caress of your true love, the hot mocha scorching down your throat. These bodily experiences, often stripped from women due to sexual violence, and objectification, must be taken back. I think that the perfect illustration of reclaimed bodily power occurs when a riot grrrl fan attends a concert. The fan feels the electricity of not only the music, but all of the other fans jumping in a synchronized motion. Such power expressed in an often tiny, strange space. The beads of sweat falling down her brow, the hand of her lover grasped tightly as the move to the rhythm of the base guitar. She knows every single word to Sleater-Kinney’s song “Jumpers,” and is certainly not afraid to let anyone know. Her hands raise, fingertips to the sky, addressing some benevolent source most people think does not exist, but she secretly hopes does exist in some way. She is not afraid, anymore. She merely enjoys the music. She feels like herself. She admires the poster she made, which is now hung up on the wall of the club, and checks to see if any other fans are admiring her handiwork. Several other women smile at her and clap in the beat of the music. Oh, to be a fan. Oh, to be a feminist.
In a essential passage of *Cunt*, the author mentions that: “We women have a lot of responsibilities [including] seizing a vocabulary for ourselves, actively teaching ourselves to perceive cunts - ours and others’ - in a manner generating understanding and empathy, taking this knowledge out into the community, learning self-protection, seeking out and supporting other cuntlovin’ artists, businesses, media and role models, using our power as consumers, [and] keeping our money in a community of cuntlovin’ women” (xxix). The tasks of reclamation also applies to riot grrrls. By either playing music, or participating in the full time job which is fandom, riot grrrls reclaim their bodily identities and spirits.

The riot grrrl community also provides financial and friendship support to numerous women and feminists of all gender identity, further contributing the the community’s reclamation effort. The *Do It Yourself* philosophy of riot grrrl also encourages women musicians and fans to resist the various patriarchal tendencies of the mainstream music industry, including the gendered and raced power hierarchy of producers, artists, and consumers. Riot grrrl further emphasizes inclusion, and the current day movement highlights the contributions to music made by women of color, as well as trans punk rockers. Riot grrrls include people of all gender
identities and sexualities through zine culture, live concert policies of safety and community support, and songs embracing a multitude of identities. This visibility, which honors these women and encourages others to pick up their guitars and sing about important feminist issues, is extremely different than the typical, sensational, stereotypical portrayals depicted in the media. Trans women, riot grrrls, and women of color should be allowed to voice their opinions and beliefs, without the patriarchal emphasis on their processes of medical transition or life before coming out as queer.

Part 1: Girls to Fans, Fans to Bands, Bands to Revolutionaries and How Feminism Saves Lives

A Riot Grrrl Message.

http://40.media.tumblr.com/6f9eaf342be55ce190e99d8cc261b3ad/tumblr_ngwis2JTOZ1u1na7ro1_500.jpg

In the following sections, we will discuss the origin stories of several prominent riot grrrl bands. Many of these groups rose to riot grrrl fame during the 1990s, at a time when women were told that they no longer needed feminism. Some theorists proposed that women, during the 1990s, had achieved equality with men, and therefore feminist work could and should cease. This, of course, was certainly not the case. Women and people who identified as queer faced
tremendous persecution and oppression at the workplace, in the home, and on the stage, if they happened to be in a band. Foucault’s ideas of sexual hierarchy and systematic sexism were certainly prominent in 1990’s American culture (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*). Foucault, in *The History of Sexuality*, explores how the discourse of female passivity and purity relates to false stereotypes and assumptions about sexuality. Riot grrrls wanted to talk about sex, but not in a safe, fearful, traditional way. Instead, these women decided to embrace sexuality and gender queerness, and encourage all gender identities to feel proud and confident about their bodies and selves. Girls and women were sick and tired of this message of false equality, and the early riot grrrls knew that in order to make a stand, they would need more numbers, and a louder sound. The louder sound was created to be heard and recognized, but also because they wanted to express the right to be loud, the right many punk bands claimed prior to the riot grrrl revolution.

*Kathleen Hanna and Bikini Kill: Path to Riot Grrrl Identity Formation*

![Image of Kathleen Hanna and Kurt Cobain](https://41.media.tumblr.com/9a6552de0dcf8e258fe13080e74099f7/tumblr_myqopw0Q0e1qim2pno1_500.jpg)
As Sara Marcus writes in *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution*, “In the beginning, someone told a girl to start a band” (Loc 385). Indeed, in 1989, Kathleen Hanna was only nineteen years old, a student at Olympia’s Evergreen State College. Like many of her peers, Kathleen’s education included “beer and pot, sleazy guys, big hair, small-scale heavy metal and reggae concert [...] women’s studies class, which seemed to have nothing on the syllabus besides Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*” (Loc 385). Kathleen started out just like me, and just like you: as a die-hard fan of an obscure cultural figure that received recognition in a particular community of eccentric college feminists. Her hero was Kathy Acker, author of the cult classic Blood and Guts in High School, which “tackled female sexuality head-on and took an ax to literary form [through] contradictions, ruptures, and refusals” (Loc 398). Acker’s work inspired Kathleen in many surprising ways, and eventually impacted the essential ethos of the riot grrrl movement.

*Kathy Acker Quote.*

Furthermore, these main themes include the importance of self-confidence, and the necessity of rebellion against the traditions of patriarchy, and sexual and racial hierarchy. In a similar fashion, I identify with many of my favorite riot grrrl artists because they do not avoid topics including women’s sexuality and sensuality. Far too often, in popular media and music, women are objectified, and treated as sexual objects to be used by men. However, when a woman wants to talk about her own sexuality and desires, she is often shunned by societal discourse, and expected to recant any sexual acts or expressions. The system of social sexism and patriarchal punishment is deeply explored through riot grrrl’s loud protest of such injustices. Instead, riot grrrls reclaim words previously associated with female deviances, and sing about the significance and legitimacy of women’s sexuality. As Kathleen read the work of feminist Acker, she highlighted a key passage from the text. Acker explains that: “We don’t hate, understand, we have to get back. Fight the dullness of society. Alienated robotized images. Here’s your cooky ma’am. No to anything but madness” (Loc 398). Kathleen’s favorite books also told the narratives of women facing abuse and violence, which included depictions of fragmented memory. Our memories are often preserved as meaningful bits and pieces, and traumatic experiences are not often recorded chronologically. Instead, the pieces come to us in the form of pictures, sounds, and jumbled words, which can be powerfully conveyed through music and melody. Many women saw riot grrrl as a helpful platform for expressing worries and traumas, and the music served as a way to heal, and as a way to feel better.

In a similar fashion, the fragmented, noisy, and loud style of punk feminist music illustrates narratives, far “too complicated to be told through typical narrative” (Loc 398). After all, the politics of mainstream music, often based on the hierarchal relations between producer, artist, and consumer, make it necessary for feminists to utilize a punk, DIY style of writing and
lyrical composition. Riot grrrl music sounds abrasive, and to some ears harsh and even unpleasant, but I believe that this is indeed the point of the genre. Disrupt listener eardrums, in order to disrupt the influences of sexism, racism, and ableism ever present in the music industry and society at large. Listening to a riot grrrl song should not be easy. Instead, it should make the listeners think about their world, the issues of sexism and gendered discrimination, and call them to action. Kathleen took action, and tried to contact Acker, in order to discuss feminist issues. Acker, interested in this discourse as well as communicating with her fans, told Kathleen she could meet with her. During their meeting, Kathleen was totally star-struck, but did not completely agree with Acker regarding the effects of sexism for men. Kathleen believed that “men benefitted from sexism” (Loc 419), while Acker thought that everyone was emotionally or psychologically harmed by sexism. Even though Kathleen was at first discouraged by the open disagreement, she later realized that the ability to discuss issues and disagree with one another is completely necessary in the feminist community. Acker later suggested that Kathleen sing and start a band, in order to voice her opinions and important feminist causes (Loc 434). A similar type of mentorship and encouragement, despite potential disagreements, exists throughout feminist punk spaces and DIY communities. After all, the core of the riot grrrl movement has always been the community, and each individual is meant to inspire others to express themselves in creative, healing, and positive ways.

Later on, Kathleen started her first band, called Amy Carter, with a few of her college friends. The group “got together to discuss their own art and the work of trailblazing feminist artists such as Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, Sherrie Levine, and Cindy Sherman” (Loc 434). Once again, these young women were connected through a mutual admiration, or fandom, of prominent women thinkers, artists, revolutionaries, and feminists. A type of spiritual pendulum
exists throughout the history of feminist punk bands, which involves admiration, devout fandom, and nostalgia for the DIY aesthetics of the 1990s. The artists relate to fans, while the fans do not feel intimidated or quantified by the artists. Instead, both parties value community and love above business, and therefore art above money and power. Additionally, feminists realize that community support is especially important for women who face prejudices, violence, and sexism each and every day. For instance, riot grrrl zines often encouraged young women to share experiences and stories through accessible print media. According to the Feminist eZine, “Sassy, a popular teen magazine from the early nineties, published the addresses of several Riot Grrrl zines, many of them were forced to stop production, because they couldn’t handle the flood of mail they received. [...] This was a testament to how zines validated girls’ experiences and made them feel that they were not alone” (Schilt). Honest community allows us to express ourselves, without judgment and the condescending stares often present throughout pop culture. The narratives of other young girls and women provided those in need with a safe home to turn to, and a safe space to share, heal, and be creative.

Kathleen Hanna performing live.

http://41.media.tumblr.com/948150614e5d3e3f3ba16638fb12d2c3/tumblr_ngphqhXJa01reck6no1_500.jpg
When she was not singing her powerful songs, Kathleen worked at a domestic violence shelter called Safespace, “doing crisis counseling and giving presentations at high schools on rape and sexual assault” (Loc 486). Kathleen believed that creating a safe environment for these girls and women to discuss their experiences and heal, was extremely necessarily and far too often overlooked. She soon formed a band inspired by the bravery and stories of the survivors, called Viva Knievel. Her music directly corresponded to the narratives of these courageous women, and was made to help them heal, and feel safe and supported in a community of women warriors. Numerous other women spoke to Kathleen after her concerts, and shared with her their own narratives of domestic violence, abuse, and survival. As she did at the shelter, Kathleen would “find a quiet place away from the crowd to listen to each girl in turn, tell her it wasn’t her fault, help her identify supportive people in her life, and urge her to call a local crisis line” (Loc 486). Her work with both fans and women at the shelter taught Kathleen about her passion for feminism and counseling. Riot grrrl musicians often rebelled against the popular notion that feminism’s work is now over, and that women have achieved total equality. Further, Kathleen saw the real and disturbing consequences of sexism, racism, ableism, and the horrors of domestic violence. As Marcus concludes, “Kathleen knew that feminism could save people’s lives” (Loc 521). In order to fight the injustice and oppression, riot grrrls identified the patriarchal and violent discourse prevalent in society, and built a community of survivors and feminists to both analyze systematic sexism and fight back through art, songs, and politics.

Furthermore, the power of the song allowed Kathleen to express her support for women in the community. The power of punk also permitted her to sing about the real issues, the sexism and domestic violence that existed in the lives of many of her friends. Punk is typically thought of as an angry genre, and the women in punk rock tell their fans that it is perfectly acceptable for
women to be angry. Far too often, women and girls are told to be passive, sweet, and perform socially constructed and gendered acts of kindness. Sometimes, most times even, we have to fight back against injustices in order to survive our daily lives. Punk as a creative outlet, for both fans and artists, represents an open, accessible, and accepting space for feminists to be themselves, talk about anything they would like, and express emotions without constructed pressures and stereotypes.

**Join the Girl Gang, Read Riot Grrrl Blogs, and Find Yourself (Myself?)**

In high school, I loved anything and everything by Kate Nash. Known for her cockney accent, similar to that of Lily Allen, Kate Nash sang of her adventures, her desires, and her thoughts in a clever, poppy way. I say along to her songs throughout every family car trip, and memorized the lyrics and melodies. One of my best friends, Molly, shared my love for Kate Nash’s music, and we often discussed her style and contributions. The song “Foundations,” and “Merry Happy” soon became my favorites. There was something just so frank and personal about her songs, and I felt like she would understand me. I immediately connected to her songs. Her lyrics seemed like a conversation, my own secret conversations that I could hold dear even when I was down or felt alone.

Nash’s 2010 album, *My Best Friend is You*, represented a stylistic change for the singer. The record featured a harsher sound, along with extremely personal, riot girl lyrics. Additionally, the album also included “I Hate Seagulls,” which remains one of the most important songs I have ever heard. Nash croons, “And I can’t find the words, to make it sounds unique but honestly you make me strong. I can’t believe I’ve found someone this kind. ‘Cause you’re so nice, and I’m in
love with you.” Her words are simple, easily understood, but ultimately hold an immense sense of meaning and importance to me, as well as many other fans.

Further, Kate Nash holds an extremely impressive musical catalog and remains dedicated to her fans and girls and women in need of support and feminist community. In 2008, Kate won the “Best Female Artist” at the BRIT Awards, proving her talent for composing creative, catchy songs, with relatable and uniquely feminist lyrics (katenash.com). Additionally, Nash dedicated herself to improving the lives of women and girls through music, artistic expression, and community. In a similar fashion to Kathleen Hanna, Nash turned to helping women and “shifting gender perceptions and inspiring a new generation of female musicians, writers, producers and technicians [through] the Rock ‘N' Roll for Girls After School Music Club” (katenash.com). This rockin’ community provides girls with a place to express themselves through music. The young students are encouraged to be loud, and shout in the face of the patriarchy. They are encouraged to play electric guitars and experiment with sound, and are never told to quiet down or act in a more feminine manner. Instead, each individual is encouraged to simply sing and compose about
issues they care about, just as the early riot grrrls did in the 1990s. Nash continues to work with “self-harming women at The Wish Centre in Harrow” (katenash.com)” and often spreads important messages throughout social media and YouTube relating to women’s mental and emotional health. Kate encourages women and girls to wake up every morning and tell themselves that they are awesome, important, loved, and tell everyone not to bother them. She tells her fans to always remain confident and proud, and express yourself despite people who put you down. In several interviews on YouTube, Nash discusses how the British tabloids would often draw attention to her acne in their published stories, and how this treatment tremendously bothered her both emotionally and psychologically. She describes how she often had a hard time even leaving the house in the morning due to these stories, and her intense feelings of shame and self-loathing. On her website, Nash writes a blog, and encourages fans to engage in feminist discourse and share experiences. Essentially, riot grrrl is both an in-person and online movement, creating an accessible and far reaching fourth wave feminist outlet.

Kate Nash lyrics, “Navy Taxi.” http://40.media.tumblr.com/tumblr_lmqq2d6mn1rp32b4o1_r1_500.png
Personally, though it is certainly difficult to write about, I relate to her narrative on many levels. I often suffer from eczema, which is basically just really dry skin and allergies. A lot of people have it, but it still impacts me psychologically at times. My skin allergies are exacerbated by my feelings of anxiety and worry, and just like Kate, I sometimes struggle to face the day. We are indeed the hardest on ourselves. Only with the love and support of my parents, boyfriend, friends, and community have I been able to accept myself, all of myself, and enjoy every moment of every day. But, perhaps, Kate has helped me too, in many ways which I did not realize before. I look up to her, she is, of course, one of my musical idols and one of the reasons I decided to write this thesis. She also inspired me to not worry so much about my physical appearance, or what I perceive my physical appearance to be. Instead, I walk around confident and proud of myself, determined to love this wonderful life and everyone in it. I do not know if I will ever be able to tell Nash the impact her music and community work has had on my life, but part of me knows that she already feels my thankfulness and appreciation.

Wake up every morning and tell yourself you’re a badass bitch from hell and that no one can fuck with you and then don’t let anybody fuck with you. -Kate Nash

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A Modern Girl’s Listening Guide: An Annotated Playlist of Feminist Punk Songs

“Modern Girl” by Sleater-Kinney

Sleater-Kinney is probably my favorite riot grrrl, feminist punk band, in part due to their notoriety, and fearless lyrics and melodies. Of course, Carrie Brownstein is now a very famous actor and comedian. I love Portlandia and often watch the show. The feminist skits, at the Women and Women First Bookstore, are among my favorites, as you might have guessed. However, as discussed throughout this projects, many fans do not know about Brownstein’s first and arguably most important career and artistic work as a feminist punk musician. Her band, Sleater-Kinney, defined a punk rock sound, sometimes acoustic and sometimes hardcore. The band’s lyrics express the general anxieties and ambivalences of young girls and women in the United States. “Modern Girl” may sound soft, acoustic, and without the typical screaming and shouting involved in Sleater-Kinney songs. It is certainly an honest song, and something about the opening chord progression just sounds real. Carrie’s voice is ambivalent, and anxious, and perfectly ironic. Of course, she sings, “My whole life, looks like a picture of a sunny day.” But what exactly is this treasured “sunny day?” Is it achievable for “modern girls” to achieve the pure, unadulterated happiness of a sunny day in a world of sexual harassment, and workplace prejudice? Perhaps playing in a band, or listening to music, allows us to get closer to the sun. The music becomes very distorted as the song progresses, and I absolutely adore the technique. Riot grrrl music is traditionally distorted, resisting the auto-tuned culture of the popular music industry, and the big money and patriarchal influence of pop producers. Distortion relates to Do It Yourself aesthetic, and is very anti-corporate machine, if you know what I mean. But really, the distortion in “Modern Girl” reminds me of the constant noise, blaring throughout the air, and often our dreams. I’m not just talking about the year long construction project at my Davis
apartment (I awake to bulldozers every morning, but as you might imagine, I often blare music in response). I’m talking about the sexist whispers, the cat calls, the dirty looks. The pressure of the beauty ads, the television shows, the music, fitness, and entertainment industries. I love these industries, but then again, I hate them. All I hear is the noise.

http://images.shazam.com/coverart/t40961116-i912881087_s400.jpg

“Rebel Girl” by Bikini Kill

Certainly one of the quintessential riot grrrl songs, “Rebel Girl” by Bikini Kill is also one of the best songs to dance around to in your bedroom. The iconic chord progression, defined but punk band spirit, might be difficult to listen to at first, because of the loud, abrasive sounds and nontraditional melody. I guess one might say that the song is hardcore punk, due to the standard DIY, anti-production sound. However, after multiple listens, the music fan truly feels immersed in this girl power, feminist punk revolution. Essentially, lead singer Kathleen Hanna croons about her admiration of a woman, and her desire to become exactly like her icon. Hanna’s subject of awe is strong, kickass, and does not succumb to any type of patriarchal force or
intimidation. Everyone around knows just how badass this girl is, and frankly, fears her power and pizzazz. Certainly, women are often written about in songs as obtainable objects, or forces of desire or sex. Many popular songs sexualize women. However, these tunes are still considered fun, poppy, innocent. Hanna’s lyricism addresses these particular gendered stereotypes by featuring characters who are gender queer, punk, and unconcerned with the status quo. The band cleverly plays a military sounding beat throughout the song. The march of the rebel girls becomes a force to be reckoned with, and Hanna hopes to join the ranks of her feminist and punk friends.

Further, Hanna claims that this rebel girl is the strength of the revolution, and the “queen of the neighborhood.” Individual women and girls are often considered small, and unimportant by mainstream media and society. We’ve all heard the discourse before. Oh, well, she’s just a little girl. Or, teen girls just gossip and gossip, and they don’t really know anything. Bikini Kill strives to redefine the word “girl” as the ultimate source of power and opportunity. They identify women and girls as the people with the true power, who must be respected and honored like the royals in the United Kingdom. Girls are not insignificant. They are not small and passive by nature. They are whatever they damn want to be, and Bikini Kill provides the theme songs for this reclamation of identity, body, and spirit.
“I’m So Excited” by Le Tigre

I have always loved the classic “I’m So Excited” by the Pointer Sisters. Many of us know this song, and may feel that funny little feeling of embarrassment whenever it accidentally plays for our friends or family. The song is essentially about the excitement associated with being with your love and the powerful force of intimacy. It is also full of unadulterated fun, and an honest representation of the feelings of giddiness and completeness which love gives us. I chose to include Le Tigre’s cover version of “I’m So Excited,” because it also makes me want to jump and dance with glee. Kathleen Hanna is also a member of Le Tigre, along with Johanna Fateman, Sadie Benning, JD Samson. The band, which formed in 1998, defined a gender and trans inclusionary riot grrrl methodology and sound. All members adorned the same clothes during performances, defying gendered expectations and stereotypes. Le Tigre can certainly be classified as genre bending as well, as the group composes punk rock songs with a strong electronic sound. The band does not shy away from the use of synthesizers, and other electronic beats, in order to create anthems of identity reclamation and queerness in music. Many of Le Tigre’s songs draw on the works of other famous artists who identify as female, and the works recognize the importance of community contribution in legendary women’s careers. Due to the electronic beat of many Le Tigre songs, I often think of these songs at riot grrrl, political revolution dance party anthems. To the dance floor!
“Redondo Beach” by Patti Smith

One word: Morrissey. Morrissey, the British indie rock legend, known for his band The Smiths during the 1980s, classic coiffed hair, and strict vegetarianism, has always been one of my absolute favorites. Now, I am sure I already mentioned Morrissey earlier in my thesis, but I would just like to mention him again for good measure. But not just randomly. His song, “Redondo Beach,” describes the state of apathy, sadness, and inner confusion often felt in response to violence and isolation. Or so I thought.

Actually, this song was originally written and performed by Patti Smith, my godmother of punk rock hero. She wrote it about an argument with her sister (Patti Smith Complete). The song’s pop flavor and beat complements the lyrics of disagreement and misunderstanding. The sound is almost ska in tone, which reminds me of my love of Gwen Stefani’s No Doubt career. Smith’s version of “Redondo Beach” is now certainly my favorite, as it sounds so raw, and so real. I don’t think anyone could dislike this song. No offense to Morrissey’s version either, since
I still do listen to the Moz’s recording when I feel like it. However, I wish Morrissey’s version would have paid a clearer tribute to Smith, as the song is truly her work of creative genius. And now I’ve officially said one critical comment about Morrissey, which I can assure you, is a very rare thing for me.

Conclusions and Reflections: WWPSD? (What Would Patti Smith Do?)

I’m not really sure how I can conclude my thesis in a punk, riot grrrl fashion. Maybe I should do one of those anti-conclusion techniques, in which I leave the reader with a cliffhanger, or simple do not even include a conclusion. But I feel like that would be too boring, maybe even expected? Well, here’s my try at a punk rock thesis conclusion. I hope Patti Smith would approve of this conclusion, and maybe one day she will read it (hence my title, WWPSD?).

I often hear people talk about what music does for a party, a special occasion, a family gathering. Music is supposed to make the environment fun, or relaxing, or perhaps provide
simple background noise. But really, music gives us so much more than that. It is a gift, a gift of community and shared experiences. Riot grrrl songs, as well as indie pop melodies, classic rock tunes, and folk Americana standards, make me feel at home more than the bed, the kitchen table, or the chairs. My favorite moments include listening to music with those I love. Now, I’m not going to write this and tell you what to listen to. Maybe you don’t even like punk (if so, thank you for reading this whole thing). But maybe you do. Or maybe you’re looking for a supportive community or friends or a family. The riot grrrls offer all of that, and even more. Sometimes I think to myself that if I can embody a type of strong, feminist, punk rock hero, I don’t have to worry anymore. With my loved ones by my side, I can accomplish anything, experience life fully, and grow up into myself. Music lets me see a new side of myself, and share her with the world. Punk rock teaches me that I have so much to give. Punk rockers show me that my words, my melodies, no matter how loud or how quiet, might help someone out there searching for a friend. We each are worth so much more than we know, even though we sometimes may feel small, even tiny. We are loved, so loved. We’re worth it. You’re worth it.
riot = not Quiet

https://rebelgrrl.files.wordpress.com/2010/02/riotequalsnotquiet.jpg
Annotated Bibliography for Punk Rock Women Thesis
Rachel Levin

Secondary Sources


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