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Portland's Ladies Rock Camp lets women fulfill their rock 'n' roll dreams

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Beth Nakamura, The Oregonian

Portland, OR--10/22/10-- Gisele da Silva of Vancouver, BC, exuberantly bangs on the drums while participating in the Ladies Rock Camp, a three-day camp for adult women that takes place in Portland twice a year. The camp puts the proceeds of their experience into the Rock Camp for Girls, a nonprofit that teaches girls confidence and self-worth through learning to play an instrument and becoming part of a band. Women come from around the country and the world to participate in the camp; several participants have attended the camp more than once. Beth Nakamura/The Oregonian

Mary Adams, a petite mother of two from Everett, Wash., has a soft voice and a pixie haircut; she's shy at first and slightly nervous. Then she starts to sing.

For Adams, 39, and her bandmates at **Ladies Rock Camp**, Anndy Hosier (bassist) and Jennifer Miller (drummer), the need to rock came early.

"I became a big-time music nerd at age 13 when a friend handed me a Velvet Underground album," Hosier says. "It changed my life."

For Adams, it started with her first Duran Duran album -- and her subsequent crush -- when she was in her early teens.

"My lip prints have worn the faces off that album cover," she says.

They, and more than 30 other women who gathered last weekend, have spent their lives chasing it -- experiencing rock vicariously through boyfriends, by religiously attending shows at dark, grimy venues that reek of sweat and history, or by the feverish search for a new sound to love and a new band to idolize.

But, at a cozy musician's space in Northeast Portland, these women get the chance to really rock. In three days at Ladies Rock Camp, they learn to play an instrument, form bands, write a

Portland's Ladies Rock Camp lets women fulfill their rock 'n' roll dreams gallery (11 photos)

song and perform it live in a showcase at Satyricon -- like they've always wanted to.

Ladies Rock Camp is a twice-yearly fundraiser for Portland nonprofit **Rock'n'Roll Camp for Girls**, which aims to empower girls 17 and younger by teaching them to play music, says Ladies Rock Camp program director Marisa Anderson. Each participant pays \$380 for three full days of intensive lessons and practice. That money goes directly to the Rock'n'Roll Camp for Girls and enables the organization to offer scholarships and fee waivers to girls who can't afford the organization's weeklong summer camps.

For the women at Ladies Rock Camp, the dream has always been there: in the backs of their minds. In their career choices. Stowed in their garages. Adams worked at a record label for a while in the Seattle area. Hosier, also 39, and her husband, David, have a collection of instruments, amps and equipment. And, before she got married, Miller, 43, found herself in a pattern of dating drummers.

These women don't have time to be rock stars. They have kids, school, jobs -- the responsibilities so many people have to attend to.

Ladies Rock Camp exists so these busy women can fulfill their neon, punk-rock dreams, if only for a weekend. Since it started in 2004, Ladies Rock Camp has evolved into a serious tradition for a cluster of women from across the United States and Canada.

"This is the only thing I ask for all year," says Adams, who has attended the camp 3 1/2 times (one year her husband had to pick her up midcamp after she came down with the flu -- and she cried the whole way home). "I don't want Christmas presents or birthday presents."

The Rock'n'Roll Camp for Girls began in 2001 as the senior thesis project of Misty McElroy, then a student at Portland State University. The outpouring of support guaranteed it wouldn't be a one-time project, even after McElroy left the organization to pursue other interests.

Ladies Rock Camp almost ended after its first year because of changes in leadership at the nonprofit. But the small group of attendees had fallen in love. In 2006, they organized the camp themselves with the help of a Rock'n'Roll Camp for Girls liaison, who offered her expertise. The proceeds in 2006 -- \$7,500 after costs -- went directly into the Rock'n'Roll Camp for Girls' bank account. Ladies Rock Camp has been a permanent biannual event ever since.

"We loved it so much, we couldn't let it die," says Leslie Yeagers, a veteran of the first Ladies Rock Camp and a volunteer at every camp since.

Yeagers is among the first of a growing -- but still tightknit -- club.

Editor's note

Oregonian reporter Candice Ruud enrolled and participated in last weekend's Ladies Rock Camp to write this story. Candice is a senior at Oregon State University and a fall intern at The Oregonian. She played guitar with Rock Camp band Bad LadyFinger.

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On Friday, Oct. 22, 35 women trickle into the Rock Room, a back room at the Rock'n'Roll Camp for Girls space where campers and staff members meet, eat, hold assembly and occasionally jam. The women pour cups of coffee and sit down, anxiously awaiting the start of camp. Some are meeting each other for the first time, but many of the women are two- or three-time Rock Camp alums.

Through the weekend, nobody is left out, and no cliques are formed. Thirty-five women remain captive in a confined space for three days without cattiness or gossip. "Everyone is taking a risk, and they need to feel safe," Anderson says.

Aside from being program director for Ladies Rock Camp, Anderson also runs the Girls Rock Institute, an after-school program for girls who want to get serious about learning to play their instruments. The Girls Rock Institute is also a branch of the Rock'n'Roll Camp for Girls organization.

Women from all musical backgrounds -- or none at all -- come to Ladies Rock Camp twice each year. Many come in knowing no one and have no musical experience; some are afraid they won't be any good at being a rock star. But the first-day mantra -- "Dare to suck" -- helps ease fears. "They want each other to succeed," Anderson says. "This camp defines community. ... Community is a place where people are depending on each other for really essential needs."

The first time Adams came to camp, she was with a friend. She remembers sitting in the car staring at the building for minutes, painfully deliberating whether they should go in.

"I remember thinking, 'We could leave right now and nobody would know,'" Adams says.

Every camper remembers that feeling. But by Saturday night, when the Rock Room transforms into a dimly lit bar and the women transform from giggly beginners to swanky karaoke singers and dancers, there are no strangers, and there are no more jitters.

"That's what makes this such an amazing place," Yeagers says. "When I first came to camp, I was really trying to fit in -- and then I realized I didn't need to be."

Adams keeps in touch with the members of every Ladies Rock Camp band she's ever been in but says this camp was the best by far. A few minutes into introductions and the formation of their band, Bad LadyFinger, Hosier, Miller and Adams are gushing about their love for punk-rock band X. They discover they have the same taste in music and movies. The three of them even share the same favorite color: green.

By the time they get on stage for the Sunday showcase at Satyricon, they are finishing each other's sentences. The goodbyes were going to be emotional anyway, but they are especially tearful this time because the famed downtown Portland venue where many of them had spent their 20s hanging out is officially closing -- **tonight marks Satyricon's final show.**

Bad LadyFinger takes the stage second Sunday afternoon. The butterflies that had been dissipating since Friday morning fly back in as they look out over the hot lights to the crowd. But then Miller hits the drums, Hosier snaps the bass line and Adams starts to sing.

At first Adams is barely audible over the instruments and the crowd. But once the song warms up, so does she. Even her bandmates are surprised when she rips the microphone off the stand, swings herself into a punk-rock stance and belts out the lyrics she has written. The song ends, and the crowd explodes into applause. When they exit the stage and start to come down from their adrenaline high, the women can barely remember what happened.

"This weekend was a roller-coaster ride," Adams says. "But it's the best roller-coaster ride I've ever been on."

-- **Candice Ruud**