

# AURAL HISTORY



ONE OF MY FIRST MUSIC MEMORIES IS OF Carly Simon singing “You’re So Vain.” It was the mid-’70s; I was probably 5. Most of the lyrics made no sense to me (“Clouds in my coffee”? *Wha...?*), but the song’s intention was clear in Simon’s snarly, disillusioned vocal. I sang along with the record, rolling my eyes and pointing at an imaginary ex-boyfriend during the dramatic “I bet you think this song is about you/ *Don’t you? Don’t you?*” coda, acting out a role I somehow sensed was a woman wryly calling her idiot ex on his folly.

Little did I know that a couple of years before, in 1973, as “You’re So Vain” resolutely held on to its number-one spot on the airwaves,

another musical phenomenon was winding down: the Chicago Women’s Liberation Rock Band, a powerful—if short-lived—creation of the second wave of feminism.

I know about the band because, although I was born in 1970, many of my friends were active in feminism during the 1960s and ’70s. In fact, getting to know the women we read about in women’s studies has

**WITH THE WOMEN’S LIBERATION ROCK BANDS,  
SECOND-WAVE FEMINISTS KICKED OUT THE JAMS  
LONG BEFORE RIOT GRRRL.**

**BY JENNIFER BAUMGARDNER**

been a personal passion—even mission—for me. I read books like *Daring to Be Bad* and *The Feminist Memoir Project* the way a lot of people read *US Weekly*: for gossip and thrills (*and* history and theory, which don’t fit into the tabloid rubric as well). A few years ago, one such older friend took me to scientist and feminist Naomi Weisstein’s 60th birthday party. The guest list was like



This page: The Chicago Women's Liberation Rock Band at work.

Previous page (left to right): Pat Miller, Naomi Weisstein, Sherry Jenkins, Susan Abood, Suzanne Prescott, Fanya Montalvo.

a consciousness-raising group circa 1971 come to life: Gloria Steinem, Alix Kates Shulman, Jo Freeman (known back then as Joreen), Phyllis Chesler—name the famed second waver, she was there. Weisstein held court from her bed, where she has lain like a radical Snow White (with nurses, rather than dwarves, in attendance) for about two decades under the spell of chronic fatigue syndrome. I loved her on sight. She managed to be both wild and wildly activist while bedridden, Lenny Bruce and Rachel Carson in one prostrate package.

Among other accomplishments, Weisstein happened to have founded the Chicago Women's Liberation Rock Band. She gave me a record and some grainy video footage of them jamming at the Old Wobbly (IWW) Hall on Chicago's north side, one of 100 gigs this six-piece lineup played between 1970 and 1973. The record was interesting, but the video told a whole 'nother story: First of all, this didn't appear to be your typical rock concert. At one point, the audience dances in a kick line, arms around each other's waists, like hippie Rockettes. In another segment,

***MOUNTAIN MOVING DAY* DOCUMENTS THE FIRST ATTEMPT TO CREATE EXPLICITLY FEMINIST ROCK. WOMEN WERE FINALLY THE PROTAGONISTS, RATHER THAN LOLITA TEMPTRESSES OR "TAKE ANOTHER LITTLE PIECE OF MY HEART" VICTIMS.**

the band stands at the front of the stage, laughingly raising their pant legs in a mock striptease, displaying their hairy, man-hating legs. The audience appears to be all youngish womyn—I say "womyn" rather than "women" because they look archetypally like '70s feminists, with their big eyeglasses, hair that had recently been freed from bouffants, and loose pear- and apple-shaped figures. It is a soft moment for women's bodies: the moment between torpedo bra/girdle oppression and personal trainer/Wonderbra oppression. The most revealing thing, though, is not how these women look; it's how comfortable and in the moment they appear to be.

That's how one should feel at a rock concert, right? Free to channel Tina Turner, free from groping

hands, free to do a corny, fun cancan—*liberated*, man! Rock 'n' roll might ostensibly be about sex and drugs, but sex and drugs have always been shorthand for freedom, particularly in the early '70s, when parents were terrified of what their kids were listening to.

These days, baby boomers and their spawn both consider rock

"their" music, and we are all a little more jaded about its possibilities. We see how commercialism trumps content: We see the way raw, exciting punk chicks like Bikini Kill or L7 are slimmed down, smoothed out, and sold back to us as Avril Lavigne. We watched the way "girl power" was yelled by riot grrrls and made its way to the Spice Girls, eventually landing disconsolately in the un-rock office of Health and Human Services, when Donna Shalala launched her 1997 "girl power" initiative to keep girls healthy, confident, and not pregnant. We see how radio playlists, once local and unique, are now generic, dictated by a few executives at Clear Channel central headquarters. Back then, though, rock really was the cultural expression of youth and daring. It meant casting off that

scratchy Banlon turtleneck and those itchy white-bread values.

Of course, for women, the potential of rock lib was a bit different. Even with a burgeoning movement of women turning to each other for support and salvation, rock itself was dominated by testosterone. Deejays, musicians, stars, roadies, record producers—even those lonely, pimply teens who jammed alone in their bedrooms—were all male. There were few roles available to the woman who wanted to do more than listen to the Stones on her hi-fi. She could be the groupie offering backstage comfort, the hysterical fan going into raptures that rivaled St. Theresa's, or the chick singer—a solo folkie like Joni, or a Motown-style backup chirper. And that was it. Rocking out with a guitar slung across her chest or a pair of sticks in her hand was not an option. Even wild, articulate Janis Joplin didn't play an instrument, and in the year she died, 1970, there was one lone all-female rock band signed to a major label recording contract. The band was called Fanny, and in the male-run music industry, that smart-mouthed name might as well have been Piece of Ass.

Fanny was confident—and future women's music star June Millington<sup>1</sup> played guitar—but pre-feminist consciousness. In contrast, the Chicago Women's Liberation Rock Band and its East Coast twin, the New Haven Women's Liberation Rock Band, had consciousness to burn. Both bands came out of the explosion of energy that was the women's movement of the late '60s and early '70s. New Haven came first, in 1970, when Judy Miller

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parked a shiny new drum set on Virginia Blaisdell's front porch in Yaleville and said, "Teach me how to play this thing. We're gonna start a rock band."

Soon after, Naomi Weisstein was lying on her sofa, listening to the Rolling Stones, thinking about the band her friend Virginia had said she'd started. Weisstein was feeling a little deflated, but not from any autoimmune treachery. Women's liberation was getting her down. From 1967 until 1969, the movement seemed unified by the idea that women had more in common than not, simply because they shared the experience of being women in a sexist society. The year 1970 marked the beginning of the many splits that came to characterize radical feminism—gay vs. straight, black vs. white, cultural vs. political feminists. This discord was draining the joyous urgency that had been rampant a few years earlier.

Feminists were old hands at critiquing pop culture, beginning with their national media debut: the 1968 Miss America protest, at which they crowned a sheep on the boardwalk at Atlantic City and threw lipstick and hair curlers into a "freedom trash can." (Contrary to popular belief, they did not burn bras.) Feminists protested both their exclusion from

culture and the demeaning options they had within it. They protested male editors at women's magazines, all-male Playboy clubs, and Eastern Airlines ads featuring stewardesses who said, "Fly me." Rock was part of the revolutionary language, and feminists were squeezing out the sexism there, too. They were challenging the Rolling Stones, or at least talking back to their lyrics—"She's 'under your thumb'? Oh, yeah? Screw you, sexist pig!"

But Weisstein didn't want to just criticize rock. She wanted to jump in, to really be out from under the proverbial thumb, to invade the boys' club with her cooties—to create, in her words, an "ecstatic feminism." She wanted to rock.

Initially, people tried to squelch her. "Rock was its own thing, they said, and you couldn't mess with it. Art and politics don't mix, they said," she wrote in "Days of Celebration and Resistance," her essay in the 1998 book *The Feminist Memoir Project*. "I dismissed this." And so the band was formed. Their first concert was a free-for-all—13 women howling at the moon in Chicago's Grant Park—but soon a real group got together.

Every member of the band was at least musical, and some were quite accomplished. Kit McClure, who played trombone,<sup>2</sup> would later go on to form the Kit McClure Big Band, an all-female ensemble that played many professional gigs, including a

1 Millington and her partner, Ann Hackler, now run the Institute for Musical Arts in Goshen, Mass., which includes a rock 'n' roll camp for girls. Find out more at [www.ima.org](http://www.ima.org).

2 While you don't often hear trombone in rock music today, horn sections were common in the '70s. Remember Chicago? Blood, Sweat and Tears? All those funk bands?



Above: Gettin' on the mic, women's lib-style. Right: Naomi Weisstein at the keyboard.



tour with Robert Palmer. Many of the band members came from classical, folk, and jazz backgrounds, which made learning rock's rhythms a bit tricky. None had ever played in a rock band before. In fact, most women who played music at the time had no experience at all playing in bands—unlike guys, who were jamming in droves before you could say “cock rock.”<sup>3</sup>

As they learned the essentials, they reimagined the more idiotic elements of rock's swagger. They showed up to gigs on time, for instance, demonstrating some respect for the audience; prided themselves on playing at decibel levels that wouldn't damage eardrums; and didn't smash their instruments. Their shows were giddy and uninhibited. One, at Cornell University, had the all-female audience stripped to the waist and dancing like snake charmers. It was common for the audience to request that the band

play a song—like the popular “VD Blues,” for instance—three, four, even six times.

In 1972, Rounder Records recorded both the Chicago and New Haven bands for a split LP called *Mountain Moving Day*. Now the label is reissuing the album—the sole recording of either band—along with some new material as *Papa Don't Lay That Shit on Me*. While the bluesy feistiness of the new name is appropriate, the original is a gorgeous phrase—one that conveys both the enormity of the task '70s feminists saw before them, as well as their utopian spirit. As they say/chant in lyrics to the original album's title song: “All sleeping women now awake and move!”

*Mountain Moving Day* documented the first attempt to create explicitly feminist rock. With songs like “Sister Witch,” “Abortion Song,” and “Secretary,” women were finally the protagonists, rather than the Lolita temptresses or the “Take another little piece of my heart” victims—better even than the resilient protagonist of “You're So Vain” who,

let's face it, was still writing about a cad she'd wasted her time on. And both of the Women's Liberation Rock Bands anticipated the swell of the feminist music scene: *Mountain Moving Day* came out a year before the pioneering women's label Olivia Records was founded, four years before the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival began its run of more than a quarter century and counting, and four years ahead of the birth of label/distributor Ladyslipper—a few of the most prominent institutions in the web of promoters, producers, songwriters, festivals, and musicians that became the women's music movement.

**THE CHICAGO WOMEN'S LIBERATION ROCK** Band was around only from March 8, 1970, until the spring of 1973. After a truly heady few years of touring successfully to ecstatic feminist crowds, they “began arguing too much and rehearsing too little,” according to Weisstein. The bitter schisms of the era had caught up

<sup>3</sup> This is a similar phenomenon to women's later start with masturbation and lack of cultural reminders (say, a *Portnoy's Complaint* for women or an *American Pie* with a girl protagonist) that getting off isn't just for guys.

## THE TWO WOMEN'S LIBERATION ROCK BANDS ASSERTED THAT WOMEN COULD PICK UP INSTRUMENTS AND ROCK FOR WOMEN, WITH SONGS ABOUT WOMEN'S LIVES. THEY POSITED THAT A WOMAN COULD BE A POLITICAL FEMINIST AND BE IN A BAND. AND, MOST PROFOUND, THEY BELIEVED THAT ONE'S BAND COULD BE ONE'S ACTIVISM.

with them, as had the popular feminist ideal of a leaderless movement, and they were unsure of what it would mean to say that one woman might be more charismatic than another. They didn't know that a backlash was on the horizon that would make their fear of having a spokesperson or "leader" irrelevant, but Weisstein's bandmates worried that she was too prominent. She left what was becoming an increasingly unfriendly atmosphere in January 1973, to take a job at Bell Labs in New Jersey. The band dissolved for good three months later.

As the most sharply visible wave of the women's movement crested, women outside that movement were finding similar ways of making their voices heard. In 1977, five years after the Women's Liberation Rock Bands made their record, punk rock came out kicking and screaming, bringing with it women like Siouxsie Sioux, the Slits, and Poly Styrene of X-Ray Spex. Their confidence about owning rock differed from that of Weisstein's generation—it was de facto, rather than arrived at with a "click"—but the Slits sang sarcastically about "Typical Girls" who read magazines and love their boyfriends for the same reasons that the Chicago Women's Liberation Rock Band sang, "Ain't gonna marry/Ain't gonna settle down." If women were still objectified in song by rock's male players,

at least there were now women who, snarling and smirking, were making themselves the subjects of the music. Only half a decade lay between Weisstein leaping up from her couch in Chicago and the beginning of women making significant inroads in rock—leaving their soft, folky homes for grittier, more electric territory.

The two Women's Liberation Rock Bands asserted that women could pick up instruments and rock for women, with songs about women's lives. They posited that a woman could be a political feminist and be in a band. And, most profound, they believed that one's band could be one's activism. Thus, they were driven to make rock music not just to escape to a "better" counter-culture, but also to affect the gender dynamic of rock—and the larger culture that sanctioned its male-dominated aesthetics—in politically relevant ways. It was an idea that would influence musical subcultures significantly throughout the coming decades: Ian MacKaye helmed the straightedge movement in Washington, D.C., challenging the idea that cheap sex and copious drugs were necessary for rock 'n' roll and creating an alternative label and distribution system that bypassed the mainstream industry. And Bikini Kill, the mother of all riot-grrrl bands, fomented punk-feminist activism throughout the '90s and

beyond, galvanizing a community of female fans and artists to organize on their own behalf.

Bikini Kill is no more, but the young feminist electronic punk band that Weisstein recruited for new tracks on *Papa Don't Lay That Shit on Me* evolved from riot grrrl—and, more generally, from the ethos that led Weisstein toward feminist music from the start. Joining Naomi and gang on this release are Kathleen Hanna, Johanna Fateman, and J.D. Samson, better known as Le Tigre. At Le Tigre shows, the audience is full of young women who are tattooed and unafraid. The band wears costumes and choreographs moves, breaking down the typical seriousness of the punk-rock concert just as the Chicago Women's Liberation Rock Band did with their hairy-legged high kicks. Still, similar as they are, some people might be scratching their heads at the thought of Le Tigre—a bona fide successful band—seeking out something as brief and outside punk rock as Weisstein's old band. How did they find each other? Hanna is the type of woman who describes being at a screening of *Not For Sale* (Laura Cottingham's filmic essay about feminism and art in the '70s) as like being at a Who concert, and describes herself as "a feminist fan." And Weisstein, in turn, is a fan of Hanna's: "I'd heard all the Bikini Kill cds and was knocked out," she says.

"I asked her to pick up 'I'm on My Way,' the Underground Railroad, then civil rights song that ends, 'If they won't go, I'll go anyway.' If [Hanna] and her band continued it, I said, it would signify that our movement would never die. It would be like watching a grainy old black-and-white movie jerk to an end, and then suddenly burst into gorgeous color and go on."

Listened to today, *Papa Don't Lay That Shit on Me* has much more in common aesthetically with the folk of the women's music movement than with the sex-fueled Stones. The most deft musicians are the least rock-like: Virginia Blaisdell on French horn and Kit McClure on trombone. At times the record is bluesy; at others it sounds a lot like another album of that era, *Free to Be...You and Me* (albeit by way of Kate Millet), or a profane version of Helen Reddy's "I Am Woman, Hear Me Roar." The tracks, while alive and gutsy, sometimes deteriorate into repetitive jams. (Weisstein chalks these up to studio panic. "We made the mistake of thinking we could just improvise those parts," she told me, "like on stage. But improvising on stage is a whole different experience—the audience is with you and spurs you to heights of your imagination.") The melodies are catchy, but underdeveloped.

Underdeveloped makes sense, though: The band broke up before many of the less experienced members got a chance to really learn to play, and their enduring legacy is their message, not their music. It says something that one of the most timeless tracks on this record is "Defending Yourself with Karate," an entirely spoken piece wherein Weisstein tells the story of how she wants to be fierce and ugly, so she takes karate and gets decked by

some sexist street harasser. (Le Tigre sampled the track on 2001's *Feminist Sweepstakes*.) While it's a unique and funny bit, it's noticeably not a song.

This tradition lived on in riot-grrrl bands. To hear Hanna yell, "Revolution grrrl style now!" was—for young women unused to seeing other women as the architects of punk rock—as exciting as hearing Jimi Hendrix retool the national anthem on his electric guitar. Riot grrrls switched instruments mid-set—proclaiming that being a rock star was doable for literally any chick out there—just as the Women's Liberation Rock Bands put that very idea into practice. And, for better or for worse, riot grrrls' message overwhelmed their music, too.

The reissuing of the Women's Liberation Rock Bands' 1972 recordings is significant musically, to be sure. But more important, it's a piece of our history. *Papa Don't Lay That Shit on Me* is a reminder that the real story of rock music isn't just about the guys who made it to the major labels, the stadiums, or the cover of *Rolling Stone*. The tale of the Women's Liberation Rock Bands also mirrors that of the early radical women's groups. They came together in such a spirit of adventure and idealism and trust—utopia—that the eventual realities of complexity, mediocrity, and petty and large betrayals were devastating enough to destroy the group. Meanwhile, internalized misogyny, the beast within that all women must deal with, slowed down the ecstatic feminism of the project. Players refused to get better as musicians because they didn't believe that the band was grand to begin with. (As Weisstein remembers in "Days of Celebration and Resistance," "I'm good enough for this band," remarked one drummer

when she was asked to take percussion lessons.)

Or they were making music to create a reason to be with other women in a new way. "The music was almost incidental at a certain point," said women's music pioneer Meg Christian in the documentary *The Changer: A Record of the Times*. "It was the *great adventure*." Those early adventurers—which included activist groups like Redstockings, New York Radical Women, and the Furies, as well as the Chicago Women's Liberation Rock Band—imploded, but the energy and consciousness that brought them together scattered like atoms, all over the world.

As proof of this continuity, *Papa Don't Lay That Shit on Me* proclaims a successful relationship between second- and third-wave feminists. When Le Tigre sings "I'm proud to be associated with you," it's the kind of anthem the hardworking broads of the second wave deserve. This record is both a memoir of and tribute to those women who believed that you didn't need permission to make rock music and who imagined roles for women beyond Chick Singer, Girl Fan, and Hot Groupie. Younger generations taking those ambitions farther than second wavers could confirm Naomi Weisstein's interpretation: that our movement will never die. And while the Rock Bands (and the Old Wobbly Hall, for that matter) are gone, rock 'n' roll women are here to stay. So when you hear, "I'm on my way/I'm on my way and I can't go back" on *Papa*, you can bet this song is about you. 🎸

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