



## Women Make Noise: Girl bands from Motown to the modern

Julia Downes (ed.)

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On the back cover of *Women Make Noise* the reader is informed that in this book: musicians, journalists, promoters and fans excavate the hidden story of the all-girl band: from country belles of the 20s-40s and girl groups of the 60s, to prog rock goddesses, women's liberationists and punks of the 70s-80s; from riot grrrls and queercore anarchists of the 90s to radical protesters Pussy Riot and the most inspiring all-girl bands today. These aren't the manufactured acts of some pop Svengali, these groups write their own music and play their own instruments.

In short, this book discusses a lot of all girl bands from The Shirelles, The Slits to indie band Sleater-Kinney but I found a number of issues confusing. For example, many girl groups of the 1960s were indeed controlled by pop Svengalis (see O'Brien 2002: 77) and there is no mention of many important artists associated with Sarah McLachlan's feminist Lilith Fair (1997–1999 and 2010–present) such as the Indigo Girls, Luscious Jackson or the Dixie Chicks. In addition, I found certain terminology puzzling, such as the statement by the book's editor, Julia Downes', that, "we came to realise that our use of the term 'all-girl band' may not cohere to the ways that *all* women's music collectives and communities work" (2012: 14).

There is no denying the sincerity of the passion in which Downes' and the collection's authors demonstrate the secret history of women in popular music, but why this talk of women's music collectives and communities? It would have been useful to explain to the uninitiated reader that this collection of essays is centred on the DIY aesthetic of the riot grrrls - the zine-based, third wave feminist movement that according to Monem (2007) originated in 1991 on the north-west coast of the US, in Olympia, WA.

The chapters that follow chronicle the continuing influence of the riot grrrls on the current independent or 'indie' scene: Bryony Beynon's chapter 'Subversive Pleasure: Feminism in DIY Hardcore' looks at how girls/grrrls have fought to establish their own space, most significantly in the moshpit, within a sexist American hardcore scene; Val Rauzier's 'Queercore: Fearless Women' studies the development of queercore (queer + hardcore) music and its use to support the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community (LGBT); Elizabeth K. Keenan and Sarah Dougher's 'Riot Grrrl, Ladyfest and Rock Camps for Girls' looks at the Ladyfests, riot grrrl-inspired women- only music-art-

film-writing and gender politics festivals, as well as camps designed to encourage girls to get involved in DIY bands. The collection finishes with 'Epilogue: Pussy Riot and the Future', in which Downes offers a study of the political activities and recent arrest of this Russian music collective.

All this is fine but problems emerge when the authors believe they can rewrite history from this riot grrrl perspective. As a result this book exhibits a presupposing tendency that seems similar to historical overviews of women in music that has been critiqued by (Leonard 2007: 3):

A comparability of experience based on the premise that all the subjects under discussion are women (...) fails to acknowledge that different music genres carry with them distinct histories, performance practices and discourses that affect how gender is constructed and experienced.

There is no denying a riot grrrl perspective can provide insights into some past music genres, as Jane Bradley states in her chapter, "You Create, We Destroy: Punk Women", it is important to readdress "the contributions that women (specifically those playing in all-girl bands) made in shaping the punk scene" (156). Arguably this should work for punk because, as Joy Press observes, "with their angst-venting screams and gouged-out guitars (...) the first wave of girl punks (...) provided today's (...) [riot grrrls] with something that men take for granted: a legacy" (1997: 301), but this 'all girl band' focus often proves problematic. For example, Victoria Yeulet's 'Female pioneers in American Old-time and Country' lacks important all-girl ensembles and instead concentrates on the blues soloists Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey alongside country artists Sara and Maybelle Carter; Elizabeth Keenan's 'Puppets on a String? Girl Groups of the 50s and 60s' discusses the famous girl groups but also Carol King and the girl group influence on contemporary artist Amy Winehouse; Jackie Parsons' 'Prog Rock: A Fortress they call The Industry' studies sexism in relation to the career of prog rock band Mother Superior but also solo artist Kate Bush; Rhian E. Jones' 'Post-Punk: Raw, Female Sound' discusses The Slits alongside solo artist Lydia Lunch and the bassist of No Wave band Sonic Youth, Kim Gordon and even Bradley's study of English punk, despite her aims outlined above, focuses on individuals in mixed gender punk bands such as Poly Styrene and Siouzie Sioux.

Adopting a riot grrrl position could explain a number of other confusing issues. For example, Downes' dislike of previous studies that "focus on what it is like to be a woman musician in a 'male-dominated' music industry" (11) could explain why there is no mention of Lilith Fair, singer-songwriter Sarah McLachlan's all-female travelling musical festival of the late 1990s, which, despite "providing a [commercially successful] platform for feminist groups", reflected McLachlan's taste in "guitar-strumming melody-loving songwriters rooted in folk, pop, and country music" (Raha 2005: 225), music riot grrrls dismissed as 'PMS fraud rock'. Is it ironic that the independent 'Women's Music' movement of the 70s and 80s took the contrary position of excluding "lesbians who did not play acoustic instruments and soft types of music" (Carson et al. 2004: 100)?

Another problem with this book is the ubiquitous, DIY position that any girl can pick up an instrument and start a band. It reflects a polemical issue Deborah Wither (119) raises in her interesting chapter on the history of the UK Women's Liberation Movement 'Feminist Musical Resistance in the 70s and 80s', specifically one of the key debates at the time concerning the conflict between professionalism and amateurism: "should women reproduce male musical prowess or should they deconstruct it? Is being musically proficient elitist or, worse, patriarchal?" Given the nineties riot grrrl's "almost fanatical rejection of virtuosity" (Whitely 2000: 209) perhaps it is not surprising many of the writers in this book favour DIY deconstruction at times ignoring artists that do not fit the model. For example, Timonen's 'Truth Gotta Stand: 60s Garage, Beat and 70s Rock' notes the 70s teen rock band, The Runaways was a "combo in the vein of 1960s garage groups" (77) and makes no mention of the fact lead guitarist, Lita Ford, was "the only female heavy metal guitarist to be taken seriously during the '80s" (Raha

2005: 25). Despite talking extensively about sexism in the industry, Timonen mentions nothing of the musical ability of seventies rock band Fanny other than that they were “experienced musicians who wrote their own material (...) [releasing] five studio albums in the 1970s” (2012: 77). Is this because Fanny produced commercially successful music based on ‘masculine’ rhythm and blues? In contrast, Bradley informs us X-Ray Spex’s saxophonist Lora Logic in the tradition of the best punk DIY “squealed and skronked (...) breaking melodies apart with destructive glee (...) turning *that* into music” (qtd. in Bradley 2012: 167). There is nothing wrong with taking this position. In her afterword to Attali’s *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (1985) Susan McClary praises the “aggressively simple (...) genuine sonic noise” of the New Wave for “the raw energy of its social and musical protest” (qtd. in Reddington 2012: 113). The issue in relation to Downes book is why not acknowledge this is the predominant aesthetic position? Is not the title of the book *Women Make Noise*?

Another recurring problem is an apparent lack of familiarity with academic research in the field. For example, Bradley’s observation that prior to the emergence of punk in the 70s English society demanded “women be demure, sexless and utterly passive” (Bradley 2012: 172) reflects the riot grrrls’ lack of familiarity with the history of feminism (see Leonard 2007: 126). There is no denying this book’s importance in relation to its firsthand accounts by musicians, journalists, promoters and fans of the riot grrrls’ continuing influence on the current ‘indie’ scene, such as the postmodernist critiques of the sixties girl group genre offered by the Vivian Girls and The Pippettes in Keenan’s chapter (58), but as an appraisal of the history of women in popular/rock music this book may seem confusing and possibly even misleading to anyone unaware of its riot grrrl-based position.

## References

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