

European Electropunk Riot Grrrls

Rhythm King and Her Friends are Pauline, Linda & Sara. Formed in 2000, this Berlin-based Trio has developed a special musical style we just can't get enough of! They have successfully melded together the seemingly disparate worlds of Electronic Music and Queer | Feminist politics. Their songs are easily danced to -- they are very richly layered, have nice beats and sampling mixed in with live instrumentation. They boast a wide variety of instruments in their employ, too, ranging from a child's xylophone to synthesizer to guitar. They frequently trade off instruments during their live performances as well.

But don't miss what Rhythm King and Her Friends are saying! Their lyrics are wonderful and worth a sit-down listen; exploring life from the female, queer and feminist perspective. The band gained some well deserved attention resulting from their appearance on the Toxic Girls compilation in 2002 and their opening for Le Tigre's 2002 European tour. You can learn a little more about Rhythm King and Her Friends thanks to Peter at Kitty Yo, who presented us with the opportunity to interview members of Rhythm King. Click to read CoG's interview with Pauline on October 11, 2004. It is our distinct pleasure to introduce these ladies to our North American listeners.

C: How did you meet and get started?

P: I met the other girls when I arrived in Berlin. I lived in Switzerland before and when I moved to Berlin, I decided to start a band. I came across Linda's former band and thought they made really great music, the kind of thing I thought I would not discover in Germany. It was a bit like Sleater Kinney; not electronic, but guitar driven. I really loved that band and I never had written any band before, I never do that. But I thought „well they are in Germany and so maybe I should write to them“.

At the time, I didn't know the name of their city – I didn't know anything about Germany at all really, but I was able to find their address and write to them and then we [Linda and I] became friends and I had met Sarah in Berlin too and we started about four years ago. It was a very new project for us because all of us had done a little bit of music before – kind of Riot Grrrl stuff. But we were fed up with that because we had the feeling it wasn't going further on. We wanted to carry on the content or spirit of it, but we wanted to start learning other kinds of instruments; be more playful with all the kinds of instruments you can find and do electronic music. So that was for us the idea at the beginning; to link queer politics with electronic music and that's what we wanted to do. We wanted to create the kind of music we would want to hear when we go out and dance.

C: Excellent, so you didn't see it out there and decided to create yourself

P: Yeah exactly!

C: How did you come up with the name Rhythm King?

P: I was looking for a name for the band and it's usually so difficult to come across something that's really striking in mind. I had this record with a picture on the back with the whole band is on it and the guitarist had on a very chic pink jacket with „Rhythm King“ on it. We thought „Wow! We want that jacket!“ and so we stole his jacket [laughs] so that's why our band is called is Rhythm King. We felt it's really funny to be a girl band called Rhythm King because there so many Rhythm Kings everywhere but they're always male musicians. So we thought it would be a good name for a female band. But the Rhythm King is also very alone; doing his thing. So we wanted to underline that we belong to a community and there are lots of women around us who are inspiring us and helping us, so „and Her Friends“ underlines the community feeling and makes it important.

C: That's so cool.

P: So that's the story of our name! But it's much too long and I can tell you everybody writes it wrong all the time. But it's also a good name because people get stuck on it and invent different ways to write it down.

C: Who are you influences?

P: As I said before, many women bands...queer bands that we were listening to maybe 8 years ago...you know...US bands. I think they were important to us musically, but more like as I said before we wanted that feeling of community in Germany; we wanted to be part of a scene and to be able to play with other women musicians so maybe they were important more for that kind of feeling. Musically, we have many many influences and there's no one band we wanted to be like because when we started, there weren't many women bands in electronic music so we didn't have a model. My favorite band is The B52's and I listen to a lot of New Wave, Post Rock, women bands from the 80s as well. I love ESG and Opal, but I can't really tell you one exact band that is our main influence. Maybe for the queer aspect of it, one of my really favorite bands is God is My Copilot, they're from New York. Many influences; many beautiful people. Plus many American bands; that's why people say we are not so German. We are based in Berlin, but we have no real roots in German Music.

C: Can you tell me about the equipment you guys use?

P: Yeah sure. We started very very simply, because we had never done it before and we wanted to be as direct with electronic equipment and we could be with a guitar somehow because the very direct, very live effect is very important to us. It's been important to us always, also I think for woman in bands when yr trying to read the instructions to use a machine, you want to be direct with that. So we've been samples, very cheap equipment actually; like a sampler and drum machine the very simple ones you can buy. We have some keyboards, but I can tell you they are keyboards that we found at the flea market. But you can still get really good sounds with them. We have a kind of small glockenspiel, like xylophone, like the kind of things you have when

you were little. But you can get really good sounds with that. So it was important for us not to start with big, expensive equipment but to show ourselves that we can do it with simple things and be inventive with that and mix things together that are not usually mixed together. I think it's a kind of problem for women in bands; if you stay so simple with the instruments, you are going to be very quickly categorized as a „Girl Band“ so it's been important for us to break that, you know, destroy that image so that's why we haven't used a very good guitar with a really great sound or a synthesizer that is much better than the others, to break that image, to not be so quickly categorized.

C: A lot of your lyrics explore the world of work and horrible jobs. The way that you talk about it is very revealing of certain aspects.

P: We all live in this economic situation that affects our lives as much as different identities; being queer, being a woman, and so on. It is just as important to my daily life where I am working, what kind of job I do, how people treat me, and so on. So that's why economy is important, and that's what some of our songs are about; where you get yr money from or what you give up in yr daily life to cope with very tricky behaviours or demands at yr job. But I think to us it is very important when we think about Capitalism to not just have a usual Marxist view on it but to try and see it from a feminist perspective and from a queer perspective also. So the song I am Disco is about that; what are the kinds of demands at your job and how femininity or heterosexual femininity is demanded at work and how this is something you have to respond to and create for yourself the kind of strategies to resist it. And it's very tricky because today you are supposed to involve so much of your own personality and your own creativity in your job and at what moment can you resist giving that because of your personality. So it's about that kind of moment where you are in a very strange trap right? So that's why the lyrics say „I have got a good disposition, but I have got a bad and that wants to work too.“

C: That's one my favourite lines from song. My next DJ night, „I am Disco“ is definitely going into the mix. You know, a lot of female electronic I've talked to have said the electronic music scene both here and abroad still remains a kind of „boys club“ and I'm wondering what your experience is both as a female and as a queer artist?

P: I would say it is very male dominated, but here in Berlin there are so many other woman bands and there have been so many feminist rock bands in the past that there is the kind of awareness here that you won't be treated like shit. We haven't had that many bad experiences actually; we are always treated with a lot of respect. Of course you very often arrive in a club and all the technicians and everybody are boys and we always have a technician with us and sometimes she has to fight with the guys that don't want to let her at the machines, but usually she gets what she wants. I don't know how it is in the US, but here we can be lucky for now that a lot of things have changed. And we have to go on with taking up our space and trying to be respected for what we do. I don't think the battle is won, but I think a lot of things have gotten better.

C: Any future plans, goals?

P: We are touring a lot now and it's going really well. We are touring lots of Europe, Germany, and we will be in London next week and I am looking forward to that. And I'm also looking forward to coming to the US, we are coming next spring. So that's what we are doing at the moment. Then we will come back home and starting working again with our instruments and doing new things because you don't have so much time when you are on tour to anything new really!