
The most attractive thing about punk is its dedication to stand against the status quo in hopes to create a more just world. Punk has been a vehicle for political movements against poverty, sexism, homophobia, racism, and other forms of systematic inequality. It is the art of rebellion, but also of deep care and love for the well being of marginalized and oppressed peoples. Punk rock has roots in activism, but like many other genres, has been converted into a commodity that lost its justice seeking purpose in order to appeal to a larger audience. This is when a band’s revolutionary potential comes into question. One may argue that mainstream success grants bands more exposure, and therefore more power to change. One may also argue that the exposure does not matter when a band must adhere to the establishment and play by its rules, further enforcing, rather than resisting, the status quo. This contradiction has emerged within various subgenres within punk. This project will focus on the way this contradiction has manifested itself in the Riot Grrrl movement by researching and following how three contemporary bands negotiate the Riot Grrrl label. At Northwestern I have designed an ad hoc major under Music Entrepreneurship to do projects like these. I have chosen classes that will enrich my knowledge and skills in music business, but I continue to value music as a powerful form of expression. This project will give me the opportunity to explore the intersection between music, identity, business, and social activism.

The Riot Grrrl movement was influenced by feminist punk zines that began circulating in Washington during the early 90’s. Zines, an artistic work particular to DIY, or “Do-It-Yourself” punk culture, are self-published booklets made of bound photocopied pages of cutout text and images that focus on a certain theme. “Riot Grrrl” zines were aimed at resisting sexism by opening a critical dialogue about “taboo” topics such as rape, incest, and sexuality. The term “Riot Grrrl” originated from a highly respected zine of the same name. It was co-written by Kathleen Hanna, a college student who was one of many riot grrrls who were interested in subverting the straight-white-male-dominated punk scene by forming bands of all or most female members and opening the dialogue through music and performance. These bands also functioned within the DIY mindset, which valued alternative ways of creation and distribution of artistic work that avoid reliance on oppressive corporate structures. The music of these bands were powerfully energetic, assertive, and included confrontational lyrics that were sung in angry screams. The sound was loud, chaotic, “unlady-like” and unapologetic. While many of the ladies had no formal training and often no prior experience with their instruments, their songs became anthems for young women all across the country. Fans of the zines and bands, identified as “riot grrrls”, began to organize clubs and workshops where woman-identified people could get together to discuss personal stories, offer advice and support, and eventually, address criticism. Riot Grrrl was not completely free from the hegemony of punk. The movement received criticism from women of color who felt excluded by the “white feminism” that controlled and dominated the efforts and actions of the movement. Riot Grrrl, in this way, enforced the establishment that oppressed many of the women they claimed to be fighting for. This tension contributed to the “fall” of the Riot Grrrl in the mid-90’s, but what truly halted the movement was attention from mass media. Magazines published negative and condescending articles about Riot Grrrl bands, zines, and interviewers would ask demeaning questions to participants. Riot Grrrl bands and the movement faced
commodification and misrepresentation when it lost its underground status. Various bands disbanded and many of the organizations ceased to continue their meetings.

The Riot Grrrl Movement has been studied in a variety of ways. Sara Marcus’s book Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution is a carefully collected history of the movement from its inception to its so-called death. This work captures the key aspects particular to the movement, and the ideologies and intentions behind the performances and zine-making, but is missing narratives from any Riot Grrrls of color. Mimi Thi Nguyen writes about Riot Grrrl regarding the criticism it received on race. She reveals the argument from women of color at the time of the movement, but never exposes whether there were bands of women of color participating in the movement. Scholar Kristen Schilt studied the legacy of Riot Grrrl, observing “angry women” artists such as Fiona Apple and the Spice Girls who emerged right after the fall of the Riot Grrrl movement. This work explores the way in which mainstream media contributed to the demise of the movement, and how artists who may have similar feminist agendas must contradict Riot Grrrl and their agendas themselves in order to gain mainstream success. Riot Grrrl is studied as a phenomenon of the past and primarily through the narratives of white women. I intend to re-examine Riot Grrrl and its reverberations in order to expose narratives of Riot Grrrl musicians of color.

To do this, I will observe three bands in their respected hometowns and throughout their summer tours. I will make two comparisons: one between a white Riot Grrrl band and a Chicana Riot Grrrl band, and the second between two Latina bands, but one identified with Riot Grrrl and the other one not. I will search for patterns in the way the “Riot Grrrl band” label functions in each band, and the ways in which these bands as “reverberations” of the movement grapple with the ways the movement and the representation of the movement lack narratives and presence of people of color. I will interview band members, the band’s promotional team or record label, and their fans, and I will also observe the band’s performance at their live shows (interview questions in the appendix). The bands are Clitoris Rex (C-Rex), a white women Riot Grrrl duet from religious and conservative town Springfield, Missouri, Fea, a Chicana Riot Grrrl and zine/epunk band from San Antonio, Texas, and Girl in a Coma, an all-Latina rock band from San Antonio, Texas that shares members with Fea.

This project was conceived from my interest and participation in feminist and Latina punk. I have taken classes that have critically explored the deviant participant in music cultures. In my Women in Gender class I read articles on Riot Grrrl and women in rock, and in my Queer Music class I wrote my final paper on the ways that sexual and gender digression affects punk authenticity. I have been studying punk culture critically since my freshman year in college. As a music entrepreneurship major, I have also gained skills in business that could be helpful in observation. I won second place in a quarter long startup pitch competition through the program Project Pitch. Through this competition I received guidance, mentorship, and experience in entrepreneurship within creative fields. This knowledge will come to use when I examine the promotional strategies of each band in relation to the Riot Grrrl label. And as I mentioned before, I participate in feminist punk rock myself as the front woman and manager of my own all-female punk band. This experience has given me a certain understanding of the types of business and artistic decisions that are made within a band. I am confident that this research will exercise my skills and enrich my knowledge as an aspiring music entrepreneur.