

# Back beat

*Beth Wooten, the executive director of Rock 'n' Roll Camp for Girls, on the international appeal of empowering women — young and old*

BY SUE ZALOKAR  
STAFF WRITER

After graduating from law school, Beth Wooten found herself hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt, in a dismal job market, at the height of the recession. She decided to forgo taking the bar exam and look to other work options. She turned to another calling — her music and activism for young women. In 2012, she became the executive director for the Portland Rock 'n' Roll Camp for Girls.

The Rock 'n' Roll Camp for Girls was founded in 2001. It was part of a senior project by Misty McElroy, then a women's studies major at Portland State University. Just over a decade later, there are girls' rock camps in cities across the country — more than 40 worldwide, including one in the Islamic country Bahrain. The organization makes it clear: Yes, rock 'n' roll is in its title, but this is really about girls finding the beat of your own drum, and amplifying their voice for social change.

**Sue Zalokar:** *It's so important to celebrate music for music's sake. From what I've been able to gather, the camp really does a lot to build this idea in the minds of campers. It's not about being a superstar, it's about the joy of music passing through you.*

**Beth Wooten:** Definitely. We try to create that environment for the girls. What is a band? A band is kind of an imaginary space you create with your friends. (Laughter). We try to focus on

that and the collaboration and the shared experience over any type of battle of the bands environment.

**S.Z.:** *You said that you volunteered for the Brooklyn camp first, I thought the Portland camp was the first camp?*

**B.W.:** The Portland camp was the first camp. It just wasn't my first experience. I believe the Brooklyn camp was the second one. And now there are over 40 worldwide. There is an organization called the Girls Rock Camp Alliance. But we are all our own nonprofits. We're all kind of out there independently trying to figure out how to make the best camp for our individual communities. But we have a really great network that is maintained through the Girls Rock Camp Alliance. There is a lot of networking and skill sharing — which is really nice because nonprofits can have some ups and downs, so it's nice to have that support.

**S.Z.:** *Why girls and women only?*

**B.W.:** We want to create a safe space for them to express themselves and explore a way of understanding themselves or relating to each other that they might not get at school.

It's also really fun. It's just a week.

We teach music but we also teach a self-defense workshop and we teach workshops on interrupting oppression or the history of women in popular music. These kinds



PHOTO BY SUE ZALOKAR

of workshops present the opportunity for topics to come up, and it's kind of good to have that safe space for girls to feel comfortable expressing themselves. And maybe feel comfortable expressing different emotions.

I feel like sometimes when we talk about programs for girls, or we talk about young girls, there is sometimes this anxiety that they are going to fall into some sort of self-esteem hole if we don't help them out. And there are a lot of mixed messages that are directed at girls. At Rock Camp we try to just encourage them to express a wide-range of emotions. So if they are feeling angry, we can talk about the structural reasons for their anger. We can identify and dismantle together these emotions. Maybe even write a song.

It's also nice to have a girl space because it allows for mentorship. In so many fields, there will be the girl or the woman who succeeds — the singularity. At Rock Camp, we're all girls; we don't look a certain way. Camp offers a wide range of what girlhood can look like.

**S.Z.:** *It strikes me, as women and girls, we are constantly*

*bombarded with images and impressions of what we should look like or how we should act. By adolescence, girls have already come to feel pretty in sexy, revealing clothing. That kind of goes against the feminist perspective of Rock Camp. I am wondering about that idiosyncrasy. I wonder if that exists? I mean, they're teenage girls, so it must.*

**B.W.:** It is something that we talk about. That can feel conflicting. We try really hard to not censor or act as surveillance. We try to create conversation around that. We have to work, as staff and volunteers, to check ourselves. Am I worried about this girl because she's wearing a tank top or am I worried about this girl because I have some ingrained sense of moral panic in society that is always going to fall on teenage girls?

We're not trying to police their expression in anyway. But we have had workshops where we have talked about that pressure to express yourself or your sexuality in a certain way and how that might be aligned with advertising. We try not to predetermine what's appropriate for girls to think about and express because it's all out there, and they are all exposed to it.

**S.Z.:** *You also offer a Ladies Rock Camp for "big grrrls" (21+).*

**B.W.:** Ladies Rock Camp is for women, 21 and up. It's kind of the Girls Rock Camp model, but it's

