

# The Chicago Women's Liberation Rock Band 1970-1973

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[Introduction by Naomi Weisstein: *My paper, "The Chicago*

Women's Liberation Rock Band 1970-1973: A Slapstick Demolition of Male Supremacy" was presented at the end of March at the Boston University Conference "A Revolutionary Moment: Women's Liberation in the Late 1960s and early 1970s." This landmark conference drew a multiplicity of papers, rigorously retrieving a suppressed history, and countering such contemporary notions as that "leaning in" is what the radical women's liberation movement was, and is, about.

*Since I am ill and bedridden, my paper was presented in absentia by my long-time friend, Heather Booth, who, like me, traces her feminist history to the Chicago West Side Group (1967-1969) and the Chicago Women's Liberation Union (1970-1979). The version of my paper below was cut for delivery (in a session on "Women's Liberation in Action: Theory, Practice and Organization") from a fuller version that I will be seeking to publish shortly.]*

In Chicagoland in 1970, almost every teenage girl listened to rock. They considered it THEIR music – hormonal, quasi-outlaw, with screaming guitars and a heavy, driving beat. But it was sooo misogynist. This wasn't the Beatles' playful, woman-affectionate songs. These were vicious boy bands: the guitarists stood with their legs spread wide, pretending to fuck their guitars, while they sang about how stupid girls were, and how they were good for nothing but sex. Often, rape.

All our lives, we girls had been taught that male abuse was sexy. But this stuff was a cultural carpet-bombing of girls, based on the amplified idea that *brutal* = *sexy* wow! *shiver!*

How could a feminist combat this? As a beginning jazz pianist and stand-up comic, and an ardent member of the Chicago Women's Liberation Union (CWLU), I decided to form a women's liberation rock band, *that's how*. It would have us singing about how smart, strong, and hip we were, and how we would have sex only on our own terms, thank you. And we would get so good that soon we would saturate the airwaves, inundating teenage girls with a new kind of musical culture – joyful, playful, funny, and taking *no shit from no one*. Sort of like the much later Pussy Riot.

On International Women's Day in March 1970, we played our first gig, in the bandshell at Chicago's Grant Park. It was a disaster.

We regrouped and retooled. I insisted that we add boffo comedy, along with setting music to our serious feminist poems.

We did our second gig, at the New Left coffee house, "Alice's Restaurant." The audience exploded with joy. They clapped and shouted. They picked up the words to some of our choruses, and sang and danced to the music. After we finished, they mobbed the stage, hugging us and crying.

In the following three years, we made tours of the northeast and as far west as Colorado, playing to ecstatic audiences. For example, at a "Y" camp in Michigan for inner-city pre-teen girls, they repeated the lyrics to Amy Kesselman's "VD Blues" and, singing and bopping, they made us play it three times over before they let us move on. At Cornell, where we played with our sister New Haven band, women stripped to the waist, held hands, and danced in a huge circle, even though they had

heard that a fraternity had threatened to destroy the event. New Haven's vocalist, sang out, "Put your shirts on, sisters. We're in grave danger." "No!" they shouted back, "We won't! We're FREE." This happened again and again, in different forms, in the three years that we performed.

However, there were a few catastrophes. The most comical of these was at the Second Annual Third World Drag Queen Ball. Out of the blue, a male voice, identifying himself as "Ortiz, Third World Revolutionary," phoned me to invite the Chicago Women's Liberation Rock Band (CWLRB) to perform. "Of course we will," I said, thrilled. We got to the ball on the far South Side of Chicago, and swiftly realized that we were going to be out-bezazzed. Tall, gorgeous black men in glittering red ball gowns and Diana Ross wigs were lip-synching to her recordings, which were being played at top volume. When we took the stage, with our politically correct scruffiness (see the jacket photo on our CD "Papa Don't Lay that Shit on Me," from Rounder Records) and feeble amplification, we resembled supplicants at a Salvation Army catfish breakfast for the homeless. We played two songs and then quit. Nobody was listening. They had no idea of why we were there. A disappointed Ortiz and his partner, wearing identical one-piece pink wool bathing suits, clapped politely. We fled the stage.

We thrived as a chapter under the CWLU tent. While we toured, we also played all over Chicago whenever we were needed by CWLU, at conferences, dances, and Chicago street demonstrations. We stayed and played.

Recently, I saw for the first time an old photo of the band playing outside the Chicago Civic Center, in the Loop next to the Picasso sculpture. I noticed a row of CWLU women standing in back of us, some with their arms crossed, like Elijah Muhammed's "Fruit of Islam" bodyguards. What were they doing there? Answer: they were acting as our bodyguards because it was an unruly crowd. I teared up. They were protecting the band, although we never asked them to, and we were performing because they needed us to add festive vibes to their demo: **Solidarity and sisterhood!** A revolutionary moment!

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For more on the CWLRB, see:

CWLRB's CD, with New Haven Women's Liberation Rock Band, "Papa Don't Lay that Shit on Me" (2005) from Rounder Records.

Noami Weisstein, "Days of Celebration and Resistance: The Chicago Women's Liberation Rock Band, 1970-1973," in DuPlessis, Rachel Blau, and Ann Snitow, eds., *Feminist Memoir Project: Voices from Women's Liberation* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998).

Hillary Reser, "'One By One You're Gonna Know Our Power': The Chicago Women's Liberation Rock Band and the Politics of Cultural Transformation," (2004).