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Speculative Fiction: Social Movements Research

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Jigsaw Youth: An Exploration of the Riot Grrrl Movement

The year was 1992. Washington, D.C. was sprawling with women in leather armor and dark lipstick, sporting buttons painted with symbols of Venus and the names of bands like *Bikini Kill*, *The Gits* and *Bratmobile*. Explicit words screamed from the lapels of their denim vests. That night, they had all gathered in one black box of a room to see their idols perform live. The band began to play and their three distorted chords shook the room. To some, the snare would be an instant headache. To the Riot Grrrls, it was part of an anthem. Kathleen Hanna, the Riot Grrrl Queen, raged into the mic: *"I can sell my body if I wanna. God knows you already sold your mind. I may sell my body for money sometimes,"* and the feminist punk rockers went wild. These Grrrls knew they would change the world. They knew that they were part of a movement. In the early 90's, punk had resurfaced, this time with new leaders: women. Women who were tired of the patriarchal music industry, women who would not allow themselves to be objectified, women who wore what they wanted, wrote what they wanted, and sang what they wanted. It was as if punk and feminism had a love child: the Riot Grrrl movement. The Riot Grrrl movement empowered young women to fight sexism, conformity and, most importantly, to love themselves.

Historical Backdrop

Riot Grrrl was primarily founded on the ideals of two major movements: punk and feminism. Feminism in the United States dates back to 1910 when women began their fight for the right to vote. American women were granted the right to vote in 1920, but the fight for

gender equality was far from over. After the end of World War II, a massive amount of women began enrolling in college and joining the workforce, a rarity prior to the war. Feminists like Betty Friedan, who started the National Organization for Women, were determined to revolutionize women's roles in education, sexuality and employment (*How Did Feminism Evolve?*, 2013). By the mid-sixties, feminism was alive and well. However, so was the patriarchal society.

Real change for women's rights began after the publication of Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963. The book addressed the undeniable unhappiness of women in the 1950's and early 1960's. Friedan shed light on groundbreaking issues like women in the workplace, rape culture, sexual objectification of women, sexual rights, etc. These were unaddressed subjects prior to the release of *The Feminine Mystique*, and therefore caused quite a bit of controversy amongst more conservative readers. That being said, the book was a fantastic hit with women, and still is today (Maslin). Friedan's fascinating exploration of women's role in society spearheaded the second wave of feminism in the western world and helped give birth to more modern women's rights movements such as Riot Grrrl.

In the early 1990's, feminist values were becoming more and more popular amongst young women, and influenced a multitude of budding artists. Young women like Kathleen Hanna were inspired to abolish rape culture (a culture in which sexual violence is desensitized and objectification is the norm,) to create equal opportunities for women, to redefine beauty, and most importantly to stop young women from feeling like they were less than because of their gender. These Grrrls' weapon of choice? Punk rock.

Punk originated in the 70's and was lead by bands like The Ramones, The Clash and the Sex Pistols. Punk was not just a genre of music, it was a culture, a lifestyle. The first wave of

punks were anti-establishment, anti-conformity, anti-capitalism, anti-authority, etc. Punk initially had a wide variety of musical genres (hardcore, psychobilly and surfpunk to mention a few.) However as the culture progressed, the hardcore punk sound became recognized as the universal sound of punk rock, especially during the second wave of punk in the 90's. Bands like *L7* and *Babes in Toyland* were formed by women who loved the idea of punk culture, but recognized that the music industry, including punk, was a male dominated place. Women were not being represented, they were being objectified and dehumanized (Maslin). Change had been a long time coming.

Significant Events/Figures of the Movement

Kathleen Hanna has come to be known as the leader of the Riot Grrrl movement. She was barely twenty-two when she moved to Olympia, Washington in 1989 in pursuit of becoming a spoken word poet. After dabbling in spoken word, she quickly realized that if she *really* wanted to be heard, she should make music (Maslin). Hanna and her close friend Tobi Vail rallied together a group of feminists, giving birth to one of the most influential underground bands of the 90's: *Bikini Kill* (Feliciano). *Bikini Kill* influenced countless other Riot Grrrl bands like *Heavens to Betsy*, *Sleater Kinney* and *Team Dresch*. These girls revolutionized the underground scene, reintroducing DIY culture and publishing feminist zines.

Zines- independently published short magazines- were a huge part of the Riot Grrrl culture. They consisted of art, poetry and personal stories submitted by Grrrls all around the world. There were an abundance of fanzines, entirely focused on Grrrl's favorite bands of the movement, that were often passed out at punk shows. There were also zines that, much like *The Feminine Mystique*, addressed groundbreaking topics like domestic violence, sexuality, slut shaming, rape and women's rights (Green). Zines were unlike any other publications at the time.

Writers were unafraid. In the zine “Blue Stocking,” a young female artist named Erika Langley even dared to document her experience as an adult entertainer. Langley spit on slut-shaming and urged women to “take charge of one’s sexual power and brandish it” (Langley).

In July 1992, when Riot Grrrl was in it’s glory, Grrrl bands across the nation gathered in Washington D.C. to host the first ever Riot Grrrl Convention. Every Grrrl zine and newsletter advertised it and encouraged Grrrls from all over the country to attend. It was an incredible success. There were performances by every Grrrl band imaginable, women’s rights protests, and rallies lead by Riot Grrrl royalty. Kathleen Hanna and thousands of other women began writing words like “rape” and “slut” all over their bodies, calling attention to the slut-shaming-rapeculture they were all living in (Marcus). The convention finally brought some outside attention to the Riot Grrrls and what they were fighting for.

Impacts

Although it was short lived, the impact that Riot Grrrl movement has had on both women’s rights and music is undeniable. “Girl Power,” a common theme found in modern pop originated in Riot Grrrl. The movement paved the way for women in the music industry, allowing them to be daring, empowering and most importantly *heard*. The movement has even produced rock royalty like Joan Jett and Cherie Currie of *The Runaways*. Sadly, even they couldn’t save the Riot Grrrl movement. Jett recalls in an interview with *Guitar World Magazine* that “Yeah, it felt powerful back then, and I don’t really know what happened...but there was always resistance from the radio. Like, only one girl gets to be played at a time” (Jett). Punk has slowly fallen from it’s former glory, evolving into mainstream pop-punk and grunge, taking Riot Grrrl with it. That’s not to say that women don’t have a more prominent role in the music industry. They most definitely do, and they have Riot Grrrl to thank for that.

Riot Grrrl lasted through the middle of the nineties, then mysteriously fizzled out in the 2000's. Nobody quite knows why. Perhaps it is because, although Riot Grrrls fought so hard to be heard, they refused the mainstream media. "The media attention had killed it, people said. Or grunge had killed it, or Courtney Love had killed it, or maybe it had never existed in the first place except as a mirage dreamed up by the press" (Marcus). All very real possibilities, but no one person or instance can be held responsible for the death of Riot Grrrl.

Conclusion

The movement may have only lasted half a decade, but Riot Grrrl music lives on and continues to inspire. There are still a few true Riot Grrrls out there, staying true to their roots by donning vintage leather and reading zines of the past, though they are few and far between. It is important to remember the women who fought for their place in the music industry and in society as a whole. It is important to remember all that the Riot Grrrls have done for music and for women's rights, for they have helped shape both in massive ways. Behind the distortion, the snare and the screams, Riot Grrrl was about something so pure, so simple: love.

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