

Revolution, Grrrl Style Now!

by Leilani Clark

In 1993, I was in my late teens and thoroughly obsessed with music. After graduating from high school, I fell in love with "grunge" and male-fronted bands like Nirvana, Pearl Jam, Alice in Chains, Mudhoney, Soundgarden, Mother Love Bone, Green River, and any artist listed on the Singles soundtrack. But it was a Bikini Kill show in the backyard of a suburban Santa Rosa track home that ultimately altered my relationship to both playing and listening to music as a woman. Through Bikini Kill I discovered Heavens to Betsy (fronted by Corin Tucker who went on to form Sleater-Kinney with Carrie Brownstein of Excuse 17), Team Dresch, Bratmobile, The Third Sex, The Need, Helium, Slant 6, and countless other woman-fronted bands that eventually inspired me to start a fierce band of my own.

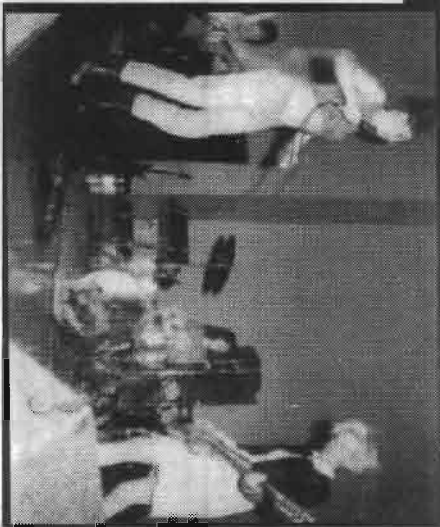
Bikini Kill started in the early nineties in Olympia, Washington, considered by many to be the forerunners of a movement towards highly-politicized, raw feminist punk; they called themselves "riot grrrls." In the blistering opening anthem "Double Dare Ya," that kicks off the band's self-titled EP, lead singer Kathleen Hanna declares over a cacophony of guitar feedback, "We're Bikini Kill! And we want revolution girl style now!" It rings out like a war cry; an invitation to fight a mighty battle. It was a song that spawned a million riot grrrls.

As I did my lonely trudge around the campus of Santa Rosa Junior College, where I was finishing up my second year of community college, I'd see these punk rock goddesses, these "riot grrrls," walking among us mortals with their colored hair and black hoodies emblazoned with their feminist fist of power. They sat on the lawn and smoked cigarettes, taking a break from lives of brazen revolutionary abandon, or so I imagined. I wanted to be one of them. I wanted

to live my life outside of the gender norms imposed by society, punk rock style. By spring of 1993, about two months before I moved back to San Diego, I became tentative friends with a girl whose name, if I remember correctly, was Melissa. She was in with the scene and told me about the Bikini Kill show coming up that weekend. I decided to go. Although I was deathly afraid of attending events by myself, it seemed like something I didn't want to miss.

That weekend, I found the innocuous, blue, stucco house, with a white fence, where the show was to take place. Melissa sat on a stool outside the gate collecting five dollars from attendees. At the time, that was the going rate for a show with three good bands in someone's backyard. I gave her my money and made awkward small talk for a minute, then entered the backyard. About thirty kids sat on the lawn, on the porch, around the periphery of the yard, waiting for the bands to start. I stood in the corner of the yard and people-watched, praying the bands would begin soon so I would be alleviated of the pain of not knowing a soul.

It was late in the afternoon and the sun shone weakly as Raouul, an abrasive yet endearing, all-girl band from the East Bay, began their set. Two fearless teen singers screeched and pawed their way through rambling, out-of-tune songs wracked with sarcasm, boasting, and a devil-may-care attitude. I fell right in with their fearless rantings, their ability to scream against the terrible awkwardness and confusion of being a young female in American society. The crowd danced with raucous pleasure as Raouul barreled through a short set of songs, none longer than two minutes.



Bikini Kill in concert

By the time Raouul finished, the sun was setting and twilight had transformed the crowd into shadows. Bikini Kill began to set up and I heard the band members talking about how they wouldn't be able to see the instruments in

the dark.

"Why don't we pull the cars forward and shine the lights on the band," suggested a guy with a blue Mohawk and a Rancid patch.

Soon, a flood of car headlights illuminated the area where the band would play. Kathleen Hanna, who went on to form feminist electro-pop group Le Tigre, drummer Tobi Vail, guitarist Billy

Karren, and bassist Kathi Wilcox, tuned up quickly, then blasted into a set of songs that began my re-envisioning: what it was to be a woman in modern American society. I was in the midst of a group of traveling, feminist warriors who had been sent to transform me into a warrior myself; singing lyrics that hit me at my heart's core. Their lyrics castigated rape, body image issues, and gender stereotypes alongside full-blown, unfettered rants against patriarchal oppression.

I drank it in—the shining car lights, the dancing crowd, and the Santa Rosa night sky. Hanna called out, "Revolution Girl Style!" and we screamed back "Now!" We were young punks, male and female, desperately wanting a new way of existing beyond what we had known before. We wanted it so bad. It was like a shot of truth to break up the muddled confusion of teenagehood. The desire to be everything in a world that might offer nothing; the map I needed to create my own way.

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