



IS IT RIOT GRRRL?

RIOT GRRRL: A Legacy in Three Parts

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In 2021, my Spotify wrapped told me my most listened-to genre of the year was “Riot Grrrl.” It’s with some shame I admit this is almost 100% because of Tik Tok. Beneath the dance challenges, people were rediscovering what was thought to be a bygone movement. How did an obscure feminist offshoot of Olympia hardcore become an internet phenomenon in 2020? The

rise and fall of Riot Grrrl is somewhat elusive, yet its impact cannot be denied. A six-year span of radical girlhood, zines, and DIY revolution left enough of a mark that, over two decades later, it has made its way back to the forefront of youth culture. But it’s not all the same. The focus of the new movement has shifted from a political message to an aesthetic. The political and social landscape today is vastly different from that of the movement’s birth as well, subjecting it to a modern critical eye. The Riot Grrrl resurgence is a complex story of adaptation, evolution, and the power of the internet.

The scene was born in the artistic cradle of Olympia, Washington. Female rockers were tired of the culture of drugs, bars, and masculinity that defined the burgeoning Seattle punk scene. They wanted not only to create spaces for women but to seize them. Kathleen Hanna, who was and remains a figurehead for the scene, was a student of Olympia’s own Evergreen State College when notions of a movement began to simmer among the female youth of the city. She, along with Bratmobile members Allison Wolfe, Molly Neuman, and Erin Smith, authored the 1991 Riot Grrrl Manifesto.¹ The manifesto was strong in its anarchist and

anti-capitalist ethos, as well as in its intent of building a scene by girls, for girls. The message was clear: Girls would not assimilate. Girls would not be silenced. Girls were the revolution. Their message was published in the *Bikini Kill Zine*.² Zines, DIY pamphlets used to spread messages, ideas, and art, would come to define the new scene.² Hanna’s band Bikini Kill, as well as Bratmobile, were credited as the founding bands of the movement because they had authored the manifesto. As they gained popularity, Riot Grrrl spread, first jumping across the country to Washington, DC, then spreading across the nation and beyond. The movement burned bright for a

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few years, inspiring an array of other women musicians to carve out their own scenes, reclaim their lives, and embrace a new femininity. However, when Bikini Kill disbanded in 1997 due to mounting stress, burnout, and media harassment, many people considered the movement to be dead.³ Some bands from the scene saw success into the 2000's, but the momentum was lost. The fire that Riot-Grrrl lit had turned to embers.

Part 1: Resurgence

Riot Grrrl differs from other subcultures of Punk. Where many other microcosms of the genre defined themselves by aesthetics or sounds, Riot Grrrl was more innovative politically than it was musically. It was a

national network of young, angry feminists searching for ways to make themselves heard. There were the bands, of course, but more important than the screeching vocals and fuzz guitar was the community. That's what Riot Grrrl really was: young girls coming together with their fists in the air. As Sara Marcus, author of the 2010 retrospective *Girl to the Front*, describes the impact of her first Riot Grrrl DC meeting: "Talking to these girls, I began to understand that I didn't have to be miserable. ... I felt powerless not because I was weak but because I lived in a society



that drained teenage girls of power For the first time in years, I knew that I was going to be OK."⁴ The music left behind by the Riot Grrrls is an artifact of something much more ephemeral—a sisterhood that shone through chapter meetings, hand-stapled zines, and DIY 8-track tapes.

Flash forward thirty years, and feminism has permeated the mainstream in a very different way. I'd argue it has become the default to identify as a feminist, but this default is somehow different from the feminism of the liberation-oriented movements that came before it. It seems less concerned with action than it is with simple awareness. On the heels of the Me-Too movement, pop-culture feminism—that is, the kind that reaches *Saturday Night Live*—has been boiled down to a notion of "we are women, hear us roar" that doesn't quite "roar" the way it did in the 1970s.⁵ During Me-Too, there was a moment when powerful men were brought to justice by the women they abused, but where are we now? Brett Kavanaugh is in the nation's highest court after a lengthy sexual assault hearing all too reminiscent of the 1991 hearings and subsequent confirmation of Clarence Thomas. *Roe v. Wade* was overturned despite the overwhelming protests. Modern, popular feminism is cosmetic, a flashy coat of paint to give the impression of progressive politics. This isn't to say awareness is not important, but it is a question of whether it's enough. Democrats have a branding problem. To my

generation, they're all old and lame. So obsessed with public appeal, they lose any real stance. The same goes for their values. The modern day, politically correct, default "feminism" is no longer subversive.

There's a phenomenon well known to teen girls called the "pick-me's." These are girls who change themselves or put down other women to seem more appealing to men.⁶ I can't help but think of the "Cool Girl" monologue from *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn. Flynn declares that every man "wants a Cool Girl, who is basically the girl who likes every fucking thing he likes and doesn't ever complain."⁷ This monologue is big online where some girls identify with the "Cool Girl" both solemnly and enthusiastically. Some rue its truth, seeing in themselves the effects of what is known to gender theorists as the "male gaze."⁸ Others, however, embrace it, letting themselves be the perfect male aspiration. From "Manic-pixie-dream-girl" to "femme fatale," modern feminine archetypes are the result of the same thing: the lameness of modern feminism. The "cool girl" rejects feminism beyond sexual empowerment. She goes about her femininity alone because to meaningfully engage with other women would wreck the male fantasy that governs her. For the sake of the "cool girls," feminism needed a face-lift.

In my opinion, there are two things that happened in 2020 that catalyzed the sudden return of the Riot Grrrls: a new emphasis on political activism and a re-popularization of alternative fashion. Both were amplified by Tik Tok. I remember the summer of 2020 well. Above anything else, I remember experiencing it through that app. I was seeing footage of protests at a staggering quantity and getting practically all of my news in the same place. At the time, I truly believed that Tik Tok was more reliable than the news. It was raw and firsthand. It wasn't being fed to me through a news corporation filtering the truth. (It was actually being fed to me through a different media corporation.) I remember seeing videos about anarchy, communism, and mutual aid, and briefly thinking I was an anarcho-communist while barely understanding what that meant. I also remember the obsession many had with "alt" Tik Tok. That was a bizarre set of trends and aesthetics that stemmed from an online fashion called "e-boy." This is what ultimately brought more alternative styles back into the mainstream. People interested in "Alt" fashion eventually started to delve deeper and discover classic punk and goth aesthetics. The emphasis on radical politics in online circles made the philosophies of classic punk especially appealing. Anti-establishment, anarchist, and full of rage—it was everything teens attempting

a social media revolution wanted to be. Punk was cool again. People delving into subcultures of the past quickly discovered it was very male and very white—at least that was true of what was popular. To a modern eye, Riot Grrrl was like a lighthouse in a sea of testosterone. To "cool girls," it was a beacon of hope and the revitalization that modern feminism needed so badly. This was helped along by the popularity of 90s aesthetics which made Riot Grrrl even more appealing. In fact, that was likely the reason it gained popularity as fast as it did. A lot of the initial intrigue was fashion, but as it spread, people became more interested in its history. They looked back on the ethos of sisterhood and rebellion and learned that it was more than a style. It was a genuine movement, and in turn they rediscovered the empowerment it brought.

Part 2: Revision

People on the internet have a hard time remembering that words have definitions. Take any internet "buzzword" that seems to get thrown around a lot. For example, the popular nickname "Karen" once meant WASP women with entitlement issues harassing minimum wage workers over things they can't control. Today, "Karen" gets thrown around so loosely it more closely means "woman I personally found somewhat obnoxious." This happens often. The internet, especially Tik Tok, is full of echo chambers where words and ideas get bounced around until they almost completely lose their initial meaning. This, combined with our fixation with labels—for identities, aesthetics,

fan communities, and beyond—creates a puzzling climate for anyone trying to dissect the latest buzzword fads. When Riot Grrrl rose back into popularity, it was subjected to all of these tendencies.

The definition of Riot Grrrl was already loose in the 90s. Media didn't really know what to do with this network of radical women. As one unnamed Riot Grrrl explained to a journalist from the *Seattle Times*, "The press has tried to smooth off the rough edges of their lives, has dolled them up when they don't want to be dolls, has exploited their confessions about being hurt by incest, rape and betrayal."⁹ Mainstream media eventually landed on the incomplete conclusion that it was a genre of music. Further, it came to be assumed that any girl into rock was a part of it. As Sara Marcus recalls, following the death of Kurt Cobain, the media even began referring to Courtney Love as Riot Grrrl's "patron saint," even though nobody she knew from Riot Grrrl DC meetings cared at all about Nirvana or Hole.¹⁰ Because Riot Grrrl is thought to have died so quickly, it's hard to pin

Modern feminine archetypes are the result of the same thing: the lameness of modern feminism.

down where exactly it ends and the rest of 90s alternative begins. You'll always see Katleen Hanna's name attached to it, and, to a slightly lesser extent Bratmobile, as they were responsible for the manifesto. It came out of Seattle, but it



had thriving chapters around the country, mostly on the coasts. When you Google the term, Bikini Kill always comes up first, followed by Bratmobile, then L7, Heavens to Betsey, Babes in Toyland, 7 Year Bitch, Sleater-Kinney, and more. But L7 and Babes in Toyland formed in the 80s, years before anyone really knew Hanna's name. And Sleater-Kinney came onto the scene in 1994 when it was already beginning to fizzle out. Many bands from the era stayed together for years after Riot Grrrl was considered dead, and some of its strongest voices came before it was officially born. So, what then defines Riot Grrrl? It's not the fashion, the aesthetic, the bands, or the music, but the philosophy. It's the attitude and intention that differentiates Riot Grrrl from plain old punk and other subcultural scenes. Riot Grrrl was about loudly creating new spaces for women instead of settling for token spots in the male-dominated and worn-out old ones. Modern interpretations largely miss this, relying instead on the aesthetics and sounds of the movement to try to recapture what made it special.

Modern attempts to imitate Riot Grrrl have also been subject to modern cultural politics. The movement has had its resurgence in a very different social climate than it originated in. It has become common for old subcultures and bands getting revisited through Tik Tok to be subjected to modern ideals of political correctness. For example, videos have circulated on the platform calling out the use of the n-word in "Romeo's Distress" by Christian Death; homophobic lyrics in Bad Brains songs; Siouxi Sioux's adoption of a Native American tribe's name; and, of course, classic



punk's problematic appropriation of Nazi symbols. Despite its feminist politics, Riot Grrrl has received the same treatment. Much of the criticism focused on the overwhelming whiteness of the scene. Tamar-kali Brown, a black woman musician who watched the rise and fall of the movement recalls, "I didn't think it was exclusive, but it didn't feel inclusive to me...It just felt super white."¹¹ Modern criticism points out the failure of the original movement to uplift black voices, but it often neglects the difference in expectations to do so today versus thirty years ago. It is possible, however, to critique the lack of diversity in the movement without condemning it and to acknowledge those women of color were a part of the scene. For example, Tamar-kali Brown, in response to the predominant whiteness of Riot Grrrl, helped organize Sista Girl Riots, punk shows by and for black women who felt out of place in other scenes.

The issue of diversity has been at the forefront of the new wave of bands inspired by Riot Grrrl. Whereas the original movement seemed

to lack intersectionality, today's musicians inspired by the movement emphasize it. In a recent *Billboard* interview, Tik Tok creators at the forefront of the online revival addressed the problem of inclusivity. As one interviewee, 19-year-old Maddie Peletsky, proclaimed: "having inclusivity to Black women and Black non-binary people — pushing their music, adding it to playlists, writing about them in zines — is so instrumental in getting everybody's message out."¹² New Riot Grrls want to make good on the original Riot Grrrl manifesto's belief in "fostering and supporting girl scenes and girl artists of all kinds," and they do their best to make the revival a revolution for all.¹³

Issues modern fans have with Riot Grrrl, however, don't stop at diversity. Many also critique its gender essentialist tendencies. The original movement was not explicitly welcoming of trans women, despite being so interwoven with queer identities. One popular and explicitly lesbian band, The Butch-

ies, created a controversy when they played the 1999 Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, a woman-only event that held the trans-exclusionary "womyn-born-womyn" policy from its first year in 1990 until its last in 2015. Le Tigre, another band fronted by Kathleen Hanna after Bikini Kill disbanded, also played the festival in 2001 and 2005. Both bands have since apologized and released statements declaring their support of trans rights, but the reputation of Riot Grrrl as trans exclusive persists.¹⁴ It doesn't help that many of the radical feminist theorists who influenced the original Riot Grrrl movement have since become explicitly anti-trans, with "rad-fem" often being used as an online dog whistle for TERFs, or "trans exclusionary radical feminists." In response, modern iterations of Riot Grrrl have become increasingly focused on inclusivity of all gender identities and sexualities. In fact, a significant portion of neo-Riot Grrrl bands are fronted by, or have members who are non-binary and trans. These new riot girls want to learn from the successes and failures of the original movement and reinvent it into something that's truly for everyone. Yet, by casually adopting the Riot Grrrl title, they sometimes miss the originality that made the movement what it was. Meanwhile, the music industry is only making things worse.

When you go on Spotify and look at their "Riot Grrrl" playlist, it's a bit of a mess.¹⁵ It does include the big names

that came out of the 90s that are widely agreed to have been a part of the movement. Yet, it gets it wrong with the inclusion of X-Ray Spex, for example, an English, woman-fronted punk band that formed in 1976. Poly Styrene, their lead singer, wasn't a riot girl. She was a strong woman in a man's punk world foreshadowing a movement that wouldn't pop up for another decade. They make the mistake of including Hole as well, again casting Courtney Love as the Riot Grrrl she never claimed to be. Spotify's selection of modern bands is stranger still. There are feminist punk bands clearly influenced by the pioneers, such as Pussy Riot and The Linda Lindas, but there's also a lot of indie bands. In fact, most of the contemporary bands on the playlist are just indie bands with a distorted 90s sound and a female vocalist. They imitate the sounds of the classic bands, but likely don't share the core values that defined the movement. Worse still, the playlist includes the likes of Olivia Rodrigo, the Disney Channel actress turned pop star. Though Rodrigo cites punk acts like Babes in Toyland and Rage Against the Machine among her influences, she's still a pop artist through-and-through, with multiple wins and nominations in the pop category at the Grammy's to show for it. Rodrigo doesn't claim to be a Riot Grrrl either, but her recasting as one is exemplary of the modern misunderstanding of the movement.

Corporate misunderstanding of Riot Grrrl doesn't stop there. As soon as the movement blew up on Tik Tok, it started popping up on the radars of Netflix executives and music producers, and, as with ev-

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everything that gets popular on the internet, they started looking for ways to profit off it. Consider the story of Tramps Stamps. They were an all-female pop-punk band that started posting on Tik Tok in 2020. When their videos started gaining attention, it was for all the wrong reasons: people absolutely hated Tramp Stamps. The band was made up of three women in their late 20s dressed in trendy "gen-z" fashion and pushing a strange power-washed Riot-Grrrl aesthetic. They claimed to be a new, DIY band, but people immediately flagged the high production-value of their videos, their histories in the music industry, their blank backstories, and their admittedly terrible, over-engineered, soulless music. In short time, they gained the reputation of the "most hated band on Tik Tok" as commenters accused them of being industry plant posers. The Tramp Stamps stopped posting soon after that.¹⁶

Then there's the case of Moxie, a 2021 Netflix movie produced and directed by Amy Poehler about a teen girl discovering the Riot Grrrl movement and

getting inspired to combat sexism at her own school. People were hesitant about the movie when it came out, and while it had the potential to be a love letter to the movement, many agreed it ended up being a vapid and inaccurate portrayal of what the original movement was all about. The film boiled the music of the era down to "Rebel Girl" by Bikini Kill, which is commonly identified as a Riot Grrrl anthem, and failed to delve into any politics beyond surface level declarations of "Girl Power." The movie failed to represent or offer any new perspectives on the movement. Instead, the same middle-class, suburban rhetoric was regurgitated for an unimaginative story about a white girl finding her voice. Some reviewers, like Linda Holmes of NPR, pointed out the more interesting routes the movie could have taken by focusing on the main character's black best friend, Lucy.¹⁷ Instead, the movie predictably defaults to a tired and lame (white) feminist narrative in which awareness is the final step in equality. It's a watered-down message that steers away from any deeper or more progressive meanings that would reflect the true politics of Riot Grrrl and other radical feminist movements

It's possible that Riot Grrrl's moment has once again passed. It's had its round of inauthentic interpretations and cash grabs. Some of the original bands are still active, with Sleater-Kinney releasing new albums in 2019 and 2021 as well as a new single just last month. Bikini Kill, meanwhile, is set to continue their reunion tour in South

America and Europe next year. However, modern bands under the Riot Grrrl marquee still boast an indie sound far different from the movement's origins in hardcore that begs the question if they can even be considered as the same thing. Perhaps Riot Grrrl is not meant to be revived but instead reinterpreted into a new movement that has learned from the original without trying to change what was so misunderstood, hard to define, and completely revolutionary.

Part 3: Reflection

Spotify has a tendency to make up genres, as exemplified by the bizarre mix on their Riot Grrrl playlist. There's one genre they like to throw around that has a lot in common with the music on the Riot Grrrl playlist. That genre is Queercore. The playlist for Queercore lists the Riot Grrrl anthem "Rebel Girl" among its first songs. In fact, 75% of the artists on this playlist could just as easily qualify for Spotify's definition of "Riot Grrrl." It even includes The Butchies, freed from their Michfest controversy.¹⁸ This genre has been readily adopted by a lot of bands who identify with its sound and ethos. Where Riot Grrrl was decidedly more political than musical, Queercore is music first. For that reason, it has a lower barrier of entry. Modern interpretations of Riot Grrrl have merged with Queercore into a new breed of DIY music that can foster a more di-

verse collection of artists. This version of neo-Riot Grrrl puts inclusivity at the forefront while keeping some of the attitude of the original movement alive, although without the same sense of tangible community and mobilization. The neo-Riot Grrrls have spread primarily through Tik Tok, meaning they lack the more real connections of in-person community. This is not entirely their fault, of course, as the revival took place during the pandemic, and the internet is admittedly a very easy place to find and organize something like community; but it's hard to take rebellion seriously when the involvement stops with Tik Tok, especially considering how the original movement succeeded in carving out actual social spaces. Maybe the resurgence has incorrectly labeled itself as Riot Grrrl. It's not really the same movement, but a reinterpretation for the modern age. It shares some of the same gender politics but includes a newfound understanding of the power of intersectionality. In the same way Poly Styrene foreshadowed the movement in the 90s, Kathleen Hanna foreshadowed today's feminist punkers. She's someone for them to learn and grow from. But maybe they should focus on finding their own unique voice instead of trying to stretch an old name to fit something new.

The world still needs feminism, on the internet and beyond. There's a noticeable difference in

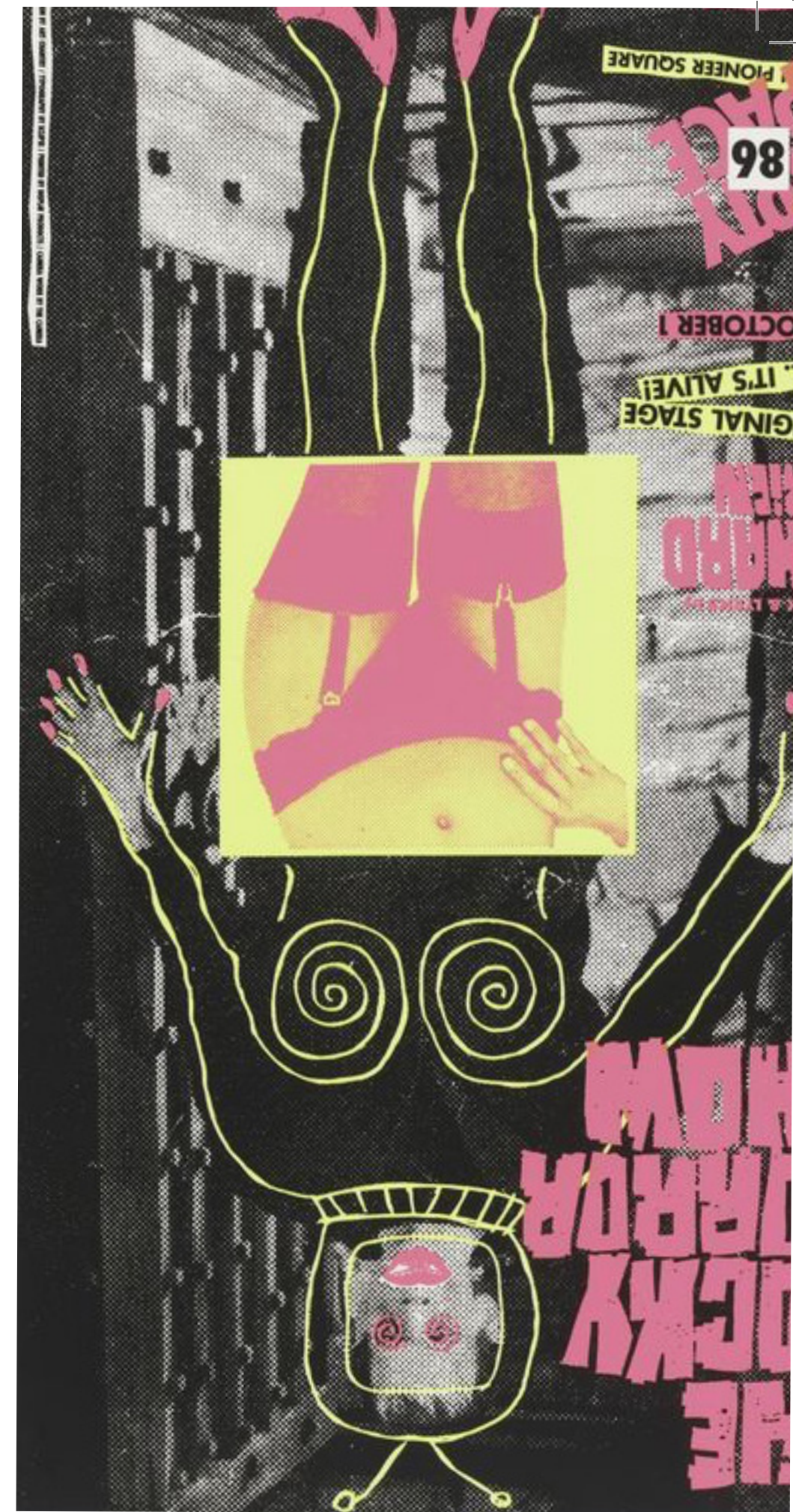
the way men and women get treated in online spaces. Male pop-punk artists that use Tik Tok to gain influence get plenty of hate, but the Tramp Stamps were all but smote from the app. The "Karen" trope is often used as an excuse to criticize and tease women who dare to have strong opinions. Ridicule of modern feminism as vapid and reactionary makes girls embarrassed to associate with it while women's rights are overturned in the courts with alarming ease. Conservative rhetoric paints feminists as hysterical and uneducated, especially when it comes to the Pro-Choice movement. This forces women who are speaking out for their rights to adhere to an inhuman level of composure at the risk of being mocked and dismissed. Then they usually get dismissed anyway. These expectations trickle down through films like *Moxie* and its sanitized representation of rebellion. At the same time, hyper-femininity has made a resurgence online with trends like the coquette aesthetic and the rising popularity of the "bimbo." Though these trends may stem from an inherently queer notion of performative gender—amplifying certain gendered traits as a means of embracing and reclaiming aspects of one's identity—they've been misunderstood to the point that some teenage girls' greatest aspirations in life really are to be hot and dumb. Then there's the whole "girl math" trend, where women rationalize certain purchases as free because they were on sale or bought in cash.¹⁹ Whereas some elements of the online bimbo trend play with sexist stereotypes

on a level of irony, this irony easily slips into sincerity in other corners of the internet. Progress has been made since the 90s, but the Riot Grrrl attitude is still needed, regardless of whether the original movement has completely passed. In its most powerful form, Riot Grrrl reminds women that they are not what society tells them they are and that they should scream as loud as they want, even if society calls them hysterical for it.

For all that the revival has gotten wrong—its overreliance on online community, its obsession with inoffensive politics, its tendency towards assimilation, etc.—it has at least brought Riot Grrrl to my generation and reminded us of the power of being unapologetic and authentic. Maybe it's even relit the fire somewhere outside of popular culture, where the mainstream can't file down its grit. What the internet has fostered is something closer to remembrance. The true Riot Grrrl revival could be happening beneath the mainstream radar, in undiscovered teen subcultures or in house shows, dive bars, and backyard mosh pits—some place that's safe, loud, and far away from Tik Tok.

End Notes

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AU/2023

SUN 26 FEB - HOBART - MONA FOMA
WED 1 MAR - PERTH FESTIVAL
FRI 3 MAR - BRISBANE - THE TIVOLI*
SUN 5 MAR - ADELAIDE - LION ARTS FACTORY* presented by PAK Music
WED 8 MAR - MELBOURNE - THE FORUM*
SAT 11 MAR - GOLDEN PLAINS
MON 13 MAR - SYDNEY OPERA HOUSE*

***All Ages**

