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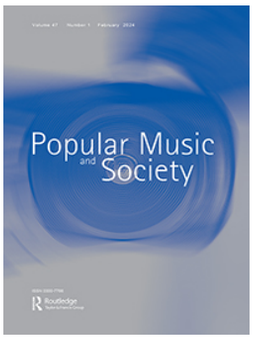

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ABSTRACT
The 2023 closing of the Rock "n" Roll Camp for Girls (founded in Portland, Oregon in 2001) was due to many factors, some of which were present in its founding. Using interviews, scholarly literature, and archival materials from the camp, this paper explores elements contributing to its end, including changing categories of gender, dynamic ideas about what constitutes women's and girls' empowerment, an altered music industry landscape, changes in technology, and rampant gentrification.

KEYWORDS
Rock 'n' roll camp for girls; girls; music education; feminist organizations; summer camps; riot grrrl

Introduction

In December of 2022, I heard that the Rock "n" Roll Camp for Girls (RnRC4G or Rock Camp) in Portland, Oregon, was closing. I was at a party, and the person I was talking to sat on the board of another youth music organization in Portland, called Friends of Noise. Her organization was in talks with the Rock Camp board, and she said they were planning to dissolve it in the spring. I immediately began to wonder: Has the Rock Camp lived out its initial vision? Why was it closing now? And most importantly, how could I approach this situation clearly and critically, without letting nostalgia cloud my perceptions?

I had been, for a short time in 2002, the first employee of the then-fledgling organization. I volunteered nearly every summer as a songwriting coach and a "women who rock" history teacher. I had even traveled to Bahrain in 2014 to produce a girl's rock camp as a cultural mission of the US Embassy. My knowledge of Rock Camp comes from the combined experiences of creating and participating in the programming of the organization, traveling to other iterations of the camp around the country as a volunteer, and facilitating the formation of the Girls Rock Camp Alliance in 2008. In addition, I have researched and written about the Rock Camp in the context of my scholarship about girls and popular music ("When Loud;" Dougher and Keenan; Dougher and Pecknold, "Girls," "Gender Identity").

In 2015, a new (and last) director was hired, a person with fundraising experience (she had been the director of a lighthouse conservancy), and very little in the way of cultural or social connection to the camp. In a 2020 interview with the *Willamette*

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Week during a holiday fund-raising effort, for example, she admits that she had not previously heard of the camp before applying to lead it, nor did she play music —"Only some barroom karaoke" (qtd. in Zusman). Although lack of a background in music in and of itself does not preclude successful administration of a music organization, I argue that it set this last director up for an often difficult and ultimately failed tenure. This failure unfortunately brought the camp down with it. I met this director a few times to talk about the camp, but I did not feel much incentive to get involved. Not only had my own circumstances changed (I was a mother of two young children and teaching full time), but also my orientation toward the camp had also changed through my research and scholarship, which had started to use the camp as a site of knowledge production, especially for tween girls (Dougher and Pecknold, "Gender Identity").

Nevertheless, when I heard about the closure, I felt sad. I also began to think about how and why it was ending now, rather than at the many junctures in the past when it appeared almost to tank completely, either through dint of human drama or simply being strapped for cash. I wondered how much of this feeling was about the camp itself and how much was really a sadness about not managing to conjure my own enthusiasm to be involved again with a grassroots feminist project about girls' empowerment and music.

The reasons for the Rock Camp closure can be traced across a set of stories, which all contribute something to our understanding and knowledge of the situation. I see value in approaching the closing of the Rock Camp through these stories, since the issues I examine arise from such disparate academic contexts, including urban studies, organizational studies, feminist theories of change, sociology, autoethnography, and musicology. Moreover, my personal connection to the institution and the city entangles me and my own stories within all of these discourses. These stories shed light on why we should think about and care about the camp's closing, and separating the issues into these stories is an organizational shape that brings different elements into dialogue. I often found that some stories cover multiple themes, and that themes twine in and out of others—it is ultimately a story with many facets.

The idea of the camp was a good one—so good, in fact, that there are more than a hundred Rock Camps for Girls all over the world now, as well as an international organization, the Girls Rock Camp Alliance (see website, *Girls Rock Camp Alliance*).[1] Sadly, however, the reality of the camp was often not as good as everyone hoped. I can't tell the whole story of the camp; no one can. The knowledge of these events is unstable, will be told and retold. There were thousands of people involved with the organization over the two decades, and lots of documentation.

With a team of colleagues, I am currently working to preserve what is left of the ephemera of the Rock Camp at Portland State University, where I teach. These other academics participated in the camp and their involvement, like mine, derives from their interest in the history of a feminist organization created to serve girls. This archival process has put me in conversation with people whose diverse experiences draw a fuller picture of the institution's 22-year run, while also helping me understand the many forces that contributed to its closure. I have interviewed board members, former directors and staff, long-time volunteers, former campers, and a colleague who used the Rock Camp as a site of community-based learning for their college course. Although many expressed sorrow and noted that the demise of the camp feels bad, many also recognized the

transition of the Rock Camp's assets to Friends of Noise as a pragmatic and logical solution.

In fall of 2021, the last executive director resigned her position, following the last camp. The circumstances of her departure are narrated differently depending on whom you ask, with people who care about this event either feeling strongly one way (that she left and there was no problem) or the other (she left and there were lots of problems). It is not my purpose in this paper to litigate either position. Rather, I think it is useful to recognize there are at least two opposing views of this precipitating event: the closing of the Rock Camp organization. Is the resignation of the director the only reason the camp closed? Of course not. It would be much simpler if that were the case. Instead, in my interviews, I found that gentrification and movements for racial and gender justice have exacerbated political, class, and generational divides within the organization's base of devoted volunteers, parents, former campers, staff, and board. There are many camps built on the same model that are still operating successfully and contending with similar external struggles (Gaia, "From Salaries;" Gaia "Combatting"). The closure of this camp can be traced to changes in what I see as the five central stories of the camp: the organization story, the city story, the money story, the music story, and the girl story.

Organization Story: What Is the RnRc4g?

Founded in 2001 as a Women's Studies student project at Portland State University, thousands of girls worldwide have benefited from Rock Camp's approach to music education, rooted in DIY and riot grrrl politics and aesthetics. With an emphasis on esteem and community building, Rock Camp took an expansive view of how girls gain musical knowledge, including through traditional rock instruments, fanzines, songwriting, self-defense, sound and recording technology, and playing in bands.

Depending on whom you ask, the RnRC4G was founded by (1) one person or (2) a collective of people in 2001. The origin story that this project was the work of a single individual plays effectively into a model of solitary striving upon which most capitalist mythology is based. Even in the process of describing the origins of the camp to my colleagues, I am never sure what to say. It was begun as a senior project by Misty McElroy, but it would not have been possible without the volunteers who taught, staffed, and ran the camp, the teachers and mentors who guided her, and the university who awarded her credit for the undertaking, the parents who trusted her with their kids, and those kids themselves who took a risk to try a new thing. This school project was turned into a 501(c)3 nonprofit, which required a set of structural elements that in many ways ran counter to the collective expression of community care that formed its moral core.

McElroy described the idea for the camp as a "natural progression" growing out of her lived experience and knowledge of the music industry: "When I went into a music store, there was never the assumption that I was a musician. When anyone talked about tech stuff they were never talking to me," McElroy reports in an interview from 2002 (kofi-bruce). She also reports experiencing the first Ladyfest in Olympia (2000) where she "saw women helping other women and I thought, 'Oh—maybe I don't have to do this by myself'" (qtd. in kofi-bruce). This combined impetus—to assert her identity as a woman musician, and to join together with other women to create culture—took the collectivist values of riot grrrl and focused them on an educational project for girls.

As musician Carrie Brownstein writes in the foreword to the book published about the camp in 2008, "Rock camp isn't music camp. The campers are not just learning technique as much as they are learning how to communicate in a way that they aren't usually allowed to" (Anderson 10). These sentiments are reflected in artistic director Marissa Anderson's observation that "Rock Camp is not only about music—it's about taking risks and being supported, it's about community and the strength that is gained by knowing you are not alone in the world" (12). The goals of the camp were revolutionary because they sought to ameliorate oppressive structures through giving girls, nonbinary, and trans youth access to the power and voice they already had. Here it's important to recognize that the mission of the camp was not simply girls' empowerment but also structural social change. What this change looked like, and how it was to come about, is another very complex question. On one level, the camp allowed girls, and their parents, to participate in and encourage empowerment activities—the development of self-confidence and skill. On another level, the camp created a counter-cultural organization that challenged the status quo on a personal and collective level.

Organization Story: Stabilization

Between 2005 and 2011, the Rock Camp experienced a period of stabilization and growth, after McElroy resigned amid staff conflict and organizational disarray (Van Fleet). The camp moved into its own space in Northeast Portland and launched the Girls Rock Institute, an after-school program that provided opportunities for girls to get involved throughout the year. The camp began offering a class called "Hip Hop Elements" and worked to create affirming spaces for nonbinary youth as they took part with increased openness. Run by a collective of women, the camp founded the Girls Rock Camp Alliance (2008) and stewarded the filming of *Girls Rock! The Movie*, a feature documentary following four campers through their experiences at the 2005 Summer Camp, released nationally in 2008. That same year, Chronicle Books published *Rock "n" Roll Camp for Girls: How to Start a Band, Write Songs, Record an Album, and Rock Out!*, based on early versions of the *Rockin' Road Map*, a summer camp program guide, as well as writing from the wider Rock Camp community. The directors of the camp started a record label called 16 Records and were celebrated in their 10th year when Mayor Sam Adams proclaimed 27 June 2011, "Portland's Rock 'n' Roll Camp for Girls is Awesome Day!" (Kolbe). The camp operated under a shared leadership model (collaborators included Jen Agosta, Amanda Paulk, Winner Bell, and STS) which drew on a wide range of expertise and personalities, as well as a close connection to the large community of volunteers, parents, and campers. As collaborator STS noted in her contribution to *Rock "n" Roll Camp for Girls*, "Programs and workshops are constantly evolving, but Rock Camp's mission to build girls' self-esteem through music creation and performance still stands as the strength and binding force behind everything we do. And everything we will do for years to come" (Anderson 23).

Organization Story: #girlboss

Beth Wooten took over directorship in 2011. She had been an organizer of the Girls Rock Camp in South Carolina, and a volunteer at the Willie Mae Rock Camp in

Brooklyn, New York. One of her first jobs was to move the Portland camp out of its original building, which was determined to no longer meet fire code regulations (although it is doubtful that it had met them in the preceding ten years). The financial crisis of 2008, together with the rise of digital dominance in the music industry, created unstable and under-resourced conditions for the organization. Wooten kept the camp going after a radical staff reduction (from five employees to two and a half). Additionally, the introduction of the iPhone fundamentally restructured how girls communicated with each other and consumed media. Nevertheless, the camp persevered, and Wooten created above all a welcoming space for queer and non-binary youth. Keeping the community of the camp together, including creating a supportive environment for camp volunteers, was important to Wooten, although she perceived that her values were not in alignment with the board. The board wanted to see growth of a different kind, partly in response to the opening of the franchise music school called "School of Rock," which provided a contrasting, overtly apolitical, for-profit model of music education (Runquist). She noted, "[The board] kind of painted me into a corner as a Debbie Downer, because my questions about their ideas were grounded in the reality of the camp, but seen as negative" (Wooten). Our conversations from that time included wondering what the phrase "moving the needle" meant. By the time Wooten was fired in 2014, Sophia Amoruso had published her book *#Girlboss*, and the version of feminism that prioritized beating men at their own capitalist game was ascendant (Banet-Weiser; McRobbie). Beth had been earning approximately $38,000 (about $48,000 in 2023 dollars), while the board of directors was dominated by women in real estate and finance. By the end of Covid, #Girlboss had largely been discredited and was blamed for toxic and racist work culture (Mull). There were serious disconnections between the actions and aspirations of the board, and the community of the camp.

Organization Story: Endgame

The last executive director of the camp helped it operate without debt for about five years. The programming shrunk, and the grant writing increased. When she began her tenure, the last director was paid approximately $10,000 more than her predecessor. The combination of Covid and the increased urgency in addressing institutional racism and inclusive gender politics created a lot of pressure in the organization to address values of inclusion and equity.[2] After a hybrid camp in 2021 marked with conflict, the director resigned. The board, which was contracting in size, undertook an eighteen-month community input and exploration process, culminating in the decision to close.

The Rock Camp Board donated its assets, including cash in hand, musical instruments and equipment, curriculum, trademarks, and intellectual property to the nonprofit, Friends of Noise. They also made what they called a "meaningful" donation to My Voice Music, a Portland 501(c)3 whose youth and young adult programs include MVM Studios, Summer Rock Camps, after school programs, and satellite sites at therapeutic centers, juvenile detention centers, schools, and other youth organizations (Van Wing).

City Story: Creative Class

One story that emerged after the Rock Camp closed was that the board had to break a lease on a building that the director had rented in the southeast quadrant of the city. The last director had signed a multiyear lease coming out of Covid. The building was on the edge of a residential area, right next to an arterial road linking the city and its southeastern suburbs. The question of finding an appropriate, stable place to hold camp and to undertake the administration had been a challenge ever since the camp had to move from its original site, an old sewing factory on the far north edge of town, bordered by the Columbia Slough. Camp location was always a major concern to the organizers. A variety of community centers, churches, and schools stepped in to host one or more camps, but no place was ever permanent. This instability made it difficult to undertake year-round programming and disconnected the institution with the neighborhood in which it had lived up to that point. The camp's move out of its original space mirrored the ongoing displacement of poor people and people of color from the Northeast section of the city toward the far east side, called "The Numbers" (Stanton and Scribes).

Changes in economic growth have impacted the cultural scene of mid-sized American cities like Portland, which in the early 2000s welcomed an influx of well-educated people seeking a rich cultural life and what sociologist Richard Florida called "creative economy" jobs. Sociologist Jeff London builds on Florida's claims, describing the ways in which Portland was in many ways an ideal case study for Florida's theories. In his study about Portland's indie music scene from 1990 until 2014, London shows how the process of gentrification was essential to the growth of the art and music scenes in Portland, while at the same time planted the seeds for an economy that ultimately priced out everyone but the most well-resourced (London, *New Portlandia*; London, "Portlandia;" London, "Portland"). London suggests "people of color, working class homeowners, and the indie music community have begun to see each other and their homes as integral to new collective strategies against unchecked growth" ("Portland" 48).

In some ways, we can understand both the successes and challenges of Rock Camp as connected to gentrification; the breakdown of community-based structures within the mechanisms of Rock Camp hastened the decline of an organization that depended upon community support and shared values. The inability to remain in one place and the steeply increasing rental market impacted both the institution and the people who volunteered, worked, and sent their kids there.

If we only understand Rock Camp as a music camp for girls and gender expansive youth, we miss the ways that Rock Camp served as an example of collective resistance masquerading *as* a conventional cultural form: a summer camp. This sentiment was pervasive throughout the life of the camp, even showing up in fundraising literature on Facebook from 2020, where the staff writes, "The secret of Rock 'n' Roll Camp for Girls is that we aren't a music program at all, we're an empowerment program! We use music creation and performance to amplify the voices of girls and trans youth and show them how to get loud, take up space, and find the power within them . . . our community has felt the transformative magic of Rock Camp for nearly 20 years, and we plan to go for 20 more!" But while this optimistic call may have brought in donations, it did not do much to solidify the community-based infrastructure which was ebbing.

The camp's origins hew closely to the organizing visions of riot grrrl and Ladyfest—that is, it carried along the idea that by giving girls and women the tools and spaces to create, gather, and organize, that some kind of movement for social change would emerge as a matter of course, that the practices of consciousness raising, political organizing, and creative expression would reflect the interests of the people undertaking it. The interests and identities of its founders and participants created the conditions of its existence, and until its last years and its engagement with wider movements for racial justice, these interests and identities were majority white.[3] When the camp was working most effectively, it had year-round programming, a paid staff, a record label, a youth advisory board, a functional board of directors, and education for girls in a wide variety of musical genres. The combination of the economic exigencies of a rapidly gentrifying city, together with the cultural and political distance between administrators and volunteers, created conditions that were not ideal for a strong future.

City Story/Money Story: Rent Seeking

According to Portland's alt-weekly *Willamette Week*, the relationship between the vacancy rate for rentals in Portland and the price for rent show a connected pattern over time (Wheeler). When vacancy rates are low (that is, there are fewer available properties), the rate for rent increases. Commercial and residential rents have been steadily increasing since 2009 following the economic crisis in 2008 and, although his pattern is true for any capitalist housing market, it holds special implications for the issues of an organization depending on the volunteer labor of artists and musicians. The rate for a one-bedroom apartment currently hovers around $1,500. A recent study reports that to live comfortably in Portland, you need to earn approximately $74,000 annually (Redden). When the camp closed, the Executive Director was paid $57,000, while the Program Director earned $42k, and the Community Engagement Manager a mere $33K.

The economic changes that Portland has experienced in the past twenty years, especially with the impact of Covid, have created a situation that makes it even more difficult for a small nonprofit to stay afloat (Chikoto-Schultz and White). The last executive director of the camp was able to keep the doors open, but at great cost to the thriving of the organization itself. Long-time volunteers and former staff bristled at the gala-style awards ceremonies that formed the centerpiece of the fundraising year. Many who had been involved in the camp for years asked, Why put one person on a pedestal? Why trade in the market of fame? Why objectify one woman musician out of all the women musicians that make up the community? There were real stylistic and ideological conflicts between the foundational culture of the camp and the realities of keeping the program functioning for another year.

I'd like to draw on the concept of "punk damage" as a way to understand some of the divergence of philosophy when it comes to money and fundraising for the Rock Camp. This term was coined by the editor of a zine-turned-book of vocabulary called *The Lesbian Lexicon*. "Punk damage" is "the sordid underbelly of self-limitation that comes directly from having come of age in a punk scene; often marked by an extreme distaste for the making or spending of even small amounts of money" (Anntonym 16). Although meant partially in jest, this idea

nonetheless holds resonance for many of the community members who were involved with the pre-2015 iterations of the RnRC4G. In addition to operating on a shoestring for the majority of its existence, the political orientation of the relationship between money and music was most often that money created conditions that exploited girls and women and was on the whole a corrupting force. Additionally, as Klein recognizes, this is a position that pervaded the evolving independent music industry in the U.S., with Nirvana—a band with geographical and cultural connections to the Rock Camp—being perhaps the most vivid cautionary tale (Klein 80). A frequent theme of skit humor for campers was the story of an outside industry man who comes to camp to scout the next big thing in the form of a single girl star. The "girl band" in this skit assertively reject his offer and they kick the guy out, ultimately overcoming the lure and downfall associated with commercial temptations, and instead finding security and fulfillment in having fun with each other.

Money Story: Be Your Own Boss

The problem with money is foundational to the origins of the camp. In the winter following the first camp, the feminist magazine *Off Our Backs* interviewed Misty McElroy about her experiences starting the camp. In this piece, she describes losing money ("Expenses come from everywhere . . . ") and reports that the registration fee of $20 in no way meets the cost of a week of camp, which at the time she estimated at around $300 (qtd. in kofi-bruce). In a story for *Entrepreneur* magazine called "Be Your Own Boss," McElroy is counseled by professionals in the nonprofit sector: "How can this nonprofit rock camp for girls keep rolling? The experts compare notes" (Torres). In this piece, there is no mention about feminist politics. Instead, the program is described as a school project which "snowballed into a business venture," which "aims to teach music to girls in a fun way." McElroy is counseled to build a strong board and develop relationships with program officers at foundations who are interested in the development of girls. At the time, there was only one person on her board. In another article from 2002, the *Portland Business Journal* reports McElroy as saying, "I need financial help big time," although she concedes being able to undertake the project because of donations from individuals and businesses, along with the free labor of over 200 volunteers (Strom).

By 2004, an article in *The Chronicle of Philanthropy* reported that "The camp's lack of donors and its leaders' dearth of fund-raising acumen threaten the young charity's survival" (Anft). McElroy self-reports, "I was this loser surf chick who wanted to get involved in rock 'n' roll in any way I could" (qtd in Anft), painting a picture of an organizational leader who stumbled into a good idea, but whose abilities to follow through depended on the generosity of others. The article continues with McElroy's self-aggrandizement: "I've been named one of the top 40-under-40 entrepreneurs by the *Business Journal* of Portland and one of the top 50 entrepreneurs by *Oregon Business* magazine. . . . It totally cracks me up because I don't get paid a cent. There's this false assumption that we have money" (qtd. in Anft). These comments reflect the simultaneous over exposure and under development of the Camp as an institution, headed by a person who is anxious about conventional (capitalist) economic success. Although the

Chronicle reported that the camp cost nearly "$1000 a girl" with more than 70% of the girls given free or sliding-scale scholarships. McElroy describes "most" of the campers as being on need-based scholarships. "And we'd like to keep it that way," she pronounced (qtd. in Anft).

Music Story: Be the Change

In 2015, Portia Sabin became the chair of the Camp's board of directors, and it was under her leadership that the final executive director was hired. Sabin is a successful music businessperson, who is married to Slim Moon, the founder of the independent Olympia label Kill Rock Stars, which sold last year to an investment firm (Hussey) and managed the Gossip during their rise in popularity in the U.K. Sabin is now the president of the Music Business Association where, according to her bio on the website, she "genuinely champions every aspect of the diverse music industry" ("Staff"). Sabin's stewardship of the Rock Camp during a transitional moment reflects her interests and expertise in large, and largely corporate, music systems. Her career suggests that she retains a deep interest in the opportunities for musicians, as well as their fair treatment within the business—a business rife with contradictions and trade-offs.

She hosts a regular podcast called *The Future of What* about the music business, and the 15 March 2023 episode ("Be the Change . . . Pt. 1.") featured a study called "Be the Change" undertaken by a music analytics organization called Luminate ("Music's broadest set of verified global engagement metrics," see *Luminate*). I mention it here since it is fresh information at the moment of the Rock Camp's closure about the status and experiences of women in the music industry. Luminate surveyed over 1,650 creators, industry professionals, and executives from 109 countries, and the study suggests that gender discrimination remains prevalent in the music industry, with women and gender expansive individuals reporting ongoing barriers due to sexual harassment, ageism, and unequal pay. Perhaps one of the most startling findings from this report is that, although 81% of industry profession and creators believe that discrimination exists in the music industry, just under 60% believe that gender-based discrimination is a major problem. While 73% of women and 83% of nonbinary people believe discrimination exists in the music industry, only 39% of the men surveyed believe the same. Sexual harassment is reported by 34% of women in the industry (that's 70% more than the average workplace), and the numbers rise to 43% for nonbinary and trans people (over 110% more than average). Of these people who experienced sexual harassment and abuse, nearly all (97%) felt that resources were not available to them after the incident occurred.

The aggregation of data about women and gender expansive people in the music industry is in keeping with one preferred mode of storytelling in 2023. Anyone who is a part of an institution that is trying to get resources knows that the central mode for this process is an overreliance on metrics to describe assets and deficits. I am curious about the differences in modality of how nonprofits narrativize the problems they seek to address: the first-person narrative as contrasted with staggering statistics. How does each mode support social change as well as dampen enthusiasm for change? Philanthropic support for women's and girls' organizations is still less than 2% of overall charitable giving, and some argue that it is because we lack the critical data—or in some cases, we

fail to make use of critical data—that makes the strongest possible case for support (Woodard). The Rock Camp's foundational narratives are based in first-person accounts of oppression and exclusion from spaces where music was being created, and this is connected to the centrality of first-person narratives in the traditions of feminist activism, art, and especially riot grrrl. These stories are not easily translated into statistics.

Music Story: Politics, Movement, and Music

In her work on the historiography of riot grrrl and the issues related to the archiving of materials from that movement, Elizabeth Keenan explores the ways in which the archival record of riot grrrl underrepresents music and overemphasizes politics in both ignoring the musical content of zines and other ephemera, as well as treating music as "an add-on to the movement, rather than its impetus" (Keenan). Her concern about the displacement of music in the historical accounts of riot grrrl link both the contentious ways histories of feminist movements are told (Hemmings) as well as the over-emphasis of riot grrrl more generally on the history of the Third Wave. She argues effectively that music should be recentered, noting "Riot Grrrl's amateurism was a way of luring young women to feminism *and* to playing music . . . the ability to not feel the weight of expectation to be *good* at something. . . . For the performers and their fans, Riot Grrrl's musical contribution is a starting point, and not an ending point, for how music and politics intersect over time" (Keenan). The forms and aesthetic expressions of most early riot grrrl bands are fruitfully understood using a perspective similar to that of scholar Mimi Haddon in understanding the role of amateurism in postpunk women musicians from Britain—how does the meaning of "amateur" arc effectively over the musicians choices of genre and "performative mode (in the Butlerian sense)" (Haddon 161), and at the same time encompass women performers' unconventional and/or unstudied ways playing? As I work to identify the material and the organization of the Rock Camp's archives, which include a large collection of written ephemera, I'm struck by the ways in which music both was and was not the central feature of this undertaking, and how we might strive for accuracy in the documentation of the organization.

By 2011, at the first florescence of riot grrrl nostalgia, Bikini Kill front-woman Kathleen Hanna recognizes Rock Camps as "the most lasting legacy of riot grrrl" in a piece in the *New York Times* (Ryzik)—an interesting claim, to be sure, and one that is borne out through some camper, volunteer, and staff experiences. Susan O'Shea and others describe the networked relationships that allowed women activists and musicians to continue their work in the vein of riot grrrl through the organizing related to Ladyfest and rock camps (Keenan; Dougher). While it's correct to identify cultural and political connections between riot grrrl and rock camps, including shared personnel, the projects are politically and practically quite distinct. While riot grrrl focused largely on the empowerment and connection of young adults with one another, rock camps concentrate on the musical, political, and social education of much younger people. The processes of communal skill sharing within safer spaces at rock camps mimic the tendencies of original riot grrrl, but the intergenerational elements of rock camp pedagogical and social spaces render them quite distinct. There is no doubt that the experiences of leadership at Rock Camps (in the role of

volunteer, intern, staff, or board) create conditions for cross-generational community building and learning. But the particular pedagogical structure of Rock Camp—where adult practitioners worked with young people who were generally inexperienced with playing music—offered a different mode of organizing and consciousness-raising than what took place in most riot grrrl environments, which tended to feature peer-to-peer knowledge-sharing (Marcus).

Girl Story: Which Girls?

Interest in the specific feminist music culture of riot grrrl continues into the present, fueled by reunion tours of bands from the era, Gen X nostalgia, and contemporary identification with feminism expressed through loud, performative rage (Darms; Pelly; Keenan). The podcast *Starting a Riot*, put out by Oregon Public Broadcasting in 2023, seeks to complicate the story of riot grrrl, an important ideological precursor to the Rock Camp ethos, by "focus[ing] on the stories that haven't really been told as part of the history of the movement . . . from people on the margins, people who felt left out, and the people who insisted on being part of the conversation anyway" (*Starting a Riot*). In describing her own path to accomplished artistry as well as to the editorship of *She Shreds Media*, the only magazine created to showcase female guitarists, Portland musician Fabi Reyna tells the story of how she came to the Rock Camp as a teenager:

> At that time, in 2007, even in a big city like Austin, it felt impossible to be taken seriously as a girl who played guitar. And honestly, being told that I couldn't do something that felt so necessary to my wellbeing was discouraging. I wanted to give up. Then my mom found an ad for the Rock n Roll Camp for Girls in Portland, Oregon. She drove us 2,053 miles where I found myself in a sort of broken-down warehouse in the middle of North Industrial Portland. I had no idea this place would pretty much change my life. (qtd. in "They Are")

She and her friend, KP (Katherine Paul, now the band Black Belt Eagle Scout) found themselves as "two of the very few brown teens at camp," and yet the experience there helped them feel a sense of community and the power to create their own community, which they have gone on to do as key performers and community-builders in the Portland music scene. She notes, "We didn't necessarily feel like we belonged in a lot of spaces, but there was something about Rock Camp and riot grrrl that spoke to us as outsiders." These affective memories and hindsight tell one of the most important stories of the camp: that it was a place where girls, nonbinary, and trans young people found community, support, and an opportunity for essential, life-saving access to music.

Girl Story: Girlhood Studies

The Rock Camp was formed at a time when some of the foundational texts of girlhood studies were filtering into the mainstream. Although girls and women had benefitted from the extensive legal and social changes implemented through the 1970s, there was (and is!) still concern that girls are not getting what they need, that culture curtails, inhibits, denies, and diminishes girls' experiences. The popular book *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* also touched on this concern, identifying adolescence as the moment during which girls' identities are most at risk (Pipher).

The Rock Camp's rhetoric of inclusion, which assumed active discrimination against women in the music industry more broadly, was heavily influenced by riot grrrl language that sought to create a space and power for young women within the American punk communities of Washington, D.C., and Olympia, Washington (Marcus). There was always a tension between the problem of discrimination within the mainstream industry and the punk rebellion that fueled riot grrrl, which actively eschewed mainstream music industry participation. At the Rock Camp, this looked like a complex negotiation between older volunteers and leaders whose aesthetics slanted punk, and a camper population who loved pop music. Music functioned as both a site of oppression (by the mainstream/capitalism, by men) and liberation (from gendered expectations and assumptions about behavior and music-making).

A volunteer handbook from 2007 (v 3.0) illustrates the liberatory ideology that organizers used as their North Star:

> We want to eradicate all the limiting myths about music and gender that make girls afraid to speak up, sing out and make noise. We want to abolish all the obsolete traditions that restrict many girls' and women's free musical expression and obstruct their access to *the world of music*. . . . We believe that by teaching these things, we can help girls develop – musically, mentally, and emotionally – toward their own ideas of who and what they want to be. (*RnRC4G*)

The "world of music" looks many different ways depending on your subject position, so it would follow that the barriers to these worlds might often be quite diverse.

Girl Story: "We're Not MTV Material"

In the first two years of the Portland Camp, founder Misty McElroy was frequently asked to comment about the situation of girls in relation to music, as well as about the efficacy of the camp as a tool for esteem-building, music education, and feminist community-building. She noted in 2002, "I just want [the girls] to make their own music. Britney Spears is not my reality or the reality for so many people. . . . We're not MTV material. That shouldn't mean that they can't make noise and get together and play and change the world. This camp is about confidence and options and a curiosity about their own voices" (qtd. in Strom). To answer these questions from outsiders, McElroy elides her own adult experiences with the experiences of the girls attending the camp. She uses the language of oppression—what she experienced as an adult in the music industry, as well as constricting gender stereotypes (Spears in schoolgirl short skirts). She's not interested in any female-making music; she's interested in girls and women who make music they want to make. She characterizes the transformational power of playing music as in opposition to commercialized demands on mainstream women musicians. Additionally, she sees "confidence and options and a curiosity about their own voices" as a paramount goal, and the outcome of playing music together (qtd. in Strom).

All that she predicts comes to pass when she notes, "After the camp last year [2001], I heard stories of complete transformation in these girls' lives. . . . I got feedback from parents who said, before the camp, their daughters were really timid and shy and passive and who, after the camp, have a clearer idea of what they want and are able to stand up for themselves" (qtd. in Strom). For parents who might be fearful of their own daughters'

victimization across any number of fronts, such boosterism for the efficacy of Rock Camp toward empowerment must have sounded enticing.

The elision of girls' and women's reactions to, and involvement with, the Rock Camp continued past the leadership of McElroy, who left in 2004. Many women involved loved music and the empowerment naturally grew out of that love. For many parents, the empowerment was what they sought for their kids and music happened to be the vehicle. One of the directors of the camp noted in the *Advocate*, a national commercial gay and lesbian magazine, that "The queer women of Portland, they are a part of a politically activist community ... and the expression of a lot of our political beliefs is making music the medium for self-esteem and learning about who you are and your identity and valuing yourself" (Schwartzapfel). Although painting with a somewhat broad brush, this particular staff person connects the experiences of queer women musicians with some of the fundamental values that the Rock Camp gained from its riot grrrl roots: the creation of politicized safe space for the identity exploration and expression of girls and women. Through music, as well as other expressive media and consciousness-raising, Rock Camp could be a place for connecting music to feminist politics.

Girl Story: "A Very Particular, Majority White, Majority Upper Middle-Class Clientele"

In an Oregon Public Broadcasting article about the closing of the Rock Camp in May of 2023, André Middleton, Executive director of Friends of Noise, comments on how and why his organization is a good fit to take over the assets of the camp. Noting that much has changed since the camp started twenty years; hence, he points specifically to what he calls the "trans rights movement:" "People acknowledging that gender is just a construct, wasn't where it is today" (qtd. in Van Wing). He also sees the legacy of the camp as specifically white: "It's also fair to say that Rock Camp really did draw a very particular, majority white, majority upper middle-class clientele." In identifying his vision for the future of music programming for youth in Portland, Middleton asks, "How do we expand that to include more BIPOC youth, more youth from East Portland, more youth from marginalized areas?" (qtd. in Van Wing).

According to their vision statement, Middleton's organization is built on the values of "collectivism and restorative justice." The statement continues, "We seek to transform the culture of BIPOC and LGBTQ+ youth access to the music industry. We foster a healthy ecosystem for all ages to thrive by providing youth-focused programs, teaching industry skills, developing resources, mentorship and professional development" (*Friends*). The organization "meet[s] young people where they are by facilitating opportunities for immersion into a safer arts community while uplifting youth voices" (*Friends*). Although implied, girls are not identified as a specific group needing specific resources in relation to power or to music.

I'm interested in unpacking the differences in vision that are expressed in the Friends of Noise statement, particularly as it has become part of the narrative of change (in relation to both girls and culture as a whole) as the Rock Camp was disbanded. Was the Rock Camp only serving "a very particular, majority white, majority upper middle-class

clientele"? When I read this, I wondered if things had changed so much from when I had been involved. I also thought about Fabi Reyna's experiences as a teen of color coming to camp in 2007. Although the camp was structurally rooted in punk feminist politics of the early 21st century, when race was not at the forefront of mainstream organizing principles or concerns, the girls who came to camp were not all white, and certainly were not all "upper middle class."

To confirm my perceptions of this as an incomplete narrative, I reached out to former director Beth Wooten. She said,

> You know, that quote really jumped out to me too. I kind of scoffed because I disagree. Although I do agree there was board pressure to *market* to upper middle-class clientele. [There was in the period 2011–2014 with] many-an awkward meeting and email thread about how rock campers are seen as "at risk youth" and it was "hurting our brand" or whatever. Our budget truly did depend on tuition income. [Because of this] a tension existed between "no girl turned away for lack of funds!" and crossing fingers that enough families would pay full price to balance it out. I won't deny some flattening of the "all girls need this" messaging as the organization tried to keep its footing. (Wooten)

She went on to suggest that the statement that Rock Camp only serves middle class white girls is not backed up by numbers. She remembers collecting financial information on families requesting tuition assistance, and simplifying the application form to be a pay-what-you-can, honor system as opposed to a system requiring proof of income. Additionally, the camp saved spots for campers who participated in programming with community partners working with low-income families (Wooten).

When inquiring about the numbers, I discovered that in the years before the camp reduced its programming because of Covid, 20% of attendants reported as "non-Caucasian" and a quarter received need-based aid. A professor friend, and longtime volunteer for the Camp, who worked to involve college students in community-based learning by volunteering at the Camp had similar thoughts in suspecting the "upper middle class white girl" story. After that discussion about camp demographics, the OPB interviewer also seemed to posit that another strength of Friends of Noise (and therefore a shortcoming of the Camp) is that Friends of Noise is more inclusive of music genres outside of just rock music. That, too, seemed over-generalized to fit into the narrative of why RnRC4G could no longer sustain itself and why Friends of Noise would be a better option.

Conclusion: Does it Matter That the Rock Camp Closed?

I think it does. It gives us a lot to consider if we are interested in the ways in which musical knowledge is transmitted within institutions, especially when the musical knowledge is fundamentally connected to radical visions of liberation. Even situations that are set up to provide forms of liberatory music education for girls can get derailed by problems baked into the epistemological assumptions of their founders: What and who is a girl? What is music and musical knowledge? What's a job, or even a good job? What's a success? How much money is enough? Who is a reliable narrator? What does freedom feel like? How do you get it?

Maybe something else will emerge in Portland, something that meets the needs and demands of girls and young women, and nonbinary and trans youth, some other

format to meet the new needs for knowledge and power that combat experiences of the ongoing paternalist, misogynist nonsense flying toward us daily, to say nothing of the continued discrimination in the music industry. There are Rock Camps all over the United States and the world that are sustaining the vision and practice of collective, liberatory musical practices in the form first conceived by the founders of the Portland Camp. It is possible that Friends of Noise is the right organization to take on the next chapter in Portland, and we can hope that it is. Rock Camp has surely laid the foundations for as-yet-unknown forms of liberatory musical practice into the future.

Notes

1. The Girls Rock Camp Alliance mission statement reads as follows: "The Girls Rock Camp Alliance is an international membership network of youth-centered arts and social justice organizations. We provide resources and space for community building to our membership in order to build a strong movement for collective liberation"
2. A Facebook post from August 21, 2020, reads, "We want to share with you all our dedication to the Black Lives Matter movement and our commitment toward creating an anti-racist society, here at Rock Camp and beyond. Thank you to Girls Rock Camp ATL and to the Girls Rock Camp Alliance for allowing us to borrow a few action items that are relevant to our camp. We've put careful thought into our action items and the restructuring of Rock "n" Roll Camp for Girls, so please take a look at our official statement here.

   Rock "n" Roll Camp for Girls believes Black Lives Matter. Rock "n" Roll Camp for Girls was founded on the premise that girls and trans youth can become empowered by learning Rock "n" Roll music in a community that honors and uplifts them. While our organization has always intended to acknowledge and respond to the intersecting oppressions that affect the communities we serve, such as racism and anti-Blackness, we realize that intention is not enough. We have fallen short, and we recognize that we have work to do. We want to make clear that we stand with our Black community members, and we will work to support them by implementing these tangible action items to make long lasting change at RNRC4G. As an organization that is primarily white, we recognize that our job is to listen, learn, and use our privilege to amplify the voices of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC).
3. Both Mimi Nguyen and Elizabeth Keenan describe the phenomenon of borrowed Black feminist theory in riot grrrl, as well as the impacts of white-majority spaces on the experiences of women of color throughout the movement.

Disclosure Statement

The author worked at the Rock "n" Roll Camp for Girls for approximately one year (2002–2003) and volunteered in unpaid roles until approximately 2016.

Notes on Contributor

Sarah Dougher is an educator, writer, and musician from Portland, Oregon. Her current work at Portland State University focuses on strengthening the pathways for high school seniors into higher education, especially historically excluded students. She has written extensively about girls, music, and social change in both popular and academic venues, including the *New York Time*s, the *Los Angeles Review of Book*s, and the *Journal of Popular Music Studies.*

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