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Reviews of Thunder: A Film about Ferron, Sarabah, and The Punk Singer: A Film about Kathleen Hanna

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Films for the Feminist Classroom

Issue 5.1

***The Punk Singer: A Film about Kathleen Hanna.* Directed by Sini Anderson. New York: Opening Band Films, 2013. 81 minutes.**

***Thunder: A Film about Ferron.* Directed by Bitch and Billie Jo Cavallaro. Clawson, MI: Short Story Records, 2013. 60 Minutes.**

***Sarabah.* Directed by Maria Luisa Gambale and Gloria Bremer. New York: Women Make Movies, 2011. 60 minutes.**



Still from *Thunder: A Film about Ferron* (Bitch and Billie Jo Cavallaro, 2013). Used with permission from Short Story Records.

Reviewed by **Sarah Dougher**

The Punk Singer: A Film about Kathleen Hanna emerges into a larger movement of resources documenting the 1990s punk feminist movement called riot grrrl, including the opening of the Fales Library archive at New York University and Sara Marcus's brilliant history of the movement, *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution*.¹ With a tight focus on the experiences of Kathleen Hanna, lead singer for the punk band Bikini Kill, the story revolves around the intertwined personal and political challenges faced by many women who were part of this scene. Because it primarily tells the story of perhaps the most well-known celebrity of that movement, the story is highly personalized, so that some of the broader concerns of riot grrrl, and many of the internal and external critiques of the movement (such as racism and insularity), are elided for narrative coherence (and convenience). As a result, this film may be of limited use in the classroom, unless the course was designed to study either biographic film technique, the riot grrrl movement, or art as a form of political activism.

After the demise of Bikini Kill in 1997, Hanna went on to form the band Le Tigre, get married to Beastie Boy Adam Horovitz, and struggle with the effects of a long-undiagnosed Lyme disease. This film spends a lot of time

chronicling the challenges an artist must face when she is physically unable to take up the role of front-person/lead singer and must retreat to a safe, domestic space to heal. Many students will no doubt find Kathleen Hanna to be a charismatic personality, whose struggle to overcome illness and create again is certainly inspiring. There are also many electrifying live music sequences from the heyday of Bikini Kill and footage from a pre-internet time when radical feminist pronouncements seemed to have a grittier edge and greater urgency. Hanna had a great impact on the visibility of a certain kind of feminist politics in punk, and inasmuch as she contributes to a wider conversation, this film is a useful document. It is not, however, a stand-alone story of the larger riot grrrl movement, and should be considered ancillary to any study of this period or the movement.

Similarly, *Thunder: A Film about Ferron* provides a snapshot of one major player in a larger musical/political movement. Although there are a couple of films that document the contexts and impacts of the women's music movement of the 1970s and 80s (*Radical Harmonies* and *The Changer: A Record of the Time*), *Thunder: a Film about Ferron* takes a decidedly different approach by assuming viewers know the basics about the movement and the political context from which it emerged.² Primarily a piece of documentary art that delves deeply into the life and career of Ferron, the film uses hand-drawn animation and jerky, quick-cut, impressionistic views of landscapes to overlay musical performance, and intersperses the songs with interviews, archival photographs, and film footage of Ferron's career. There is obviously a close and meaningful relationship between Ferron and Bitch, one of the filmmakers (as well as Ferron's musical collaborator), but this is not explored in a depth that would give viewers a clear story of intergenerational musical connections. Fans of Bitch, whose band Bitch and Animal toured with Ani DiFranco in the United States and Europe and released two albums on DiFranco's label, Righteous Babe Records, will find intimate footage and beautiful performances; fans of Ferron will reconnect with an old friend and her music.

The film implies that Ferron's career is on the wane, since she is now retired and living in a cabin with her dogs. She describes the impetus for playing music as an overwhelming urge to make her life and experiences feel authentic; at one point she says, "I wanted to know if I was real. I wanted to know if anybody else thought the way I thought or felt the way I felt." Expressing this kind of vulnerability and exploring the basis for the creation of art in experiences of abuse is something that will resonate with many viewers, and perhaps forms the basis of connection between Bitch and Ferron, but this is left unresolved. As with *The Punk Singer*, the film's

biographical focus may narrow its use for educators; however, courses about twentieth-century US or feminist history, music studies, and the practices of putting a person's life history into film could easily include this documentary.

Sarabah narrates the work and life of Senegalese hip-hop artist Sister Fa in a more conventional documentary manner, tracing the way Sister Fa has defied cultural and gender norms to develop her talents as a singer and rapper. Finding some success in her native country, she recognizes the impact music can have in bringing voice to the disenfranchised women in Senegal by writing songs about everyday life and struggle. She then travels with her new Austrian husband to live in Berlin. Her status as an outsider in German culture gives her a new perspective, and while there she gives birth to a child and begins to reflect on her own experiences of female genital cutting. She writes songs on the subject and learns more about activism in West Africa combating the practice, which has impacted an estimated 140 million girls and women worldwide and continues to affect at least three million girls annually in Africa. She also starts working actively with an organization called Tostan that combats female genital cutting in Africa using strategies of respect and inclusion in the communication of information about this often very deeply traditional act. Having experienced genital cutting herself, Sister Fa's journey of reconciliation and transformation throughout the film is moving. Working tirelessly to promote her musical career while raising awareness of the negative effects of female genital cutting, she later has an opportunity to return to Senegal with her German band to do both. With help from her father and her aunt, she is able to educate and empower women in her home region of Casamance to reject the tradition and to improve health outcomes for girls and women, as well as villages as a whole.

The film is a sensitive portrait of a woman whose artistic life has become wholly devoted to the awareness and education music can bring to people. Educators using this film might also consider assigning readings from Nancy Naples and Manisha Desai's edited collection, *Women's Activism and Globalization: Linking Local Struggles and Transnational Politics* to analyze the ways the film explores the problems and advantages that a transnational life can have for a woman who is pursuing this kind of activism.³ Ultimately hopeful and inspiring, the film depicts strategies for education and organizing using music for social change.

¹ Sara Marcus, *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl*

Revolution (New York: Harper Collins, 2010). [The Fales Library collection](#) is documented in *The Riot Grrrl Collection* edited by Lisa Darms (New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2013).

² *Radical Harmonies*, directed by Dee Mosbacher (San Francisco: Woman Vision, 2002), 88 minutes; *The Changer: A Record of the Times*, directed by Frances Reid and Judy Dlugacz (Seattle: Wolf Moon Records, 2004), 72 minutes.

³ Nancy A. Naples and Manisha Desai, eds., *Women's Activism and Globalization: Linking Local Struggles and Transnational Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

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