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Rocking Out, No Boys Allowed

By **ROBBIE BROWN**

ATLANTA — Asha Crews had never played a guitar before this week. But on Wednesday, she took the stage in her favorite Michael Jackson shirt, strummed a few chords and shouted, “One, two, three, four!”

Then her band, Rainbow Unicorns, began to rock, playing an angst-ridden song that sounded like early ’90s grunge. “It’s all complicated, I feel so frustrated,” sang the four girls, ages 10 to 13.

This was not a standard garage band. For one, the members had picked out instruments two days earlier. For another, the jam session ended when a supervisor called, “Ladies, it’s snack time.”

The band formed at [Girls Rock Camp](#) in Atlanta, which teaches 10- to 16-year-old musical beginners to bang drums and windmill guitars like their rock heroes. The five-day camp has a simple message: Girls rock too. In a genre long dominated by men, the founders want campers to feel as comfortable being loud and expressing themselves on stage as many boys do.

“When the girls finally take the stage, their adrenaline is going absolutely crazy,” said Stacey Singer, the camp’s founder and executive director. “Even if they’ve been reserved and shy, they lose themselves.”

On Saturday, the 60 campers will perform at one of Atlanta’s most popular rock clubs, the [Variety Playhouse](#), where Modest Mouse and Gnarlz Barkley have played on tour. “It’s so crazy,” Asha, who is 13, said, “that I thought they were kidding.”

A similar rock camp for girls opened in Portland, Ore., in 2001, and the idea has quickly gained steam. It was founded by a women’s studies student who had worked in the music industry and wanted to encourage more women to start bands.

Now there are more than 40 camps in seven countries in Europe and North America, and an alliance of girls rock camp leaders from around the world meets every spring. A documentary about the camps called “Girls Rock!” was released in 2008; a book by the same title followed. In response, some camps added similar programs for women.

Over the course of the week, campers pick instruments, form bands, learn basic chords and drum beats and design promotional materials for the concert. And if they do not own instruments, the camp provides donated ones.

“It doesn’t take a high level of technical skill to accomplish a rock song,” said Beth Wooten, who runs Portland’s camp. “A lot of the best songs are only a few chords.”

Songs tend to focus on parents, bullies, friends and yes, boys. It can be a stressful process. Katherine Butler, who is 10, said four girls in her band, Think Fast, each wanted to be the lead singer, and none of them could agree on lyrics. “We’ve had some hard times,” she said. “It feels like we’ve been a band way more than two days.”

Having a short deadline forces songs to come together, even if they’re not perfect. “Yesterday it sounded like five people playing five different, really bad songs,” Amy Lashley, an instructor, said. “Today it sounds like music that everyone is playing together and that has a beat.”

The camp includes lessons on female empowerment, self-defense, and how women are represented in the media. All of the campers and instructors are women. One of the songwriting classes was led by Emily Saliers of the Indigo Girls. Growing up, she told the girls, Rolling Stone felt like a men’s magazine and the rock industry like a boy’s club.

“It’s a different world now,” she said. “But it’s important that the girls feel safe to express themselves. Here, they aren’t distracted by boys. They’re able to focus on the task at hand.”

The girls play any genre of music they want, from pop to punk to hip-hop. Asked who influenced them, one responded, “We’re kind of like the Stooges and the Doors meet Velvet Underground,” and another girl said, “I don’t respect Justin Bieber, but I really, really like him.”

One camper, Flannery Bogost, who is 10, said she came to camp to sound like her favorite ’80s bands, Journey and Survivor. She has tried to bring some arena rock sensibilities to her band, Liquid Nitrogen.

“The only other time I’ve been on stage was ballet class,” she said. “This will be a really different kind of dancing.”