

WORDS AND GUITAR, I GOT IT

Recollections, excerpts,
reflections and lyrics on two
countercultural eras and their defiance

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One of the two main focuses of this article is the production of music zines. Reflecting the format and aesthetic of zines, the writing has not been provided with notes - they would have been seemingly endless, possibly distracting. Instead, a list of cited works and a bibliography can be found jointly in the last page. Also, typos and grammatical errors of cited works have been left as they were in original publications.



Words and guitar:
A Spotify playlist by the author
- a soundtrack to the essay that
follows

Picture this: United States, California, possibly San Francisco. But, most importantly, the mid 1960s. Just out of the Eisenhower era, of McCarthyism, of the plastic 50s. Vietnam and Selma's Bloody Sunday. The immaculate American white fence is slowly starting to crumble. LSD is here, it's new, both mysterious and tempting - above all, it's not illegal. Not yet. And rock and roll is giving signs that are louder and louder, its most absurd and prosperous

era right about to dawn. We'll call this place in time Place #1.

Now picture this: the States, again. The Pacific Northwest, mainly.

Survivors of the 80s, of the Reagan presidency, now boiling under Bush. New peaks for a War on Drugs and last vestiges of a Cold War. For students and outcasts, you'd say, there's punk rock. And yes, punk rock is here, it's been around for more than a decade now, and it still seems like the obvious answer. But punk rock is looking different, it's all muscles by now. It's gaining violence and losing inventiveness. We'll call this place in time Place #2.

Now, I'd like you to keep your feet in these two different places at the same time. We'll go back and forth, we'll alternate glances. 60s and 90s and

one more time 60s, and then again 90s. I'm not asking you to draw parallels, I'm just setting the scene for a double, synchronous trip.

Place #1: Consider all we said so far. Now locate it in the intersection of Haight Street and Ashbury Street. Colourful Victorian houses, as beautiful as cheap, and the very first head shops. Quicksilver Messenger Service and Moby Grape are rehearsing a few streets away, while over here Janis Joplin is joining Big Brother & the Holding Company. The Grateful Dead have turned 710a Ashbury Street into a communal house, while members of the Jefferson Airplane share a majestic mansion at 2400 Fulton Street. You see the greatest new bands in the world (plus astonishing light shows) at the Avalon Ballroom, or the Fillmore, or the Matrix. There are

kaleidoscopic posters, split fountain prints, tie-dye shirts everywhere. The Diggers give out food, plays and parties for free. It's a circus, isn't it? One of its prominent contortionists, Allen Cohen, will eventually write: "the media loved the circus but were confused by it".

Place #2: The exact date is 1990, and if you find yourself around the Evergreen State College (Olympia, Washington) you might be given a copy of a new zine, Bikini Kill - named after the emerging, loud Kathleen Hanna fronted band. One of the first pages catches your eye: "I'm so sure that lots of girls are also in revolution and we want to find them. Sure our revolution has a lot to do with making ourselves important enough to start a revolution, but we also don't care about this... Because what makes us feel good without hurting others IS good. This society isn't my society cuz this society hates women and I don't. This society doesn't want us girls to feel happy or powerful in anyway". Punk rock (call it hardcore, call it the moshing parade) also seems to hate women. But there's a bunch of girls ready to pick up a guitar and start screaming about it. And writing about it. And supporting others who will sing and write about it. Let's go back to the zine, look at the end of the page:

"ENCOURAGEMENT IN

THE FACE OF INSECURITY is a slogan of the revolution".

Place #1: Remember Allen Cohen? One morning he dreams of a rainbow newspaper being read all over the world. Shortly after that his dream becomes reality and the San Francisco Oracle comes to life. Many other cities in the psychedelic States welcome their own oracles: people want to read about rock music without the usual paternalism, they want to discuss the mind-opening properties of acid and find visionary works of art in the centerfold of their newspaper. It seems like all they're interested in cannot be found in existing magazines and papers. According to Cohen, "the newspaper format was one of the vehicles of the oppressions and materialism of the past". When you realize that, when you believe that, what do you do? Do you find a new vehicle, your own invention full of potential? Of course, and here's rock - psychedelic rock - for you. But you can't resist the incomparable pleasure of taking possession of that very format, subvert its very principles and create a revolution out of it.

Place #2: Zines always have that appearance, it always looks like they

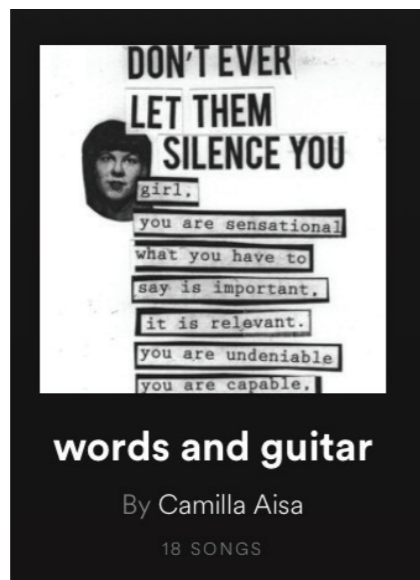
have just been invented. It's the never-aging medium, and you feel tricked to believe you're one of the first to know. But disillusioned connoisseurs will know zines were really that young and that new perhaps for our grandparents only. They came to life in the 1920s thanks to science fiction fans, they came of age with Dada, Fluxus and the Beat Generation, they flirted with politics incessantly, and they found their ultimate vocation with punk. Since the 1920s, they have been summoning geeks, outcasts, misfits and underground agitators. Riot Grrrls add two more definitions to the mix; they call themselves dorks, bidding farewell to the good old punk cool, and they profess to be common, not special.

Place #1: The mightiest principle of traditional journalism is perhaps that of objectivity. Or, of course, that's what traditional journalism wants us to believe. Likewise, the inherent purpose of, say, posters is to give out a piece of information, to communicate something specific. Now, the hippies couldn't care less for any of this. What is the truth, if there is one?, they keep asking themselves. There's no such thing as THE truth, acid trips suggest: there's yours, there's mine, there are millions of

angles and the boundaries that keep them distinct are not as defined and certain as we were taught to believe. Here they come, then: the newborn psychedelic newspapers favour personality over rigor, curiosity over gloat, stimulating the expression of individualities and undercurrents that reflect a living community of originals and originators. Similarly, \psychedelic posters bury the informations they're supposed to thoroughly give under an hypnotic sea of colours and shapes. Objectivity finally finds itself unclaimed. And for the first time, author and user overlap.

Place #2: Perhaps this is the great distinction of the riot grrrl zine, what really sets apart the 90s Pacific Northwest zine from the illustrious tradition of punk zines. If you read one and you find yourself thinking "I could do that", here it is. That's the point. With punk zines you never had to be particularly gifted either, of course, but now you're not supposed to be well-connected or knowledgeable either. The hectic music geeks you found at every possible underground concert since the late 1970s are old history. Knowing every single band of your scene of choice is old history. It really doesn't matter. What really matters, Chainsaw and Jigsaw and Bikini Kill and Girl Germs suggest, is your

own voice. You set scene. Your little, utterly crucial vision of the world. Are you special? Yes - obviously personality cannot be shared, or replicated - and no, anyone could do it. It's all about concocting a revolution that is a thousand voices strong. The second issue of Bikini Kill provides a clear manifesto: "BECAUSE us girls crave records and books and fanzines that speak to US that WE feel included in and can understand in our own ways. BECAUSE we wanna make it easier for girls to see/hear each other's work so that we can share strategies and criticize-applaud each other. BECAUSE we must take over the means of production in order to create our own meanings. BECAUSE viewing your work as being connected to our girlfriends-politics-real lives is essential if we are gonna figure out how what we are doing impacts, reflects, perpetuates, or DISRUPTS the status quo".



Place #1: So, how do the intrigued media narrate the circus? Well, first of all we will have to ask ourselves when the intrigued media starts narrating the circus. And the answer is after a while. The mainstream seems to love being late, and the Haight Ashbury revolution keeps rolling almost on the sly in its most decisive years. Newsweek, Life, Time, Look, all eventually arrive though. They report news of an incipient Summer of Love where, they imply, drugs will abound and the streets of San Francisco will open their arms to any rambler's twisted desire. And they actually succeed in merchandising peace & love. In June "San Francisco (Be Sure to Wear Flowers in Your Hair)" conquers the charts: its author is John Phillips, the South Carolina born leader of the Los Angeles based Mamas & Papas, while its singer is Phillips' old friend Scott McKenzie, born in Florida, met in Virginia.

The infamous Summer of Love, meanwhile, ends up being a colossal disaster for the original spirit of the Haight. The Death of the Hippie is soon announced: "The media cast nets, create bags for the identity-hungry to climb in. Your face on TV, your style immortalized without soul in the captions of the Chronicle. NBC says you exist, ergo I am.

Narcissism, plebeian vanity. The victim immortalized. Black power, its transcendent threat of white massacre the creation of media-whore obsequious bowers to the public mind which they recreate because they too have nothing to create and the reflections run in perpetual anal circuits and the FREE MAN vomits his images and laughs in the clouds because he is the great evader, the animal who haunts the jungles of image and sees no shadow, only the hunter's gun and knows sahib is too slow and he flexes his strong loins of FREE and is gone again from the nets. They fall on empty air and waft helplessly to the grass".

Place #2: It's an anonymous flyer, undated. "What is a riot grrrl?", it asks loud and clear on the top. Most importantly, it argues: "BECAUSE in every form of media I see us/myself slapped, decapitated laughed at, objectified, raped, trivialized, pushed, ignored, stereotyped, kicked, scorned, molested, silenced, invalidated, knifed, shot, chocked (sic), and killed".

Place #1: "Hallucinogenic drugs like marijuana and LSD, they believe, are the knives that cut those knots. Once unleashed, most hippies first become insatiable hedonists, smoking and eating whatever can turn them on

in a hurry; making love, however and with whomever they can find (including "group grope") that "feels good and doesn't hurt anybody"; saturating the senses with color and music, light and motion until, like an overloaded circuit, the mind blows into the never-never land of selflessness. The middleclass ego, to the hippie, is the jacket that makes society straight, and must be destroyed before freedom can be achieved" - "Youth: The Hippies", Time Magazine, July 1967.

Place #2: "They do things like scrawl SLUT and RAPE across their torsos before gigs, produce fanzines with names like Girl Germs and hate the media's guts. They're called Riot Grrrls and they've come for your daughters" - Kim France, Rolling Stone, 1993.

INTERLUDE: Imagine what it is like to be portrayed for what you're not. Or just by the appearance of it. Or not portrayed at all - just trivialized, when you cannot be unseen. An esoteric fanatic with flower beads, an angry failed paper doll. Questions are being asked about why you don't follow the norm, why you don't make sense, or smile more. What do you do? The obvious answer would be: you complain. Cry, weep for

incomprehension. Our two places suggest a different solution, though. Perhaps, you tell you own story, your way. And perhaps, you disrupt your detractor's own medium. For good.

Place #1: The psychedelic newspaper is ready to permanently divorce its content from the conventions of traditional journalism. Be ready to say goodbye to censorship, and even to editing. Take the Oracle's interviews, for example: they are all printed in full, except for stuttering and repetition; "all Oracle interviews are printed as they were spoken even if we had to continue them in small print to fit. Interested readers might have to squint, but what they read was everything that was said, warts and all", Allen Cohen would later recall in 1990. As for ads, underground papers - in 1967 finally allied as the Underground Press Syndicate - will freely choose whether to accept a proposed ad or not. Books and LPs will be favoured - promoting them is still a good way to "undermine the corporate state".

Place #2: The unknown author of the flyer we were reading earlier concludes: "BECAUSE every time we pick up

a pen, or an instrument, or get anything done, we are creating the revolution. We ARE the revolution". And the unthinkable is about to happen: we'll stop talking to the media at once. (See? It's so convincing I'm starting to write in first person - and I am writing for a journal). A media blackout is initiated in 1992: riot grrrls don't want to be interviewed by the press or photographed by the mainstream media. Three years later, Sleater-Kinney sings: "Sold out do do you wanna it/ On a magazine cover / Take it, its my body / Ooh, ooh I don't wanna". Meanwhile, zines are being copiously produced.

Place #1: We witness the effacement of another journalistic dogma: the editorial line. Messiness is the word, as a plethora of interests, undercurrents, curiosities flourish through the pages of psychedelic papers. After all, psychedelic rock is busy mixing folk with electric marvels, eastern influences and blues adaptations, theremins and sitars. As the first volume of the Haight Ashbury Tribune commences, "incomplete and inadequate, but a good beginning". Meanwhile, the Berkeley Barb alternates articles on "How to Handle Your Friendly Neighbourhood Fink" to passionate political rants.

Place #2: "Clarity of agenda is not really something that

is important to me. RIOT GRRRL is a total concept. There is no editor and there is no concrete vision or expectation, or there shouldn't be. In the tradition of the NEW Modrockers and Hypocrobats, we riot grrrl are not aligning ourselves with any one position or consensus, because in all likelihood we don't agree. One concrete thing we do agree on so far is that it's cool/fun to have a place we're we can express ourselves that won't be censored, and we're we can feel safe to bring up issues that are important to us. To me riot grrrl along with other angry grrrl zine's, exists in the face of boring nowheresville fanzinedom to confront as well as to be something fun. Those of us who have been working on these past four issues might not do them again, but this name us bit copywrited (sic)...so take the ball and run with it!".

Place #1: And then... "Funeral notice. HIPPIE. In the Haight Ashbury District of this city, Hippie, devoted son of Mass Media". The un-devoted sons and daughters find new homes, or new skies, and mainly leave San Francisco to the rambblers. It's the beginning of the end, somebody says. Maybe it's all because of Altamont. Or maybe it just seems like it isn't worth it anymore, without Janis. Maybe those two men on the pickup truck at the end of Easy Rider had to seemingly win.

Place #2: And then... "It's a privilege, it's a

background / It's everything that I own / It's thinking I'm the hero of this pretty white song / It's thinking I'm the hero of this pretty white world. / White girl / I want to change the world / But I won't change anything / Unless I change my racist self".

(IN)CONCLUSION:

Battling with the media isn't fascinating per se. Long haired hippies and angry girls, they both led their own battles picking the possibility of an innovative self-narrative as their weapon of choice. When all the annalists you see are telling a wrongful, obtusely biased story, you tell your story yourself, you become the historian - they seem to recommend. And time, time seems to prove them right. Fifty years ago they had to face a disdainful Times Magazine, twenty-five years ago they were minimized by a jaundiced Rolling Stone. This is when it gets fascinating: fifty or twenty-five years later, I'm not studying psychedelic culture or the riot grrrl movement through the outworn pages of old Times and Rolling Stone magazines. I'm listening to the very voices of artists, visionaries, activists and common participants of those communities. Of course, that makes the possible investigations almost endless. How can you read, or let alone retrieve, every page of every 90s grrrl zine, when everyone - anyone - was being encouraged to produce their own? And above all - isn't this beautiful? You grapple as

much as you can, you don't faced have not been resolved. The problems are still out there keep your hunger quiet. And But the temptation of you follow stories - wherever confronting them with they go-, even when they take nothing but complaints is the form of messy parallel weaker. Those stories have recounts of cultural eras that proved action - creative, seem so distant. relentless, ingenious action - is much more satisfying, and

Here's Place #3, then. London, effective. A few methods have 2018. Let's say it, the problems been illustrated, a few visions Place #1 and Place #2 have have been shared.

The problems are still out there - I think we should write, sing about it.

"Words and guitar, I want it
Words and guitar, I got it
Way way too loud, I want it
Words and guitar"

(Sleater -Kinney, Words and
Guitar, 1997)

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SONGS:

- Heavens to Betsy, "White Girl", from Calculated, 1994
- Sleater-Kinney, "Sold Out", from Sleater-Kinney, 1995
- Sleater-Kinney, "Words and Guitars", from Dig Me Out, 1997

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