

MUSIC

In an old sewing machine factory, sandwiched between a machine shop and a trailer park, rests the Rock 'n' Roll Camp for Girls.

Rather than making lanyards and roasting marshmallows, these girls spend a week in July getting their hands on the tools they need to create their own rock band.

Started as a senior project in women's studies at Portland State University, the camp outgrew two venues before coming to the 5,000-square-foot warehouse near Marine Drive. Its past two homes, Crystal Ballroom and PSU, couldn't accommodate the growing demand for a summer camp that could give girls, says director Misty McElroy, the "unique tools to make it as a girl in a culture that exploits, rather than values, their voices."

Four years ago McElroy had a vision. She had worked as a music technician and roadie for more than nine years and struggled through "intolerable misogyny, sexism and homophobia."

This frustration resulted in a senior practicum—every paper and project that had the potential became connected to the camp, including McElroy's final thesis. The girls camp became the brainchild of a frustrated feminist and queer indie rocker.

As founder, McElroy does everything from organizing benefit shows to finding sponsors, with the help of a handful of dedicated rock camp enthusiasts.

In between studying and writing papers, McElroy found the time to design the Web page and logo while recruiting teachers and soliciting donations. It was a brilliant idea, she thought, but hadn't someone else already thought of it? Apparently not, even though the camp is so popular, she had to add another session this year.

In July 2001, the first weeklong camp began. For \$20, a girl in grades six through 12 could get a head start into the world of rock. Though the tuition was a fraction of the \$300-a-head operating cost, the camp survived thanks to people in high places responding to the need.

McElroy reports there was one day when the phone didn't stop ringing. People across the country and the globe offered themselves or their services for the betterment of a rock camp for girls. An Ebay auction was arranged with donations from the likes of Beastie Boys, Alanis Morissette and Pearl Jam.

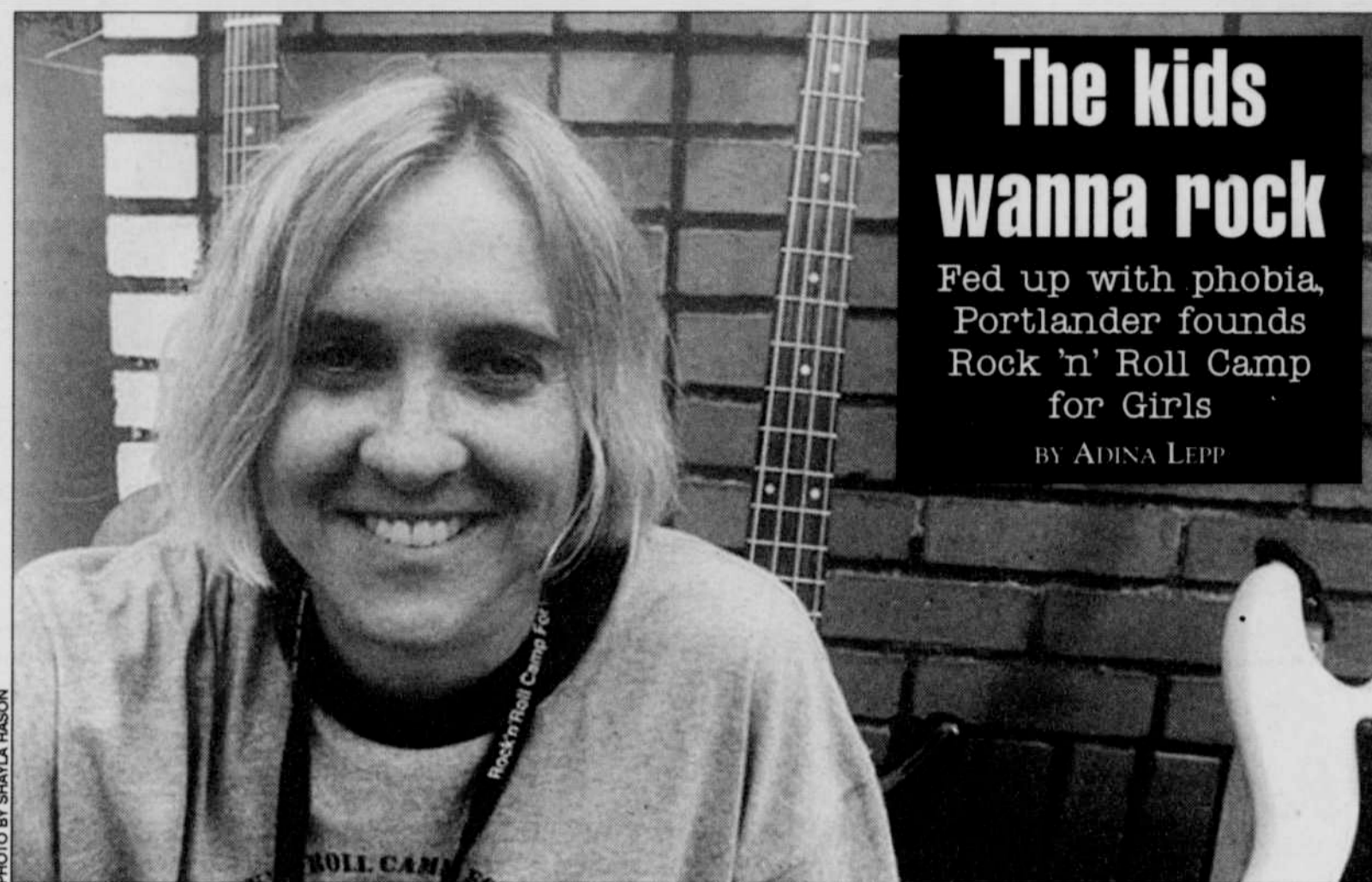


PHOTO BY SHAYLA HASON

It's a good thing Misty McElroy was a pissed-off dyke feminist roadie or Portland might have never seen the Rock 'n' Roll Camp for Girls

The kids wanna rock

Fed up with phobia, Portlander founds Rock 'n' Roll Camp for Girls

BY ADINA LEPP

More instrument donations came in from other supportive bands (Le Tigre, King Cobra, The Donnas), and guest speakers and panelists from many Portland bands (The Haggard, Sleater-Kinney) signed on.

Now in its fourth year, the rock camp splits each day into morning and afternoon programs. Every day starts off with an all-camp assembly featuring warm-ups and cheesy sing-alongs. Self-reliance workshops of varying kinds follow—for example, zine publishing, self-defense, songwriting, media literacy, stage presence, history of women in rock, visual arts.

One popular workshop is on size oppression. "It seemed really interesting to have big people there to talk about being big," says guitarist Io Fortier-Kuttner, a 10-year-old former camper. "The workshop reaffirmed how I felt. Fat is beautiful."

Each workshop fits into the camp's mission statement, which is to "encourage, engage and showcase musical, artistic and individual tal-

ents of young girls and women." Each has a role in the construction and empowerment of the whole girl. "Our workshops support being a strong woman in a music context," explains McElroy.

Besides workshops, a typical rock camp afternoon consists of two hours of musical instruction followed by more than two hours of band practice. All campers have the choice of learning vocals, keyboards, drums, bass or electric guitar.

Halfway through the week, the girls form their own bands, some of which continue performing after camp ends. Pom Pom Meltdown, The Fringe and The Hellcats are a few bands formed through the camp that have stayed together.


Fortier-Kuttner and her 10-year-old sister, Zayna Langer, formed Black Peppercorns at last year's rock camp and went on to play at Nocturnal and Portland coffeehouses. They have a CD out and run their own Web page—with the help of their parents.

Every girl gets a chance to play onstage with her band during two public performances at Aladdin Theater the last night of each session; the shows sell out every year.

Once rather isolated, queer girls are also making and producing their own music after

camp remains true to its mission statement. Any girl who has the passion and desire can attend, space permitting. (Slots fill up months in advance.) Scholarships are available to cover the tuition, which has risen to \$300, and minority girls are targeted, as it's likely their path to rockstardom has more obstacles.

Despite financial struggles, the camp has expanded to include the Girls Rock Institute and Ladies Rock Camp, the former a year-round after school program designed to continue the spirit of the summer camp while connecting girls to recording studios and performers in the Portland music scene, and the latter for women older than 18 who could have benefited from a program like the rock camp when they were younger.

In a warehouse painted with an image of a girl holding a guitar almost as big as she is, the Rock 'n' Roll Camp for Girls promotes motivation, self-reliance and empowerment through music. 

Learn more about the ROCK 'N' ROLL CAMP FOR GIRLS at www.girlsrockcamp.org. Camper Finale Showcases are 7 p.m. July 24 and 31 at Aladdin Theater, 3017 S.E. Milwaukie Ave. Tickets are \$5 at the box office.

ADINA LEPP is a Portland free-lance writer.

"Girls see queer women in the roles they want to be in and receive enormous validation for that, often for the first time in their lives"

—Misty McElroy

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