

March 6, 2005

Girls rock! A Portland program puts young musicians in the spotlight of rock 'n' roll

By Carolyn Lamberson
The Register-Guard

PORTLAND - Offstage at the Meow Meow Club, Cleo Hehn and Caitlin Arias stand together, red guitars slung over their shoulders, quietly practicing their chords and singing at quarter volume.

Leia Walton stands nearby. At the moment, she has no guitar, so instead she plays in the air, running through the song that she and her band mates in the Slurps soon will perform in public for the first time.

Leia, Cleo, Caitlin, Kelly Maloney and Blake Peterson are members of this brand-new rock 'n' roll band. Only Cleo and Caitlin knew each other before the band got together. They're friends from school.

Middle school.

The five members of the Slurps are too young to drive, too young to vote, too young to be in high school. But they're not too young to be a rock band.

And on a Friday night at the Meow Meow, an all-ages club in southeast Portland, the girls of the Slurps are preparing for their debut. They're not alone. Eleven bands of girls will plug their guitars into their amps, sit behind their drum kits, grab their microphones and perform this special version of a music school recital.

These rock stars in training have just finished their studies at the Girls Rock Institute, an offshoot of Portland Rock 'n' Roll Camp for Girls. While the summer rock camp lasts a week, classes in the GRI Rock Block meet weekly for 10 weeks. Winter session concluded on Feb. 18 with the Winter Showcase concert, a rock camp tradition in which the



The Plasmic Stallions perform at the Meow Meow Club in Portland as part the Girls Rock Institute Winter Showcase.



students put on a show.

It's 30 minutes before showtime. Jennifer Agosta, a teacher and assistant director of the Rock 'n' Roll Camp for Girls, runs through a few last-minute instructions. When she asks, "How you guys feeling?" she's greeted with a lively chorus of "Good."

A few minutes later, the Slurps are assembled near the stage. They'll be the second band to perform, after the Ready, a band of 10- to-13-year-olds that formed at a previous rock camp and stayed together, even booking their own gigs.

Hehn chats with a friend from the audience as the 7 p.m. opener draws near.

"I'm kinda mellow now," says Hehn, an eighth-grader at Fernwood Middle School in Portland. "I was nervous half an hour ago."



Eight-year-old Amelia Rasmussen-Berger prepares to sing "Pippi Piggie," a song she wrote about her Chihuahua, to an appreciative crowd at the Meow Meow.



Lisa Walton of Beaverton gives her daughter, Leia, a kiss before the concert; Leia was preparing to perform with her band, the Slurps.

Photos: **Thomas Boyd** / The Register-Guard

Growth through music

Misty McElroy organized the first Rock 'n' Roll Camp for Girls in 2000, as the community service component of her women's studies degree at Portland State University. McElroy spent nine years as a roadie. She'd seen how the rock world treats women. As the camp's literature puts it, the idea was to offer girls a chance for personal growth and expression through music, and to show girls that there is more for them in the rock world than the roles of "fan, groupie, dancer or overtly sexy singer."

What was meant to be a one-shot deal is now heading into its fifth summer, and has expanded to a year-round program offering after-school music lessons.

GRI formed in 2003 as a way to funnel Portland area girls away from the weeklong summer camp, Agosta says, making room for out-of-town students. GRI can accommodate 30 girls a day, and the spring session will expand to three days a week.

GRI's Rock Block program is open to girls age 10 to 18 and includes small group instrument lessons, band practice, songwriting lessons and sound-tech workshops. Each session concludes with a showcase concert.

Girls also can sign up for private lessons and bands can rent

practice space. If girls don't have an instrument, they can borrow one. Scholarships help make sure that any girl who wants to participate, can.

Workshops in 'zine making, music video production, promotion and marketing and self-defense, among other topics, also are offered.

All for girls. All taught by women. GRI's instructors are either in bands or have been in bands or are working on their solo projects, Agosta says.

"We all had to learn this stuff the hard way," she says. "These are the things we learned just by doing it."

And no, in most cases, boys are not allowed. Because the rock world is so male-oriented, organizers are adamant about keeping this an all-girls community. After all, no one ever says Jimi Hendrix was a great guitarist, for a guy.

Besides, Agosta says, boys seem to have a much easier time forming bands than girls do.

"Boys get together and make things and girls get together and talk," she says.

The only GRI outlet for boys is the new coaching program. Fledgling bands, which have to be at least 50 percent female, can sign up for practice space and private coaching sessions with a GRI teacher.

But Agosta knows there are a lot of disappointed boys who want in this club.

"There really does need to be something like this for the boys," she says.

Organizing the noise

Rewind to Tuesday, three days before the showcase. In an old sewing machine factory in outer northeast Portland that serves as the rock camp headquarters, the students of Tuesday's GRI Rock Block are assembled in the large classroom.



Guitars sit ready for tuning while the students run between a photo shoot and a sound check before the final concert.



Posing for a band photo are the Slurps: (from left) Blake Peterson, Leia Walton, Caitlin Arias, Kelly Maloney (front) and Cleo Hehn.



Leila Maloney, 12, adjusts her guitar before class at the old sewing machine factory in northeast Portland that serves as the rock camp's headquarters.

This particular class is made up of eight girls ages 12 to 14. They've formed two bands, the Slurps and AMP (that's Awesome Monkey Pronouns). At the showcase, each band will perform a song they've written, then the whole class will join together for a cover of Green Day's "Boulevard of Broken Dreams."

Four instructors - Elizabeth Venable, Winner Bell, Marisa Anderson and Aubree Bernier-Clarke - ride herd over seven girls.

For Anderson, this is her first gig working at GRI. Her old band, the Dolly Ranchers, was always on the road, so she couldn't get involved until winter term.

"It's great. I love working here," she says. She wears earplugs, acknowledging this group of girls can make a lot of noise. "And this is the end of the quarter. The noise is rather organized compared to what it was."

The girls launch into the Green Day song. It quickly comes to a halt.

"Ummm," Anderson says to the girls. "Can I have the guitarists all play a G at the same time?"

Take 2. Take 3. Take 4. Time to move on to band practice.

Leila Maloney, 12, is in AMP. She's been playing bass for two years and she has the rock look down - fishnet stockings, mismatched tennis shoes, two skirts. She and her twin sister, Kelly, are rock camp and GRI veterans.

"It's really fun and they teach you a lot," Leila says as she and drummer Thea Frizzell, 12, rehearse their song. "But it's more like they're your friends. When my dad's teaching me, it's like, 'You messed up.' Here, they help you."

The twins' mother, Karen Maloney, calls GRI the most positive thing her girls have ever done.

"They have never come out of here without a big smile on their faces," she says. "And these are girls who have hated their music teachers and learned nothing."

"A bit far out"

While Karen Maloney has great enthusiasm for GRI, other parents are cautious. Lisa Walton, Leia Walton's mother, stands in the Meow Meow on show night, looks around at the spiked hair and wild outfits and shakes her head.

"I think that if I were still living in the Midwest, this would be a bit far out," she says.

However, it's not so far out that she's unwilling to drive her fifth-grader from Beaverton to northeast Portland once a week.

"Leia's been wanting to be a rock star since she was 2," Walton

says. Even at that young age, Leia was writing her own songs. "I'd have to write them down for her when she was like 3 or 4."

Walton bought her daughter an electric guitar for Christmas. But spring term, Leia's going to play drums.

"I think she wants to experience all the musical instruments," Walton says. Leia adds, "I just want to try something new."

The youngest girl on the showcase bill is too young to attend GRI's Rock Block. At 8, Amelia Rasmussen-Berger takes private guitar lessons from Anderson. She also writes her own songs.

"Her Chihuahua is her muse right now, you might say," says Amelia's mom, Pernille Rasmussen. "So they're all about Pippi."

Amelia has a whole album planned, 14 songs, all of them about Pippi. She's got the titles - "Crazy Pippi," "Sad Pippi," "Dirty Pippi" - but she hasn't written the songs yet. It took her a month to write the song she learned for the Meow Meow - "Pippi Piggie."

It's her first time performing in public, and she admits to some nerves.

"I'm nervous that I'm going to mess up," Amelia says.

"A little musical force"

On stage, the girls of the Slurps get ready to sing "Caffeine," the song they wrote at GRI. Cleo came up with the words, Caitlin came up with the music and the other girls added their ideas to the mix. For a song about caffeine, Caitlin realizes it moves a bit slow. She and her fellow Slurps are OK with that.

"We decided to be ironic," she says.

Before the show, Caitlin was worried she'd blow an amp, while Blake fretted about dropping her guitar pick. In the end, their set came off without a hitch. And when the Tuesday class returned to the stage for the Green Day song, the bad notes - if any - were unnoticeable, the heads in the audience bobbed along and the set ended with smiles all around, from the girls on stage to their fans in the audience.

Similar camps have popped up in other places, and the Portland group runs a rock camp for women as a benefit for the scholarship fund. Agosta says she's eager to see how this next batch of Alanis Morissettes and Avril Lavignes turns out.

"I'm so excited to see in 10 years, five years, what this generation of girls will do," she says. "I really feel that we're starting a little army or a little musical force."

GIRLS ROCK

INSTITUTE

GRI is the home base of the Rock 'n' Roll Camp for Girls and

other programs.

Rock Block: Once-a-week sessions for girls 10 to 18; spring term is under way.

Private lessons: For girls age 8 to 18; e-mail jaws@girlsrockcamp.org for details, or call (503) 445- 4991, Ext. 1.

Practice space: For bands that are at least 50 percent female, e-mail jaws@girlsrockcamp.org for details, or call (503) 445-4991, Ext. 1.

Rock 'n' Roll Camp for Girls: July 25-30 at the GRI, 8900A N.E. Vancouver Way, Portland. This is a day camp and accommodations are not provided, but some students can be placed with host families. Applications are available at www.girlsrockcamp.org; some scholarships available.

Ladies Rock Camp: April 15-17 at GRI; application deadline March 25; applications available at www.girlsrockcamp.org.
