

## **Lesbian Dissonance, Music Cultures and Mainstreams**

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Many same sex attracted people not only position themselves outside heteronormative culture but have, in recent times, become anathema to the mainstreaming of lesbian and gay culture. With an emphasis on lesbian and queer female identities and popular music practices, this paper seeks to expand upon and illuminate some of the 'trends' as well as the resultant oppositional responses of lesbian/queer music-makers: the purpose of which is to highlight the multiple strategies, politics and fractures in the history of lesbian/queer music-making. In order to do this, this paper will review some of the mass cultural stereotypes of lesbian and gay identities, explore the emergence of pop music 'celesbianism', and discuss the development of womyn's music traditions and riot grrrl's subsequent disassociation from them. Finally, it will draw upon a case study of Australian queer/feminist band, Bertha Control, to demonstrate how some women construct a queer relationality to established lesbian music cultures.

### **Becoming Mainstream**

In the advent of gay liberation in the 1970s, homosexual identity and the medicalisation implicit in the term 'homosexual' were dramatically reconfigured. Lesbian and gay identity was constructed in its place as a political counter to the classification of 'homosexual'—a term organised in negative opposition to the privileged and naturalised category of heterosexual. Basing its politics loosely upon what Reynolds calls "a utopian vision of liberated bodies and unrepressed psychic drives" (2002: 70), gay liberation sought a new and radical approach to the way gender and sexual identity were conceptualised for both women and men. Declaring that hegemonic society was fundamentally corrupt, members of the Gay Liberation Front challenged the institution of marriage and sought to reconfigure kinship notions of family. Moreover, they were also advocates for Third World liberation and strong critics of capitalism, making a common cause with some feminist movements, anti-war movements and black power counter-cultures. United by individual experiences of oppression,

liberationists politicised the personal, publicised the private and optimistically sought the end of oppression for all.

As lesbians and gays gained greater mainstream acceptance during the 1970s, the liberationist model—a model that continues to resonate with contemporary queer radicals—was outmoded in favour of an ethnic model of identity politics. The ‘legitimation’ of lesbian and gay sexuality and the mobilisation of lobby groups throughout the West consequently resulted in the assimilation and commodification of lesbian and gay identity (Reynolds, 2002; Wotherspoon, 1991). Rather than continuing to pursue the destruction of normalising and oppressive systems, assimilated lesbians and gays began demanding inclusion within existing heterosexist structures. Moreover, these efforts became largely gender separatist and focused on unitary lesbian and/or gay sexual identity, ignoring considerations of race and class. The effects of this are exemplified in the way lesbian and gay identity has been packaged and marketed for mainstream consumption.

Today, mass culture perpetuates an image of gayness that can aptly be described as youthful, white, healthy, middle-class, male, and focused on consumption. Schulman theorises this image as:

*A fake public homosexuality [that] has been constructed to facilitate a double marketing strategy: selling products to gay consumers that address their emotional need to be accepted while selling a palatable image of homosexuality to heterosexual consumers that meets their need to have their dominance obscured.* (1998: 146)

She goes on to argue that this image of gayness is very much a ‘straight’ construction. The fake public homosexual serves to deflect attention from the less wholesome images of queerness such as stone butches, trans people, rent boys and queer punks—people who, as Bronstein points out, threaten to “‘wreck’ everything for ‘assimilated’ lesbian and gays” (1994: 134). Similarly, Rofes stresses that this is not only the work of ‘straight’ marketing strategists but also of mainstream gay culture in general.

The gay mainstream, argues Rofes:

*Present[s] a sanitized vision of our people and replace[s] butch/femme dykes with Heather and her two mommies, and kinky gay men with domestic partner wedding cakes.*  
(1998: 204)

Most notably, the decline of politicised queerness and its association with gender and sexual perversity has corresponded with a rise in prime time television shows and Hollywood films featuring ‘wholesome’ gay characters whose gayness very much parallels straight ideas. As Wheeler and Wheeler have argued, the constant theme in shows like *Will and Grace* (1998–2006) and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2003–2007) is “we’re just like you only a little more fashion conscious” (2006: 100, emphasis in original). Mainstream films such as *My Best Friend’s Wedding* (1998) and *The Object of my Affection* (1998) also exhibit similar sexually non-threatening representations of gayness. In each of the aforementioned cases, the gay character is an attractive, youthful, white, middle class male who befriends an equally attractive, youthful, white, middle class, yet heterosexual female—thus illustrating Schulman’s earlier point.

While mainstream representations of lesbianism have taken a little longer to appear on living room screens, we are now beginning to see the emergence of heteronormative lesbianism as well. The married, monogamous, cohabitating lesbian mummies in the North American production of *Queer as Folk* (2000–2005) were set in contrast to the semi-pornographic sexual exploits of the show’s male characters. Similarly, the lesbian cast of *The L Word* (2004–2009) exhibits, according to Chambers:

*Practices that reify the structures of heteronormativity—by either mimicking the heterosexual norm or upholding patriarchal visions [and] assumptions [of women]—these practices, may and should, be criticised for their conservative and freedom-limiting effects.* (2006: 86)

Recently, we have witnessed a dramatic increase in the mainstreaming of lesbianism from within the pop music industry. Singing her hit song ‘I Kissed a Girl’, the self-declared hetero pop star, Katy

Perry sat at the top of the ARIA charts for six weeks and in the US charts for seven consecutive weeks in 2008. We can add to this list the infamous Madonna and Britney kiss, plus the rejuvenation of faux-lesbian Russian duo t.A.T.u, who recently replaced Victoria Beckham as the face of Marc Jacobs' latest fashion collection. With a frenzy of rumours surrounding Lindsay Lohan and DJ Samantha Ronson, plus one half of the teen pop-idols The Veronicas and MTV VJ Ruby Rose making tabloid headlines for their lesbian escapades, it would appear that women loving women is remarkably in vogue in the music industry. In fact, lesbian culture is so fashionable right now, says Whitelaw (2008), that *The Sydney Morning Herald* actually listed 'lesbian culture' in the number one position of its top ten list of trends sweeping the globe in August 2008.

This fake public celebrity lesbianism or 'celesbianism'—as it has been tagged by journalists (Duggan, 2008b)—is a mutation of lesbian culture; it is the heterosexual mainstreaming of 'girl on girl love' and it is driven largely by the music industry's media puppeteers. Yet, it is not only these heteronormative constructions of lesbianism that are seen as problematic by lesbian and queer identified women. Lesbian counter-culture has often been charged (by queer women) for its similarly narrow constructions of female sexuality. With this in mind, I now turn to other musical representations of lesbian sexuality and the chasm between the gender rigidity of womyn's music, the mainstreaming of lesbian culture and the queer women who, through 'alternative' musical expressions, position themselves outside of both.

### **From Womyn to Grrrl**

If you type the phrase 'lesbian music' into any online search engine you will most likely return a selection of hits that feature artists such as Alix Dobkin, Cris Williamson, Janis Ian, Ann Reed, Indigo Girls, Sarah McLachlan, Melissa Ethridge, k.d. lang, Jane Siberry and Ani DiFranco, among others. Moreover, compilation discs such as *A Love Worth Fighting For* (1996), *Out Loud* (1995) and *Lesbian Favorites* (1997) all feature a selection of female singer-songwriter tracks by many of these popular lesbian icons, thus substantiating their iconic status.

The predominantly folk sounding, singer-songwriter style that is associated with lesbian music is rooted in womyn's music traditions which articulated its message primarily through folk music styles, because folk was already imbued with political themes and its sound was considered 'softer', less aggressive and therefore less 'masculine' (Bayton, 1993; Kearney, 1997). Favouring a DIY separatist approach that was politically grounded in second wave feminist and lesbian feminist discourses, womyn's music emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s as a direct reaction against the domination of men within popular music traditions of the time. Valuing a non-hierarchical and participative democratic approach to music-making, the womyn's music movement sought to create a style and culture of explicitly female music incorporating women in all parts of music-making including song writing, performance, production, promotion and sound reinforcement (Bayton, 1993; Quimby, 1997). Music was a necessary process in the institutionalisation of lesbian culture and the creation of lesbian visibility within broader public culture (Quimby, 1997). In 1973, Dobkin released *Lavender Jane Loves Women*, which was groundbreaking in its attention to lesbian feminist themes. Dobkin said that she wanted "lesbians to have tangible musical proof of their existence" (1979: 12). For female musicians of this kind, the personal was intensely political and this was reflected in their musical style and lyrical content, which often dealt with issues of suffrage, lesbianism, domesticity, motherhood, the female body and other explicitly female themes.

As womyn's music continued to position itself in opposition to male music styles such as rock, punk and metal, its focus on binarised gender differences within music proved to be somewhat problematic for future generations of women. Womyn's music tended to homogenise lesbian identity, downplay female sexuality and to redefine lesbianism as a sensual rather than sexual experience. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, a new generation of lesbians inspired by third wave feminism, queer theory, punk rock culture and AIDS activism "flatly rejected women's music as part of a reevaluation and critique of cultural feminism's construction of 'womaness' and women identification" (Peraino, 2006:

175). As younger women grew sceptical of second wave feminism and the gender rigidity of womyn's music traditions, new female musical cultures such as riot grrrl began to emerge in the early 1990s.

Drawing inspiration from earlier female punk musicians such as The Slits and Poly Styrene from X-Ray Spex, the riot grrrls provoked a renaissance in angry, loud, aggressive and bratty female music-making. The riot grrrls' pro-female stance allowed for the celebration of femininity without the necessary rejection of traditionally masculine attributes—thus it did not rely on dualistic systems of identification. Instead, riot grrrls rejected prescriptive performances of gender, critiqued normative constructions of the feminine and promoted flexible forms of self-identification which meant the movement's participants were free to embrace a range of femininities—be it playful girliness and/or militant lesbian feminism. Adopting the catch-cry 'revolution girl style now', riot grrrls sought to establish women's equality within masculine musical spheres such as rock and punk, while at the same time tackling broader social issues. According to pioneering riot grrrl Kathleen Hanna of the band Bikini Kill (cited in Rosenberg & Garofalo, 1998), sexism, heterosexism, racism, classism, ageism, thinism and capitalism were also key targets on a list of social ills that the riot grrrl movement sought to quash through musical participation.

Often overlooked in discussions of riot grrrl are the ties between this movement and queer female identity generally. For many riot grrrls, lesbian visibility was as much desired in the 1990s as it was by women like Dobkin in the 1970s. Phoenix notes that "for some queer women, Riot Grrrl provides a refuge from a homophobic punk scene and a conformist gay culture" (1994: 40). As such, queer female musicians have contributed, and in many cases expanded upon, riot grrrl-style feminism by incorporating a decidedly queer politic into their music-making. In Klein's work on this movement, she illustrates how younger feminist and alternative music communities became a space for "queer and questioning girls" (2002: 415) to discuss their feelings of isolation and their experiences of sexuality. Moreover, Kearney suggests with reference to the movement that "the incorporation of queer politics and theory in feminism has been largely responsible for refocusing discussions of

gender and sexuality in provocative new ways” (1997: 224). These “provocative new ways” encouraged women to celebrate their femaleness and femininity whilst also allowing them to play with, subvert and deconstruct gender and sexual normativities, creating new modalities of female gender, and alternative performances and articulations of female sexuality.

Riot grrrl-inspired, queer cultural articulations of femaleness—which exist very much outside of the heteronormative as well as lesbian mainstreams—provide yet another take on cultural constructions of female sexual attraction. Bands like the self-proclaimed queer/dyke punk rock outfit Tribe 8 employ feminist politics in their lyrics while addressing and critiquing queer dyke gender and sex roles in songs such as ‘Neanderthal Dyke’, ‘Estrofemme’ and ‘Femme Bitch Top’ among others. Through singing about these exceptionally queer subjectivities, Tribe 8 has produced “a taxonomy of queer lives and a dissonant record of dyke punk and dyke genders” (Halberstam, 2007: 57). Team Dresch—who are often called the “de facto riot grrrls of the queer rock scene” (Ciminelli & Knox, 2005: 182)—also interweaves queer and feminist themes in its music, speaking from multiple minority positions which aim to challenge both sexism and heterosexism at the same time.

On The Butchies’ album *We Are Not Femme* (1998), the band performs a cover of Cris Williamson’s iconic womyn’s anthem ‘Shooting Star’. The Butchies’ rocked-up rendition of this folk song is noted by Halberstam as way for what she calls the emerging “riot dykes” to “build a bridge between the raucous spirit of rebellion and the quieter, acoustic world of women’s music from the 1970s and 1980s” (2006: 18). Bands such as Tribe 8, Team Dresch, The Butchies, as well as other notable queer riot grrrl off-shoots such as Le Tigre and Lesbians on Ecstasy who borrow from both feminist and queer cultural and political discourses, suggest that riot dykes do not counter-identify with womyn’s music traditions but instead selectively refer to and borrow from them. Thus, during the mid- to late-1990s a cross-pollination of feminist and queer politics both within and outside the riot grrrl movement has produced a new politico-musical discourse that is employed by a variety of queer female artists.

## **Bertha Control**

Once such local example of this is the five-piece Brisbane-based all-female band Bertha Control.

Bertha Control draws upon queer and feminist politics and sensibilities, which it mixes with elements of distinctly non-queer and non-feminist musical styles such as funk, reggae and ska. When I interviewed these women in 2005 as part of my doctoral research it was clear that they saw themselves a distinct from the local lesbian establishment; moreover, they provided valuable insight into the restructuring of queer female identity through music-making.

Drawing a distinction between the lesbian and gay mainstream and queer lifestyles, Matilda from Bertha Control offered her opinion on queer as an ‘outsider’ identity and a positionality that is resistant to heteronormativities. She stated:

*I reckon it's the difference between buying into the capitalist heterosexual patriarchy and not. The kind of Queer Eye for the Straight Guy, the Wickham [a local gay nightclub], and all that stuff about how perfect your abs are and how waxed your back is in the gay male culture which translates in the female culture by women just wanting to move into single couple households and have kids and a picket fence just like the heteros do. I think as queers we've got the opportunity to expand beyond that because we're put outside that paradigm to start with and then we have to choose to go back or choose to go somewhere else and I think that's where the chasm is. (i/v with the author, 30 November 2005)*

The band admitted that it does not spend much time interacting with mainstream lesbian and gay culture. Instead, members suggested that they feel a part of what they called the more ‘alternative’ queer scene. Moreover, they do not feel that their music is particularly suitable to mainstream lesbian sensibilities, which they defined as both folk and mainstream top-forty tastes.

In terms of its musicality, Bertha Control exhibits a rather curious bricolage of, or possibly ‘queer’, approach to musical style. I posit this because the band’s sound—specifically its rejection of rock’s

whiteness and misogyny—incorporates elements of funk, reggae, ska, rap and occasionally punk styles, thus situating them queerly within the discourses of typical feminist music production and also within the dominant styles of queer cultural production, as funk, reggae, ska and rap are not genres traditionally associated with either feminist or queer cultures. Bertha Control's sound is typified by funk guitar, bass grooves and interlocking 4/4 rhythms. In the style of funk, many of the melodic instruments often take on rhythmic qualities, contributing equally to the percussive drive of the music, as well as its timbre and tonal qualities. Songs frequently incorporate the off-beat sounds of reggae with its recurring accents on the third beat of the bar, intricate vocal harmonies, freestyle rapping, and classic ska-style keyboard, saxophone and trumpet riffs. Moreover, Bertha Control does not have a designated lead singer: vocal performances are shared between the band members. This idea of equally sharing the stage and the role of vocalist is a central performance aesthetic of the band. It is a marker of the members' equality as individuals and their collective resistance to hierarchical power structures—again reminiscent of a second wave approach to musical organisation.

Through its lyrics, the band signal its alliance with multiple social causes such as Australian politics, Indigenous issues, censorship, racism, environmentalism, refugee rights, social pluralism, the abuse of policing powers, anti-corporatisation, anti-capitalism, feminism and sexuality. These multiple political alliances very much point to the neo-liberalist politics of queer—politics that obviously include, but also extend upon, constructions of gender and sexuality. When speaking with band members, they noted their attempts at negotiating the stereotypes of femininity and lesbianism and the difficulties that such negotiations encompass. Speaking about her gender and sexual identity, and her expressions of this in Bertha Control, Matilda pointed out that:

*[On stage] I feel that I clearly come across as a lesbian, I love it when I sing "I hope your daughter's gay and have a good fucking day", but even Mona does that and she identifies as being queer.... I see us all as being sistas, so [our sexuality] is kind of linked to the identity of the band. But I've always felt a bit of conflict in how to express gender identity because as a lesbian if you do something like have hairy armpits or wear a tank*

*top you're conforming to society's idea of what a lesbian is but if you wear a dress you're conforming to society's idea of what a woman is so you just have to get past that. Either way you're conforming to someone's stereotype of something. So I really enjoy playing around with different kinds of costuming. I personally identify as a woman, but I enjoy wearing things that would shock people and conflict with being a woman but at the same time conflict with being a lesbian too. (i/v with the author, 30 November 2005)*

Clair added that she finds the performance and musical space of Bertha Control to be generally accepting of and accommodating to her multiple gender and sexual identity performances:

*I think I'm definitely a woman ... but I also think I've got a really strong boy spirit that I have a lot of fun with .... I actually got recruited half way through Bertha Control's life into being a lesbian so I'm a cross-over case, so I identify mostly as queer but also as bisexual and lesbian and heterosexual, so I identify as lots of different things and I'm not afraid to express all of those different identities on stage or musically. Patty and I do a song called 'The Rap Against Homophobic Crap' which we wrote together, and we're out there saying, "we're gay and if you don't fucking like it fuck off". But a lot of my songs are about men that I've been in love with too. (i/v with the author, 30 November 2005)*

Through its music and lyrics, Bertha Control articulates a broad range of political and social concerns, and rejects cultural elitism, exclusivity and hierarchy in favour of cultural hybridity and collective participation. While Bertha Control displays a clear line of influence from earlier forms of feminist music-making, the band has been careful not to directly replicate them. Rather, it has borrowed selectively from them, producing a distinct politico-musical discourse by interweaving feminist, queer and broader leftist political articulations into the non-white and traditionally 'masculine' sounds of funk and reggae. By situating themselves on the outer edges of the folk traditions of womyn's music, the punk style of the riot grrrls and rejecting the new pop celebrity lesbianism, the women of Bertha Control are enacting a particularly queer relationality to established lesbian music cultures generally.

## Multiple Mainstreams

After briefly outlining some of the political and cultural complexities of lesbianism—distinguishing heteronormative lesbianism, lesbian feminist women's music, riot styles and queer style (which maybe better described as a lack of cohesive style)—it is clear that musical expression provides an accommodating way to articulate all of the above. But what is most interesting here is the relationship between each of these cultural expressions of female sexuality and same-sex attraction. Recent articles in mainstream lesbian and gay press have shown great disdain towards the emergence of lesbianism within the pop music industry. In an article titled 'Lesbianism: The New Black' in the August 2008 edition of *Same.Same*, Duggan slams the current lesbian craze in the pop industry saying that:

*With Madonna too busy working on her new face to spend time culturally raping minorities any more, it's up to the new breed of singers like Katy Perry to take what they can from the lesbian scene and milk it for all it's worth before its value runs out.*

(Duggan, 2008a)

For many queer identified women, however, they see the lesbian mainstream (such as those directly catered for in the lesbian press) as equally limiting in its construction of female sexuality and its privileging of certain modes of cultural expression (namely folk and soft rock). The degrees of influence, cross-over and the oppositional musical responses arising between and among lesbian and queer female cultures presents a rather interesting take on notions of sexual and musico-sexual mainstreaming which I have only touched on here and indeed warrants further examination.

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