

# ROCK MY WORLD

*Girls Rock!* shows that Portland's Rock 'n' Roll Camp for Girls goes beyond just music

By Laura Leebove • Photo by Nicole Weingart

"Are you ready to rock, Portland, Oregon?" shrieks Palace, a spunky 7-year-old. Seemingly shocked by the nearly glass-shattering noise that just escaped her mouth, Palace's eyes go wide and dart around the room as if to say, "Did I do that?" before she proceeds to scream it another few times. But only minutes before, she shied away when her instructor at the Rock 'n' Roll Camp for Girls in Portland encouraged her to even speak into the microphone. Palace's sudden transformation — which happened in a matter of minutes — is a perfect example of what many girls experience at rock camp, and it's the theme Arne Johnson and Shane King wanted to focus on in their documentary *Girls Rock!*, released theatrically in select major cities on March 7, 2008.

When the two filmmakers, both then in their late 30s, approached the camp three years ago in hopes of making a documentary, the staff couldn't help but be a bit skeptical. The camp, founded in 2001, is for girls ages 8 to 18 and is run almost completely by women — including the likes of Sleater-Kinney's Carrie Brownstein and the Gossip's Beth Ditto — and the organizers didn't want it turned into some type of reality TV show. However, after Johnson and King made a trial film about the camp's after-school program, it was clear that they had a positive agenda.

Johnson and King say they were raised by "sort of alternative parents," and growing up around the Portland punk music scene gave them an appreciation for the type of culture the rock camp had created — made obvious in the film's soundtrack, which includes songs by Sleater-Kinney, Bikini Kill, and Le Tigre. "We knew [the women running the camp] would be more interested in protecting this culture they had created than making it famous, and that was what interested us," Johnson says. And he says when they made the short film, they learned that Rock 'n' Roll Camp for Girls isn't only about girls not having the opportunity to play music but also "this whole thing about finding your own voice and making noise and dressing however you wanted to." The shorter documentary won over Misty McElroy, the founder and former executive director of the camp, who told Johnson, "You guys can do whatever you want."

In the 90-minute film, Johnson and King follow four girls through their week at camp in the summer of 2005. Their task is to write an original song with a band and perform it in a showcase on the last day, regardless of age or musical ability. "To have that path seem really impossible to a lot of people, girls and women that have never picked up an instrument before, to have them do that after a week — it's so inspiring to so many people," says Winner Bell, 25, now executive director of the camp.

Making the documentary was more of a journey than Johnson and King expected. The two flew around the country to speak to as many of the campers as they could before their first day in order to decide who to focus on throughout the film, which opened their eyes to issues they had no idea the young girls were facing. "Actually talking to these girls was a really mind-blowing experience for what they were really seeing and feeling and going through," Johnson says.



Seven-year-old Palace performs at Rock 'n' Roll Camp for Girls.

"It's always easy to look at a statistic — but sit in a room with an 11-year-old girl who tells you she doesn't think she's beautiful or she's not worthy. I was really shattered by the fact that I had lived this long and had been a guy who was supposed to be a sensitive guy and had missed most of that."

They ended up with an interesting group: Palace, the youngest of the group, finds her voice and then wants to take charge of her band; 8-year-old Amelia is a loner at school and writes songs about her dog Pippi; 15-year-old Laura loves heavy metal and learns to talk about her low self-esteem; and 17-year-old Misty, who was living in a group home after being involved with a gang, hadn't even seen a bass guitar until her first day at camp. "Yeah, that transformation that the girls go through at their first time at camp sort of happened to Arne and I too," King says, laughing. "We weren't expecting that."

"I think [the documentary is] really informative and really powerful and emotional and that serves its purpose as well to kind of just raise awareness about girls and women and music and sexism and feminism," Bell says. "I think it's a really great film because it's not about the drama, it's not a reality TV show. There's a lot of emotion and sincerity, and it's very genuine." Rock 'n' Roll Camp for Girls' current program director, 35, says she hopes the documentary inspires girls to sign up for the camp in Portland or others like it around the country. "I hope that girls feel like music isn't a boys' club," she says. "I really want girls in rock to be a standard and not an exception. I think it's a really cool community and I just want more girls to be involved and feel like it's successful."

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