

# DATEBOOK

## ROCK CAMP

### Forget the s'mores — rock is a verb

By Jen Burke Anderson  
SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

Catherine Lenz walked over to a battered boom box on the floor and hit play. The multi-purpose room echoed with a clean, hard drum solo followed by the garage-surf electric guitar attack of the Go-Gos' "We Got the Beat." The assembled group of women, ages 27 to 35, each with her own electric guitar and amp, played along in time.

And just like that, the Ladies Rock Camp was officially in session on a recent weekend afternoon. It was the first fundraiser of its kind for Bay Area Girls Rock Camp, a sister offshoot of the Portland, Ore., camp featured in Berkeley filmmaker Arne Johnson's 2008 documentary "Girls Rock." Over a weekend, campers convene at the Malonga Casquelourd Center for the Arts in Oakland, learn an instrument, start a band, write a song, then perform live at Berkeley's Starry Plough.

The mission of Bay Area Girls Rock Camp is to empow-

er girls through music education — but as many are discovering this weekend, women, too, can reap the psychological and artistic benefits of rocking out.

"Rock music encourages people to be loud and take up space," says Anna Gazdowicz, 26, who started out as a volunteer for Girls Rock Camp last summer. "Little girls are kind of taught the opposite." This weekend, Gazdowicz is a Ladies Rock camper playing the electric guitar for the first time.

The campers' second day starts with a bagel breakfast in the Ladies Rock Restaurant & Lounge, which volunteers have transformed from a plain rec room into a cozy chill zone with colored lights, couches and rugs. The women are invited to spin LPs on a 1960s portable record player; the vinyl collection includes everything from Memphis Minnie to Bikini Kill.

After breakfast are announcements and wacky skits. The teachers pretend to be disorganized, navel-gazing



Photos by Carlos Avila Gonzalez / The Chronicle

band members who learn that the drummer is the "mystical one" whom they must follow to start really sounding like something.

Then it's off to two hours of instrument instruction.

Electric bass students stay in the lounge, where they pluck along with the instructor's Motown line, each on their individual bass and amp, picking up pointers on slides and other aggressive filigrees.

In the basement, women are

*Rock camp continues on F3*



The band Changing Light, above right, performs for an appreciative audience, right, after the first Ladies Rock Camp, which raised funds for Bay Area Girls Rock Camp.

# Women and girls band together empowered by learning music

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learning to get, in drummer's parlance, "in the pocket."

Under a string of glowing Christmas lights, instructor Anna Petrisko, 27, leads a call-and-response exercise; when the drummers get more confident, they try flourishes on the tom-toms and crashes on the cymbals, hooting out encouragement to each other.

"The drums are really about intuition and depth," Petrisko tells them. "The stick is like an extension of your body, it comes from your core."

"How we feeling?" she asks as the exercise winds down.

"Tired," says a camper with a laugh, running a sleeve across her forehead.

## Tribal huddle

In an adjacent classroom, drum kits are circled around a tangle of white Christmas lights that glows like a campfire. The women pound away after instructor Carey Fay-Horowitz, 27. If this feels like a tribal huddle, it's no coincidence: In the mix with the sticks is Carol Fay, 53, Carey's mother.

Upstairs, Carey's aunt Donna Matern, 64, is learning the electric guitar.

The intergenerational ties among Girls Rock Camp, Ladies Rock Camp and the families of the organization's volunteers are deep and varied. Tembani Abeje, 8, said she'd go to Girls Rock Camp if mom River Abeje, 51, went to Ladies Rock Camp first.

Middle school counselor Laurie Halliday, 45, sent her daughter to Bay Area Girls Rock Camp last summer and was so impressed with the results she joined the board of directors. This weekend, however, she's a camper singing

## Girls Rock Summer Camp

Bay Area Girls Rock Camp will hold two weeklong sessions this summer at the Julia Morgan School for Girls in Oakland:

**Session One:** June 22-26

**Showcase performance:** June 27

**Application deadline:** Today

**Session Two:** July 6-10

**Showcase performance:** July 11

**Application deadline:** May 29.

Instruments will be provided. Tuition is \$400; financial aid is available. Go to [www.bayarea-girlsrockcamp.org](http://www.bayarea-girlsrockcamp.org) for more information or to donate.

vocals with her band, Rock Candy.

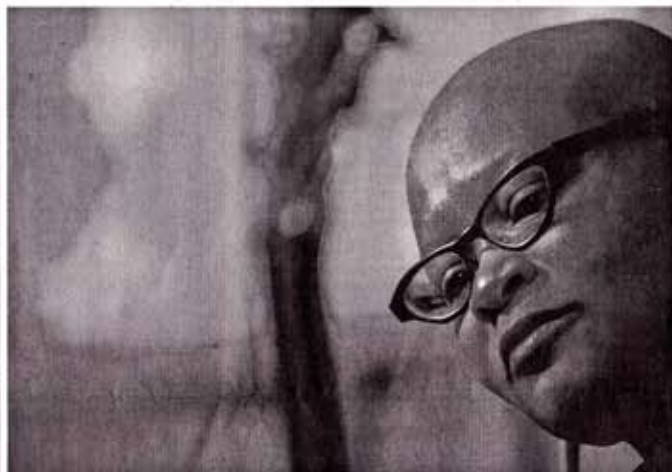
When one drummer in the workshop has trouble keeping the beat, she's allowed to lead the group. It's not long before she falls into a groove and the others can follow. It's a recurring phenomenon as the day goes on: Once one woman in the group gets it, the rest of them are able to in short order.

Many campers say the supportive, noncompetitive atmosphere is what produces the sharp learning curve. As program coordinator Sarah K. Mehlfeld says, "We don't need to push someone down to get to the top."

## Band practice

Fittingly, lunch consists of DIY tacos. Nerd Power, composed mostly of grade school girls rocking out in front of a white board with "e-mc" scrawled on it, provides the floor show.

From here on out, it's a choice of workshops on either self-defense or the music busi-



Carlos Avila Gonzalez / The Chronicle

River Abeje performs during the showcase performance of the Ladies Rock Camp at the Starry Plough in Berkeley. She tried the camp at the suggestion of her 8-year-old daughter.

**"If adults understood how (rock camp) is life altering, they'd all want to do it. It's not about being a rock star, it's about finding your tribe."**

Laurie Halliday

ness, then band practice before the women take the stage the next day.

Though it's an urban day camp where attendees return home at night, participants say the days are so long and intense that an overnight camp experience might be a little too immersive.

"The days were really, really long," says Ri Beaubien, 35, who came from Los Angeles to attend the camp after learning about it on Craigslist. "But it was a fun exhaustion."

Overnight rock camps for women and girls are available in places as far-flung as Europe and the Midwest. Girls Rock Camp Alliance's Web site boasts that the girls rock camp phenomenon has exploded far beyond the bohemian climes of the Pacific Northwest. Bay Area Girls Rock Camp lists self-esteem, self-expression, DIY ethics and cooperation as its core values. But Girls Rock Camp is a week and Ladies Rock Camp is a weekend; can all these

things really be instilled in campers in so short a time?

"I've seen dramatic changes in a day," says Mehlfeld, 26. "They leave with a confidence they didn't have before."

"A lot of what they learn here, they can apply in their lives," she says.

"If adults understood how (rock camp) is life altering, they'd all want to do it," says Halliday. "It's not about being a rock star, it's about finding your tribe."

Because of the recession, support from foundations has declined, as it has for nonprofits across the board. But popular support for the girls camp is undeniable; applications for summer are pouring in.

The organization subsidizes tuition for the girls, and since

it's their goal to have 30 percent of their campers on full scholarship, they will need all the support they can get.

They accept instrument donations, noting that drums and working amplifiers are especially needed.

On the Sunday afternoon wrapping up the weekend, the crowd at the Starry Plough pub is spilling onto the streets. Daughters, sons, husbands, grandmothers and uncles assemble around beer pints and grill snacks. The Ladies Rock Camp performers, some of them having only played their instruments for three days, psyche themselves up for the showcase that's the culmination of a weekend of hard work.

## 'Breadth of experience'

"These women have a breadth of experience and life that you don't get with the girls' campers," master of ceremonies and volunteer Lisa Kleinzweig tells the waiting audience. Before long the first band, the Belladonnas, takes the stage to perform "Last Goodbye," a ballad with a strong backbeat. The crowd's response is thunderous, and the band members' faces show that the three days of struggle were worth it.

The word "ladies" used to be off limits to the women's movement of the 1970s; the Girls Rock Camp in Portland was the first to use the term for its women's rock camp. But things change, and "ladies" can now be used in a fun, tongue-in-cheek way.

"We're ladies," says Mehlfeld, "and we rock."

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