

The History of Rock Music: 1989-1994

Raves, grunge, post-rock, trip-hop

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Foxcore

(These are excerpts from my book ["A History of Rock and Dance Music"](#))

The riot-grrrrls of Seattle, 1991-94

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Hardcore punk-rock had been mostly a male phenomenon. Girls were excluded from hardcore the same way they were excluded in society from many other male-only rituals, whether street gangs or USA football. The "riot grrrrls" movement of the 1990s changed the sociopolitical landscape of punk-rock by introducing the "girl factor" into the equation of frustration/ depression/ desperation/ anger.

The riot-grrrrls movement originated largely in and around Seattle (Olympia, to be precise), and indeed it was Seattle that boasted the most fertile scene for female-only bands. The movement's manifesto was the article "Women, sex and rock and roll", published by "Puncture" in 1989. The first radio program to address the angry young girls was "Your Dream Girl", conducted by Lois Maffeo on Olympia's KAOS. One of the earliest riot-grrrrls was Molly Neuman, who joined Allison Wolfe to create the fanzine "Girl Germs", one of the main alternative media for college girls. In the summer of 1991 they celebrated themselves at the Olympia campus, shouting their slogan "Revolution Girl Style Now!" The mood had been changing throughout the 1980s: the magazine "Sassy" had been founded already in 1987 as an alternative, not afraid to tackle brutal themes, to the conventional magazines for teenage girls.

Artistically, these young girls harked back to New York's female folksingers of the 1980s (who began singing about the female condition in hyper-realistic terms, not only from a sociopolitical point of view but also from an intimate-diary point of view), to California's all-female punk bands (Runaways, Pandoras, Frightwig and L7, not to mention Sugar Baby Doll, formed in San Francisco in 1986 by future foxcore stars Kat

Bjelland, Courtney Love and Jennifer Finch), and to a few creative all-female British bands (Raincoats, X-Ray Spex and the Slits). To some extent, female intellectual rockers such as Patti Smith, Chrissie Hynde, Exene Cervenka, Lydia Lunch and Kim Gordon were all influential in defining the riot-grrrrl ethos. Seattle/Olympia was one of the areas with the most sophisticated "do it yourself" infrastructure: it was not difficult for these girls to begin releasing their own cassettes and CDs (e.g., via the label founded by Beat Happening's Calvin Johnson). In nearby Vancouver, anarchic poetess Jean Smith had formed [Mecca Normal](#) in the mid-1980s to create polemic works such as **Calico Kills The Cat** (1988), which became an inspiration for the riot-grrrrls of Seattle.

This was a musical movement founded on the lyrics, not on the music, so their sound varied wildly. But, mostly, the vocals were quite unattractive (they tended to imitate a scream, rather than enhance a melody) and the playing was quite amateurish. The female voice had been treated as an instrument (a sound) in the male-dominated musical culture: it now became a vehicle for a message. The rest of the music was largely redundant and/or optional.

They were rebels, but only to an extent. Their message was not revolutionary: their message was intimate. They dealt with the real problems of teenage girls, from rape to loneliness. Their fanzines were not agit-prop pamphlets, they were blackboards to write on about their intimate experiences. The fundamental fact of the riot grrrrls was that their heroine was not terrible: she was terrified.

Musically, the riot-grrrrl phenomenon began in february 1991, when Kathleen Hanna and Tobi Vail formed [Bikini Kill](#) at Olympia's Evergreen College, and released the cassette **Revolution Girl Style Now** (1991), followed by the even more furious mini-album **Pussy Whipped** (1993). Hannah would later clean up her act, and, dressed like a housewife from the Sixties, release a solo album credited to **Julie Ruin** (1998), offering her post-feminist meditations in a surprisingly radio-friendly format (a fusion of electronica, dub, and hip-hop). Even more accessible was **Le Tigre** (1999), the album recorded with video director Sadie Benning and music critic Johanna Fateman.

Even less musical was **Pottymouth** (1993), the debut album of Molly Neuman's [Bratmobile](#). Other original riot-grrrrls were [Calamity Jane](#), who released **Martha Jane Cannary** (1992) four years after the first singles; [Dickless](#), whose **Saddle Tramp** (1990) revealed the roaring vocals of Kelly Canary that would detonate the Teen Angels' **Daddy** (1996); Donna Dresch's [Team Dresch](#), who hailed lesbianism on **Personal Best** (1994). They mostly played ragged rock'n'roll overflowing with angst and propelled by screeching guitars and primitive drumming.

Courtney Love's [Hole](#) (1) was one of the bands that launched the new female aesthetics nation-wide, thanks to Love's slutty attitude (an extension of the kind of depraved punk provocation already inaugurated by the likes of Lydia Lunch and Madonna) and to her marriage with Nirvana's Kurt Cobain. **Pretty On The Inside** (1991) was indeed a powerful statement of psychological devastation, its desperate ballads delivered in spasmodic fits.

Unrelated to the political movement, but sharing its visceral and raw approach to rock'n'roll, [Seven Year Bitch](#) (1) delivered **Viva Zapata** (1994), and [Sleater-Kinney](#) (1), i.e. songwriters Corin Tucker and Carrie Kinney, delivered **Call The Doctor** (1995), two albums that easily matched the emphasis of the early riot-grrrrls while focusing on the music.

California's foxcore, 1991-94

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The contagion soon spread to California, that had nurtured rock girl-groups since the 1960s.

San Francisco, whose Frightwig had pioneered the idea, boasted the [Mudwimin](#), formed by Frightwig's guitarist Mia Levin and Tragic Mulatto's drummer Bambi Nonymous, with **Skiz** (1992); [Stone Fox](#), lesbians who played melodic hard-rock on **Burnt** (1994); [4 Non Blondes](#), whose **Bigger Better Faster More** (1992) was highlighted by the Janis Joplin-style roar of openly-lesbian Linda Perry; [Tribe 8](#), a radical lesbian band that played loud and fast "homocore" on **Fist City** (1995); and more moderate groups such as [Tiger Trap](#), the project of Sacramento-based Rose Melberg, who played romantic punk-pop on **Tiger Trap** (1993), and [Ovarian Trolley](#), with the even less aggressive **Crocodile Tears** (1993).

The spectrum was broad, but was eventually unified and sold to the masses by the [Donnas](#), a novelty act (four teenage girls from Palo Alto all named Donna who played tight punk-rock with a strong Ramones fixation) equipped with producer Darin Raffaelli's catchy, energetic, anthemic tunes on **The Donnas** (1996), released when they graduated from high school, and **American Teenage Rock 'N' Roll Machine** (1998).

Los Angeles (where L7 had ruled) was home to some of the most successful and influential bands. The mostly female [Creamers](#) (1) recorded one of the most powerful albums in the frantic style of the New York Dolls (whirling rock'n'roll and catchy hooks), **Love Honor And Obey** (1989). The [Red Aunts](#) (1) evolved into a sort of cross between the Sex Pistols and the Rolling Stones on **#1 Chicken** (1995). [That Dog](#), featuring violinist Petra Haden and bassist Rachel Haden (daughters of jazz great Charlie Haden), honed the intellectual **Totally Crushed Out** (1995). The [Muffs](#) (1) were a vehicle for former Pandoras bassist Kim Shattuck, who seemed to re-live the careers of wild female rockers of the past on **Blonder And Blonder** (1995).

Midwestern foxes, 1990-94

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The Midwest (where Scrawl were already a legend) was no less prolific of girl-only bands. Minnesota's [Zuzu's Petals](#) were perhaps the best heirs to the Scrawl with **When No One's Looking** (1992). On the other hand, [Veruca Salt](#), led by the songwriting duo of Nina Gordon and Louise Post, offered little more than power-pop on **American Thighs** (1994).

The most impressive musicians of the entire scene were Minneapolis' [Babes In Toyland](#) (11), led by vocalist and guitarist Kat Bjelland. **Spanking Machine** (1990) was already an eruption of cathartic violence, but **Fontanelle** (1992) stood as a set of psychological traumas, a witchy pandemonium of voodoo/pow-wow rhythms, hysterical screams and massive distortions, from which Bjelland vomited harrowing lyrics, mad with rage, disenchantment, hopelessness and frustration. The trio managed to express the schizophrenic coexistence of the innocent, apprehensive and defenseless child with the experienced and corrupt slut, junkie and juvenile delinquent. The Babes In Toyland invented an art of extreme emotions: more than singing or playing theirs was "acting", and it was "acting" one's own life.

[Sugarsmack](#) (10) were the vehicle for the Fetchin Bones' vocalist Hope Nicholls, one of the most extraordinary voices of her generation. **Top Loader** (1993), assembled with help from Pigface's Martin Atkins, came through as a catalog of terrifying neuroses, mixing industrial music, rap, heavy-metal, blues and acid-rock, and conveyed in her visceral, guttural and demonic style that fused Patti Smith's hysteria and Lydia Lunch's depravation.

Eastern foxes, 1990-94

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The phenomenon was hardly visible on the East Coast. New York's [Free Kitten](#) were mostly a supergroup of female intellectuals (mainly Pussy Galore's Julia Cafritz and Sonic Youth's Kim Gordon). [Luscious Jackson](#), featuring keyboardist Vivian Trimble, were white female rappers lost in disorienting soundscapes of jazz, funk and lounge music, best on the mini-album **In Search Of Manny** (1992). The [Murmurs](#) were a duo of female folksingers, capable of running the gamut from angelic folk to distorted hard-rock on **Pristine Smut** (1997), their third and best album. [Cake Like](#) were the closest thing to a riot-grrrrl group in New York, particularly on **Delicious** (1994).

Washington's [Slant 6](#) were punk-poppers, catchy and amusing on **Soda Pop = Rip Off** (1994).

[Picasso Trigger](#) in North Carolina, featuring acrobatic vocalist Kathy Poindexter, were perhaps the best riot-grrrrls of the South, as proved by the bacchanals of **Fire In The Hole** (1994).

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