

SCHOOL
OF ROCK

Can a girl-power skeptic and musical neophyte be transformed into a fearless bass player in 72 hours? When **Rachel Rosenblit** heads back to high school to tackle a long-held dream, she finds that rocking hard starts with softening up

Walk into any high school and it feels like the one you grew up in. Every locker resembles the small cell you shoved your life into; every dingy GIRLS bathroom has the stale-cigarettes-and-ammonia scent of time well wasted. Suddenly, you're reminded of all those outsize adolescent feelings that once seemed kinetic enough to propel a jet engine, plus a few world wars.

At 29, I felt no older than a freshman on the bright August day I walked into Brooklyn International High (home of the Urban Assembly School of Music and Art), with its familiar cold linoleum and Scotch-taped directives: YOU MUST CARRY YOUR ID AT ALL TIMES! I rode the elevator with Martha and Jessi, a mother in her fifties and daughter a couple decades younger: pixie-haired, high-cheekboned mirror images of each other. "Are you ready to rock?!" Jessi shouted to the ceiling, before relaxing into a giggle. Um...I guess? Or, wait...I mean, hell, yes!?

I had returned to high school for Willie Mae Ladies Rock Camp, a three-day non-profit rock 'n' roll camp for women ages 19 and up that helps fund the group's sister program for girls ages 8 to 18. The camp—named for Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton, the '50s blues power crooner who recorded Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller's "Hound Dog" three years before Elvis—is a fantasy crash course in being in an all-girl band: instrument and songwriting instruction (no experience needed), practice spaces (math and history classrooms with dry-erase lessons left over from spring semester), band-logo silk-screening, and old-fashioned camaraderie, culminating in a Sunday performance at the Knitting Factory, the venerable New York City music hall (once home to acts including Sonic Youth and Yo La Tengo). The term *rock star* gets a lot of colloquial play these days—you're a rock star if you find a killer parking spot or have exact change—but here was my chance to be Joan Jett. Or at least Joan's bass player. That's



Joan Jett

the instrument I'd checked on the application, because, while I'd never attempted any of the ones offered (bass, guitar, drums, vocals), I'd always been intrigued by quiet, effortlessly cool bass guitarists, who capture attention because they seem not to want it.

I had no idea what to expect from Willie Mae. The most I could fathom about band-dom was that blurry-eyed, I'm-totally-rocking-out delusional feeling you get after 76 rounds of *Guitar Hero*. As someone who ditches every long-term goal I've ever had—the screenplay, the pilot, not to mention the book—I saw rock camp as the chance to see one of them to fruition. By the time I got off the elevator, the other 39 Willie Mae "campers" were assembled in the cafeteria, making small talk and decorating guitar-pick-shape pieces of construction paper with magic markers. I picked a seat next to Marylynn, a 59-year-old high school secretary who'd

enrolled last year on a nudge from her musician daughter and was back for her second summer on drums. "Maybe I'll actually learn to play them this time!" she said. Next to her was Beth, a 40-year-old event planner and Willie Mae Ladies counselor who'd returned as a camper to "finally overcome my fear of writing songs. Also, I missed the riot grrrl movement in college, so I have some catching up to do." There was Laura, 23, a freelance production assistant-slash-sex educator—"a pretty hilarious mix!"—who told me she'd always found some excuse or another not to learn the guitar.

Karla, Willie Mae's earth-motherly executive director, approached the mic, wearing sport sandals and a Willie Mae tee. Later, she told me that a summer spent volunteering at a girls' rock camp in Portland, Oregon, was the catalyst for founding New York's Willie Mae—as well as having been the "first

time I felt comfortable in my own body.”

“Clap seven times if you can hear me!” she exclaimed to the room. Magic! The room applauded itself to silence. This really felt like camp, right down to the three official rules: Everyone supports each other at rock camp; when you’re writing your song with your band, don’t ever dismiss an idea—for a lyric, a chord, a piercing scream; and never say “I’m sorry” for forgetting a verse or knocking over an amp—say “I rock!” Our daily affirmation: 10 rousing reps of “We rock!,” our fists punching the air.

By the fifth repetition, I started to get itchy. I’d signed up for rock camp for music instruction—fingers go here, amp goes there—but that, apparently, came with a heaping helping of self-love and legislated bonding. I’ve never been the feely type; I count most heartfelt confessions as oversharing. Grown women getting together to “express themselves” conjures Kathy Bates and her hand mirror in *Fried Green Tomatoes*; the man-hating-divorcée book club in *Jerry Maguire*; irritating female talk-show hosts whose shows never had a chance—e.g., *The Tempestt Bledsoe Show*—leading the audience in a chorus of “You go, girl!” while guests have a good cry. It’s not that I’m in any way against women organizing, especially for political and social rights. I’ve always considered myself a feminist, and I take particular pride in being able to prove that we can come in this package: girly, sexy, rarely teary-eyed, and not all that radical. But I’ve always been squeamish about women coming together to “share” and “connect.” It feels like we’re just adding another bullet point to gender-based idiocy, e.g., Hillary Clinton being “too emotional” to handle the stresses of life in the White House. And I’ve just never vibed with the idea of being an emotive oil well for the sake of relating to other women. Aren’t the most interesting things about a person the truths she doesn’t tell?

Still, there I was, fists flying. “Our ‘We rocks!’ are gonna fill the streets, and then all of Brooklyn—the entire borough,” Karla declared, “and then the universe!” I may not be one for daily affirmations, but it’s unnervingly easy to be snapped back into kid mentality, that vague sense of being corralled and directed.

In instrument class, I picked up my bass for the first time. Just the idea that I could actually play this thing—or look badass trying—gave me a rush. Over the next three days, I felt the same surge every time I ducked under that shoulder strap, even if my playing only got a tiny bit better. Teacher Jamie—a counselor for the girls’ camp who plays in a band called the Jamies—drew the bass strings (G, D, A, E) and first four frets

on the dry-erase board, and we followed her fingers, playing the notes she played, then experimenting with our own riffs. Shortly thereafter, we’d split into bands to write original songs; Jamie, a realist, told us to “just keep it simple—all the best songs are simple. I mean, we’re not Steely Dan here.”

And yet in just two hours of practice, our unnamed band—lead singer Amanda, a 24-year-old actress from the East Village; Abby, a 37-year-old elementary school teacher with a God-given talent on drums; Laura, the sex educator, on guitar; and I—wrote the lyrics to our ironic love letter to New York, “Hot Trash in the Summer,” and

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The author onstage at the Knitting Factory

put it to music. Not that we could quite play anything resembling that. But it was thrilling to bang and strum the crap out of instruments inside a high school social-studies classroom. On the windows had been scrawled several aphorisms: ARE YOU BEING EDUCATED OR PROGRAMMED? ARE YOU LIVING OR JUST ALIVE? Before Sunday, we’d have to figure out how to combine our anarchic noises into something that wouldn’t induce migraines. But right now, we were just four grown women learning how to play all the wrong notes and not give a damn—we were living, of course!

After rehearsal, we were sent to the cafeteria for a karaoke assembly. Women started signing up, ready with their best goof-off renditions of “Every Rose Has Its Thorn” and “Love Shack.” A quiet girl in her midtwenties whom I hadn’t noticed before appeared at the mic. “This is absolutely terrifying for me,” she told the room, before busting out with—of all things—Bonnie Raitt’s wrenching ballad “I Can’t Make You Love Me.” It wasn’t pitch-perfect; she wasn’t a singer. But the raw feeling behind those supercharged lyrics brought the room to stunned silence. At first, I was annoyed. How cheesy and girl-powerful did this assembly have to turn? But by the second line, I couldn’t take my eyes off her. I sat stock-still, wondering about the kind of confidence shift it might take to make a nonsinger, a girl who was “terrified” to expose herself, want to do it anyway.

On the subway home, I found myself thinking about eighth-grade math. My

school had used us as guinea pigs in an education study and divided the advanced algebra classes by sex. Would it make the girls more confident, they wondered, if our voices weren’t being muffled by boisterous boys? Would we answer more questions? Enjoy math more? I have no idea what they discovered in the end. But I do remember the day Leanne Marks farted, so loud and fancy-free that our teacher stopped lecturing to laugh with the rest of us. Leanne was mortified; you could see it all over her plum-color face. But within seconds, her arms flew up above her head, two clenched fists raised in proud victory.

And she was laughing the loudest. Riding back to Manhattan after a day of women declaring “We rock!” and “You rock!” and “No—but you *really* rock!” and one quiet girl’s bold performance, I tried to envision what might have happened had that math class been coed. I could hear the boys’ disgusted exclamations and indignant insults. And I could see Leanne—running from our classroom, her face streaked with tears.

The second day of camp, my band decided on a name, Free Cocktails. We silk-screened T-shirts with a martini-glass-and-shaker logo Amanda had drawn, and we strummed our scrappy way to something like a melody. Eh, “melody” is pushing it—but at least the verses sounded different from the chorus, which was just a lot of shouting. (What’s more “You rock” than shouting in unison?) After practice, we met the other campers for the day’s workshop, Releasing the Rock Body, designed to break down any self-consciousness that might keep us from letting go onstage. Hana, who teaches a body-image workshop at the girls’ camp, had us stand in a circle. “It’s hard to have a body,” she said. “I believe it’s no harder or easier for anyone to have a body than anyone else.” To prove it, we each had to perform a movement inspired by a time we felt ashamed of our bodies. After spending two days with women who at every age and in front of one another were trying things they’d never tried before, I wanted desperately to meet them halfway. If this wasn’t my chance to reprogram an aversion

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to estro-sentiment, then what was? But as the women took turns recounting eating disorders and dressing-room terror, the only thing I could actually imagine sharing out loud was the time in fifth grade when Joey Weber proclaimed that my breasts were growing—I kicked him in the groin and ended up with detention and a lecture about what a swift blow could do to sperm count. It would be the *Rachel Rocks Comedy Hour*.

A middle-aged woman named Sue stepped forward. She twirled and twirled before shrinking down into a deflated heap. One fateful day at a middle-school dance, she explained, she'd danced with all the earnest abandon in her young body—until the boy she had a crush on started laughing. She watched him as he mocked her to his friends. Sue clasped her hands in front of her and shrugged. “I can’t believe I remembered that,” she said softly. “I can,” Hana replied. I could too. And I could bet she’d remembered it—on some level or another—at every dance since then: prom, college dance parties, and all the weddings she’d attended, including, maybe, her own. When my turn finally came, I passed. But I still felt connected to every woman in the room, as though Sue’s story had hit the same nerve in each of us; as though that day we’d made a pact to finally get over middle school.

By Sunday, Free Cocktails had practiced our fingers raw and took it as a good sign that we couldn’t get the damn song out of our heads. The Knitting Factory would soon be packed with our friends, lovers, and relatives, but for now, it was just the Willie Mae women gathering for our daily “We rock!” cheer—all nerves, adrenaline, and unabashed encouragement. Martha and Jessi’s band performed an ode to *Murder, She Wrote*’s Jessica Fletcher (“She doesn’t need a gun/ Her intellect is set to stun/ ‘But there was no mail delivery on Tuesday!’”) and the quiet karaoke songbird played drums to “Je Voudrais en Croissant,” a perfect bit of absurdist pop that sounded—I swear—professional. I don’t remember much from Free Cocktails’ performance: just bright lights, my trying hard to look aloof, and poof, it was over. The high, of course, lasted for days.

Or maybe it was more of a low, because for the next few weeks, I felt blindsided by girl-power withdrawal. Suddenly, I was hopelessly tuned in to how rarely, in real life, women cheer each other on, how frequently we apologize, and how carefully we hide. It’s amazing how often we even avoid eye contact. I don’t know that I’ll ever be open to sharing my inner life for the sake of female bonding, but post-rock camp, I find myself in awe of the women—braver than me—who are.

The day of the show, I never considered the possibility that it wouldn’t go well. It hadn’t occurred to me that our song might suck or that we four novices would screw the whole thing up. Or that I’d be nervous or forget a lyric or trip on a wire. For three days, I’d gotten used to being built up, told that I rocked and that “every note you play is great!” Willingly or not, the energy had reverberated, and the message had stuck. I may not have become an expert bass guitarist, but I was a confident, inspired, fearless one. And if I could get there simply by following the first tenet of rock camp—“Everyone supports each other”—just imagine: What if we’d all followed that rule in high school the first time around?

Some names have been changed.

