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Riot Grrrl in ‘90s Olympia

I can’t remember the first time I heard the term Riot Grrrl. Having grown up in Portland, Oregon and then moving to Olympia, Washington at 18 years of age in 1994, Riot Grrrl seemed to be a punk tradition from back in the ‘70s or ‘80s heyday. It had roots in early punk culture and clear forbearers, but Riot Grrrl had really only been growing as a movement and music genre for a year I suppose when I began to be aware of it. Unknown to me, Riot Grrrl, was a locally grown movement that had a far-reaching effect in a relatively short time.

Riot Grrrl in Olympia in the 1990s seemed at face value very normal. Smart, cool women were playing music, making art, and maybe going to school, while maybe working at a café. Olympia was a super fun place to live. K records and The Evergreen State College were major contributors to OLY’s identity. There were constantly homegrown music and art festivals. From the International Pop Underground Convention came Yo-Yo a Go-Go which was big and there were countless other things going on. I was kind of unaware that a lot of the people I knew and hung out with were part of something, looked upon as maybe groundbreaking and inspirational to so many young people. Women were vital to the punk rock scene in Olympia. Initially, I didn’t realize this was from thoughtful actions taken by the women only a few years older than myself. The punk scene in Olympia had less of the stale-male-centered-hardcoreness of other scenes. This wasn’t an accident. The Olympia scene was conscious of feminist, queer, and transgender issues within our community so much that it was second nature.

What Riot Grrrl was, at least in the early ‘90s, was an extremely multi-faceted movement of young women challenging all kinds of dogmas and traditions. Ok yes, but it was really about playing music and having fun.

Rock and Roll music gave birth to the most interesting and viscerally satisfying expressions of art in the past century. Whether it be the music itself, visual art, or performance art, it has taken the form of pure goofy entertainment yes but it is hard to extricate Rock and Roll from the political. With its origins in early American black music it Rock and Roll was inexorably linked with the subjugated in the 20th century. But, Rock and Rolls political history has been short sided in respect to women. With only a number of exceptions, misogyny and exclusion from the boys club have been themes through out its past. Before the nineties, Rock and Roll has been a voice of the civil rights movement, the working class, the anti-war movement, the anti-establishment, the radical left, the inner city youth, and the poor. But within the industry itself women were not looked as seriously as their dick swinging counter parts. Riot Grrl stuck a finger in the eye of this construct that existed even in the political Punk Rock movement of the early nineties. Girls were sick of the punk world in the nineties mirroring the *normal* world when it came to gender.

Riot Grrrl moved the feminist dialogue forward. It is sometimes associated with *third wave feminism.* It takes head on the reality of violence women face systemically and personally. Zines were a pillar of Riot Grrrl’s wide spread influence. Riot Grrrl’s aesthetic came out of the zine in many ways. Touring groups always brought zines with them and within the zines was encouragement to write and distribute more zines. It was all about sharing experiences and finding ones voice. Riot Grrrl gave uninherited confidence to young women to write, perform, and speak. It was anti-capitalist. It was confrontational in the punk tradition but mocked the violent confrontation the male dominated scene. Mosh pits (yikes) where people didn’t feel safe were not tolerated.

Riot Grrrl came out of the punk tradition as a response to the male dominated scene that was gaining notoriety in the NW. The style carried on and poked fun at punk fashion, at the same time, always with an eye toward the dowdy grandma or fifties housewife, but with color, lots of color.

Riot Grrrl was this thing people I knew were doing that all these other people were paying attention to. This speaks to the DIY side of Riot Grrrl. Olympia was a town we could all get by in at the time with relative ease. One could work at say a pizza place, ugh-hmm, for 30 hours a week and pay rent and have the free time to explore whatever artistic or self destructive activities they chose, while surrounded by a wealth of creative and talented people with similar aspirations i.e. not wealth or fame, supposedly. There were places like the Red House, the Phoenix House, the Lucky 7 House, the Witch House, Arrowspace, the Midnight Sun, the Capital Theater Backstage and later Le Voyeur, a litany of places for music. On any given night you might trounce around to who knows how many shows.

Riot Grrl was confessional and witnessing. (Pfaff Shalmiyev 2014) It created a safe place for young women to speak out about abuse and rape. On top of that it gave women agency, whether realized or not, whether real or not, to deal with violence. Women at Riot Grrrl meetings made public the names of those who perpetrated violence against women. While this empowered women, it may have been a little problematic. Riot Grrrl was a sort of DIY remedy for people who may have needed real support with the help of mental health professionals. It was no doubt absolutely an amazing forum for dealing with problems facing young women and moved the world forward, but it created conflict within the community. As Sophia Pfaff Shalmiyev put it “this was hard because it became a bunch of really traumatized girls with raging hormones playing cop and getting very toxic.” One instance I can remember in Olympia was a group of people who started their own therapy group. With no facilitator, many participants’ feelings were hurt and in turn many friendships were shattered to this day. Much of the early momentum held by the vanguard subsided by the late nineties, possibly because of the hard truths Riot Grrl was tackling. Drugs, fame, and mental illness took their toll on many while genuine maturation may have played a part in the fizzle. Riot Grrrl is to some degree a youthful construct. It’s a “gateway drug for feminism” as Kathleen Hanna put it. But it seems more strident than that. Riot Grrl has shaped the feminist critique and even expanded it to encompass queer and transgendered issues as well. Queer men make up a significant slice of Riot Grrrl. Second Wave Feminism, to many is an academic or alien concept that can exclude those who may not fit the regimented ideals it proposes. Riot Grrrl made Feminism accessible to young teens, sex workers,

Riot Grrrl gave birth to Ladyfest in 2000. Ladyfest Olympia was substantial. Downtown OLY felt the noticeable influx of young women in town for shows, art shows, workshops and conferences that were organized. Ladyfest has spread globally. Cities on both coasts put on Ladyfest. The Sex Workers Art Shows were a pillar of the annual OLY calendar as well. When I search these things on the Internet, so much comes up. These OLY events spawned events of the same name fervor all over the place. At a Riot Grrrl karaoke night I went to here in Portland six months or so ago, my wife and I found ourselves in a packed bar or of 21 year olds carrying on the aging movement.

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