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Louise Barrière

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A “Very DIY Music” For Punk-Feminist People? Doing and listening to noise music in Ladyfest-inspired festivals.

L. Barrière (Université de Lorraine)

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Abstract

My paper discusses the links between noise music and punk-feminist scenes, by looking at the Ladyfest network.

Ladyfest festivals generally aim to challenge gender roles within the punk scene. The network draws on a punk-feminist inspiration and specifically maintains several links with the Riot Grrrl movement that developed in the 1990s¹. Yet, their musical scope has widely expanded through the years, and Ladyfests’ programs nowadays include punk as well as, for instance, electronic dance music, hip hop or, to a certain extent, noise music.

Drawing on my PhD research, I have analyzed the programs of more than 100 Ladyfest and Ladyfest-inspired festivals that took place in France and Germany since 2003, and studied the place of noise music in that network. During fieldwork sessions, I have attended noise concerts, and had informal talks with artists or organizers. In the first part of my presentation, drawing on the informations I have gathered, I will therefore explain why noise music occupies a place at the margins of the Ladyfest network.

Yet, I made the hypothesis that doing noise music could serve a feminist purpose. My guess was that the DIY dimension of noise music could be empowering for women and queer people who attend such festivals, because it would offer them the possibility to make music without much equipment nor musical knowledge. I thus have organized noise music workshops during various festivals over the year 2019. In the second part of my presentation, I will discuss my assumption by analyzing my experiences and multiple conversations I had with the participants.

Key words: Ladyfest, feminism, empowerment, gender roles, noise

Introduction

Last year, I did several interventions on queer and feminist punk festivals, in academic conferences. As I explain that the scene expanded to other music genres, such as hip hop or EDM, a few colleagues asked me “yes, and what about noise music?”. After hearing that question quite a bit, I decided to dig a little bit further: what was the actual matter with noise music at queer_feminist punk-inspired festivals?

My paper therefore discusses the links between noise music and punk-feminist scenes, by looking at the Ladyfest network. Ladyfest festivals generally aim to challenge gender roles within the punk scene. The network draws on a punk-feminist inspiration and specifically maintains several links with the Riot Grrrl movement.

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Yet, I made the hypothesis that making noise music could serve a feminist purpose. My guess was that the DIY dimension of noise music could be empowering for women and queer people who

1 See for example: O’Shea, Susan. *The Art Worlds of Punk-Inspired Feminist Networks-a Social Network Analysis of the Ladyfest Feminist Music and Cultural Movement in the UK*. Diss. The University of Manchester (United Kingdom), 2014.

attend such festivals, because it would offer them the possibility to make music without much equipment nor musical knowledge. I thus have started to organize noise music workshops during festivals. I will introduce this project in the second part of my presentation.

1. Noise and feminism: a (very short) literature review

Very short because... I haven't found a lot of academic literature on that topic, indeed.

Anyway, Marie Thompson's work specifically inspired me, especially as she qualifies "noise" as a feminine feature. Though "the participation of female artists in the noisy fields of experimental and electronic music has been sidelined", "[she outlines] various intersections of noise and femininity through which noise has been feminised and the feminine has been produced as noisy. I argue that in Eurocentric cultures, noisiness has been understood as characteristic of certain 'bad' femininities."²

She further asks "When and how does the feminised become feminist?" and suggest that when "certain arts practices might be interpreted as 'feminist', this does not refer to the intent or political identity of the producer; rather it refers to what these practices are understood to do within a particular context. By extension, I propose that whether the feminised can be interpreted as feminist depends on what it does: What is perturbed by and through the feminised? What work does the feminised do to unsettle and transform normative gendered relations? What are the outcomes and effects of this process of feminisation?"

Indeed, these questions are also underlying in my current and upcoming works on noise music and feminist festivals.

She concludes "diverse historiographical and curatorial projects (...) [seem] to suggest that noise has some promise from a feminist perspective: they point to a shift from feminised noise to feminist noise."

Amongst the projects she is writing about is Tara Rodgers' book, *Pink Noises*³. In the introduction, Rodgers reflects on her own musical path and points links between noise music and the Riot Grrrl movement. This is something I found interesting as well.

Rodgers writes: "My own impulses to learn electronic music production and start the website Pinknoises.com felt quite different. In addition to my established curiosity with music and computers I was inspired by the legacy of Riot Grrrl, the grassroots movement in the early 1990s that catalyzed feminist art making and political activism."

That quotation shows that music movements are keen to intersect with each other. If the legacy of the Riot Grrrl movement influenced Tara Rodgers, could noise music also inspire the legacy of Riot Grrrl movement, in the form of the Ladyfest scene?

2. Noise & experimental music in the queer_feminist punk festival scenes: a study of German and French programs

As I mentioned in the introduction, during the process of doing research for that talk, I looked at the place occupied by noise and noise-related music in the programs of German and French punk-inspired queer_feminist festivals. The creation of a database that I've been filling since my MA thesis facilitated my work. The database collects basic information about a total of 146 of festivals organized since 2003; 40 of them in France and 106 in Germany. (I don't really have time to explain why I chose to do fieldwork in these specific countries, but I'd happily discuss it later if you're

2 Thompson, Marie. "Feminised noise and the 'dotted line' of sonic experimentalism." *Contemporary Music Review* 35.1 (2016): 85-101 ; see also : Thompson, Marie. "Gossips, sirens, hi-fi wives: Feminizing the threat of noise." *Resonances: Noise and Contemporary Music*. Bloomsbury, (2013): 297-311 and Fitzpatrick, Susan, and Marie Thompson. "Making space: an exchange about women and the performance of free noise." *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory* 25.2 (2015): 237-248.

3 Rodgers, Tara. *Pink noises: Women on electronic music and sound*. Duke University Press, 2010.

curious about it.) Information I gathered include dates, locations, price, workshops and concerts programs.

Thus, I have been able to gather in a same document all the names of the bands and artists who played at least one these festivals. I have then searched for those of them who identify their own music as in some way related to “noise”. Relying on the musicians’ self-identification indeed helps not [imposer] the point of view of the researcher on a corpus. I also looked for artists that claimed mixing noise music with other genres (such as hardcore punk, for instance), and I aggregated other kinds of experimental music (such as ambient, dark ambient, drone, and so forth) around the “noise music” category, mostly for sonic and organological reasons.

Final results showed a very low number of artists booked by these festivals claimed performing noise or noise-related music.

Noise musicians who performed during the analysed festivals include for instance: CHRA, Cuntroaches, NADIA LENA BLUE, Lucia Lip, Pripoy, LauraL, MonsieurScary.

3. Music at the margins...

I consider noise music to be at the margins of the German and French ladyfest scene. Firstly, because of statistics, of course. I have indeed showed that the festivals’ organizers do not often book noise musicians. But there is also a second reason. When a noise musician happens to perform during one of these events, they often play either at the very beginning of the evening, like as an “opening act”, either at the end (with the DJs). If we consider the unfolding of the concerts as a chronological line, noise therefore occupies marginal spaces in the lineup of the night.

This has several implications for noise musicians’ performance. Indeed, the first concert is generally not very crowded, since the evening just began and people are still arriving small groups after small groups.

For the record, I observed that the peak of the evening, in terms of frequentation and occupation of the space right in front of the stage, generally happens during the last gigs, right before the “after party” with DJ sets.

The introduction of DJ sets generally marks the moment at which some people start leaving, or just hang out at the bar. The room right in front of the stage becomes less crowded than during the bands’ gigs. People then leave small groups by small groups until the end of the night.

Organizers explained to me that they purposely made this choice: they thought that, if they would have programed a noise act in the middle of the evening, during the peak of frequentation, it would “break the fun”.

And indeed, it is true that the audiences that attended the noise performances I have been able to observe didn’t act the same way as the audiences that attended the following concerts. During noise music shows in punk-inspired queer feminist festivals, people would generally sit around the stage, focus on the music. The level of interaction between them is very low.

Later during the night, when non-noise music bands are performing on stage, people were more likely to dance, to interact with each other, or to interact in a visible or “loud” manner with the artists (screaming, clapping hands, and so forth).

Basically, this means that, though the punk-feminist festival scene has opened up to other genres, they don’t all hold the same status.

4. Bringing noise in punk-inspired feminist and queer festivals: an experimental approach.

Up to now, I have mostly considered the act of “listening” to noise music during ladyfest-inspired festivals, through my own ethnographic research. I will now look at the “making” of noise music. As I explained, this part of my presentation draws on workshops I have organized during festivals, named “purple noise” (not very original, but I’m bad at names). I indeed am a researcher, as a PhD student, but I’m also a musician (or at least I’m trying to). Though mostly a guitar player, I also enjoy experimenting with various mediums. This is part of what I wanted to share when I developed the concept of this workshop.

I should warn you that this is still an ongoing research. So far, I only did that workshop twice: once during Lady*fest Heidelberg (Germany) and once during Ladyifest Strasbourg (France). When I submitted my paper proposal I hoped I could do that workshop a bit more often, but unfortunately this hasn’t been possible this year. But I seek to bring it to new events next year!

My idea was the following:

As in several music scenes, Women and queer folks remain in the margins of the noise and experimental music worlds. This workshop aims to give people a few keys to reclaim these genres, thanks to a queer_feminist approach and low-cost music mediums such as cassette tapes.

The reasons why I developed this idea are multiple.

- First, I wanted to give something back to people I meet during fieldwork sessions. Consciously or not, they help me with my PhD research, they make my knowledge of the scene grow, and I wanted to share some of the things I know, music-wise, with them too. I also felt like it would be a way to connect with people. Like, when you come from far away and know absolutely no one in the local scene, it is sometimes hard to bond with people who hang out with each other all the time, and when I first began to do fieldwork in such festivals, I felt quite a bit lonely.

- Second, music related workshops are quite common in the scene, but they often focus on the typical rock instruments, or on practice such as DJing or MCing, since EDM and hip hop have also become common genres in the scene. A noise music workshop seemed more original, and could contribute to reclaiming the “feminine noisiness” analysed by Thompson.

- Third, if workshop attendees got attracted to noise music and the techniques they learned, it’s still an easy music to perform alone and they wouldn’t have to look for bandmates if they didn’t feel like it or just if they didn’t live in a very crowded area. Moreover, fourth reason, the material I showed people how to make music with generally remains affordable. And finally, none of this necessitate any knowledge of music theory, nor a “good ear”, a “good sense of rhythm”.

Basically it sounded like a “very DIY music” – as one of the participants once pointed – that could find its place in both the festivals programs and the potential attendees range of interests.

The workshop consisted in three different actions.

In a first part, we would generally open regular cassette tapes, in order to make loop tapes out of them. This was generally also a good time for me to explain a bit about noise music to people who didn’t know a lot about it and I would generally emphasize the links between noise music and the so-called “cassette culture” (Novak).

I also provided a playlist so people could discover women noise-related musicians such as Puce Mary, Pharmakon, Moor Mother, and confront themselves to the sonic characteristic of the genre, if the festival didn’t book any noise musician.

In a second part, we would go to record our tape loops, thanks to a bunch of very cheap and very lo-fi walkman. In both workshop, people mostly recorded their own screams or noises from the environment.

In a third part, we would try making a collaborative noise music piece. Plugging the walkman in a mixing deck, and make a feedback loop with effect pedals (I mostly used cheap reverb and delay as

well as distortion pedals). Everyone could play with the pedals as well as with their own walkman and the channel in which it was plugged. They could thereby make the tape run or stop, and influence its sound, while increasing/decreasing the effect levels, or playing with the bass-mediums-high level knobs.

So far, I have been able to notice the following outcomes:

- So far, festivals organizers and participants enjoyed the idea of the workshop. People came to discover a new technique, a new way to make (noise) music. Some of them already had a musical practice, and even played different instruments or sung. For instance, I met a girl who told me she tried to make rap music with a friend and would like to attend the workshop so she could make her own backing tracks for her songs; at LF Strasbourg Nadia Lena Blue, who had played a guitar-based noise performance the night before, stopped by the workshop hoping she could learn a different way to make noise music. Some others didn't know much about music. But none of them had ever made cassette loops.

The workshop mostly attracted people in their 20s or their early 30s (which is the main age range of the festivals' attendees). They considered the cassette tapes as a "nostalgia" thing. During one of the workshops, a participant exclaimed "I feel like I'm dissecting my childhood!". Others said they "didn't know walk-mans still existed!" These two sentences illustrate that nostalgic feeling well, and I would like to explore that sensitivity/sensibility the near future of my research.

But some limits of my research started to appear as well:

The first one considers noise music and failure. Though I consider it to be plenty part of the process, and definitely a characteristic of noise I personally enjoy, it was sometimes frustrating for the participants when their loops got scratched or just split up during the recording or music-making processes. Though the workshop doesn't require any kind of music knowledge, the (high) possibility of failure and the instability of the tape material might discourage the attendees to pursue.

I would also like to reflect on the "confrontation" of noise music with a more "typical" melodic culture of music: when I played my "women of noise" playlist at Lady*Fest Heidelberg, one of the attendees put her hands on her ears when she heard the beginning of Puce Mary's "The Spiral" and asked me if I could change the music (which I did). She said she was "okay with listening to some music, but not that" because it scared her (as like, the music of a horror film).

Both failure and the first encounter of the workshop participants with noise-related music are directions I would like to explore further in the future.