



EMO: WHERE THE GIRLS AREN'T

A few months back, I was at a Strike Anywhere show. The band launched into "Refusal"; a

song offering solidarity with the feminist movement and bearing witness to the inherent struggle in women's lives. It is not a song of protection; there is no romantic undertow. It's a song about all people being equally important. Everyone was dancing, fanboys and girls at the lip of the stage screaming along—like so many shows at the Fireside. By the first chorus of the song, I was in tears. I have often been so moved to shed small wet tears at Strike shows, but this time was for AN entirely different reason—A mournful new awareness: *I am here, at the Fireside Bowl probably 75 times a year for the last five years. The numbers of times I have genuinely felt, or even sensed my reality or the reality of the women I know portrayed in a song sung by male-fronted band—that number was at zero and holding.* The ratio of songs/shows/expressed sentiment-to-affirmation of feminist struggle/girlhood is staggering. This song was the first.

No wonder most of my girlfriends and I have been growing increasingly alienated and distanced from our varying scenes, or have begun taking shelter from emo's pervasive stronghold in the cave-like recesses of electronic, DJ or experimental music. No wonder girls I know are feeling dismissive and faithless towards music. No wonder I feel much more internal allegiance to MOP songs, as their tales of hood drama and jewelry theft FEELS far less offensive than yet another song from yet another all dude band giving us the 411 on his personal romantic holocaust. Because in 2003, as it stands, I simply cannot conjure the effort it takes to give a flying fuck about bands of boys yoked to their own wounding AKA the genre/plague that we know as E-M-O. Songs and scenes populated with myopic worldviews that do not extend beyond their velvet-lined rebel-trauma, their bodies, or their vans. Meanwhile, we're left wondering *how did we get here?*

As hardcore and political punk's charged sentiments became more cliché towards the end of the '80s—as we all soon settled in to the armchair comfort of the Clinton era—Punk began stripping off its tuff skin and getting down to its squishy pulp heart. Forget bombs and the real impact of trickle down economics, it's all about elusive kisses and tender-yet-undeniably-masculine emotional outbursts. Mixtapes across America became soiled with torrential anthems of hopeful boy hearts masted to sleeves, pillows soaked in tears, and relational eulogies. Romance of the self was on.

I think somewhere right around the release of the last Braid record, is where we lost the map. Up until then, things seemed reasonable, encouraging, exciting—thus far we were sold on vulnerability, there was something revivifying in the earnestness. New bands cast their entire micro-careers from bands we all liked:

Jawbox, Jawbreaker, Sunny Day Real Estate etc. In those bands, there were songs about women, but they were girls with names, with details to their lives, girls who weren't exclusively defined by their absence or lensed through romantic-spectre. Jawbox's most popular song, "Savory" was about recognizing male normative privilege, about the weight of sexualization on a woman ("see you feign surprise / that I'm all eyes"). In Jawbreaker songs women had leverage, had life, had animus and agency to them. Sometimes they were friends, or a sister, not always *girl to be bedded or pursued or dumped by*. They were accurate, and touched by reality.

And then something broke—And it wasn't Bob Nanna's or Mr. Dashboard's sensitive hearts. Records by a legion of done-wrong boys lined the record store shelves. Every record was a concept album about a breakup, damning the girl on the other side. Emo's contentious monologue—it's balled fist Peter Pan mash-note dilemmas—it's album length letters from pussy-jail—it's cathedral building in ode to man-pain and Robert-Bly-isms—it's woman-induced misery has gone from being *descriptive* to being *prescriptive*. Emo was just another forum where women were locked in a stasis of outside observation, observing ourselves through the eyes of others. The prevalence of these bands, the omni-presence of emo's sweeping sound and its growing stronghold in the media and on the Billboard chart *codified* emo as A SOUND, where previously there had been diversity.

Girls in emo songs today do not have names. We are not identified. Our lives, our struggles, our day-to-day-to-day does not exist, we do not get colored in. We span from coquettish to damned and back again. We leave bruises on boy-hearts, but make no other mark. Our existences, our actions are portrayed SOLELY through the detailing of neurotic self-entanglements of the boy singer—our region of personal power, simply, is our breadth of impact on his romantic life. We are on a short leash in a filthy yard—we are mysteries to be unlocked, bodies to be groped, minimum wage earners of fealty, harvesters of sorrow, repositories for scorn. Vessels redeemed in the light of boy-love. On a pedestal, on our backs. Muses at best. Cum rags or invisible at worst. Check out our pictures on the covers of records—we are sad-eyed and winsome and well cleaved—Thank you Hot Rod Circuit, The Crush, Cursive, Something Corporate—the fantasy girl you could take home and comfort.

It is a genre made by and for adolescent and post adolescent boys, who make evident, in their lyrics and dominant aesthetic that their knowledge of actual living, breathing women is tiny enough to fit in a shoebox. Emo's characteristic sensitive front is limited to self-sensitivity, it runs in a fanciful maze of reflexive self pity, rife with a vulnerability that is infinitely self-serving. It is a high stakes game of control—of "winning" or "losing" possession of the girl (see Dashboard Confessional, Brand New, New Found Glory and Glassjaw albums for prime examples) Yet, in the vulnerability there is no empathy, no peerage or parallelism. Emo's yearning is not to identify with, or understand, but rather to enforce sexual hierarchy and omit women's power via romanticide.

As Andy Greenwald notes in his forthcoming book about emo culture *Nothing Feels Good: punk rock, teenagers, and emo*, lyrically, emo singers "revel in their misery and suffering to an almost ecstatic degree, but with a limited use of subtlety and language. It tends to come off like Rimbaud relocated to the Food Court." Women in emo songs are denied the dignity of humanization through both the language and narratives, we are omnipresent, but our only consequence is in romantic setting; denying any possibility or hope for life outside the margins, where they express a free sexual, creative or political will.

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On a dancefloor in Seattle, a boy I know decides to plumb the topic,

"I heard you're writing a column about how emo is sexist"

"I am."

"What do you mean 'emo is sexist?'" Emo songs are no different than all of rock history, than Rolling Stones or Led Zeppelin."

"I know—I'd rather not get into right now."

"How are songs about breaking up sexist though? Everyone breaks up. If you have a problem with emo, you have a problem with all of rock history!"

"I know. I do."

And to paraphrase words of Nixon sidekick HR Haldeman, "History is wack."

There must be some discussion, at least for context, about the well-worn narrative of *the travails of the boy rebel's broken heart* as exemplified in the last 50 years of blues-based music. There must be some base acknowledgement that in almost every band since the beginning of time, most songs are about loving and losing women. Granted, broken hearts are a part of human existence. Songs about women but not written by women, practically define rock n roll. And as a woman, as a music critic, as someone who lives and dies for music, there is a rift within, a struggle of how much deference you will allow, and how much you will ignore *because you like the music*.

Can you ignore the lyrical content of the Stones "Under my Thumb" because you like the song? Are you willing to? How much attention can you sacrifice to the cock-prance of Led Zeppelin or cheesy humpa-humpa metaphors of AC/DC or the heaping pile of dead or brutalized women that amasses in Big Black's discography? Is emo exceptional in the scope of the rock canon in terms of treatment of women or in it's continual rubbing salute to it's own trouble-boy cliché image? Is there anything that separates Dashboard Confessional's condemnation of his bedhopping betrayer and makes it any more damning than any woman/mother/whore/ex-girlfriend showing up in songs of Jane's Addiction, Nick Cave, The Animals or Justin Timberlake? Can you compartmentalize and not judge the woe towards women readily exemplified in most of the recorded catalog of Zeppelin because the first eight bars of "Communication Breakdown" is, as the parlance goes, total fucking godhead? Where do you split? Do you bother to even care, because if yr going to try and kick against it, you, as my dancing

friend says "have a problem with all of rock history.", and because who, other than a petty, too serious bitch dismisses Zeppelin?! Do you accept the circumstances and phallogocentricities of the last 50+ years of music, as it exists in popular culture and in your "punk rock community" as simply *how it is?*

Who do you excuse and why? Do you check your personality and your politics at the door and just dance or just rock or just let side A spin out? Can you ignore the marginalization of lady-lives that line your record shelves, and give yrself where you can to where you identify, bridging the sometimes massive gulf, because it's either that or purge yr collection of everything but wordless free jazz / German micro house 12"s and/or Mr. Lady Records releases.

It is almost too big of a question to ask. I start to ask this of myself, to really start investigating, and stop, realizing full well that if I get an answer I may just have to retire to an adobe hut on some Italian mountainside and not take any visitors for a long time. Or turn into the rock critical Andrea Dworkin, and report with ruthless resignation that all male-manufactured music is in service of the continual oppression and domination of women. Sometimes I feel like every rock song I hear is a sexualized sucker punch towards us. And I feel like no one takes the breadth of that impact seriously, or even notices it most days.

My deepest concerns about the punishing effects of the emotional-wave is not so much for myself or for my immediate-peer lady friends who can fend and snarl from the safety of our personal-political platforms and deep crated record collections, but rather, for the girls I see crowding front and center for the *em* shows. The ones who are young, for whom this is likely their inaugural introduction to the underground, who's gateway may have been through Weezer or the Vagrant America tour or maybe Dashboard Confessional's *Unplugged* sesh on the MTV. The ones who are seeking music out, who are wanting to stake some claim to punk rock, or an underground avenue, for a way out, a way under, to sate the seemingly unquenchable, nameless need—the same need I know I came to punk rock with. It becomes a very particular concern because Emo is *the province of the young*, their foundation is fresh-laid, my concern is for people who have no other previous acquaintance with the underground aside from the shadowy doom and octave chords that the Vagrant Records roster hath wrought.

When I was that age, I too had a rabid hunger for a music that spoke a language I was just starting to decipher, music that affirmed my faith, my ninth grade fuck you values, and encouraged me to not allow my budding feminist ways to be bludgeoned by all the soul crushing weight of mainstream culture—I was lucky I was met at the door with things like the Bikini Kill demo, or Fugazi or the first Kill Rock Stars comp, or Babes in Toyland shows. I was met with polemics and respectful address. I was met with girl heroes in guitar squall, kicking out the jams under the stage lights. I was being hurtled towards deeper rewards, records and bands were triggering ideas and wrenching open doors of interminable hope and inspiration. I acknowledge the importance of all of that because I know I would not be who I am now, doing what I do, 12

years down the line, if I had not had gotten those fundamentals, been presented with those ideas about what music, or moreover, what life can be about.

And so I watch these girls at emo shows more than I ever do the band. I watch them sing along, see what parts they freak out over. I wonder if this does it for them, if seeing these bands, these dudes on stage resonates and inspires them to want to pick up a guitar or drum sticks. Or if they just see this as something dudes do, because there are no girls, there is no *them* up there. I wonder if they are being thwarted by the FACT that there is no presentation of girls as participants, but rather, *only as consumers*—or if we reference the songs directly—*the consumed*. I wonder if this is where music will begin and end for them. If they can be radicalized in spite of this. If being denied keys to the clubhouse or airtime will spur them into action.

I know that, for me, as an auto-didactic teenaged bitch, who thought her every idea was a good idea worthy of expression and audience, it did not truly occur to me to start a band until I saw other women playing music (Babes in Toyland, early 1990). Up until then—seeing Bloodline chugga-chugga it up 97 times on local hardcore bills had not done it for me. Dinosaur Jr's hair-waving and soloing had not done it for me. The dozens of bands, bands who's records I knew all the words to, who were comprised of 25-30 year old dudes, with nothing much to say, did not feel like punk rock with it's arms open wide to me. It took seeing Bikini Kill in an illegal basement venue to truly throw the lights, to show me that there was more than one place, one role, for women to occupy, and that our participation was important and vital—It was YOU MATTER writ large.

I don't want these front row girls to miss that. I don't want girls leaving clubs denied of encouragement and potential, quietly vexed and clad in the burka of emo's male dominance. Because as fucking lame as punk rock can be, as hollow as all of our self serving claims ring—that punk rock's culture is something TRULY DIFFERENT (sic) than median society—at it's gnarled foundations still exists the possibilities for connection, for exposure to radical notions, for punk rock to match up to the elaborate idea of what many kids dream, or hope for it to mean—for all of that to absolutely and totally exist—I believe—much of that hinges on the continual presence of radicalized women within the leagues, and those women being encouraged, given reasons to stay, to want to belong—rather than punished or diminished by the music which glues the various fractious communities together.

Us girls deserve more than one song. We deserve more than one pledge of solidarity. We deserve better songs than any boy will ever write about us.

Thanks to Andy Greenwald and Julianne Shepherd for their assistance. Now playing: Jawbreaker Dear You, 50 Cent, Ellen Allien Berlinette, Superchunk No Pocky For Kitty, Dabrye 12". Po Box 14624 Chicago Il 60614. Mcfrenchvanilla@yahoo.com. New Hit it or Quit it out in June.