

# Ladyfest: the revenge of Riot Grrrl?

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**T**he Ladyfest phenomenon is quietly spreading across the globe, turning on thousands of women to the possibilities of using music, zines and performance to create an unbounded community. Using the Internet and existing networks, young women in particular are claiming their own space, whether physical or virtual.

Britain's first taste of this girl-style revolution took place in August in Glasgow. The three-day festival was well attended and there are now plans for further Ladyfests next year.

The concept of Ladyfest has emerged a decade after the birth of Riot Grrrl, and both originated in the Olympia, Washington, punk-rock axis. Indeed, some of the same women were involved in formulating both: Allison Wolfe and Kathleen Hanna. If the name Riot Grrrl started as a doodle in Bikini Kill singer Hanna's notebook, then Ladyfest represents an attempt to reshape the outdated term "lady". In the best feminist tradition, modern women have reclaimed maligned, disempowering words.

Wolfe, who performed at Ladyfest Scotland with her band Bratmobile, said that the Ladyfest idea was born out of her alienation from the current breed of baggy-shorted, misogynist male rockers cluttering the airwaves. "I just thought it was high time we had a gathering of cool, artistic, creative kind of punk rock women," she said.

Responding to her call, a group of local women organised the first Ladyfest in Olympia, Washington, in 2000. "I remember in the early 90s, with Riot Grrrl, that was going on all the time, that type of networking and community-building," said Wolfe.

Artist Becca Albee agreed that her peers had been retreating from the public domain. "It's weird because we were all in our bedrooms doing our own thing and then the whole Riot Grrrl thing happened and we were all together and then we kind of all separated again, and just recently we've all kind of come together. It's really nice to have this reuniting of different types of art."

While the old guard (still in its early 30s) has been recharging its batteries,

in Glasgow. Having been told by various establishment figures that it couldn't possibly work, even they were shocked at how well it was received. Said one tearful organiser at the festival's conclusion, "I didn't think Glasgow was ready for this."

The politics behind the cosexual festival were tacitly, if not explicitly, feminist, with mentions of "women's space" and freeing oneself from "male-dominated society". "There are a lot of lesbian organisers, a lot of straight women, a lot of hardcore feminists, a lot of women who maybe are feminist, but just do the thing, rather than shout about being a feminist," said merchandising coordinator Monika Gromek, 22, whose mother helped out at her stall. "My mum's definitely been a major influence on me being a feminist, although she probably wouldn't have identified herself as one." Though by no means an explicitly lesbian event, queer women were well integrated, and there seemed to be no obvious friction. Any festival that finds queer and straight women sporting homemade "I heart women" tattoos on their arms must be doing something right.

Said lesbian spoken-word artist Rachel Jury, who came out in the late 80s, "It's almost a redefinition of women-only things, as a breakaway from the old 80s politics. These new women have come up and they're claiming a space in their own way."

If there was a generation gap, it emerged in an unexpected way. A workshop on women and the media brought together two journalists. The older woman, a veteran of sexist newsrooms, felt women had to go off and create their own media outlets, perhaps using the internet, while the younger woman was content to work within the framework of the mainstream press. One might have expected the reverse to be true.

The importance of the net in expanding Ladyfest can't be overstated. Email and websites have created a medium for a new word of mouth. In the early 90s, Riot Grrrl didn't have these tools widely at its disposal.

As this year's organisers rest on their laurels, new teams are springing up, bitten by the Ladyfest bug. Amy Spencer, 21, who attended the original

a new generation of women has emerged, many of them too young or too far away to have seen the bands. The often-heard refrain at Ladyfest Scotland was: "This is my chance to see them. I never got to." Indeed, the spectre of Olympia hovered over the festival, with the absent Hanna, now in Le Tigre, as its figurehead. As attendees stood rapt watching footage of her being interviewed in New York, one could only conclude that Ladyfest is the revenge of Riot Grrrl. Rumours of its death were highly exaggerated.

The 15-strong team behind Ladyfest Scotland spent a year organising the festival. Some found inspiration close to home. Lee Beattie, whose mother played her The Slits and X-ray Spex, said, "I'm lucky that I have a mum who when I was younger was a really strong role model. There was never a question that she wouldn't get involved." Her mother Jane booked the spoken-word performers.

The younger Beattie was one of only three women in the group who had been to the original festival, but all of them were determined to see it happen

Ladyfest in Olympia, was even more inspired by the Glasgow event: "I could see that it was possible to hold a Ladyfest somewhere other than Olympia, and it encouraged me to try and organise one for London." Meanwhile, a group of Riot Grrrls in Holland is looking to hold a Europe-wide event somewhere in France next year. Both groups are actively seeking lesbian and bi women's participation.

A guiding principle of Ladyfest is for those attending to take it to their own towns. The message is that it's not about consuming, but about sharing skills, ideas, opinions and culture. Said Ladyfest Scotland workshop coordinator Fiona Shearer, "The whole idea behind it is that it doesn't stop here. It keeps going on."

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Allison Wolfe



Lee Beattie (left) and Becca Albee

