

In Ethical Culture's Venerable Halls, Music Camp in Riot Grrl Tradition

By LAURA SINAGRA

The halls of the New York Society for Ethical Culture on 64th Street and Central Park West are hung with stern-looking portraits of the 129-year-old institution's liberal intellectual luminaries, almost exclusively men. Last week swarms of young girls teemed past them with electric guitars and basses, instruments seemingly twice the size of some of their owners. In the hottest week of August, the society was playing host to the first Willie Mae Rock 'n' Roll Camp for Girls.

The summer ritual of band camp has been undergoing a transformation for some time now. Amps and turntables are replacing trumpets and bassoons as rock 'n' roll continues to loosen its ties to cultural rebellion.

What sets the Willie Mae camp apart is its refusal to treat rock as

Replacing trumpets and bassoons with electric guitars and consciousness-raising.

just another soccerlike activity. Patterned after the six-year-old Rock 'n' Roll Camp for Girls in Portland, Ore., the program has roots in the feminist punk-rock riot grrl movement of the Pacific Northwest. The camps on both coasts aim to provide a real-life antidote to the classic-rock crash course presided over by Jack Black in "School of Rock," in which fifth-grade girls in the head-banging comedian's kiddie band project are dismissively anointed "groupies."

At Willie Mae, named for the blues singer Willie Mae Thornton, known as Big Mama, counselors don't spend much time on groupie-dom, video vixens or anorexic starlets. Neither do they coach girls to join the boy's club of Guitar Center virtuosity. With an inaugural class of 66 campers, ages 8 to 18, presided over by 40-plus female volunteer counselors culled mostly from the local music community, the New York camp's mission stretched well beyond basic rock musicianship to consciousness-raising.

"For me, feminism is having no doors being closed to you because

you're a woman," said the camp's founder, Karla Schickele of the Brooklyn band Ida. To that end, she said, the camp aims "to create a place where girls can be loud and expressive."

"I do think rock can make a difference," Ms. Schickele said. "Playing music changes the way you feel about yourself and the sense of what you can accomplish. It makes them aware that they can challenge things."

The cultural powers that be may want to declare the gender wars over, Ms. Schickele said, but she said she was struck by campers' accounts of feminist challenges in their own lives. "The 8-year-olds here might not be talking in terms of 'feminism,' but they have a very developed sense of fairness," Ms. Schickele said. "They have already been told there are things they can't do because they're girls."

In response, the camp starts with empowerment basics, including educating campers about female musicians and broaching the topic of rocker activism. Instruction in band formation and performance is augmented here by classes on topics like media literacy and self-defense. At an "image and identity" workshop, a women's studies instructor, Ingrid Dahl, and a drummer and counselor from Portland, Winner Bell, led a discussion around new vocabulary words like "dichotomy," "institutionalization" and "oppression" (setting aside, for the time being, "percussion").

With an emphasis on candid expression, the camp was a crucible of cultural negotiations. Girls from prep schools discussed issues like racism and homophobia as well as song ideas with less privileged scholarship campers, about a third of the group. Granola-crunching Northwesterners taught guitar-tuning to fidgety Upper West Side preteens; combat-booted punk rockers addressed prim 10-year-olds; spiky-haired lesbians got compliments on their faux-hawk hairdos from kids in hip-hop gear.

The Northwest-Northeast divide was at times humorously apparent. In a "History of Women in Hip-Hop" session, the instructor from Portland was corrected when she said a member of the hip-hop trio Salt-n-Pepa died in a car wreck. "You mean TLC," shouted a blasé high-schooler. Even so, when she introduced them to the sassy 80's rapper Roxanne Shante, the girls in the Ethical Cul-



The buttons rock at the Willie Mae Rock 'n' Roll Camp for Girls.

ture Society basement nodded in vigorous approval.

For some of the girls, the camp's ancillary workshops made the strongest impression. Sixteen-year-old M. J. Geier of Sunnyside, Queens, said she enjoyed the classes on semantics and activism. "Some parts of camp really don't have much to do with rock 'n' roll," she said. "It's more about empowerment." Ms. Geier, who performed during the camp week with Kimya Dawson, a singer-songwriter, said she supports gender equality, but stopped short of calling herself a feminist.

Her new bandmate, Paroly Pena, 14, had this objection: "Feminism makes it seem like we're all one person." Their companion Willow Latham, 13, added, "It's sexism to prefer one gender over another." When asked for their musical favorites, many of these older girls cited only male rock bands — from the Beatles to Green Day to Rancid.

Ms. Bell is not surprised that some girls hesitate to call themselves feminists. Watching a young band rehearse onstage, she mused, "They used to call us third wave feminists, but these girls are like, the fourth or fifth wave." She added that some campers have come to her for advice about activism: "They just need to know they have options."

Of course, there's a strong preference here for do-it-yourself, plugged-in rocking. When a group of counselors performed a garage-punk cover of Britney Spears' hit "Toxic," complete with a cello screeching the queasy hook, a guitarist, Maria Cincotta, asked: "Do you think Britney Spears wrote that? I doubt it." She continued: "See, now you've already written your own songs. You're already better than Britney Spears!"



Photographs by Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times

Above, D. J. Shakey, left, showing Kali Villa Rosa, 9, how to spin records. Below, from left, Mallory Stifler, 12, on bass guitar; Isabel Farias, 13, on lead guitar; and Dorothy Walker, 12, vocalist, of Five Flaming Monkeys.

