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Rock Camp Lets Ladies Fulfill Their Musical Dreams

by Karla Scoon Reid

Erin King is a rock star.

She's the slammin' drummer for the latest all-female band to come out of the Boston music scene—The Boobytraps. The all-female group, which is a revamped version of the Go-Go's, held its first gig in front of a crowd of screaming fans in February.

Never mind that just two days before their debut, the foursome had never played together. And that King, whose platinum blond curls bounced back and forth to every beat, had barely touched the drums.

But hey, every last one of them was born to rock. All they needed was a little help from Ladies Rock Camp, a weekend day camp for women, run by women, and benefiting girls. About 40 women attended Boston's inaugural three-day camp earlier this year.



The Boobytraps, (L to R) Erin King, Ashley Willard, Wendy Grus, and Rebecca Mitchell of Boston, rocked out at Ladies Rock Camp in February. Photo: Kelly Davidson

"It's everything I expected and nothing I expected," says King, a 34-year-old from Jamaica Plain,

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Massachusetts. "It's sort of mind-blowing."

The first Ladies Rock Camp was held in 2004 as a fundraiser for the Rock 'n' Roll Camp for Girls in Portland, Oregon. The Rock 'n' Roll Camp for Girls is a nonprofit program that aims to boost girls' self esteem through music and performance in addition to teaching them leadership and life skills.

Over the past decade, as more girls' rock camp programs cropped up around the country, ladies rock camp inevitably followed to help finance the dreams of girls ages eight to 18. Most ladies rock camps charge participants upwards of \$300 for a weekend, which is roughly the tuition cost for a girl to attend the week-long summer camp. (Portland's ladies camp raised more than \$100,000 from 2007 to 2010.)



The grown-up version of girls' rock camp attracts women from their 20s to their 60s. Stay-at-home moms, doctors, lawyers, psychologists, and even military veterans end up taking the stage. Many women simply want a fun respite from their hectic work schedules or exhausting family lives and a chance to form new friendships.

Still, some women are driven by the music to attend Ladies Rock Camp—an opportunity to improve their skills or to play a new instrument. Others, however, yearn for a chance at redemption for never fulfilling their music dreams.

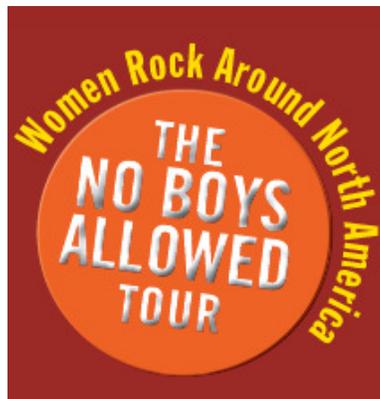
Regardless of their reasons for enrolling in Ladies Rock Camp, the women are prescribed it all—a dose of laughter, a shot of confidence, and loads of good old rock 'n' roll.

"Getting to be in a rock band was a big part of the rush," says Tracy Adams Neuenschwander, a first-time drummer and graduate of Minneapolis' Women's Jam Shop, which is a weekly program held in the evenings over a five-week period that concludes with a concert. "But that performance was kind of a celebration of going for something and doing something you always wanted to do."

Not unlike many children, Neuenschwander, who is now a 43-year-old independent bookstore consultant, recalls taking piano lessons for a few years. "When I quit, my mother said, 'You're really going to regret doing this.' I don't regret it," she says. "I regret that I didn't say that I wanted to take drum lessons, instead."

While girls' rock camp programs emphasize improving campers' self-esteem through music, ladies rock camp focuses on the music with team building being the natural byproduct of playing in a band. No prior music experience is needed for this camp and drums, keyboards, guitars, and bass guitars are all provided.

On the first day, campers choose what type of music they want to play—metal, jazz, blues, punk—anything goes. Then they form bands and collaborate on selecting the perfect band name. Most programs require the bands to write a song together that they must perform during a blow-out concert on camp's final day.



Here's a listing of girls rock camp programs that offer grown-up versions for women. Check the websites for camp dates and rock on!

Girls' Rock Camp (ATL)
www.girlsrockcampatl.org

Girls Rock Camp Austin
www.girlsrockcampaustin.org

Girls Rock Camp Boston
www.girlsrockboston.org

Willie Mae Rock Camp for Girls (Brooklyn)
www.williemaerockcamp.org

Girls Rock! Chicago
www.girlsrockchicago.org

Girls Rock NC (Durham)
www.girlsrocknc.org

Why write your own song? Leslie Yeagers, Portland's Ladies Rock Camp participant coordinator, says it's "friggin' hard" for someone with little music experience to cover a song that the audience knows by heart. More importantly, the 49-year bass-playing stay-at-home mom says: "We want women to have their own voice and give their own message and really wail on their instruments, if they want to."

A team of supportive female coaches and instructors guide the campers through every chord, every drum roll, and every note until every band member feels ready to rock the stage.

"You can come here, and in three days, I can hand you a guitar, and I can hand you a beer, and you can do it," says Hilken Mancini, program director of Girls Rock Camp Boston. Mancini, who toured with the rock band Fuzzy in the 1990s, adds: "Every punk rock song is only three chords anyway."

Marisa Anderson, the program manager for Portland's Ladies Rock Camp, explains that rock music is so male-centered that very few women work in music stores, let alone front rock bands. So the program's organizers believe that keeping the camp a female only affair is essential to creating an encouraging and empowering atmosphere. Anderson says camp can be a cathartic life-changing event for some women.

"Each of us has this 11-year-old in us," says Anderson, a 40-year-old guitarist and singer. "We're all scared of the same things."

Mary Adams described herself as "very timid and very scared to get up in front of people," before she started attending Ladies Rock Camp in Portland. Adams, who learned to play guitar, the drums, and sing by attending three rock camps, says she's more patient and more comfortable in her skin today. She even jokes that her husband says rock camp is "cheaper than therapy."

Ladies Rock Camp is becoming a healthy addiction with women returning to the program annually to recharge their lives. Consequently, there are rock bands performing in local clubs across the country that got their start at a Ladies Rock Camp.

Adams, who is a professional organizer living in Everett, Washington, continues to play with her band, Bad Lady Finger, which formed during her third stint at rock camp. She even performed a rock concert for friends and family to celebrate her 40th birthday in April.

"I don't have a beautiful voice," Adams says. "But I have a voice and I'm OK with it."

In the days leading up to Ladies Rock Camp Boston, King was convinced that the friendships she would make during the weekend would trump the music. She couldn't have been more wrong. For King, who works for a business consulting firm, it was all about the music. In fact, when a drumming instructor likened King's playing to Animal on *The Muppet Show*—the iconic drum-playing puppet became her source of strength.

Feeling a strange mix of nerves and preparedness, King and The Boobytraps took the stage to play their original song, "Shut Your Trap (So I Don't Fall In)." Seconds before King raised her drumsticks she heard the instructor shout: "Animal!"

King silently thought to herself: "Okay, I can totally do this!" It was her best performance of the

Rock 'n' Roll Camp for Girls (Los Angeles)

www.rockcampforgirlsla.org

Girls Rock Madison

www.grcmadison.org

*Girls Rock N Roll Retreat (Minneapolis)

www.girlsrocknrollretreat.com

Bay Area Girls Rock Camp

Oakland, California

www.bayareagirlsrockcamp.org

Girls Rock Philly

www.girlsrockphilly.org

Portland Rock 'n' Roll Camp for Girls

www.girlsrockcamp.org

Girls Rock! Rhode Island (Providence)

www.girlsrockri.org

Rain City Rock Camp for Girls (Seattle)

www.girlsrockseattle.org

* Minneapolis is a weekly, five-week program. All other camps are weekend day camps.

weekend. She played like a rock star.

Karla Scoon Reid is a freelance writer who now believes her childhood dreams of playing bass guitar in Prince's band may come true.



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