

Teaching Girls Rock 'n' Roll

BY SARAH DOUGHER

Truisms regarding what can and can't be learned in school abound in the lyrics of rock-n-roll. School is generally characterized as a place one dreads and evades, or where one lusts for (and fears) the teacher between cigarette breaks in the bathroom. Rock and school are characterized as diametrically opposed—one is the realm of the body and the other of the brain. This particular dichotomy, reductive as it is, has always been problematic for me because I am a teacher and I play rock.

This July I taught song writing at the second annual Rock-n-Roll Camp for Girls (www.girlsrockcamp.org) in Portland, which serves about 125 girls between the ages of eight and eighteen. Unique in the world, this camp synthesizes the basics of rock instrument playing (guitar, bass, drums) with classes such as self-defense, 'zine-making, sound engineering, and band. It introduces girls to instruments they are otherwise socialized away from and imparts basic ethics of self-confidence and cooperation. For one week, campers attend classes taught by lesser and brighter lights of the rock world. On the last night, campers perform on stage in their newly founded bands. For some girls, it is the first time they have played an electric instrument, and for nearly all it is a life-changing event.

There were thirty-five girls in the class I taught with former band mate and friend, Corin Tucker. A particularly enthusiastic student brought me nearly to tears when she asked what all her peers were probably thinking: "I really want to write songs but it's like, when I try there is this voice in my head that keeps telling me I'm stupid, and like nothing I do will ever be worth anything so why should I even try. What should I do, I just want that voice to leave me alone but it won't." How does a teacher look at a thirteen-year-old girl and tell her the truth about this "voice"? That it permeates her consciousness so completely that she cannot even locate the source?

"What if you made friends with this voice?" I asked her. "Tell it that it has no idea about what you can do. Tell it to be patient and watch without speaking." The girls in the room nodded their heads in recognition of her predicament.

As we discussed basic theory, song structure, and collaboration, the theme of a girl against the entire world returned again and again. All the girls left the class having written a song with two or three others—a small victory and, we hoped, a beginning to a long creative life for our students. We tried to teach them that they could find the strength to resist injustice and prejudice through musical composition and collaboration, that everything they did in their lives could be about their song writing and about their music.

We taught our students that the bridge is a transitional point. It takes us from what we know into something we don't. Maybe it is a key change, maybe the lyrics discuss something different or present a different perspective. We played "Back on the Chain Gang" by the Pretenders, a song many of them had never heard. The bridge of this song is a classic, and we played it three times, listening to what was happening, what was changing: "The powers that be / that force us to live like we do / bring me to my knees / when I see what they've done to you."

We all listened very closely.

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