

to laugh at the many references to women—smart women, dumb women, sexually stereotyped women, fat women, nagging women, strong women, and odd women—that have always peppered our pop culture as comic relief. If only we crazy, wild-eyed buzzkillers would just let people have their jollies without getting all whiny about it, all would be well, right?

I don't think so. And you don't really think so. And I'd be willing to bet that even Pamela Anderson doesn't, deep down, think so. In a world that continues to posit women's bodies and minds as punch lines, and that judges women's humor by standards that weren't drafted with us in mind (but hey, you're pretty funny for a girl . . .), it's clear that feminist humor's assimilation from outsider aberration into just plain American humor is still a long time coming. But when it does, we'll be the ones asking, just so blithely, "Can't you take a joke?"

Girl, Unreconstructed

Why Girl Power Is Bad for Feminism

Rachel Fudge / BITCHfest 2006

ON THE LONG LIST OF THINGS THAT ARE BAD FOR FEMINISM—Phyllis Schlafly, *Girls Gone Wild*, pharmacists who refuse to fill birth-control prescriptions, to name but a few—girl power would hardly seem to be the most pernicious. And yet as one of the most visible contemporary manifestations of the vague idea of feminism, it earns a special place of loathing in this feminist's heart. Why? Well, let me count the ways: Girl power reduces the theoretical complexity of feminism to a cheery slogan ("GIRLS KICK ASS!"); it represents the ultimate commodification of empowerment; it reinforces the simplistic conception of feminism as being, at heart, "all about choices." But most of all, it grabbed the rhetoric from one of the most potentially powerful, yet woefully misunderstood, feminist uprisings of my generation, discarded every ounce of political heft, and reduced it to cheap iron-on letters on a baby T.

I am talking, of course, about the short-lived explosion of feminist activism and creative culture known as riot grrrl—that early-'90s movement born out of young women's frustrations with the male-dominated punk-rock scenes of Washington, D.C.; Olympia, Washington; London, England; and later, cities all across the United States and Europe. Much like the founders of the women's liberation movement two decades earlier, who grew tired of fighting shoulder to shoulder with their male comrades for peace and justice only to be relegated to coffee-making and free-love-

satisfyin' duties, these girls realized that the only way to be taken seriously in their scenes was to make a ruckus of their own.

It's an old story, the co-optation of a subculture, political movement, or underground scene, but in our accelerated, mediated world, it's almost breathtaking how quickly it can happen. One day, you're stenciling "Riot, Don't Diet" on an old T-shirt so you can wear it to a show that night; the next, you can choose from among a dozen premade shirts emblazoned with slogans like "Boys Are Stupid, Throw Rocks at Them." That's the legacy of girl power: To paraphrase Kathleen Hanna, it took the bomp from riot grrrl's bomp-a-lomp-a-lomp; it stole the ram from the rama-lama-ding-dong.

Girl power is difficult to define—let alone attack—because it's not a movement; no one identifies herself as an adherent of girl power or issues manifestos calling for Girl Power Now! (Well, except for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, whose Girl Power campaign, launched oh-so-hopefully and just as vaguely in 1997 "to help encourage and motivate 9- to 13-year-old girls to make the most of their lives," seems dead in the water, though Girlpower.gov is still online.) The term first gained currency in the mid-'90s, in the wake of well-meaning books like *Reviving Ophelia* and *Schoolgirls*, which declared that if we didn't do something soon to reverse the plummeting decline in girls' confidence, we'd have a national female emergency on our hands. Riot grrrls had already been loudly proclaiming the revolutionary power of girlhood, so when the prefabricated, plasticized Spice Girls hit the scene and sold millions of records while prattling about girl power—which was never really defined, but seemed to sum up as "Be yourself (and wear a Wonderbra if you wanna!)"—many journalists, educators, advertisers, and other concerned girl-watchers seized upon this ephemeral declaration of strength. Unlike the women's liberation movement—whose pluralized name immediately conveyed the idea of collective action—and the galvanizing group force of riot grrrls, girl power is sadly, feebly singular: A girl might be able to kick some undefined ass under its auspices, but she won't be organizing any self-defense classes or antiviolence workshops for her peers.

And while the phenomenon of girl power has itself faded from the limelight—along with, thankfully, the Spice Girls—its ethos continues to dominate popular discourse about girls, gender, and equality. As a marketing tool, it has so thoroughly saturated the worlds of advertising and popu-

lar culture that it's become a cliché. It underlies supposedly go-girl teen movies like *Ice Princess*, *Mean Girls*, and *What a Girl Wants*. It allows totally manufactured pop stars like Ashlee Simpson and Avril Lavigne to claim to be edgy, powerful role models. Worst of all, it lulls us into thinking that all of feminism's battles are won, that females in America don't have anything to fight for anymore.

It seems hopelessly idealistic to say this now, but those extra r's in riot grrrl weren't just wacky wordplay: They quite literally put the *grrr* into being a girl. That bold, no-holds-barred expression of anger, aggression, and assertiveness was the linchpin of riot grrrl. The cries for revolution woven throughout the lyrics, slogans, and zines were in part a youthful flirtation with extreme rhetoric, but riot grrrls were also dead serious about changing the world, starting with the circumstances of their own lives. When the U.K. band Huggy Bear sang "Boredom, rage, fierce intention, this is the sound of revolution . . . Her jazz signals our time NOW" over grinding, spiraling ill-tuned guitars and manic, out-of-sync drums, it *did* sound like a revolution was right around the corner.

Riot grrrl expressed its mission lyrically and stylistically but also politically: Like the consciousness-raising groups of '70s feminism, ad hoc riot grrrl groups popped up around the country as young women got together to deconstruct gender, sexism, and patriarchy. They shared their experiences of rape, incest, and the lesser but relentlessly persistent abuses of growing up female in a sexist culture—and then they rose up, picked up pens or guitars or paintbrushes, and made noise about it. Like their foremothers, they saw that the personal was political, but they also made the political deeply personal. They created their own culture of music, fashion, art, and zines as a kind of haven for self-expression, but they also looked outward, challenging their local scenes to make room for female expression. And although riot grrrl was, and still is, often characterized as focusing mostly on personal politics, there was in fact a strong activist component: Individual riot grrrls joined local and national protests such as the 1992 march on Washington for reproductive rights, while bands such as L7 organized massive pro-choice benefit concerts. Taking a cue from the defiantly in-your-face AIDS action group ACT UP, women and grrrls outraged by the treatment of Anita Hill at Clarence Thomas's confirmation hearings took to the streets as the witty, media-savvy Women's Action Coalition. Grrrls formed support networks

for rape and incest survivors in their communities, and, in the wake of the brutal rape and murder of Seattle musician Mia Zapata in 1993, local women organized Home Alive, a nonprofit self-defense education and awareness organization that's still going strong today. In short, they recognized that sexism was pervasive and systemic—and that collective action was needed to battle it.

And then the Spice Girls came prancing in. Oh, it's not that easy, of course. A lot happened in between. First of all, there was a self-imposed media blackout: The mainstream press was getting a taste for those exotic grrrls, but many of the bands, zine makers, and activists profiled felt misunderstood and mischaracterized; they decided that the media would never get it and refused to be interviewed or give quotes. (The last straw was a landmark 1992 *Newsweek* article asserting that "Riot Girl is feminism with a loud happy face dotting the i.") Then there was the election of a liberal Democrat with an avowedly feminist wife after twelve years of Reagan/Bush horror, making certain political gains seem safe from erosion; the skyrocketing popularity of "angry girl singers" Alanis Morissette and Fiona Apple, who aired their almost-feminist grievances to stadium crowds; and the ever-complicated Courtney Love, whose transformation from messy, outrageous riot grrrl icon to temporarily less messy, outrageous Versace model nicely captures the confused messages conveyed by girl power. There was also growing momentum to the self-dubbed third-wave feminist movement—which could be described as the better-funded, better-organized, liberal agenda-driven counterpart to riot grrrls' diffused radicalism. (A full discussion of the third wave is beyond the scope of this essay.)

Riot grrrl never really had the chance to coalesce into a coherent movement, to work out its internal conflicts and develop a proper identity, before it was thrust into the media spotlight. And because riot grrrl focused on do-it-yourself creative culture, local action, and freewheeling manifestos that were as much about provocation as developing an ideology, it was much easier for observers to focus on its visual elements, especially its sartorial expression. The classic outfit of baby-doll dress paired with dirty combat boots, accompanied by a smear of red lipstick and Hello Kitty barrettes, was conceived as a visual expression of this girlhood-gone-angry. Media outlets from *Sassy* to *Spin* to *Newsweek* seized on the fashion, but had a hard time seeing beyond the cute to the analysis that underlay it. But rather than pre-

serve and protect the fledgling movement, riot grrrls' impulsive decision to stop talking to the media hastened its demise by leaving the terms of the discussion to the very people who had already proved they'd never get it; not surprisingly, those folks continued to focus on the superficial elements and went on to label any and every manifestation of spunky femaleness "girl power."

An excellent artifact of this time is a 1997 issue of *Spin* devoted to cataloging the achievements of "girl culture," ranging from riot grrrl bands like Bikini Kill to the cheesy TV show *Sabrina, the Teenage Witch* to the Delia's catalog to gritty nail polish to "the midriff" to, aw shucks, *Bitch*. The slippery slope of this compendium perfectly illustrates the confusing superficiality of girl power—and it's no accident that of the over fifty representations of girl culture enumerated by *Spin*, the only overtly, traditionally political one is a pro-choice march. In an essay anchoring the issue, Ann Powers perfectly summed up the appeal and the danger of girl power: "Unlike conventional feminism, which focused on women's socially imposed weaknesses, Girl Culture assumes that women are free agents in the world, that they start out strong, and that the odds are in their favor."

And that, my friends, is the lasting legacy of girl power. Of course, it's hard to argue that this is a bad way for girls to grow up, that they shouldn't be assumed to have confidence, agency, and strength. But if girl power provides their primary understanding of gender, when the going gets rough and those girls come face-to-face with sexism, they don't have the tools with which to formulate a critique—nor do they have an awareness of the power inherent in collective activism. In other words, they don't have feminism.

Nowadays, "girl power" is used by the media to mean "females: doin' somethin' unexpected"—that is, girls deviating from the norm of girliness, which, despite girl power's pretense that girls can do anything, often means doing perfectly ordinary things like starting bands, playing sports, or starring in CBS dramas. It's not that these achievements shouldn't be celebrated; it's the underlying implication that when boys or men do these things, it's just life—but for girls, these are extraordinary efforts by extraordinary females. Newspaper articles about female racecar drivers, female boxers, one-armed female triathletes, even—I kid you not—a local female-run gardening conservancy are headlined "girl power." It's no accident that these are all nonthreatening activities—you rarely see girl power used to

describe anything that is culturally oppositional—seeks social change (you know, anything feminist), unless the phrase is being used to declaw a potentially sharp critique. A prime example is “Girl Power Rules at New Habitat Project,” an August 2005 article in the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* about an all-female Habitat for Humanity team that, while declaring “it’s a girl thing,” misses a prime opportunity to talk about the feminization of poverty or why it’s important that poor women be included in redevelopment efforts in their own communities.

Girl power erases the hard work done by generations of women (and men) to eliminate obstacles, raise consciousness, and level that annoying metaphorical playing field. It shifts the focus from collective action to individual achievement: promoting math-and-science-enrichment programs for middle-school girls, for example, while overlooking the generally abysmal state of public schools. In attempting to empower girls, it reinforces a gender binary by not examining the many ways sexism and gender stereotypes hurt boys too.

It’s frequently noted in the media—most recently, by Kristin Rowe Finkbeiner in her book *The F-Word: Feminism in Jeopardy*—that girls and young women are, apparently, reluctant to embrace the word “feminism.” They don’t want to think about the reasons behind a feminist movement; they don’t want to be allied with anything that implies they are weak, or victimized, or unequal. Girl power sounds like it elevates the ladies, but in actuality it does the exact opposite of what riot grrrl tried to do: It turns the struggle inward, depoliticizes and decontextualizes the cultural messages about gender and behavior. Like the misguided idea that feminism is really only about giving women choices, it turns a collective struggle into a personal decision.

Girl power tricks us all into believing that girls are naturally powerful and therefore ignores the many ways their power is contingent on adhering to cultural expectations of female behavior. If, as Ann Powers wrote so hopefully nearly a decade ago, girls are seen as “free agents,” they have only themselves to blame for their failures. The corporate glass ceiling? Well, women just don’t want success as much as men do. Domestic violence? If they choose to stick around, battered wives really can’t complain—besides, they can murder their husbands and get away with it! Women’s athletics are institutionally underfunded? Oh, if there was really a demand for girls

to play sports, they’d form their own teams. Women still earn just seventy-seven cents to a man’s dollar? That’s because they don’t want the jobs that pay more.

For generations, feminism has given shape and structure to individual women’s obstacles—it turns one woman’s lament into a collective yell. Riot grrrl not only gave a new generation of young women a voice and encouraged them to wield it in service of feminism, it also galvanized them into group action. Girl power slaps them on the back and says, “You go, girl,” even if it’s not at all clear where or why they should be going, and it certainly doesn’t say that they might face significant obstacles along the way. Watered-down feminism may be enough to sell baby Ts and thigh-high fishnets; it may even be enough to celebrate the baby-step accomplishments of a few lucky women. But it won’t give girls what they need to demand real power.