

San Francisco Chronicle
GIRLS LET IT ALL OUT AT ROCK CAMP
San Francisco Chronicle
Reyhan Harmanci

Sunday, March 2, 2008

Filmmakers Arne Johnson and Shane King have known each other since grade school in Portland, Ore. Long before they made the recently released, award-winning documentary "Girls Rock!," they'd hatched plans for an untold number of projects - mostly films or bands.

Their most serious band, Fish Cats, lasted three practices. In an e-mail, Johnson characterizes the band's end as a result of "internal strife and competing creative visions," allowing that "lack of actual musical knowledge and talent played a part."

But, as they've discovered through making "Girls Rock!," in which they follow four girls of different ages from different parts of the country through their first year at Rock 'n' Roll Camp for Girls in Portland, they took a lot for granted in forming Fish Cats.

Boys commonly conceive of themselves as budding rock stars when all they have is a few instruments, an amp, a total lack of musical knowledge and delusions of talent. Girls, they learned, do not.

In tracing the path of the four girls, ages 7 to 17, through the transformative experience of rock camp, the two filmmakers, in their 30s, got an education in what it's like out there for girls.

"The film that we ended up making ... wasn't just cute girls with guitars," Johnson says, sitting at a picnic table in King's Bayview district backyard. "It was about girlhood, about why it meant so much to these girls to go to a place where they could be loud, where they were not worried about what they were dressed as or what their weight was."

What at first seems simple - rock camp looks sort of like a cooler version of that nerd staple, band camp - proves to be extremely powerful. Not only do the girls have to navigate learning how to play instruments they may have never touched before, but they also have to form functional bands and write original songs to be played at a concert attended by 700 people after only a week.

Without being pedantic, the film intersperses footage from the camp, where lessons are given by indie-rock luminaries such as Beth Ditto from the Gossip and Carrie Brownstein from Sleater-Kinney, with animated sequences that highlight relevant statistics about girls. It's not a secret that ridiculously unrealistic female body images permeate the media or that girls' confidence drops precipitously during puberty, but those facts take on new resonance when shown next to interviews with the girls about their experiences.

Laura, 15, who was adopted from Korea and loves heavy metal, is especially blunt about how she feels: "I just accept that I hate myself and I don't really think about it."

"The actual choosing of the girls was done by the girls," Johnson says, noting that some felt more comfortable in front of the camera than others. The filmmakers were looking for girls who provided a kind of cross section of the camp and who could articulate commonly heard issues.

"Laura talked about a lot of these things - she talked about body image, she talked about race, she was a way to talk about a lot of issues," Johnson says.

Finding younger girls to speak about these issues was a challenge.

"It's hard to get a girl to talk about being silenced while she's silenced," Johnson says.

The project began in 2005. The two old friends, now both living in the Bay Area, felt they were ready for an adult collaboration: Johnson, a San Francisco State graduate, had been working as a writer, and King had been shooting and making films mostly for other people. The inspiration for "Girls Rock!" came from a public talk given by Sleater-Kinney's Brownstein and artist Yoshitomo Nara in San Jose in 2004.

"By the end, during the Q-and-A session, some guy asked, 'Do you think rock 'n' roll is dead?' " Johnson says. "Carrie was still in Sleater-Kinney at the time, and I think they were working on an album, so she was like, 'First, uh, no, thanks. And secondly, I've been at this rock 'n' roll camp for girls in Oregon.' She just lit into this speech about it that was hair-raising. I called Shane immediately afterward, and was like, 'I think we've found our story.' "

King and Johnson traveled to Oregon and began preproduction work in late 2004. They say they had to first convince the camp owners that "two dudes" could make a responsible documentary about the lives of campers - Johnson says they were "rightfully wary" but soon got on board.

The filmmakers met and interviewed 25 girls (and their families) who would be attending the weeklong summer camp in 2005 for the first time. They winnowed the group to four: Laura; Misty, a 17-year-old veteran of drug addiction and group homes; art-rock prodigy Amelia, 8; and Palace, a feisty 7-year-old who already felt anxious about her looks.

King and Johnson learned as they went along. During filming, they had a pirate radio show called "Doc Talk," modeled after NPR's "Car Talk," in which they invited well-known local filmmakers to discuss their work.

"We talk about it being our film school," Johnson says. "We spent the whole time asking them questions about how to make our film."

"It was very specific," King adds. "No one would get any help from it except for us."

Filming minors also brought up issues: Johnson and King didn't want to interfere with the campers' experience. They employed two women to film classes, created rules for the filming and made themselves available to address concerns the girls might have.

"One of the big things that happens to them at camp is that they feel unobserved," Johnson says. "We didn't want to ruin that."

The preproduction interviews, which introduced them to at least a quarter of the campers, was helpful in putting the girls at ease.

"We worked hard at creating a situation where they knew us, they could trust us, but they didn't feel obligated to us," Johnson says. "And, really, they don't care about us. We're interesting because we have cameras and they can poke us, but they have a band to form and a song to write and a concert to perform in front of 700 people. So, ultimately, we're not the most interesting people in the room."

E-mail Reyhan Harmanci at rharmanci@sfchronicle.com.

This article appeared on page N - 24 of the San Francisco Chronicle