SEXISM IN THE PUNK SCENE

a series of essays that originally appeared on
ilivesweat.tumblr.com and punknews.org

"You know what makes me feel unsafe?" Lauren Denitzio of The Measure [SA] on her experiences of sexism in the punk scene

I'll start off by saying that I'm a white cis-female in her late 20's who identifies as queer, feminist, radical and punk. I'm speaking from my experiences being a part of a largely DIY poppunk scene for the majority of my life and in a touring band for over six years. A large part of the time, I feel welcomed, supported and accepted within the "punk" circles that I'm a part of. However, nothing makes me more angry then hearing someone, men specifically, say that the scene isn't sexist, "because we're all punks and obviously that's not cool." I am far from the only woman-identified person in the room who would like to call bullshit on that statement. While yes, most of my friends and the spaces I go to do not tolerate obviously sexist, homophobic, racist, able-ist, etc. speech, saying those concepts do not exist in our community is just flat out wrong. What offends me is not always just the action itself, but the excuse that if you wear the "punk" label that you're absolved of having done anything wrong because you "didn't mean it that way." I can't think of a rationale so unproductive.

I think part of the problem is that a lot of guys don't understand the things that women find threatening because it's not obviously dressed as a sexist act. What I think of when I imagine a scene without sexism is a scene where we consciously make an effort to create a safer space for everyone, no matter who they are. So while we might not be saying "you can't be in a band or go to this show because you're a girl", there are plenty of other things that go on that I consider to be sexist, because they're blatantly not considering what would make women in the scene feel safe. So, for those who might not know what I'm talking about: you know what makes me feel unsafe? When you're the only guy in the pit who doesn't get the message to not fly full force into someone half your size or strength. When you take your shirt off at a show. When you ask me if I'm "IN the band or WITH the band" after a male bandmate says the four of us are all IN the band. When you tell me I play guitar well for a girl. When you say that all the guys want to fuck the girl in that band. When you make a rape joke. When you use the word bitch or call someone a slut. The list doesn't end there. Now do you think the scene isn't sexist?

One benefit of being in the punk scene for me, even where these things still happen, is having people around who also don't think these things are okay. We're responsible to call each other out if we're doing things that make each other feel unsafe, myself included. No one is perfect, and I don't expect that. What I do expect, however, is the ability to be held accountable for your actions, to apologize and hear everyone's experience is valid. If you're doing something that makes me feel unsafe at a show, I don't care how long you've known me, or your history interacting with women, or how much you love Sleater Kinney. If you can't be held accountable and apologize, then none of those other things really make a difference to me. This applies to anything from jokes in poor taste to sexual assault. Just because we've all known someone for years at shows doesn't change them calling me a cunt, or assaulting their partner. Once people stop making the excuse of "we're all on the same page" and start being honest with each other, we start creating real, physical, safer spaces for everyone, not just women.

1

experiences of sexism are like "a thousand tiny paper cuts... - you wouldn't make a big deal about one on its own, but a thousand of them together are a gaping wound."

My next strongest suggestion is to not be so afraid of self-criticism. You'll probably find examples of sexism in your day to day behavior. I've found them in mine. I've looked back at things that I've done and realized how they were hurtful or inconsiderate and I've had to suck it up and apologize and change the way I act. Look at yourself and the actions of the men around you. Do you disproportionately talk over, or interrupt women? Are you more likely to make eye contact with men than women in group scenarios? These are the small symptoms that add up. Here's a few more: Do you stop and notice that the way your dancing has all the women in the room backing away from the band? Do you try to prove your coolness or masculinity by one upping other men? Do you notice the women in your scene becoming disinterested when conversation drifts into dick measuring territory, when you're comparing your record collections or gear knowledge? Do you use demeaning sexist language without thinking about it? Do you sexualize women and comment on their appearances or bodies, without thinking about how that makes them feel? I'm going to assume a lot of people reading this probably do. Like I said before, it doesn't make you a bad person. But it does make you a lazy selfish person if you're not willing to recognize and try to change those things.

Finally, we can do a lot more to encourage women to participate and play music. Supporting women-centered events like CLITfest and Ladyfest are great ways to do this, as well as the various Girl's Rock Summer Camps that happen all over the country. That doesn't mean we should be trying to dictate or organize these events, but be we should be allies, by offering the women who organise them our support and access to resources. Also, those of us who organise shows or play in bands can do a lot more in thinking about who we choose to book or play music with to keep the all-male-show from happening over and over again.

I want to finish by recommending a book and two essays that I think should be required reading. I've been distributing pieces of this literature in my records and on tour, because there's only so far someone can go to change people's attitudes by playing songs or writing an essay for a website. We need to be willing to educate ourselves and understand sexism and patriarchy if we're going to fight against it. So here are my recommendations for starters:

The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love by Bell Hooks

Homophobia as Masculinity by Michael Kimmel

I Want a Twenty-Four Hour Truce During Which There Is No Rape by Andrea Dworkin

Thanks for taking the time to read this. Please feel free to e-mail me if you have any questions, thoughts, or arguments at spoobnob@gmail.com. I know some people will undoubtedly feel that the conversation is being beaten into the ground, but it's a testament to the gravity of the issue that the argument bears repeating.

David Combs is a punk kid from Washington, DC. He plays guitar in the Max Levine Ensemble, and solo as Spoonboy. You can download his most recent record, 'The Papas', which was written around themes of patriarchal socialisation, at http://spoonboy.bandcamp.com.

Overall, I do feel good about my involvement in the scene and most of the people I associate with (of all genders). I think if we're talking about sexism, we should also really be talking about acknowledging male privilege, which I think is the root of a lot of what I've mentioned. I' tired of being asked why an all female-fronted show might be helpful for women, why creating women-only spaces is productive, why some of us call ourselves feminists. They're "not being macho assholes." "Our scene is past that." They "feel alienated by it." Well, in the words of Kathleen Hana, "I'm so sorry if I'm alienating some of you. Your whole fucking culture alienates me." If people stopped nervously laughing that one off long enough to think about what it actually means, we could have a real conversation and then maybe one day I could stop feeling like sexism exists in my scene.

Lauren Denitzio is an artist, illustrator and designer working out of Brooklyn, NY. When she isn't doing that, she plays guitar and shares voca duties in Worriers, contributes to a bunch of zines, and occasionally writes short essays on sexism for low-rent operations like this one. Find out more about her day job here www.blackandredeye.com, and Worriers here, worriers.bandcamp.com. She can be contacted at Lauren.denitzio@gmail.com

***

Superfluous Stronghold: We're Punk But We Ain't Perfect - P.S. Eliot's Katie Crutchfield offers her views on sexism in punk

It all started this weekend in Mccarren Park. The Two Funerals were in town from Richmond and we were wandering and daydreaming of margaritas in Styrofoam cups and dismally overdue heart-to-hearts. My pal and now fellow I Live Sweat contributor Lauren Denitzio met up with us and with the help of well tequila and a picnic blanket, we made all our daydreams come true. The conversation shifted into a discussion about our most recent experiences with sexism in the punk community; these conversations sort of always do. I consider all of us components of a decreasingly rare species of ladies/lady-bodied humans in the DIY punk world. We are certainly radical, but calling us "radical feminists" is too loose. It's vague. What we are is complicated. We're victims of idiocy. We are culprits of judgment without support. But we are not guilty by association.

It was then that I decided to write to Andy who runs this lovely web blog and see if he'd be so kind to let me use his medium and my minuscule notoriety as a soapbox to talk about something that is creating quite a division in our already martyred scene. We're small and we're specifically weird and the fact that the simple idea of treating all people with equal respect is warranting a shitstorm of hyper-masculine cold-shouldering and hate-typing is fucking ludicrous as far as I'm concerned. Acknowledging a giant zit on the chin of our tiny punk rock commonality does not have to be a witch-hunt. It doesn't have to be a big blame game or an excuse for some ex-JV benchwarmer with an X watch to make me, Lauren, the Two Funerals or anyone else the butt of some defensive, awkward and outlandishly counter-productive joke. It doesn't have to be a war, a battle or even an argument. It just has to be a conversation.

So what's the big problem? You might find yourself pondering that right about now. I'm going to refer back to a little bit of internet drama you may have heard about/participated in sometime last year. The abomination that is the B9 message board popped into my P.S. Eliot Google alert one day and I knew for sure that there was a storm a-brewin'. After deciphering the editorialised asininity of 15-year-old cavemen I began to notice something profound. You know when you're young and your mom tries to tell you not to bother an antpile because "they're more afraid of you then you are of them"? My intelligence, physical appearance, emotional stability and creative output were all being called in to question because of that inane thread or whatever you call it and the only rhyme or reason I can propose is that these impotent messageboard cyborgs are scared shitless that there are women out there who are more productive, talented and capable than themselves. Now that sounds mighty detrimental, right? I'll refer back to our park conversation by saying that some people are never going change their fucking stupid and bigoted opinions. You can't agree with everyone about everything no matter how right you are. Some people are just going to throw themselves to the wind as a lost cause and usually it's best to just let them sail.

So to those of you who I haven't lost by denouncing hardcore gab-session forums and all their creepy inhabitants: do you want to know what makes me feel unsafe? Being written off as a songwriter and a musician because there is a male-bodied individual in my band. Having my most personally valuable compositions and output reduced to some stupid one-paragraph blog-post I made about all the fucked up stuff people were saying about my band regarding my gender. The notion that people still write me off because they "dislike female vocals". The fact that if I take my shirt off at a show, I immediately become a spectacle. It's just as hot for me at shows in the summer as it is for anyone else. While in the scene I am directly involved and with the company I choose to keep this eerie irreverence is almost never present, I have seen and felt so much alienation in my 7 years of touring and playing all ages punk shows. All of my negative experiences mirror the negative experiences of so many other ladies involved in this music scene equitably. It's as unnecessary as it is disheartening. This issue is mocked as often as it is brushed off and it is truly inexplicable to me. The counter-culture we're a part of has evolved so much since it's outset but the consistent ideology is rebellion against an assumed oppressive normalcy. Defiance. Refusal to conform to whatever bullshit the rest of the world is being spoon-fed. What's normal today? Are women objectified? Yes. Are queer/trans-identified people struggling for parity? Yes. Is it difficult to be taken seriously if you don't adhere to certain physical standards i.e. hair color, weight, clothing, etc.? Yes. So what really gets my goat here is that there are seemingly people within the punk community who think this way too. The way "society wants us to think". That is when I feel uneasy. The thought that I could go to a show and feel the same way I did in the hallway at my highschool. Chest bumps, ass grabs, lewd comments, debauchery.

I don't think we all need to have identical convictions. It isn't a cult. But these fundamental differences and gaps make me feel pretty fucking unsafe. It isn't punk. It isn't what punk is about. It is both antagonizing and depressing that shining a light on this big flaw in our community warrants the response it gets. We, as punks, as anarchists, as

standing up for themselves," type of way. It was liberating to hear someone take on those traditional expressions of masculinity, because I hated the ways I was expected to act as a man. I hated the toughness and numbness that was expected from men, because I wanted to be able to express my emotions without fear of ridicule. I hated the predatory way that men acted towards women, because I wanted to be free to have meaningful relationships with women. Likewise, I hated the homophobia, because I wanted to have meaningful relationships with the men in my life. I see men around me all the time who refuse to show any signs of vulnerability for fear of appearing feminine, and they tend to cut themselves off emotionally from the world. It's fucking sad. I see men all the time who only view their relationships in terms of conquest, and I can't think of one of them who has a healthy emotional life. Breaking down ideas around male superiority and masculinity is absolutely in mens' best interests. In a punk context, I can say with certainty that the scenes I've visited that were the most gender inclusive have always been the most exciting and thriving music communities. There's nothing to be gained for men in maintaining the boy's club.

I want to address one common anti-feminist argument: It's the "men have always been sexist, and that's just how things are" argument. There are plenty of examples of non-patriarchal societies that have existed, so for one thing, it's historically inaccurate, but even putting that aside, arguing that doing something for a long time makes it right is a nonsensical way to approach ethics. It's like saying "there's always been murder, so we might as well accept murder as a good and natural part of our lives." I'm sure the same arguments were made to protect slavery. It's also biological essentialism to say that men will always act a certain way based on their gender. So much of our behavior is socialized and the expected traits of masculinity are no exception. There have been cultures where humans have acted in all sort of ways that would seem completely unnatural to us, but those cultures functioned fine on their own terms. If people have lived without concepts that seem essential to our lives, like number systems for example, I think we can do alright without something as banal as patriarchy.

It's also historically short sighted that so many people hold such defeatist attitudes when it comes to our ability to change the way things are. In the last century and a half we've shed the cultural acceptance of slavery, we've stopped discriminatory voting practices based on race or gender, and we've shed all kinds of official policies that allowed discrimination in the workplace and other public spheres. These are things that we've all, even the most privileged among us, come to tout as hallmarks of progress. There's no reason we shouldn't continue to shed any acceptance of sexism, racism, homophobia, etc. that exists now, just because it might seem less obvious.

So boys: if you've read this far and you've bought my argument that yes, sexism exists, and yes, it matters, and yes, it even exists in the punk scene, where do you go with it? I can offer some suggestions, but first consider this point from Aaron Scott (of Attica Attica)'s essay on I Live Sweat, "If you need suggestions for how to make women feel welcome, then I suggest you ask the females in your local scene. They probably have some pretty specific ideas." That first and most important thing that men can do to combat sexism is to take women seriously when they voice their concerns. We are socialized not to, so it's crucial that we do. And don't try to dictate whether someone else's experience qualifies as oppression.

whereupon entrance we shed all the socialized attitudes we grew up with. As long as we live in a sexist patriarchal culture that teaches its children sexist patriarchal attitudes, those attitudes will reappear within punk culture. And it manifests in all sorts of ways: There's the "I wanna kill my ex-girlfriend" songs. There's male band members telling rape jokes. There's women in bands being degraded and objectified, or not being taken seriously as musicians. There's girls at shows being treated like coat hangers. And there's the sad truth that punks rape and are raped.

But if you really need evidence that there's sexism in punk, look around at the next show you're at. Unless you participate in an unusually egalitarian scene (and that's great if you do), the chances are the majority of the audience will be male, but more importantly, chances are 100% of the performers will be male. The all-male-show is so normalized in punk, and it sends a clear message about whose voice is being heard, who's experience is central. The all-woman-show is far far rarer, and when it does happen, often men in the scene will act defensive and complain they are being excluded, as if they're oblivious to the fact that women are excluded in punk on an almost constant basis. Until the centerpiece of punk culture - the punk show - is occupied by people of all genders, in an egalitarian way, I won't be convinced that there's not sexism in punk.

So what does this have to do with rape? Try this: in the mind of a rapist, a woman is less than human. Her feelings and experiences are not worth consideration. She's considered a sexual object. She's not taken seriously. Most men aren't rapists, but most men do subscribe to greater or lesser variations of those attitudes. Subtle and less subtle ideas about male superiority are ubiquitous, and that base level of disrespect that men harbor towards women is what makes it possible to live in a world where the majority of women experience sexual assault and harassment, and no one bats an eye. This is called "rape culture." The logic is that women are inferior and thus the pain inflicted by sexist crimes is not given weight. So if women's experiences are not valued in the punk scene, if they are systematically excluded, and women are laughed at when they voice their complaints, the punk scene is basically giving a thumbs up to a culture that doesn't value women's experiences. It may not be an active endorsement of rape culture, but it's acceptance through passivity.

Now, I'd hope it'd be obvious that I'm not equating an all male punk show with rape. I do want to emphasize the emotional gravity that even subtler sexist attitudes hold. But the fact that I'd need to qualify my statement speaks to the overwhelming phenomenon of male defensiveness. When men are told that we're in part responsible for contributing to a sexist culture, we tend to lash out - as if we are being accused of being at fault for our biological make-up. Men tend to bond together and try to tear down whoever is bringing up those criticisms, as if we are each personally under attack. What's important to understand is that culture is built out of a multitude of influences and interactions. A condemnation of a sexist culture is not the same thing as a condemnation of the individuals that participate in it. Recognizing that you were raised in a sexist culture and probably hold sexist attitudes does not make you an asshole, but refusing to acknowledge it does.

And recognizing that our male dominated culture is fucked up doesn't make you a self-hating man, either. When I first heard Bikini Kill, it was fucking thrilling. Hearing someone lash out against dominant sexist attitudes wasn't exciting in some sort of "oh good for women, they're

free-thinking, coffee-drinking, Black Flag-loving, well-read, well-articulated, over-stimulated punks, are supposed to be the progressive ones. We're the people who call out the bigots. We're the people who embrace the differences in each other. We're the weirdo loner geeks who endlessly support the other weirdo loner geeks. Gender, race, age, sexual identity and any other trivial or biological property should draw no lines between us. So when the doorman at my show thinks that I'm someone's girlfriend and won't believe that I'm playing in a band, well, that makes me feel unsafe. When I'm patronized by my male peers in conversations about Nirvana and Nagstroms and obscure guitar tunings, that makes me feel unsafe too. The predominant, mainstream consumer-motivated world at large is a creepy place to be. We should be united in our hostility and we shouldn't be partitioned by an inability to empathize.

Though while sitting there in the park, I felt myself inadvertently cursing off jock hardcore, Punknews and testosterone, my attitude toward the subject remains hopeful. I don't think "calling people out" is a conclusive method of making this scene a safer and better place. I think that sensitivity, compassion and opening up a dialogue with one another is really all that it takes.

Katie Crutchfield is a writer, musician, and college dropout living in Brooklyn, NY. She writes, plays and tours in Waxahatchee and has a knack for drunken blogposts and covering Sam Cooke songs. You can find information about Waxahatchee at www.facebook.com/waxahatchee and Katie's personal blog at libranhusband.blogspot.com.

***

"We owe it to ourselves to grow and learn together…" Jen Twigg on her experiences of sexism in the punk scene

"A thousand tiny paper cuts." That's what my friend calls it when so many little injustices happen — you wouldn't make a big deal about one on its own, but a thousand of them together are a gaping wound. Add them up: some bro cheerfully telling a rape joke to a room full of laughing people, women-hating graffiti on the wall of the bathroom in the bar you're about to play, the door guy not believing you when you say you're in the band, any man in any situation talking over you to the guys in your band. That intangible, sinking, isolated, feeling of trying to be accomodating while retreating a little bit further into yourself for protection every time.

I came to punk through east coast hardcore, and everyone I knew was into it, so those were the shows I almost always went to at first. I remember standing in the back of a large room once and still getting punched hard in the face by a beefy dude. Afterward, I was talking with my ex-partner, just beginning to realize how much I was not into these displays of performative machismo, and he kept saying "this is just how it is, how it's always been. it's not going to change." I've written about violence at hardcore shows before so I won't rehash it all again, but I'll repeat this: privileging the antiquated notion that men will be men and need to blow off steam violently is not progressive, it's just mirroring mainstream values of entitlement and privilege. Allowing the posturing that happens in these cases to continue undermines any other progressive

1

politics you might be supporting (commonly veganism and straight edge). There are ways to get stoked and go buck wild without being violent and creating an oppressive space; I've seen them at a million other shows.

Although I don't think we can ever talk too much about these things that happen to us since it never seems to sink in with those who need to hear it the most, and I have my fair share of stories, I want to address it right now. If you think you don't do the things that we call out in pieces like these about gender (and race, and sexuality, etc. etc.) in punk, then prove it by being a good ally. The simple fact that you don't think you condescend to female musicians and don't tell rape jokes isn't enough; you need to be actively helping us have this conversation with folks who don't get it.

How can you be a good male ally to women (and everyone) in punk? It's really not that hard, I promise! All you have to do is listen to women and believe what they tell you about their own experiences. When someone comes to you with sexual assault allegations, don't pull the "he's always been cool to me" or "where's the proof?" cards (The only time punks love cops and believe the justice system works is when their friend has assaulted a lady in the scene.). When someone tells you they feel alienated, don't tell them they are taking it too seriously, or they should suck it up just because you have never felt alienated yourself, and don't think "Oh, well I know a woman who says she doesn't feel alienated, so that must mean you are wrong about how you feel!". Don't set up a system of competition where you privilege women who can hack it with the dudes, and look down on those who don't want to get in the pit. When you're standing around shooting the shit with a group of men and someone tells an off-color joke, speak up and let them know it's not okay, even if there are no women around. Will it be uncomfortable? Probably. Welcome to our world.

Don't condescend to women, even if you have more experience with gear and writing music than they do, because you may have been more supported in the past than they were. If they ask for your help, teach without judgment and value their input. At the same time, never assume that someone doesn't know lots about gear or writing music just because they are a woman! Educate yourself about consent. Most of all, don't expect to get patted on the back and heaped with praise every time you do something decent as an ally. Acting this way should be the norm, not the exception.

Punk is fiercely emotional for a lot of us, because we are tied so deeply to the community, and it can be hard not to take it personally and be defensive when something about it isn't perfect. We owe it to ourselves not to be defensive, though. We owe it to ourselves to grow and learn together in this community, to listen to each other, to actually be as progressive as we said we'd be when we left the mainstream to come here.

Jen Twigg is a writer, zine fest organizer, and enthusiastic girls rock camp volunteer living in Chicago. She will never give up on the Baltimore Orioles and has been a guest contributer to MRR. You can find out more about her band The Ambulars on facebook or ye olde myspace at http://www.myspace.com/theambulars *and her personal blog is at* http://jtwigg365.tumblr.com.

***

"Sexism is a disgusting undercurrent in our society and it needs to be fought and challenged." - David Combs (Spoonboy) on sexism, etc.

(TRIGGER WARNING FOR DISCUSSION OF RAPE/SEXUAL ASSAULT)

Let's get right into it.

When I was 19 I was walking to the bus station in a part of town I wasn't familiar with when an older man pulled me into an alley and attempted to rape me at knife point. I can only thank fortune that I got away unharmed. If we're talking about sexism, I can only think to start there. Most people don't think sexism matters. Here's why I think it matters. What I experienced for months after that encounter was a visceral fear of men. If I was walking alone, I crossed the street if I saw a man coming down the sidewalk. My heart palpitated if a man pulled me aside at a show. Eventually the fear subsided.

But I'm lucky. Not only because I got away, but because I was born in a male body. And because I'm comfortable in my male body. It was statistically unlikely that an attempted assault like that would ever happen to me. It's statistically unlikely that it will happen again. It helped me get over my fear to know that. It wouldn't be the case if I was a woman. Almost every woman I have been close with has had an experience of being sexually assaulted or having had someone make an attempt. The statistics say 1 in 3 women is sexually assaulted, and that's only the people who report it. I have a hard time believing it's not a higher percentage. I have a hard time believing that some element of the experience I came close to having hasn't been a reality for the majority of the women I know, women who may not necessarily have been assaulted by strangers, but maybe worse, assaulted by people they trusted.

I keep this in mind when I hear women's experiences. I keep in mind that most women have to live with the knowledge that at any time they could be the subject of an assault, that they are constantly targets, just for being women. I keep in mind that most women live with a minimal level of distrust for men, and that even the most courageous women have to watch their backs when they walk alone at night. And I keep this in mind when people talk about living in a "post-feminist society," or about how sexism is a thing of the past. Those ideas are wholly unconvincing. As long as rape is a crime that's being committed in extremely disproportionate numbers by men against women, I will not be convinced that everything's ok. Sexism is a disgusting undercurrent in our society and it needs to be fought and challenged. And rape is only one of the many ways, (albeit probably the ugliest), that it rears its head.

So the question has been brought up: is there sexism in the punk scene? It's not the first time the question's been asked. Twenty years ago, Riot Grrl made it an extremely visible issue. But now as those Bikini Kill records have been historicized as relics isolated in the past, a quick reading of the latest book on Riot Grrl will show that all of the same problems women were fighting against then still exist today. Is there sexism in the punk scene? Of course. Punk is not an impenetrable bubble