“Why Every Girl Isn’t a Riot Grrrl”: Feminism and the Punk Music of Bikini Kill in the Early 1990s
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In 1991, when Jen Smith, a college student and member of the little known band Bratmobile, “called for a girl riot” members of the punk band Bikini Kill had not yet met (Meltzer 11). Punk music, a subculture of mainstream rock music, “remained resolutely, with some notable exceptions, a boys’ club,” and women were justifiably frustrated by their exclusion from such an influential and unique form of expression (6). The preexisting stereotypes of women in punk hindered women’s ability to break into the genre. There would be no progression without action, and many women like Jen Smith were tired of their assumed “roles of groupie, girlfriend, or back-up singer” (Schilt 5). So commenced what would be known to the generations to come, as the Riot Grrrl Revolution.

Bikini Kill was not the only female-dominated band that thrived during the Riot Grrrl movement in the nineties. They were, however, leaders among the first, “women reclaiming punk’s radical energy for their own catharsis and general social insurrection” (O’Dair 454). The band consisted of three women: Kathleen Hanna (vocalist/bassist), Kathi Wilcox (drummer/bassist), and Tobi Vail (drummer/vocalist), and one man: Billy “Boredom” Karren (lead guitarist) (461). Historians have seldom explored the inclusion of a white male in a band whose core message centered on defying the white male patriarchy. Tobi Vail stated that Karren was “one of the best guitarists I knew”, he was an “identified feminist and a revolutionary,” and at that point the three women needed a guitarist and were willing “to compromise on the initial idea of having an all-girl group” (Marcus 52). Although Vail defends his role in the band, his visibility throughout the band’s documented career is representative of the feminist political message Bikini Kill wanted to reflect. In early 1991 the band was playing shows but not receiving the cult following they are known for today. The wheels were certainly moving but it was not until summer 1991, when the zine, Riot Grrrl, was published by members of Bikini Kill and Bratmobile. At that time, that goals were more formally set and ground was staked out to take on the revolution (Meltzer 13).

Bikini Kill embodies the Riot Grrrl Revolution during the early nineties. They took “the utmost pride not just in individuality but also in being an outcast” and empowered countless girls and women to pursue creative outlets they were previously excluded from. This website will investigate the music, fashion, and political activism of Bikini Kill. Examining each separately demonstrates the way in which they worked together to form a revolution. It became clear through the analysis of the three perspectives that the success of one depended on the success of the other. Because of the close link, the Riot Grrrl movement becomes inaccessible to girls who could have benefitted from Bikini Kill’s overarching message due to the importance of “authenticity” in regards to appreciation of punk, appearance, and political activism.

Musicology
Why Punk?

Bikini Kill created art. The band did not care about singles and catchy hooks that their fans could sing along to. They regarded their music as superior to the mindless radio products, they wanted their fans to scream to their songs, to mosh at their live performances, and to write their own lyrics or learn an instrument. Bikini Kill created safe and intimate spaces for their fans at their live shows that gave girls a chance to connect with the other concert goers as well as the members of Bikini Kill, which was a departure from the violent environments seen at male dominated punk shows. This community was able to feel connected with Bikini Kill because they chose to stay at a personable level of fame, which was why it was so unique that the band became such a sensation.

Bikini Kill’s attraction to punk music was no accident. In fact, it was a very deliberate choice. Punk music by nature is youthful, politically charged, angry, and most importantly for Bikini Kill—male dominated. Punk as a genre that “gave a generation of boys who didn’t fit the All-American Boy Scout type a new blueprint for masculinity and a license to be whatever they needed to be” (Meltzer 6). In other words, punk gave boys who defied their dominant gender norms a creative space
built for them to critique the world in which they did not fit into. However, for girls searching for the same release, there was no comparable outlet for release. The members of Bikini Kill were attracted to punk due to the “rapid tempo”, “instruments, played at breakneck speeds” “on the verge of outrunning one another and the singer” (Thompson 98). The musical composition symbolized the political and societal chaos that Bikini Kill felt women was experiencing. It may seem that punk has no order but when the dynamics of the band is broken down each band member plays a monumental part, “Kathi Wilcox’s bass guitar lines establish simple, repetitive figures that drive many of Bikini Kill’s songs, while Billy Karren’s repeated chords yield a buzz saw whine that fills out the band’s sound. Behind them, Tobi Vail beats out the rhythm in straightforward 4/4 time, while Kathleen Hanna’s vocals strike the ear as rhythmic chanting punctuated by screams” all of which contribute to a deliberate rhythmic disorder that rejects the mainstream catchy hooks and rhymes (63). Kathleen Hanna, Billy Karren, Kathi Wilcox, and Tobi Vail chose this genre to support a revolution that dispelled the mainstream that historically had held women and girls down creatively.

Punk wasn’t just the novel choice due to the emotional response it emits, it was also was a grassroots genre in which women were encouraged to learn instruments themselves and teach one another. The genre was based on a “movement that rejected technical virtuosity and professionalism in favor of amateurishness, iconoclasm, and a do-it-yourself aesthetic,” which gave women a chance to create music with no formal training (Meltzer 6). Regardless of punk’s dominating male presence, punk actually gave women more equality than any other genre. Bikini Kill recognized the versatility of punk and used it to their advantage in order to put their political message to a tune. Part of their message was hinged on getting girls and women on stage, feeling not just comfortable but confident in their ability to produce worthwhile music. While musicologists often critique the lack of skill involved in the creation of punk music in turn delegitimizing the genre, Bikini Kill revealed in “rejecting masculine notions of expertise and mastery” (Reynolds 324). In Where the Girls Are, author Susan Douglas explains the magnetism that Riot Grrrl had towards punk stating, “the reason it spoke to us so powerfully, was that it gave voice to all the warring selves inside us struggling, blindly and with a crushing sense of insecurity, to forge something resembling a coherent identity” (87). Girls and women who didn’t relate to stereotypes of pink ribbons and saddle shoes found solace in the bands of the Riot Grrrl Revolution, but for Bikini Kill, the space they carved out in punk music, specifically, held even more significance.

While punk’s rebellion towards corporate America served purpose for part of Bikini Kill’s overarching message, they were still tasked with bringing their presence as girl performers to the genre. The band wanted to bring feminism to punk, they saw the benefits of the already established “connotation of alienation and anti-establishment social discontent” but felt discontent with the “token women in punk” at the time who felt that “to identify themselves as feminists would only make their non-maleness more central” and make it more difficult to be seen as musicians (Carson, Lewis, and Shaw 91; Meltzer 8). While Kathleen Hanna doesn’t discount these women who “just want to rock”, her goals were different: “I’m into the revolution and radicalism and changing the whole structure,” she continued, “What I’m into is making the world different for me to live in” (Reynolds 327). These were the words of a driven and fed up girl who would, along with the other members of Bikini Kill, inspire a generation of girls and change the discourse of feminism for the generations to come.

**Lyrics**

The instruments played a monumental part in the success of Bikini Kill’s entry into punk, but the lyrics were what differentiated them from their male counterparts. Punk gave Bikini Kill an opportunity to sing about “subjects previously considered taboo, such as incest, rape, and eating disorders,” bridging the divide that previously existed between feminist issues and music of any genre (Meltzer 15). Bikini Kill’s most famous single “Rebel Girl” was an anthem of the Riot Grrrl Movement as it emphasizes strong friendships among girls, and the power of being a “girl”. Their lyrics brought Bikini Kill from just another punk band to a band that gripped “the imagination: the spirit is wild, but the musical fresh is puny” (Reynolds 329). The band created a balance between call to action lyrics meant to mobilize girls: “Hey girlfriend/I got a proposition goes something like this:/Dare ya to do what you want/Dare ya to be who you will/Dare ya to cry, cry outf—
their song “Double Dare Ya.” Some lyrics were aggressive and angry lyrics such as those from “Suck My Left One”: “Daddy comes into her room at night/He’s got more than talking on his mind/My sister pulls the covers down/She reaches over, flicks on the light/She says to him:/SUCK MY LEFT ONE/SUCK MY LEFT ONE.”

The latter song dealt with the issue of incest head-on in front of rowdy crowds. They changed the location of the conversations concerning women’s issues of incest, sexual abuse, and oppression from private to public. Bikini Kill used incest, not as a metaphor, “but an omnipresent threat”, a “symbol of patriarchal domination” (Reynolds 329). Survivors of incest, assault, harassment, and much more were able to listen to the music, in a crowd or alone wearing headphones and feel less alone in a society that commonly told them to hide their histories. Bikini Kill told girls through their music it was not their fault that it happened and it was okay as well as encouraged to be angry. Had their music had more exposure more girls and women could have felt less alone but unfortunately exposure was compromising to their image.

**Performance**

The lyrics written by Bikini Kill were personal and relatable to their many fans, but the band was known for their unique performances that excited and empowered crowds of girls and women. To see Bikini Kill perform live was the closest many had come to seeing “feminism translated into an emotional language,” the shows were “brutally honest, so utterly moving, and just, well, so true” and fans gravitated towards the authenticity that defined the movement (Meltzer 21; Potter 195). Recordings of the band evoked emotions from the listener due to Hanna’s vocal technique that “employs a monolithic declamation which avoids the sensuous shaping of notes,” and somehow even over the loud instruments her voice forces “the listener’s attention to the text” (Potter 196). That being said, the environment of the live show could not be captured in a recording. There was a certain group aesthetic that was present at the Bikini Kill shows that added to the experience. For example, “microphones were often passed around so that the audience could share stories of sexual abuse” giving the audience a chance to participate in the show where they clearly felt comfortable recalling private and sensitive events (Schilt 9). At times “Hanna would interrupt shows to get guys to stop harassing women, and try to relegate men to the back of the mosh pits to ensure the safety of the women dancing up front” (Carson, Lewis, and Shaw 91). Women and girls were finally able to see punk music up close, to obtain the privilege that men were born with. It may seem small but cultivating a punk concert environment that encouraged women to mosh or dance in the front row was a step towards equality and an act of hostility towards the patriarchal system that had relegated women as inconsequential.

Hanna was truly an anomaly when it came to her ability to balance music, political statements, and style during live performances. She was no stranger to performing, as a former stripper she knew “how to manipulate a gaze, then explode the ordeal of objectification by confronting her audience, pogoing out of pigeonholes or just doing a cartwheel” (O’Dair 461). She challenged stereotypical assumptions of female musicians and the Riot Grrrl Movement in every concert through her wardrobe or her dance. Concertgoers weren’t just subjected to the music of Bikini Kill but a full experience directed at their mind, body, and soul. Additionally Hanna’s “voice is a marvel of power and versatility: She can go from bored breathing sing-song to mournful sweetness to an explosion of lungs and emotion, expressing in rough but pure tones not only anger but also pleasure, pain, and transcendence” (461). This vocal versatility speaks not only to the versatility of punk but also of women, capable of so much but limited to so little. Hanna’s energy was infectious, her voice was unusually captivating, her clothing was thought provoking, but arguably most important her message was entirely relatable to girls across the nation and world.

**Label**

Bikini Kill’s decision to sign with the independent record label, Kill Rock Stars, furthered their persona as anti-corporation and gave them much more creative freedom in terms of the production of their music. Kill Rock Stars was an independent label started by Slim Moon in 1991 because he “had talented friends” whose “music and message should reach a wider audience” and had a “right to get paid for their work” (June). Punk’s rejection of corporate America meant that independent labels like Kill Rock Stars were the answer because they could still receive help with
distribution but could retain “creative freedom and access to a vibrant musical community” (Uehlein 27). Bikini Kill “avoided major record labels because these contracts could potentially threaten the integrity of the bands by forcing them to ‘tone down’ their music and change their image to include new clothing and hairstyles” (Schilt 10). Because Bikini Kill was a female-dominated band there was added stress that a record label would try to mold the image of the group into one that fit certain beauty standards that was essential for mainstream female musicians of the time. Women in the music industry faced discrimination and standards that were unique only to other females struggling in the art world. Kill Rock Stars gave Bikini Kill the ability to distribute to their tight knit fan-base without compromising their grassroots identity or their rejection of the mainstream.

The production of Bikini Kill’s music contributed to their creation of a small but committed community of fans while simultaneously limiting the distribution of their message even more. Bikini Kill’s music was released exclusively in the form of cassettes, seven-inch records, and ten-inch EPs and would be sent to listeners with a handwritten note, ensuring fans knew “there’s a real person on the other side of this transaction” (Marcus 271). Yet another defining aspect of Bikini Kill’s punk “rejection of cool” because cool was part of male culture (Reynolds 326; June). Vinyl is nostalgic, it’s authentic, and creates “a different listening experience, one involving more involvement and participation from the listener” (Thompson 131). There is more effort involved in finding a vinyl record or LP and the hope was that once a listener did come across either they would have more appreciation for the music due to the time devoted to the search. Listening to a vinyl record wasn’t about skipping to a specific song; it was about the album as a whole. For Bikini Kill, they wanted their listeners to consciously hear the music and the messages each song held. Unfortunately for the masses, vinyl wasn’t an option for many individuals in the 90s.

The vinyl production, in combination with the independent record label, made a statement but they also made Bikini Kill difficult for women and girls to hear let alone consciously hear. The band’s dedication to renouncing all things mainstream isolated their music, the revolution, and the message. The complete rejection of major-label artists, common in Riot Grrrl bands, did attempt to bring solidarity to those who were represented by small labels or not represented at all. It also showed girls that success in art did not revolve around sales and covers of glossy magazines but, at the same time, worked to delegitimize the artists who were major-label stars or girls who rather enjoyed the music put out by the mainstream labels. This became a defining feature of the movement that distanced a group of people in similar ways that the girls and women of punk had been alienated.

Subculture of Dress
Clothing Aesthetic

Bikini Kill’s clothing style reflected the freedom of expression that the movement was based on; their choices symbolized visually the contradictory nature of girlhood in the United States that their lyrics spoke to. The band’s clothing style was similar to many of the Riot Grrrl bands. The style was built upon drawing attention to the conflicting ideologies of how girls should look and act. Bikini Kill’s “penchant for dressing up like anarchist school-girls, pairing plaid Catholic school kilts, knee socks, pageboy haircuts, pigtails, barrettes, and baby tees with ripped stockings and combat boots” was not meant to fetishize their music, quite the opposite, the band members wanted to use their clothing choices to highlight confusing and frustrating aspects of growing up as a girl (Meltzer 19). Their contradictory clothing pairings acted as a commentary on the “tween” years every girl goes through when she can’t quite gather if she is supposed to be a pure little girl or a sexy teenager. In addition, their overtly girly attire told society “these girls were girly enough to carry handbags and wear lipstick but were still tough,” telling society that girls and women who want to engage in the “girly” still can be feminist while also addressing the “girl problem.”

Clothing Aesthetic

Bikini Kill wanted to prepare themselves against the criticisms they felt they would inevitably receive due to their gender. Often women in the limelight “are constrained, penalized, or rewarded based on their approximation of culturally appropriate standards of beauty” in ways that men
are not (Carson, Lewis, and Shaw 134). Bikini Kill’s style of dress came from a necessity they felt to speak to society, critics, and their fans. They were public figures and it was inevitable that they would not only be heard but also seen; therefore, it was smart for them to have created a conscious dress code that represented their message. Their style became a hybrid that could only be described as “girl power,” a term used very differently today. It “married the optimism of their pre-adolescent years with the sense of activism, and, sometimes, rage that they felt as adults”, in short it gave girlhood the opportunity to share the spotlight with adulthood and be taken seriously (Meltzer 17).

Mom Says, “Stop Objectifying Yourself!”
Their dress was representative of feminism of the moment as it rejected second-wave ideologies of appearance. It “gave Generation X feminists a uniform immediately discernible as different from the Birkenstocks, turquoise jewelry, and long hair of their mothers” (Meltzer 18). The intentional departure from second-wave feminist style was not meant to discount the great accomplishments and efforts made by their mothers, instead was an attempt to express the internal progressive third-wave ideas externally. The Bikini Kill punk fashion made an undeniable impact on the Riot Grrrl fan base. Appearance became an outright political statement, what had once been an undeniable aspect of being a girl was being brought to attention and questioned. Bikini Kill became known as trailblazers of fashion largely due to Kathleen Hanna.

Kathleen Hanna’s concert dress was one of the reasons she became the unofficial face of the Riot Grrrl Revolution. Her outfits ranged from satirical “punk parody of Madonna” complete with “bikini top” and “biker shorts” to completely topless with “SLUT or RAPE or WHORE scrawled in Sharpie marker” across her stomach (Meltzer 27, 18). The latter outfit was in reference to the idea of “self-objectification—taking what you imagine sexist guys in the audience are saying to themselves, and confronting them with it”, yet another example of Bikini Kill making the personal political in ways that had just been too taboo for the public sphere previously (18). The image of Hanna in a bikini top with “SLUT” written across her stomach was jarring at first but that was the intention. Seeing the word so casually scrawled across Hanna’s stomach wasn’t sexy, it wasn’t created for a male gaze, and it meant to desensitize the word. If a girl was called a slut, the image of Hanna would delegitimize the power the word had. Hanna didn’t want to give critics the satisfaction of labeling her a slut so she did it for them and hoped it would empower her fans to do the same. She wanted to reclaim slut in the same way that the movement wanted to reclaim “girl”. Perhaps it seems counterproductive, but the shock value was a marking of the new feminist discourse. This excessive presentation of sexuality was another example of third-wave feminism distinguishing itself from second-wave.

Bikini Kill, with their third-wave feminist ideas, wanted to make their audience uncomfortable when it came to sexuality. Sexuality was a political statement, the band wanted to their message to be clear. Their lyrics and dress complemented one another to express a message: women are not sex objects but they aren’t necessarily nuns either and they shouldn’t have to choose between two very polarized options. Bikini Kill’s dress revealed the Riot Grrrl Revolution as a very well thought out movement loaded with symbols and caricature but also hints at how young and somewhat confused they were, not old enough to know exactly who they were so they tried everything at once.

Bikini Kill’s message was centered on celebration of individuality, but footage of their concerts showed fans attending their concerts looking undeniably similar. They were an army of “short bangs”, “vintage cotton dresses with thrift store cardigans”, and “combat boots” and while it seems ironic to anyone looking back on the identical outfits, at the heat of the Riot Grrrl Revolution the girls and women saw their style as a symbol of solidarity against the patriarchal society that constrained them (Marcus 125). They were rebels rejecting gender norms of the dominant culture. The dress code that formed during the Riot Grrrl Revolution empowered some girls and women but it also created an “us” versus “them” that could be categorized through appearance. Wearing pink tails and combat boots became too closely entangled in having certain ideologies and those who deviated from the dress code, or wore trends enforced by the “dominant culture” were seen as drones of the patriarchy. This led to many judging the movement by its image and feeling pressure to conform to the attire worn by a “valid” riot girl, contradicting what Bikini Kill wanted their message to be.
Political Activism

Zines

The analysis of their genre and fashion choice supports the ideology that everything about Bikini Kill tied to making a political statement. Even the band’s name, which according to Vail, “encapsulated the nexus of sexiness and violence” and exemplified the connection between “gender, politics, and geopolitics” was connected to their rebellious message (Marcus 47). Bikini Kill wanted to “transform culture” and “change society” starting with the integration of women into punk music (Meltzer 11). They were tired of seeing the female figureheads in music rejecting feminism so they took action instead of waiting for someone else to. For Bikini Kill, however, music wasn’t enough. Their message was more general than just showing women they can rock, they wanted to educate and inspire girls and women to do anything. They broadened the movement with the creation and distribution of Zines, held and attended conscious raising meetings, and enforced media blackouts all of which were helped and hindered the development of their success in different ways.

Manifesto

In 1991, members of Bikini Kill authored “The Riot Grrrl Manifesto” the unofficial mission statement for the Riot Grrrl Revolution. Structured as a list, the manifesto is direct, angry, and empowering. It attacks a “society that tells us Girl = Dumb, Girl = Bad, Girl = Weak” along with “capitalism”, “racism, able-bodieism, “ageism, speciesism, classism, thinism, anti-semitism, and heterosexism”, it calls for support of “girl scenes and girl artists”, and above all the manifesto states, “I believe with my wholeheartmindbody that girls constitute a revolutionary soul force that can, and will change the world for real” (Hanna, Wilcox, and Vail). The sixteen sentences, each began with “BECAUSE” followed by a sentence that critiqued dominant culture and the damaging effects it had on girls and women. Punctuation, capitalization, and spelling all seem to be inventive, perhaps a comment on the patriarchal English rules learned in school. Bikini Kill reached out specifically to girls, who are often discarded as useless, and proposed this revolution that revolves around “the girl”. It called for girls to take action instead of waiting for someone else to do something about the frustrations that girls related to. This debuted Bikini Kill as not an average girl band, they were musicians who were taking a stand as feminists, rebels, resisters, and activists. This Manifesto gave Bikini Kill exposure and a cult following that could have elevated them to fame that many musicians dream of. The fandom that surrounded Bikini Kill proved that girl fans were a new powerful market. Major record labels took noticed but Bikini Kill resisted because their message rested on the rejection of “cool according to traditional standards”, in other words, the dominant culture (Hanna, Wilcox and Vail). This document was not the whimpering of girls, it was a manifesto, and it unabashedly urged girls to do it all, to “cry in public, join bands, teach one another how to play instruments, and fight back against both possible aggressors and the Man” (Meltzer 13). The Manifesto marked the beginning of zine creation within the movement. Over the next several years, “The Riot Grrrl Manifesto” was never edited; through all the critiques of the movement and internal friction the ideals that formed the revolution outlived the movement itself.

The zines that Bikini Kill created were another way that the band spread their message while remaining a grassroots movement. Zines vary greatly depending on who is creating them but the zines Bikini Kill published were “grounded in aesthetics, narratives, and iconography that emerge from the experiences of girls in the early 90s” while also complementing their punk origins by being “self-proclaimed anti-corporate” (Piepmeier 2). The Zines were punk in many ways; they were a true example of DIY; they could be angry and emotional; they were a place where girls could share stories that society deemed off-limits; they had no advertisements or sponsors and therefore did not support the corporate, capitalist America; and they were undeniably fascinating and entertaining. The similarities to zine production to independent labels is indisputable as zines were about “producing a paper unhampered by corporate structure, cash, and censorship”, almost identical to the perks of recording with and independent label (Schilt 6).

The zines acted as a response to the lyrical anger and confusion from the music Bikini Kill made. It gave girls and women a chance to respond “to the larger culture, a culture in which girlhood and womanhood are composed of sometimes radically contradictory ideas, unresolved double binds, double standards, and mixed messages” (Piepmeier 92). Zines were handed out at Bikini
Kill concerts but construction was so simple and the messages were so powerful girls across the country and the world were inspired to create their own with friends exploring issues on both personal and cultural levels. Zines gave girls yet another creative and artistic outlet that they could once again occupy like never before. They became “sites where girls and women construct identities, communities, and explanatory narratives from the materials that comprise their cultural moment” and while the political outcomes of zines may seem micro the legacy they created of females resistance and questioning is crucial to the gains women and girls have made since then (2). One image taken from a 1991 publication of the Bikini Kill zine encouraged female friendships. The image was a black and white drawing of two women in futuristic ensembles stamped with the statement, “STOP the J word jealousy from killing girl LOVE” “encourage IN THE face OF INSECURITY”. This zine creates an illustration for their encouragement of friendships among women instead of feeling envious. The stereotype of girls fighting is seen time and time again in the media and the zine, in combination with songs like “Rebel Girl”, called attention to the power of female friendships.

Blackout

Bikini Kill recognized that dominant culture was produced and reinforced by the media and decided early in their career that they would avoid it at all costs. The media was seen as a cog in the patriarchy forcing women in the underbelly of society. Zines were produced by Bikini Kill and Riot Grrrrls because they were able to take “seriously the literary, cultural, and interpersonal productions of girls and women” in ways that the mainstream media would not (Piepmeier 7). When zines alone were not strong enough of a rejection of the mainstream media the revolution made the ultimate power move: a media blackout. Riot Grrrl bands had a notoriously tense relationship with the mainstream media and Bikini Kill was no exception. They felt the media had too much control over how the world saw them and that their legitimacy was constantly being compromised through articles capitalizing on a group of “ridiculous girls”, “punch-drank off their first taste of feminism “and Vail felt they were “too often the band had been misrepresented and taken out of context, making them appear immature” (Meltzer 30; Schlit 9). This depiction of women in the media is nothing new. The second wave feminist movement was under a constant microscope and Bikini Kill was not about to let the mainstream have any role in labeling them when they felt their movement was so abstract. Their movement was about shutting down corporate faceless media outlets not about staging sit-ins at Ladies Home Journal, there seemed to be no point and Bikini Kill was pissed off.

Similarly to Hanna writing “SLUT” across her stomach, the media blackout was a strategy used by Bikini Kill to make a statement. Politically, the media blackout intended “to take power back” from outsiders who couldn’t understand the movement but their choice inevitably took potential knowledge and growth away from their revolution (Meltzer 33). Of course it is hard for artists to read magazines like Rolling Stone when they write things like, “they do things like scrawl SLUT and RAPE across their torsos before gigs, produce fanzines with names like Girl Germs and hate the media’s guts. They’re called Riot Grrrrls, and they’ve come for your daughters” but to Vail it was about “how something which was once mine and genuinely meaningful to me has been taken from me and has been made into something quite else than was initially intended” (Schlit 8; Marcus 256).

Sassy

Tobi Vail’s critique of Sassy contradicts the band’s original aim at supporting girls as a whole, and reveals that the movement was based instead on only the validation of only certain girls. Sassy, “the unabashedly feminist, indie-obsessed teen magazine whose brief publication coincided with Riot Grrrl”, seemed like it could bridge girls and the empowering feminist message of Bikini Kill together. The magazine was well circulated and met the needs of many different kinds of girls, mixing the mainstream with Riot Grrrl Revolution ideologies. Sassy serves as an example of the rigidity of the blackout, and how the movement burned the very bridges that could have connected them to fans that needed them the most. Tobi Vail condemned Sassy stating, “Not only did Sassy seem like it was for rich, preppy, private school girls, but it was upwardly mobile and embraced pop culture and a lot of traditional femininity I have been taught to reject” (Meltzer 30). Through this quotation Vail does not just criticize Sassy as a publication but also its readership, girls and teens that should be celebrated for being girls no matter what they read.
or where they go to school. She continues, “it was confusing to find them writing about my friends—and later me—because I was young and felt they were from a different social group, people who would have hated me in high school for not liking new wave or not shaving my legs or washing my hair or wearing a bra” (30).

Therein lays a core contradiction that Bikini Kill held. A direct line from the “Riot Grrrl Manifesto” is, “BECAUSE we see fostering and supporting girl scenes and girl artists of all kinds as integral to this process” (Hanna, Wilcox and Vail). This idea seems to be completely forgotten to Vail as she chastises Sassy, it’s largely female staff of writers, and arguably most importantly it’s readership full of girls and teens. Their blackout of the mainstream media ended up reinforcing the criticism that “reverse snobbery can still be elitist” as the “predominately white East and West Coast, urban- and college-town- dwelling Riot Grrrls forgot about their sisters living in places that didn’t have built-in music scenes or a feminist presence, who might have found the message just as useful” (Meltzer 34). This criticism was one of the main reasons why the movement could not survive more than a decade.

**Conclusion**

The music, fashion, and politics of Bikini Kill hold many common themes and reveal several problematic aspects of the Riot Grrrl movement. Though the band was famous for its music and fashion statements alike their political statement remained central throughout their seven-year career. Tobi Vail sums it up when she says, “gangs of girls—teenage girls in gangs all across America, breaking through boundaries of race and class and sexual identity, girls so strong together that they don’t listen to people who tell them they are stupid or that they don’t mean anything because they don’t really exist” (Piepmeier 1). Bikini Kill indeed influenced a many girls and women and showed the world that girls were powerful. The band created safe spaces for girls at each of their live punk shows but it is important to note that these spaces only validated girls who looked and acted a certain way. In this regard, Bikini Kill became a product of their own culture. Their baby doll dresses paired with utility jackets became a uniform that defined who was a Riot Grrrl; it was a way for the revolution to discern insiders from outsiders. What started as a movement committed to empowering women of all walks of life soon became a movement alienating those who did not conform.

This is a pattern that can be seen throughout many examples of underground movements and subcultures. The creation of the Riot Grrrl Revolution stemmed from feeling unwelcome in the punk scene; the message of the movement was much broader. It would be impossible for Bikini Kill to remain an underground and achieve its goal of enlightening all girls. It seems indisputable that the movement’s demise was “in part due to their tendency toward orthodoxy. Dividing the world into sellouts and true grrrls, they formed an elite, and only those who knew the language could find access” (O’Dair 272). The relationship Bikini Kill created between their style, music, and political statement restricted fans from participating in different degrees of the movement. Girls were expected to embody all of what being a Riot Grrrl was all about, or they were not a true Riot Grrrl. Because Bikini Kill “vowed never to record for a major label and ‘lose control of their image,’ this women’s movement in music proved inaccessible to the millions of women who consume pop culture”, and deprived many from a chance of feeling the power that came with the Riot Grrrl identity (O’Dair 476). Zines seemed to be the answer for girls who didn’t like punk but liked the message of the movement since they were “spaces to try out mechanisms for doing things differently—while still making use of the ephemera of the mainstream culture”, but they were not readily available to girls who were not already listening to bands like Bikini Kill (Piepmeier 191). Additionally, the movement’s college campus East and West coast origins combined with the complete mainstream media blackout created educational and economical barricades for women of lower class and women of color, distancing themselves from yet another group of girls and women.

Bikini Kill changed popular music for girls and women. The band had become an overnight phenomenon and tensions began to arise regarding the future of Bikini Kill’s career. By early 1993, “many of the Riot Grrrls felt the scene had been mediatized out of existence, misrepresented and trivialized; some refused to use the term to describe themselves, because it had so rapidly become a free-floating signifier circulating through media hyperspace” leading to many groups disbanding (Reynolds 323-4). Bands were confused by the Riot Grrrl Revolution’s sensationalize entrance into
society and felt out of control in terms of where the movement would go. The brevity of Bikini Kill’s career, however, should not discount their influence. Their mere entrance into punk-rock represented bravery that would blaze the trail and make it easier for female artists to come. As their career flourished they became “better musicians, better songwriters, better performers,” and defended their place in musical history (Marcus 272). Bikini Kill was based on inaccessibility and ironic exclusivity and it isolated them from the very girl they were supposedly trying to reach. So, in retrospect, not every girl was a Riot Grrrl but maybe that is a good thing. Bikini Girl exposed a new niche within girls, it showed society that girls like and dislike different music, different clothing, and hold different ideologies. The movement gave punk bands visibility and girls and women a new genre to follow and look up to while highlighting the need and market for strong women in other genres leading to an opening of the music industry. Every girl is not a Riot Grrrl, but in reality, every girl shouldn’t be.

Works Cited


